A WORLD OF WHISPERS

CONTRIBUTION FROM THE PROJECT:

Unterstützung der Entwicklung der afghanischen Zivilgesellschaft durch die Förderung psychosozialer Kompetenz als Voraussetzung für gesellschaftliche Teilhabe und soziale Integration

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PREFACE

With this small booklet, we aim to foster a better understanding of the plight faced by a people who have experienced four decades of war and the loss of life, livelihoods and property, displacement or exile resulting from the conflict. Having talked to hundreds of Afghans in their country and elsewhere, we feel the need to present the reality of people's lives that goes beyond stereotypical media coverage of the phenomenon of refugees attempting to reach Europe. Using first-hand accounts that have been fictionalised and anonymized to protect the identity of the protagonists, our aim is to provide an insight into the difficult choices that Afghans face in dealing with the multiple challenges confronting them.

The most immediate challenge for many is the direct threat of violence and insecurity. As these accounts show, however, cultural and social factors that determine how members of a family relate to each other and their community often present an additional challenge. One of the themes that emerges from these accounts is how the family remains the bedrock of many Afghans' lives. While this can be a source of strength and resilience, 'tradition' in many cases constrains the choices that individuals, particularly women like Sanga, can make.

In Afghanistan as elsewhere, however, customs evolve with time and circumstance. For some Afghans, the social unit of family is no longer able to provide the social and economic support that it seemed to guarantee previous generations. With significant numbers of families split due to displacement or exile, behaviour and attitudes are changing as the customary family hierarchy is impossible to maintain. Access to social media often compounds this apparent clash of values. The account of the kite-runner Matin's eventful journey to Europe illustrates how the support and protection that his family may have provided are of limited relevance along the way, and in his new-found situation in Europe. What compounds this sense of isolation is the shame that is likely to be attached to a return home – what Matin's uncle reminds him is like being seen 'climbing down from a donkey'

Exposure to extreme violence also has an impact on individual Afghans and their families. The account of Shir Khan's desperate journey into self-imposed exile with his son Musaafer is one example of domestic violence with tragic consequences – the true scale of which is unlikely to ever be known. The strategy adopted by Sharif in placing his sons with the mujahideen to hedge his bets will be familiar to many fathers who find themselves trapped between opposing armed groups who pose a very real threat to the survival of their family.

Ipso works with all Afghans needing psychosocial support, be it those experiencing a dysfunctional social environment or those who face personal challenges that affect their life. Whether they are returning refugees, unsuccessful asylum seekers who return voluntarily or are deported, displacees or have never left their country, we believe that they either need to develop a fresh understanding of their situation or to find a new beginning. Our counsellors have accompanied many people in this process in recent years and provided them with support to move beyond a state of powerlessness and helplessness. Through long and often-difficult conversations, we have witnessed countless brave women and men transform themselves

from victims to gradually resume control over their lives. Their courage is impressive and I believe that we have a great deal to learn from their journeys. We trust that readers of the stories presented here also have pause for thought and reflection about Afghans and others facing conflict across the world.

We acknowledge the contribution made by Ipso staff in engaging those who told us their stories, and particularly Shirazuddin Siddiqi who transcribed and edited the accounts with great care and sensitivity. Thanks too to Jolyon Leslie for contributing the introduction which provides some historical perspective to the ensuing stories as well as for editing all texts. The photographs included in this booklet, which are courtesy of Jolyon Leslie, Naim Karimi, Haider Wafa and other members of the Ipso team, provide a visual background to the lives of Afghans and do not represent the individuals or specific circumstances mentioned in the accounts.

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Inge Missmahl

INTRODUCTION

Throughout their history, Afghans have been a mobile people. Situated on important overland routes between China, India, the Middle East and Europe, trade enabled a succession of civilizations to prosper in the territory. Interactions through commerce and conquest left its mark on cultural heritage that reflected the diversity of communities that traversed or settled in this rugged terrain, where they often competed for resources. Although 19th century colonial observers perceived Afghans to be an isolated people, traders in its bazaars had networks extending to Calcutta to the east, to Moscow to the north and well beyond. The nomads who ranged across the region, largely unhindered by national borders, were an integral part of these trading networks.

It was however conflict, rather than commerce, that prompted the exodus of some 6 million Afghans after the Soviet intervention in 1979, in what was at the time the largest recorded movement of refugees in modern history. The ‘scorched earth’ tactics employed in the conflict resulted in de-population of many rural areas, where homes and property were destroyed and villagers lost their source of livelihood when irrigation systems on which they depended were targeted or fell into disrepair. The consequences for a poor country such as Afghanistan, the majority of whose population are subsistence farmers, was devastating and has had a profound impact on its subsequent development.

Most Afghan refugees at that time headed to neighbouring Pakistan and Iran, where they had to start afresh and re-build their lives. Initially, registered refugees were able to avail of public services (including,

critically, education and health care), and many found employment and gained skills. While the process of adaptation to exile was doubtless difficult, those refugees originating from remote rural areas were able to enjoy a quality of life not achievable back in Afghanistan. This has had an impact on their expectations on return to their homeland, as have the ideas and values to which they were exposed during their enforced exile. For a generation of young Afghans who were born and grew up outside of the country, this exposure shapes the way that they try to lead their lives on their return 'home'.

The exodus of Afghans after 1979 was the first of four waves of migration from the country in the late 20th/early 21st century. The second was prompted by fierce fighting that broke out between resistance factions after the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul fell apart in 1992 and an 'Islamic Republic' was declared. During 1993/4, the inter-factional conflict in Kabul displaced hundreds of thousands of residents within the city, while many fled elsewhere. The flight of many civil servants effectively paralyzed the new administration. This was compounded by the subsequent departure of many educated Afghans during the hard-line Taliban administration between 1996 and 2001, when the third wave of migration occurred.

The fourth and most recent exodus is ongoing, against a backdrop of unprecedented international engagement and investment in Afghanistan that followed the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. The military component of this engagement involved up to 130,000 foreign troops being deployed on Afghan soil by 2011 and, while this presence has been significantly scaled down since, fighting continues across the country, with up to 40% of territory now reported to be outside government control. There have been attacks in urban centres, but it is communities in disputed rural areas who bear the brunt of the conflict. In late 2016, there were estimated to be half a million Afghans displaced within the country.

Whereas those affected by earlier conflicts were able to seek safety across borders, since 2001 the governments of Pakistan and Iran have not registered further Afghan refugees. Moreover, they have restricted refugees' access to public services while actively encouraging 'voluntary' return to Afghanistan. Significant numbers have returned, and the UN reports that 5 million Afghans had availed of assistance with resettlement by the end of 2016. At least 2.5 million Afghans remain however as registered refugees in Iran and Pakistan, with a similar number thought to be undocumented migrants - 600,000 of whom were deported in 2016 alone.

Just as it has been over the past 30 years, the pattern of migration and displacement in Afghanistan continues to be complex today. Even as refugees return from Iran and Pakistan, others attempt to leave in search of a better life (there were 300,000 claims by Afghans for asylum in Europe in 2015-16), while others move to areas in the country that seem to be more secure and where they might find employment.

The impact on the lives of the millions of Afghans who have been forced or chose to leave their homes – three out of four of the population are thought to have experienced some form of displacement - is

similarly complex. For those who enjoyed access to education, gained skills or were able to accumulate assets through employment while in exile, the experience may have been beneficial. Exposure to different values and ideas may also enable them to live more fulfilling lives on their return. For some, however, such 'alien' influence is perceived to challenge the values of what remains a generally conservative society and can cause friction within families and communities. A similar challenge faces rural families who are displaced to an unfamiliar urban setting that might seem to pose a threat to their traditional customs and values.

This perception of differing values is a recurring theme in the experience of migrants and the displaced alike. As in other traditional societies, the family is the crucible of an Afghan's socialization process. A young person's relationship with his or her family not only shapes beliefs and feelings, but also offers critical information and can be the catalyst for a sense of identity and belonging to a wider community. The hierarchy within most Afghan families that ensures obedience and respect for elders is however not always compatible with a culture of individuality that encourages questioning, and even rejection, of established social norms. Whether as a result of exile or other influences, many young Afghans struggle to reconcile their aspirations with the values that their families may espouse, due to social pressure or their belief.

As a consequence, disputes between the generations within families are common, often leaving young people - two-thirds of Afghans are under 24 - feeling alienated and sometimes without direction. Some turn to community or religious leaders for guidance, while others might be exposed to malign influence that can lead to criminality. Among a small minority, extremism seems a path to challenging the status quo that they feel is unjust and corrupt. This can make them prone to incitement to commit violent acts against members of the security forces or even indiscriminate attacks on civilians.

Many young Afghans feel a less extreme sense of grievance as a result of their failure to find employment. Up to 40% of the working-age population are now unemployed according to recent press reports, although official figures are much lower. Anyone who has driven through the streets of any Afghan city cannot fail to have seen groups of men waiting to be taken on as casual day-labourers. Surveys indicate that this precarious form employment is the primary source of livelihood for perhaps 70 % of the urban families. For thousands of young Hazara youth with limited opportunities, the prospect of earning a living fighting in the Syrian conflict has proved attractive, although hundreds are reported to have been killed in recent years.

Even for those who have secure employment, the lack of security is a continuing preoccupation, with one in four young people in Kabul reporting some form of traumatic experience. The increase in the frequency of indiscriminate attacks on urban streets has added to a general sense of anxiety as well as affecting people's ability to lead 'normal' lives in a safe environment. There are clear indications that this climate of fear is having an impact on the mental health of the urban population.

In the face of these challenges, it is little wonder that some families

incur significant debts in order to pay to have their young trafficked to Europe, in the hope that they'll be safe there and in time earn enough to help support their relatives back in Afghanistan. For some parents, migration also offers a way to ensure that their offspring do not fall prey to extremism – although radicalization has also occurred among young Afghans in exile.

With fewer than 1% of those whose asylum claims fail in Europe repatriated, Afghans are likely to continue to seek opportunities for a better life abroad, despite the risks this can entail. Anecdotal accounts from recent migrants suggest that they undertook their journey after being convinced by friends already in Europe of the opportunities it offers. Boasts on FaceBook by those who've arrived in Europe often portray an image of 'success', with few willing to concede that their investment may in fact have been in vain.

The bulk of those leaving are educated, and their departure represents a massive loss to a country that needs their skills. In economic terms alone, the collective investment made by the hundreds of thousands of Afghans now seeking asylum in Europe amounts to millions of dollars paid to people-traffickers that might have been spent more productively in the country. Some migrants are able to remit funds back to their families but, as with previous waves of migrants, work can be hard to find in exile (asylum seekers are generally barred from employment) and is often menial and low-paid. It is not uncommon for a skilled migrant to be working as cleaner or guard – a fact that is usually kept from the family back home. So too is the criminality to which some migrants resort in order to make a living or to pay off their debts.

The social consequences of the absence of a cohort of Afghan society who could make a meaningful contribution to their families and wider community are profound. At the family level, the departure of a young man removes someone who might play an important role in supporting parents or siblings, and may rob the family of a voice in the wider community. Added to this is the anxiety within families back home about the safety of those who've been sent abroad and the dangers they face en route. Social media may enable them to stay in close touch but, by telescoping the distance, can also raise false hopes. Those who struggle with language and adapting to their new circumstances are unlikely to admit this to their families or on social media posts, for fear of losing face. Some face intense family pressure to make good on the investment they've made in their journey, and therefore feel unable to admit failure and return home.

The expectation among many Afghan families is that a migrant may be in a position, once established, to invite the rest of the family to join them. All hopes for the family's future can thus be pinned on the migrant, which can have a profound impact on the dynamic within a family, whose focus may shift from 'home' to wherever their relative ends up. Few seem aware of the reality that most host countries now restrict the entry of relatives, even for those granted asylum - something that challenges the business model of the people-traffickers.

It is difficult to know the impact a growing 'transnational' community of Afghans who are able to keep one foot in Europe and another in

their country of origin will have on society. While the Afghan elite have long enjoyed a degree of mobility, the most recent wave of migration is unprecedented in how sons of ordinary shopkeepers and drivers are trying their luck – and often indebting their families in the process – as part of a collective flight that is driven by the hope for better opportunities out of the country.

Efforts by the Afghan government to stem the most recent wave of migration seem half-hearted and confused. On the one hand, media campaigns highlighting the dangers of the journey and the possibility of being denied asylum are unconvincing to a population for whom the risks outweigh their perceived predicament at home. On the other hand, senior politicians send out mixed messages; while some appeal to the sense of national pride among citizens, urging them to remain and contribute to their country's development, others publicly assert that Afghans deserve opportunities for a better life abroad, and that no migrants should be repatriated.

Those who are denied asylum and are deported back to Afghanistan (almost 10,000 from Europe to date) often experience an acute sense of failure and loss of face within their communities. Many had taken on significant debt and, if they are unable to find work on their return, can find themselves destitute. Some deportees find it difficult to re-adapt to life back in Afghanistan, given their experience abroad, to the extent that they immediately begin planning another attempt at migration. Others struggle with a sense of disorientation and fear. A 30-year-old man deported from Germany in 2016 told Al-Jazeera:

" I am the only son of my family. My mother forced me to leave Afghanistan as she was worried that I would get killed as my dad was…. My heart was shattered when I heard I will be sent back to Afghanistan. I was earning some money from washing cars in a private company and used to have a normal secure life. I even used to send some money back home to my mother, (but) now I am back in Afghanistan and starting from zero. I have no job and feel very scared here. This place is not secure, so many people are dying every day.

This sense of dislocation is shared by some of those displaced from conflict-prone areas to urban centres, where they feel marginalized and often struggle without the familiar networks they relied upon in their area of origin. While some migrants who have been repatriated may be able to reintegrate within their family and community, there is negligible institutional support for those who struggle on their return. This represents a huge missed opportunity for the country, as long as young people lack trust in their future to the extent that they're willing to face an unknown fate abroad. It seems important that young Afghans are offered an alternative to migration, through practical measures that provide opportunities for education and employment so that they can fulfil their actual potential at home.

Jolyon Leslie

FREE CAPTIVES

An epic life journey through the hell-fire of war and destruction

Freedom

It looked like a special day for Sanga as she roamed from one end of the meadow to the other, humming a song she'd heard on the radio:

I am a Kochi girl

My tent is in the open of the desert

My red dress is the envy of flowers

My bangles are my drums

Accompanying my heart beat

Nature is my beautician

The black rock, my mascara

The red wild flower, my lipstick

The song was in Dari, or *Parsi* as her family called the language. Sanga hadn't been to school but she'd learned Dari from listening to the radio and talking with people here and there.

With all its richness, the nature that surrounded her added to her human beauty, as she ran around as free as a fairy. She was happy to be a free-roaming *kochi*, as nomadic people are known in Afghanistan, and felt sorry for those girls who were born to *dehsheen* families (as nomads would call settled families) and had to live within the confines of a house. Such a life seemed like a prison to her, and part of her wanted to liberate all these poor girls.

Sanga and her family never stayed in one place for long. They spent three months in Logar in the spring and then started their gradual move towards the highlands in Hazarajat and onward to Helmand where they spent winters. Some of the family had settled, and from time to time the men nagged Sanga's father to do the same, arguing that those without a proper house are considered to be displaced. When her father raised the issue, usually over a meal, Sanga would insist that the displaced were those forced out of where they'd settled, saying 'We're different, father. We were born free and remain so – they are only jealous of our good life.'

For anyone not knowing the nomadic lifestyle, it seemed odd that families like Sanga's didn't own a house and were almost continually on the move. She didn't care that those she felt were prisoners of their property looked down on her freedom. She tended to try to change the subject when anyone asked her father about their lifestyle, as she didn't want the notion of settling down to grow roots in his mind. She was terrified by the thought of confinement, and loved following the seasons across the mountains and plains, with their varied colours and light that had been her life thus far.

Sanga's name had a certain elegance. Her father had chosen it for her despite the objections of his brothers. He imagined his family to be a big tree and his children to be *sangas* or branches, and this was why he gave her this name when she was born. In his view, she was the most delicate of all branches of his family. As the girl grew up, she embraced the idea, seeing

herself as part of a swaying tree in the midst of the natural landscape. Like the tree, she lived for the seasons, watching the snow of winter give way to the soft green of spring, which deepened through the summers. She knew snow posed a threat to her family's animals, so never went near it, but was mesmerised by the white mountain peaks that they passed on their journeys along the valleys.

Sanga was the brightest member of her family and her father tended to consult her when he had to make decisions. His brother was quick to intervene and tell him what to do, so he sometimes kept silent until he had Sanga's view on an issue. As a result, Sanga always got her own way. But she didn't ask for much, as she had everything from milk to yogurt, to *qoroot* (small balls of drained lassi or yogurt) and cheese in the tent. She loved making *paneer-e kham* or soft cheese made from fresh milk and cooking for the family, as well as embroidering the clothes that her parents and siblings wore.

It wasn't only her father who sought Sanga's counsel when faced with a problem. Whenever her brothers wanted a change from eating cheese and yoghurt and longed for some meat they knew who to go to. Buying meat from the bazaar was not usual for *kochi* families – instead they would slaughter an animal if they had guests, and all the family would have their fill. But this only happened once in a while and the boys didn't always want to wait. So, they would go to their sister, who had a clever way of making father slaughter an animal.

Sanga would ask the boys to choose an animal – they usually chose a sheep, usually a fat one, and left her to do the rest. She'd wait until her father was nearby and put some small pebbles on the open fire. She knew that her father was paranoid about 'mad-sheep' disease and that that any symptom would terrify him. Once the pebbles were really hot she'd surreptitiously slip one inside the ear of the sheep before letting it run free. As it ran back to the flock, the animal would cause a commotion because of the pain of the hot pebble in its ear. Her father would notice the sheep moving its head wildly back and forth and assume that it had the disease. He would then call his sons for a knife and get them to move the other animals as far as possible away from the afflicted sheep, warning them that the disease was highly contagious and could wipe out their entire herd. The boys listened attentively to him, to protect their secret with Sanga.

With the poor tortured sheep duly slaughtered and all traces of its blood buried, their father would carefully inspect the rest of the flock to look for similar symptoms. The boys would accompany him so that he did not suspect anything. 'Have you checked the ones on top of the hill?' one boy would shout. 'How about the goats? Have you checked them too?' yelled the other. They needed to ensure their father was satisfied that there were no further signs of the disease, before returning to the tent to offer prayers for the deliverance of their flock from the scourge of 'mad sheep' disease.

The boys would then gather around the wide stone on which Sanga baked bread and place choice pieces of meat close to the fire to cook. She would then make kebab, and the boys would compete to eat a morsel from the leg, the ribs and other parts of the sheep. The older boy particularly liked the neck and would fight anyone who wanted a share. After the meal, their father would again pray that no other sheep would have the disease, while the boys exchanged furtive looks with their clever sister. She would then clear the dishes with a hidden smile, her eyes lowered so that nobody would detect any mischief.

The unexpected

It was a sunny day, with a breeze ruffling the green grass in the meadow where the scent of wild flowers was heavenly. The embroidered flowers on Sanga's wide skirt caught in the breeze as she ran from one end to the other. Her task was to keep an eye out for their flocks of sheep and goats, but in her heart she celebrated her freedom and love of nature. But today she felt restless and her energy was also a sign of a gnawing worry.

One of her brothers was watching their animals from some distance, while their father and the other boy dealt with the hooves of one of their donkeys that had been hurt coming over rocky path on the way back from the bazaar. The boy held the donkey still while his father applied a special home-made paste to its injured hooves. Their father was in a bad mood, cursing the donkey for stumbling on the path, where he had also slipped and injured his knee. Then he fell silent, perhaps ashamed as he recalled that it was he who had decided to take the short-cut along the rocky path rather than a longer, safer route to the bazaar.

Sanga was used to her father's mood swings. She loved her father for being gentle and considerate to his children, unlike so many other *kochi* men. Cursing and swearing was his way of expressing his frustration.

A shout in the distance interrupted her father from his treatment of the donkey. A group of men, all of them relatives, called her father over to talk. Among the group Sanga recognised her father's and mother's brothers, some of who who had settled in a village not far away. They were the ones

who would from time to time try persuade her father to also settle with his family. While Sanga enjoyed spending time with her cousins, she didn't like this talk of settling down, as she would lose her freedom. She was therefore apprehensive when her father joined the group and walked out of sight over the hill. They must have gone to one of the tents to share a cup of tea and seek her father's advice on something. They often asked him for his opinion on family and other issues, but his headstrong brothers usually ignored his suggestions. Sometimes they would wait for a whole season until he returned to help them resolve a dispute between them. This gave Sanga's family a special status, as her father was one of the key wise elders of the clan.

Sanga thought about her family. She loved her mother who, she thought, was the wisest woman on earth, and her brothers who were very well-behaved and looked after her. Her father was a quiet man who was respected by the wider family for his wisdom. She thanked God for being born to such a caring family who understood what it was to be free.

Sanga went over to play with the boys, and they had a long game of hide-and-seek. When it was her turn to find the boys, she found one easily but could not find the youngest even though she looked everywhere, in the meadows and behind rocks. The others joined her in the search, and she even went up the mountain in case he'd hidden there. When she reached the top and hadn't found him there, she turned to descend. At that moment she was startled by a gunshot. She stopped and looked around to see where the shots were coming from. Then she spied one of her older cousins with a gun, and he fired again. One of her other cousins was dancing around and waving a handkerchief in the air. She saw that it was one she had herself embroidered over several weeks.

Sanga felt faint and sat on the ground. The boys shouted questions at her from a distance, but she didn't listen. In her shock, she was at a loss for words. At that moment she spied the missing youngster peeping from behind a rock, but did not want to continue their game of hide-and-seek. She didn't need anyone to tell her what had happened, and in her heart knew that her freedom would soon come to an end. A sense of impending tragedy came upon her – she imagined herself as a branch being cut from the evergreen tree of her family.

When she returned to them, her brothers were unaware of what had happened and asked why she was so pale and upset. 'My life has ended' was all Sanga would say in response. They asked her why, but she was lost in her own private world. As dusk approached, they rounded up the flock and went towards their tents. Sanga following them from some distance, walking slowly as if in a daze. Her brothers knew that something bad had happened but couldn't guess what it was and realised that they'd have to wait until later to find out. Once they settled the flock, they went to see their father who looked withdrawn and was quiet. Their mother, on the other hand, looked happy and told them to go to the tent so she could talk to them.

Inside their tent, although nothing seemed to have changed, the atmosphere was different. They sat in their customary places and Sanga went off to help their mother with the food and to milk the animals. The meal was laid out and they duly ate in silence. Although there was nothing unusual in the meal of corn-bread, yoghurt and cheese, the food seemed different – almost as if someone had stolen its taste. The dishes were cleared and the boys filled their glasses with fresh *lassi* to wash the tastelessness of the food away. But it tasted like water. Thinking that maybe Sanga had done something to the *lassi*, one of the boys wanted to go out to find her, but was told by his father to stay seated as his mother also entered the tent.

Their father cleared his throat, then told them that Sanga would no longer accompany the boys to the pastures. They were stunned and

speechless. Their father to continued: ‘The reason that Sanga won’t be taking our animals to the pastures any more is because your uncle thinks that it would bring shame upon us. So she’ll stay with your mother and help in the tent from now on.’ The boys couldn’t understand why their father was listening to their uncle when he’d ignored his advice often in the past. ‘But our uncle has always said crazy things – why should we listen to him now?’, the eldest boy asked. ‘Because Sanga now belongs to him’ their father replied. They were both astonished. Their mother then told them that during the afternoon their father’s brothers had come with her brother to ask for Sanga’s hand in marriage and they’d agreed on the spot to betroth her to her cousin. Their father’s eyes were blank, making them think that he’d been powerless to stop his brothers interfering in their family’s affairs and had remained silent during the discussions. In kochi tradition, silence is taken to imply consent. Now they realised why Sanga was so upset. In fact, she was sitting outside the tent, weeping in silence.

The first winter

Zer Gul was a young child when his mother succumbed to an unknown illness and died. He had no one to look after him as his father, an ill-tempered man, showed no interested in his young son. He delegated care for the boy to his sister, Sanga’s mother. Over time, he came to be treated by Sanga and her siblings as another little brother rather than as their cousin. Zer Gul was hard-working and helped them take care of their flocks and with other chores. He became Sanga’s favourite little ‘brother’.

When he was in his teens, Sanga’s mother did the unthinkable and asked her younger brother to enrol Zer Gul in the military school. Perhaps she felt that military education was the best opportunity for a young *kochi* boy. When Sanga’s family was in the area, Zer Gul would stay with them during his leave, but when they were travelling he’d stay with one of his younger uncles. Sanga missed his company and looked forward to when they’d see each other again.

This little ‘brother’ was the man to whom Sanga had been promised. It wasn’t long before the details of their marriage were also agreed within the family. Sanga had no say in the matter. Under pressure from his brother, her father agreed that there should be no *walwar* or dowry. This was almost unheard of among *kochis*, who usually received at least a flock of animals in return for their daughters, or a tract of land. Sanga’s father was advised by his brothers that Zer Gul, as a motherless child who had grown up with Sanga was really part of their family and so no *walwar* was due.

Sanga’s married life was the complete opposite of her life thus far as a *kochi* girl. She found the confinement in the house and the restrictions that settled women faced very hard to adapt to. But there was no other option for her. Her new husband Zer Gul was about fifteen years younger than her and she was very fond of him, but never imagined that she would ever be his wife. He was a quiet, talented young man and was doing well with his studies at the military school. To her, he was more like her little brother or son than her husband, given their age difference. Tradition, even among settled *kochi* families, required that a husband and wife, when in the company of outsiders of even other family members, maintained a certain distance. Sanga wasn’t even allowed to put a cup of tea in front of Zer Gul, let alone care for him in more intimate ways. As a husband, he was expected to tell her what to do, and certainly not show his appreciation or openly give her a gift. As a result, they led a double life: one in public (which was most of the time) that was formal and distanced and a secret one which was more or less confined to their bed.

Sanga's uncle, now her father-in-law, took pride in showing his authority, especially towards women in the family. She missed the kindness that her father had shown her. Her uncle's wife had died when Zer Gul was very young and he'd lived alone since. Sanga had to be very careful not to be in his way at home, as he'd swear and tell her to get out of his sight. He not only used words, but hit women who he felt were in his way. There was nothing it seemed that anyone could do about his behaviour, which was common knowledge in the family. All the women could do was to put up with his abuse. He had tried several times to re-marry but his temper was so notorious that no family agreed for their daughters to be given to him. As the only women in the household, Sanga was vulnerable to his tantrums and violence.

Sanga felt that her uncle was hostile towards her because she'd come 'for free', as he'd paid no *walwar* for her. This made her feel worthless. What is more, he often said that he could afford at least one other wife – either for himself or for Zer Gul. At times, she cursed her father for putting her in this situation. His kindness towards his dead sister's son had resulted in the cruelty she now faced, and which might have been avoided if he'd asked for *walwar* which might have meant that she was valued more in in her new family.

The first winter after her marriage Sanga was heavily pregnant. Her world in the confines of the house felt dull and grey and she missed her family and the freedom of wandering across the green pastures. She felt the cold, shivering as she went about her chores, cleaning and cooking. She caught flu and was ill for a long time before she gave birth a handsome boy. He gave her great joy and helped distract her from thinking about her lost freedom. Sanga relished being a mother, and soon forgot about the cold and resumed her household duties. Kochi women, many of who give birth while on the move, had little time to rest, and Sanga had little choice but to keep working.

Sanga's son was growing fast. He was already one month old. One month! That meant he had been breathing the same air as Sanga for thirty days. She thought of the whole month of Ramazan when you had to fast, and the month felt longer than a year. So, her son had reached an important milestone. He was a happy and healthy boy.

One sunny morning, Sanga was sitting in the courtyard and breastfeeding her son. She looked at his little face and he smiled, as though to thank his mother for her care. She felt very grateful and her thoughts went to her family. She had been counting the days for their arrival from Helmand back to the green pastures of Logar. It felt like ages since she'd last seen them. She hadn't even said goodbye when she'd been taken away as a bride. She thought of how to present her son to her mother and sisters, realising that it'd be more difficult to let her father and brothers also know about the new addition to the family, a new branch to the tree. Custom prevented her from telling her father directly, so she'd have to ask her mother to be the messenger.

As she mulled these thoughts over, her son was suddenly knocked off her lap by a blow that also sent her sprawling across the courtyard. As she got up, she saw her uncle standing over her with a dark expression, as though possessed by the devil. She quickly moved aside and he walked on without saying anything or even looking back. Sanga rushed over to her son and picked him up from the ground. He was silent, with blood slowly coming out of his ears, nose and mouth. His eyes were closed and he seemed to be at peace.

Sanga was calm when Zer Gul returned home later that day. She didn't look as if she was grieving and, when he asked where his son was she said. 'He's with your father'. After changing out of his uniform he sat down to have a

cup of tea. As he was about to take his cap, the neighbour's wife came in. Hardly returning his greeting, the woman looked at Sanga's expression, saying 'Do you know where your son is, Zer Gul?' 'He's with my father', he replied. 'Sanga did not tell you the truth. Your son is dead. Your father killed him' she said emphatically. As he rose to go and confront his father, Sanga stood in his way and told him to calm down. This was the first time she'd behaved like this with her husband in front of outsiders. She saw rage in his eyes and didn't know whether to berate him for being so weak as to cry, or whether to throw her arms around him and join him in his grief. She then lowered her eyes and firmly told him to sit down. 'We can have more children but you won't find another father', she said. But Zer Gul was not going to let this murder pass unpunished and wanted to teach his father a lesson. Abusing family members was one thing, but killing an innocent child was something else altogether. Sanga sensed his rage but was concerned about what he might do, and how this might affect their lives.

She realised that any conflict between Zer Gul and his father could backfire on her, making her even more of an outcast in the family. A fight between father and son would tear the family apart for which she would be blamed. Such a row might also affect Zer Gul's attitude towards her. Despite the abuse she suffered at the hands of his father, Sanga had a good relationship with her husband and could not risk losing that. The thought of him having the same dismissive attitude as his father to her was terrifying. She had to do everything in her power to prevent conflict between them. 'You'll have to walk over my dead body before you fight with your father', she threatened. 'Don't do this, please!'

Sanga's parents never came to see her. She kept waiting, but not even the news of their arrival reached her. She felt angry that they'd sent her to endure a life with a mad father-in-law and then forgotten all about her. But this was her fate - her parents couldn't interfere in the affairs of her husband's family, which is where she now belonged. Sanga found it hard to feel any joy in her heart in thinking about her parents after the loss of her first-born. But she knew that she had to be brave and grieve in silence.

Despite what had happened to her, Sanga continued day-dreaming. At times she remembered the happy times she'd spent in the tent with her own family, but any sense of past happiness was tinged with sadness at what she'd lost. And of course grief, but this was a more complex feeling. No matter how much she tried to pin it down, she couldn't be sure whether she grieved because of her confinement in the house, cut off from mother nature, or because of her abusive uncle, or the loss of her first-born son, or as a result of all of these.

As the summer ended, Sanga was faced with the realisation that that she would probably never see her family again. Even if they journeyed in the region, she had no way of seeing them and they'd had to keep moving. She was also apprehensive about the approaching winter. She had hated the previous winter, and envied her father, mother and brothers not having to deal with such cold as they moved to warmer places. She was happy for her family and this helped to buoy her up. The spark of happiness she felt seemed irrational. She kept thinking and thinking and thinking but couldn't put her finger on what was making her secretly feel happy.

It was a couple of weeks after she'd last thought about her family when Sanga missed her period, and began to wonder if she might be pregnant again. She realised that her feeling of happiness had been a way of her body signalling better times ahead. She wanted to let her husband know, but knew that this would be difficult to say directly. In her culture, pregnancy isn't something you can express with words - it is felt to be inappropriate. 'Omedwary' or expectant is the closest one can come to describing what was happening inside Sanga's body. When one of her neighbours noticed

her dizzy spells, she asked 'have you missed your period, Sanga?' She lowered her head shyly and the word was out.

Zer Gul was informed about Sanga's pregnancy by the neighbour and was thrilled that he was to become a father again. He was pleased to have taken her advice not to fight with his father, which could have ended his relationship with his family. His father could have disowned him and told him to leave the house which would have meant that they'd have to live as outcasts. If they'd fought, everyone would have taken his father's side, even though he was an only son. As things were, he still had his family and soon would have a new child. The thought made him feel guilty, and he prayed for the soul of his murdered son, and that another child would be born to him. Then he felt more at peace and slept well.

Days felt like weeks, weeks like months for Zer Gul as he watched Sanga's belly fill out. Every time he thought of the child's arrival, he stroked his thin moustache. He felt that he understood his role as father and husband better now. It was fortunate that he was at home when Sanga's waters broke. It was a bright winters day and the village was blanketed with snow. He'd been clearing the paths for his father to go to the mosque when he heard Sanga scream. He rushed to check on her and, realising what was happening, called the neighbour's wife. She asked him to close the gate behind him. "Why?', he asked. She gave him a stern look and he felt ashamed for asking such a stupid question. "Do we need a doctor or a midwife?', he asked quickly to hide his feelings. 'Shut up', she barked, 'Neither your mother or grandmother are needed one – Sanga will be fine.'

As the woman went in to attend to Sanga, Zer Gul went on with clearing snow. His heart was pounding and part of him longed to be with her, but he knew this would be considered shameful. Part of him wished he'd not been

there, as when his first child had been born and he'd been spared the wait. As he continued moving the snow, he heard the cry of a child. He threw down the shovel and jumped with joy. His wait was finally over. The neighbour told him that Sanga had given birth to a girl. He felt a sudden rush of disappointment, as he'd hoped for another son. Noticing his reaction, the neighbour said 'You're both still young and will have more children in the future.'

Zer Gul's father didn't learn about the new arrival for a while – he wasn't interested in children. What is more, he didn't like girls, so it was just as well for everyone to keep quiet. The arrival of a grand-daughter only came to his attention when he heard her crying while cutting wood one day. Thinking that this came from his neighbours' house, he shouted 'I will kill the child unless you shut it up'. This caused Sanga to rush inside with her daughter, remembering what had happened to her poor son.

Zer Gul was promoted to a higher military rank and issued with a new uniform that he hung in the living room of their home. Sanga felt proud of him, and how he'd responded to their daughter, who crawled to him wherever he sat down at home.

Shortly after this, Zer Gul came home looking upset and told his father that he'd been transferred to a unit in another province. His father shook his head but said nothing. The following day, he packed his bag and kissed his father's hand in farewell. Sanga had put the Holy Quran on a shelf on top of the door and asked him to walk under it three times before leaving, to ensure his safety. He promised her that he'd come back soon and take her and their daughter to the province with him.

Zer Gul's daughter missed her father and, when she crawled to her great-uncle in his absence, he brusquely pushed her away. The more this happened, the more she crawled to him, until her mother had to take her away to ensure her safety. Sanga also missed Zer Gul, especially when her father-in-law glowered at her. She couldn't understand how such a cruel father had brought an angel like Zer Gul into the world.

Sanga's daughter was by now seven months old and a beautiful little girl. She had already developed a taste for her mother's cooking and at times had to be stopped from over-eating. One day, they were sitting together in the sun when Sanga went inside to get some more wool for the pullover she was knitting for the little girl. She heard her daughter crying and told her that she'd be with her as soon as she'd found the wool. Then her daughter's crying suddenly stopped and, as she returned outside, Sanga glimpsed the shadow of her uncle going into the living room. She rushed out, praying that her uncle had not again harmed her child. She found the little girl lying still on the ground, with dust on her face. When her mother picked her up, she went limp and, even though Sanga slapped her and pinched her there was no response from the child. She never woke up.

Another world

Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan was a completely different world for Sanga, whose family had tended to journey through the southern provinces. Here, people spoke Dari rather than Pashto, but she was able to remember what she'd learned as a child. Zer Gul was doing well in the military and their children were performing well at school. His father did not know how to react to Zer Gul's promotions and the respect in which he was held by his colleagues. Nor to his grandchildren's ability to read and write, of which he did not approve. He thought reading and writing softened men, rather than hardening them. But who would listen to him? Unlike Zer Gul

and Sanga, he didn't speak or understand Dari, so Mazar was an alien environment. Always an introvert, this pushed him further into himself and somehow pacified him. He rarely went out of the house, which, with its concrete walls and marble flooring, was also alien – his homes had had mud walls and floors. Why would anyone subject themselves to cold marble floors?

The news from the southern provinces was not good, as security unravelled and homes were being looted and people killed in the infighting between various groups. By contrast, Mazar felt safe and far from the chaos they heard of elsewhere in the country. So perhaps Zer Gul's transfer to Mazar was a good thing. The family was far from the fighting in the south, and the Hindukush mountains stood between. Their move also seemed to have tamed the anger of Zer Gul's father, who had lost his aggression.

Zer Gul was promoted to the rank of general and, instead of a soldier serving them at home, now had several at hand. Life was relatively easy and Sanga only needed to say what was needed and it would happen. This was new experienced for her. As the wife of an army general, not even her powerful paternal uncles could threaten her.

Then the situation changed and Mazar became more volatile as fighting came closer. Some of the adjoining provinces experienced conflict and there were rumours about an imminent attack on the city of Mazar. Morale was affected and several of the soldiers guarding General Zer Gul and his family deserted. Sanga was surprised at their lack of loyalty. Where did they think they would be safe? One day, Zer Gul talked his father about possibly moving to a safer district in Balkh province. His father didn't seem to have a view. Sanga lost her patience and told her husband to do whatever he thought was good for the family.

That evening, the whole family, including nine children, moved under the cover of darkness out of the city. Their new house had all the necessary amenities and had a big garden. Zer Gul used his contacts to obtain the supplies they needed. Every day, they all listened to the news and heard reports of a planned attack on Mazar. Sanga hoped that these reports would turn out to be incorrect and busied herself with organising the house. The kitchen was large and had more than enough room for cooking and dining, and became a replacement living room. Her main concern was that it was somewhat isolated, so she asked her older children to keep an eye on the rest of the house.

Given the worrying news, Zer Gul urged Sanga to give the family a treat as a distraction, so she made lassi in a bowl over which she poured fresh milk in four parallel lines. In her previous life as a *kochi* girl she would have used fresh goat's milk, but she had to improvise and use cow's milk instead. Then she made some paneer-e kham or sweet cheese made from fresh milk, which reminded her of her happy youth. Even though she had a modern kitchen in the house, she created a fireplace and placed a large flat stone over the fire to baked rounds of thin kochi bread like she'd done in the good old days. The children gathered around, fascinated as Sanga prepared their treat. Zer Gul and his father sat in the front in the sun, but kept a watchful eye on the house.

Sanga made tea and gave it to her oldest daughter to take out to the men in the garden. Then she prepared bread with cheese and raisins for the other girl to take outside. The other children remained with her in the kitchen as she worked to prepare food for them. They were having a merry time, eating and chatting. Sanga told them how much she used to enjoy this dish with her siblings when younger. The children seemed to enjoy the food the more for her stories.

Sanga began to wonder why her daughters hadn't returned from the garden, knowing that they were old enough to understand they should

leave the men alone to eat. Worried lest they had forgotten their manners, she went out to check. As she reached the threshold of the kitchen she saw someone leaving the compound with a roll of red bedding. She recognised this as her own red quilt but assumed that Zer Gul had given them to someone in need. Going out into the garden, however, she realised the tragedy had befallen her family.

Sanga counted four headless bodies lying on the ground, unsure whether this was real or a nightmare. In her shock, her mind focused on where their heads were, and who might have taken them away. Then she remembered the bundle of bedding being carried out and realised that it may have been a bundle of bloodied heads. She rushed towards the gate and down the steps leading to the front garden saw disembodied heads scattered on the ground. Not thinking what she was doing, Sanga picked up the heads one by one and lay them beside their bodies. Crying uncontrollably, the first she handled was that of her father-in-law. Then she gently moved the heads of the two girls, her two daughters. The last head that Sanga moved back was that of Zer Gul, her mighty general, additional little brother and loving husband. It looked as if he'd tried to resist or protect the family from the attackers, the way that his right hand had also been severed.

Their bodies lay out in the open for four days as no one dared to bury them. Finally, one of Sanga's relatives who had heard about the murders came to helped with burial. The attackers had also looted the house and Sanga and the surviving children were left with only a tattered old rug. She tried to keep the children warm under her wide traditional skirt as she cried and cried. She felt really alone in the world. The little puppy they had rested its head on her foot and whimpered.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't take the picture of horror out of her mind. She remembered how different her uncle's severed looked. His expression was calm, although she'd known what a madman he could be in life. Through her tears came the picture of the severed heads of her two daughters who looked like beautiful angels. She cursed those who would end the lives of her angels. What devil would commit such a heinous crime? Then there was her husband with his right hand severed with his head lying quite some distance away from his bleeding body. His fate seemed to sum up his life, and how he loved his wife and his children and also respected and cared for his mad father, even though he'd killed his children. Zer Gul had always been torn between his father and the rest of his family. Even though custom did not allow him to express it openly, he'd also loved his wife and children with every cell in his body. To the end, he'd tried to protect them from evil.

For Sanga, Mazar now felt like a hostile place that offered her and the children no protection. In her mind, it had become a graveyard that had consumed most of her family and she was vulnerable. Knowing that return to her uncles and cousins in Logar was now impossible, she for the first time since her marriage thought of her own brothers who she'd heard had settled in a city. She quickly left Mazar with her surviving children in search of them. She felt she needed the other half of her family and was eventually able to find her parents and her brothers. After nearly twenty years of absence, she returned to the family who by now had also given up nomadic lifestyle and had settled.

When Sanga had settled in, her mother listened quietly to her description of the calamity that had befallen her family in Mazar. Once her daughter had finished, she recounted how they too hadn't escaped tragedy either. One of her brothers was killed by a rocket in Kabul while on a visit to explore whether the family might move there for safety. It was by accident that another kochi with him had informed their family of his fate, and they eventually located his mutilated body in a hospital. Another brother had been

killed in Herat, while the third had been in his last year of university when he went missing. His body was found with nails hammered into his brain. Her mother showed Sanga the nails which she had kept in the cupboard. It wasn't clear why she'd done this – perhaps as evidence that she'd once had a talented son about to qualify as a professional.

Sanga felt numbed by all this suffering. Grief seemed to have lost its meaning and was no help in making sense of what she had witnessed herself and now heard about the fate of her brothers. Despite this, she felt determined to ensure that her surviving children had some kind of protection. She realised that returning to her uncles was the only hope, as they'd be duty bound to look after their niece. With this purpose in mind, she left her mother in search of safety under the wing of the wider family.

Auction of humans

It was clear from the moment Sanga arrived in Logar to re-join the wider family that she and her children were not welcome. 'Why did you decide to come to us?' was the first question she faced from her uncles. 'We can barely look after our own families, so how are we going feed all of you?' They complained that when her husband was alive and well-off her family had never visited, but now he was dead and she had nothing, she'd returned and appealed for help.

Sanga couldn't help feeling disappointed at her relatives' reaction, but knew that she had limited options. As people said, the sky was too high to reach and the earth too hard to hide under. So she worked hard in the family household and made sure that the children were well-behaved and polite to her relatives. This didn't seem to change their attitude, and she heard frequent complaints about them being a burden, as well as cruel comments about how her first-born had been killed by a blow that was meant for her. Bad luck, they said spitefully! She also had to endure malicious rumours about the manner of the beheading of her husband, his father and her older children in Mazar, and how her brothers had lost their lives. The suggestion seemed to be that Sanga brought bad luck to whoever she was with.

She knew that she was blamed her what had happened in her life. A bride's steps are considered bring either good or bad luck to her husband's household, but people tend to be very selective about what issues to base their judgement upon. For instance, Zer Gul's progress in his career was not attributed to the good luck that Sanga brought, but instead claimed to be the result of his own talent and hard work, perhaps rightly so. The prosperity that the family had achieved after Sanga's arrival was never mentioned. The violent death of her first born and the cold-blood murder in Mazar were cited as examples of the bad luck she brought. Despite the fact that there was a civil war raging and taking many lives, every tragedy seemed to be Sanga's fault. Perhaps the family were isolated from events due to their living in a remote village in Logar, or else they simply needed a scapegoat for what they found hard to understand.

The whispering and gossiping felt like torture to Sanga, who felt unwanted by the people around her and her surroundings. The mountains, the desert, the pathways, the fields, all felt hostile to her now. She felt powerless, hopeless and worthless.

One afternoon, all the uncles gathered in one of the houses and started a long and animated discussion. Sanga worried that they were discussing her possible expulsion from the village, and he mind turned to considering her options. Could she and the children return to Mazar? No, she could never go back to that graveyard. Could she go back to her parents'? They couldn't look after her and her children. Would she be able to manage on

her own? How could a widowed woman manage her family's life? What would people say?

As she ran through these ideas, a cousin came and asked her and the children to appear in front of the uncles. She felt apprehensive, but gathered her children and approached the house where the uncles were. She felt as though she was walking along a one-way road with no return. As they entered, she saw the uncles seated around the courtyard of the house. They all fell silent and looked at her and her children as if to weigh them up or assess their suitability for something. The eldest uncle told Sanga and her children to stand in the middle of the courtyard. No one bothered to tell her what was happening.

'Child A is old enough for household chores', the eldest uncle stated, adding that his daughters had married and he had no one at home to help his wife, so child A was his servant. None of the others raised an objection or put in a bid for child A. The uncle told child A to go to his house. Child B, a boy, could take care of animals and was duly assigned to another uncle who needed a shepherd. Again, no objection from the others. Child C, a girl, was given to another uncle but he complained that she was fat and he couldn't afford to feed her. He asked for Child D instead. Then they turned to the younger children and the group were asked who wanted child E, F and so on. In no time, Sanga's children had been auctioned off. In fact, in a real auction people bid against each other in order to get something, but the children were simply distributed among the group like slaves.

When this was over, Sanga asked what was to become of her. The eldest uncle cleared his throat and said 'You are an old woman. If you want to remarry, you can, otherwise our families will give you food in return for your service. That is all.' She felt as though she'd been stripped off everything. She had lost part of her family to death, and now the remainder was taken away from her alive. She was powerless, hopeless and felt worthless. She felt dizzy and couldn't think straight anymore. The cruel world had taken control of her life.

Sanga did chores in different houses in return for a scrap of bread. It was complete slavery. She felt that she should thank the ground for letting her walk over it, the air for not choking her, the sun for not depriving her of light, the nights for not consuming her. People must be right, she felt, about how she'd brought misfortune to those around her. She was in fact the embodiment of bad luck.

Sanga missed her children but could not see them, apart from glimpses she would catch when one of them passed by. She felt as if she had never been their mother. She was just a stranger in this village. It was as if the kind villagers had tolerated her presence so they could save her from dying of hunger.

Sanga had nightmares about the horror in Mazar. She dreamt that her husband's detached hand was suffocating her. She was afraid of going to sleep or even shutting her eyes in case the hand chased her again. She wondered whether Zer Gul was blaming her for letting the children be auctioned off by the uncles. Maybe he was angry with her. But this was never clear from her frequent terrifying nightmares.

Free will

Sanga worked day and night in return for left overs from different families. She came to believe that this had always been her fate, which she could not escape. Even if she could fly into the sky, she'd be dragged back down to the earth, she thought. Even if she could hide under the surface of the earth, fate would hold her by her ears and pull her out. Fate has all the power.

She was not able to take a break even when the whole village was having a nap after lunch. Sometimes her children were able to drop by and see her

and they'd snatch a few whispered words before returning to their chores. She endured endless insults and never lifted her head to see who was abusing her. After all, it was all her own doing and she deserved what she got.

One day Sanga was busy washing clothes by the river on her own. She'd been given lots of clothes to wash by several families, and it was hard going. In the early afternoon, she noticed that her children had quietly gathered around her by the river. It was the first time in months she remembered that she was actually a mother. But watching them be auctioned off like slaves made her feel that she hadn't done her duty – she'd been a bad mother. As she stood up and saw that there was no one else in sight, she jumped into action and said: 'Come on boys and girls, follow me!'

They walked in haste along the river bank for hours, looking over their shoulders to see that they were not being followed. They dared not pause for breath, but simply walked as fast as they could. Sanga could feel here energy returning as she walked with her dear children. Soon they were far from the village but stayed away from the road just in case the villagers came in search of them. As darkness fell, they didn't stop, even though the younger children were tiring and they had difficulty making out the path. They reached a bridge and all huddled under it for a rest. Soon most of the children were sound asleep.

At the break of dawn, Sanga felt the cool breeze from the river over her cheeks. She had forgotten where she was, but the sight of water flowing gently beside the grass and wild flowers brought back what had happened. She left the sleeping children and climbed up the riverbank where she found herself surrounded by green fields. She spotted a flock of animals grazing in the distance, and went back to the river to splashed some water over her face. She felt the joy of being in the midst nature again, as when she'd been young. She was free at last. ●

A LIFE WITH A KILLER

A lion in uniform

Shir Khan must have weighed two kilograms when he was born. He was their third child, and his father joked that he and his wife had perhaps used all their energy on their first two, which is why Shir Khan was so small and weak. But he didn't like it when others passed judgment on his son - if anyone said anything, he'd respond that he was as fit as a shir or lion. Over time, the boy's name became shir. His father was urged by the family members to name him Zemarai - a proper Pashto name, they said. But he refused and continued to address his son as shir. He knew that this would stand him in good stead when he went to school, especially as he wanted him to go to a farsiwan school. He reminded his family of the need to take into account the language of education offered by the only school accessible to his son, where his name would strike fear into his classmates and so they'd leave him alone. Just before his seventh birthday, on applying for the boy's identity card, his father put his name down as Shir Khan. The suffix 'khan' was common in the family but rarely included in their names on their ID documents, but his father knew that it would not be questioned.

In the village where Shir Khan grew up, the boys were real bullies. They victimised his elder brothers but, when they tried to fight back, the other boys joined forces to beat them up. As Shir Khan grew up however, things were different and the village boys did not bully him, either because he was not felt to be a threat or he had some kind of hold over them. In fact, he developed a good relationship with most boys of his age in the village.

Going to school however was a challenge, as it was some distance from the village. Sometimes the older boys would offer him a piggyback or take him on their bikes. His brothers objected, as their father had instructed them not to let Shir Khan out of their sight. The three of them would therefore go to school together on foot.

The school, set among fields and irrigation channels at some distance from the village, was surrounded by high walls that resembled a fortress. The main channel passed in front of the school as it flowed through other villages and joined the Kabul river downstream in the city. Smaller channels provided water to fields around and beyond the school, which they encircled. It was as if the channels had been dug to prevent pupils from escaping their classes. Like many other schools in the area, it was located to serve several communities and as a result the parents didn't feel that it belonged to anyone.

Along with other pupils. Shir Khan and his brothers had to walk quite some distance every day from their village to attend classes. Initially, he would complain about the long walk, and his father would remind him he was a shir, his father's lion, who was strong. This would annoy Shir Khan, but he said nothing and soon got used to the exercise. Sometimes he would sprint the last leg on his way back after classes so as to be the first to reach home. He had grown lean and tall by the time his first sister, Zarlashta, was born.

Shir Khan was a cheerful boy who always seemed to have a smile on his face, and this made him popular. He developed a quiet sense of humour, but was serious. When his brothers came home with signs that they had been beaten by their teachers, his father would ask why this had happened. Shir Khan never suffered such beatings and, when their father inspected

the bruises and welts on his brothers' hands and asked why they'd been punished, he would quietly say 'homework'. At first his father did not understand, but then he saw that Shir Khan was respectfully lowering his eyes and explaining that his brothers were only punished when they failed to do their homework. While his brothers would always blame the teachers for cruelty, it was Shir Khan who had the courage and honesty to explain the truth to his father. From then on, their father would call his brothers 'homework' instead of using their names - and everyone in the family would laugh.

While his brothers were always in trouble, Shir Khan's teachers liked him. He was however scared of one of his female teachers, who would carry a metal tool that looked like a pair of pliers and that she called cheshmkash or eye-tweezers. She would threaten to use this on children who failed to do their homework, saying she would remove their eyes. This terrified Shir Khan and his classmates, and sometime he would see the cheshmkash in his dreams and jump out of bed in a panic. No matter how much his father reminded him that he was a brave lion, the image of the cheshmkash would strike him with fear.

In the autumn, Shir Khan's mama, or maternal uncle, got married to a woman from another village. His mama was a farsiwan and, along with his brothers and sisters and his many cousins, he had a lot of fun at the wedding. They danced all the way while accompanying the decorated horse-driven tonga that brought the bride to meet her groom, with men playing dohl and sorna, the big drum and the high-pitched flute, to welcome the party.

A week or so after the wedding, Shir Khan joined his mother to visit his mama and his new bride at their home. After play with his cousins in the courtyard, they went inside for lunch and his mother asked him to call the new bride to join them for food. On opening the door of his mama's room, he saw the bride sitting at a mirror and doing something with her eyes. He thought that he saw the cheshmkash in her hand and began to scream, pleading with his mother to stop the bride from hurting herself. No one knew what Shir Khan was talking about as he yelled 'She's got the cheshmkash and is pulling out her eyes.'

After the bride had put away the tweezers, Shir Khan's mother explained that she had been putting on makeup, not pulling her eyes out. 'But I saw the cheshmkash!" he insisted. 'Who told you that this is a cheshmkash?" his mother asked. 'My teacher' he explained, adding that 'she would threaten to pull our eyes out with it, if we didn't do our homework.' His mother reassured him, explaining that she'd had similar tweezers as part of her jahez, or wedding presents, but had barely used them after her marriage. She explained to Shir Khan that they were used by women to curl their eyelashes rather than to take their eyes out. The boy was not convinced and refused to touch the tweezers.

After some years, Shir Khan's elder brother went to the military boarding school after enlisting. His military uniform was quite the talk of the village, as most people had not seen someone dressed in this way before. Shir Khan's uncle was the only Pashtun from the village who had been in the military, and his father wanted to follow in his footsteps and so had paid a bribe to enrol his eldest son at the military school. The new cadet was allowed to come home on Thursday evening and spend Friday at home before returning to the school very early on Saturday. Shir Khan missed his brother during the week and hated the school for taking him away from the village. But he loved his brother's dashing uniform and pleaded with his father to enrol him too. His father would always change the subject of the conversation, as he knew that Shir Khan would never be accepted because he was too short – even with a bribe.

Instead, Shir Khan's father would encourage the young man to think about training to be a doctor. Anyone could do medical work regardless of their height, or even gender – he had himself seen women doctors in the

hospital in the city. What is more, medicine was lucrative as most doctors had two incomes, from a government hospital or clinic and from private practice after official working hours.

Shir Khan didn't do as well at school as his older brothers, and never even made it to the top three in his class. 'My shir is third from the bottom this year', his father used to joke when Shir Khan came home with his exam results. What he lacked for high scores, however, he more than made up with personal charm, which meant that he never failed any subject.

By the time Shir Khan had completed his schooling, resistance to the Soviet occupation had spread to many parts of the country. His results in the state exams were not good enough to secure a place in a higher education institution. Disappointed, his father tried to find a way to have him enrolled in the medical faculty, to no avail. When the new academic year began, Shir Khan found himself at home while most of his classmates were at university.

As the conflict intensified, the police academy launched a recruitment campaign for young men. Shir Khan heard that the height requirement had been changed, so he applied and was accepted. After two years in the police academy, he was assigned to a remote province, but his uncle was influential enough to secure him a post in Kabul, away from the front-lines. Shir Khan enjoyed his work. His father was happy too and proud of the status that having two sons in uniform brought him in the village.

A noisy marriage

Shir Khan's elder brother was by now an accomplished military officer and his parents found him an educated urban wife. Soon after their marriage, his brother was assigned to a province in the southeast of the country

where fighting was fierce. He spent months in the field and only had very short periods of leave at home in the village. His other brother didn't want to get married, even though his parents suggested suitable women as possible brides. So the parents turned their attention to Shir Khan and soon found a literate girl from the city for him to marry. He was delighted and wanted to get married straight away, but the parents wanted his brother at the ceremony and his leave schedule was unpredictable. So they decided to wait, as Shir Khan too wanted both of his brothers to be by his side at his wedding.

A winter passed without Shir Khan's marriage taking place. In early spring, his brother did get some leave but there was not time for the family to organise the wedding. Before returning to his duties, he promised to come back in a month and suggested that his parents start making arrangements for Shir Khan's wedding. The groom-to-be was excited and started shopping, taking his fiancé with his sisters-in-law to visit textile shops where they chose fabric, shirts, ties and scarves as presents for the bride's family. This went on for days, as they searched for suitable gifts for everyone. Then it was time for gold. Shir Khan's fiancé didn't like the usual jewellery that most women wore and so they looked for special items. A key part of each shopping trip was a good kebab in one of the city's restaurants. Shir Khan was pleased that his wife-to-be wanted different jewellery, but found the shopping very tiring and tedious. He also had to buy items for each ceremony, the henna-night, the nikah and then the actual wedding, and found himself running from one end of the city to another, only to find that there were additional things to be bought. Soon the house piled high with gifts and supplies for the big day.

What is more, the venue of the wedding needed to be agreed between the families. The fiancé's family wanted it to be held in a wedding hall, but Shir Khan's father put his foot down and refused, saying that taking women to these places was against his family tradition, so they would not attend the ceremony. The bride's father tried to persuade Shir Khan's father, to no avail. Finally, it was agreed that the wedding would be held at the family home. All the shopping was done and cooks found, and the mullah was reserved for the nikah. But there was no news of when Shir Khan's brother would get leave.

The night of the henna had to be held without Shir Khan's brother present. His father kept praying to God to shine some light of mercy on the heart of his son's superiors so they would allow him to attend his brother's wedding. In the mosque, the mullah prayed for his safe return. The following day, as the wedding got under way, there was lots of noise with family members shouting instructions, with village boys assigned to assist the various people in charge of different things. All of Shir Khan's relatives, uncles, aunts and many cousins were helping out. It was almost as though the wedding required serious shouting to give it the necessary sense of occasion.

Despite the air of celebration for the couple, Shir Khan's father was furious at his son's superiors for not allowing him to take leave to be at his brother's wedding. This made him very irritable, and the family reacted by shouting instructions loudly for more wood to be in the fire, more water fetched from the well, the paths to be kept dry and the like.

Because of his father's dark mood, Shir Khan's nikah was not a happy event. When the issue of dowry came up, he put on a fierce expression and silenced members of the bride's family when they tried to speak. One of the bride's uncles took serious offence, saying 'Brother, you seem ready to fight'. Others nodded in agreement but did not raise their voices lest they provoke an assault. The man had a point; Shir Khan's father seemed willing to pay someone to create an excuse for a fight so that he could vent the anger he felt at the absence of his elder son. When the nikah ceremony was over, a couple of elders from the bride's side murmured to each other that it had seemed more like a funeral wake than a wedding.

As Shir Khan was accompanied outside the nikah ceremony to pay his respects to his mother, grandmother and other relatives. His mother had asked one of her nephews to be at his side in the absence of his elder brother, but had not told her husband of this. Seeing his mother's nephew standing at Shir Khan's left side, he lost his temper completely, shouting at the young man. 'What are you doing standing by my son's side, eh? Who gave you permission? This place belongs to his brother and nobody should stand in his place!'. The young man left the room quietly and was not seen again.

From beginning to end, Shir Khan's wedding day was overshadowed by his father's bad temper. He was hoping that his father might calm down when he saw the bride and, after the women's ceremony was over he walked beside his bride, praying in his heart to get a warm welcome from his father. Instead his father gave them one look and disappeared, When his uncle went to find him, he found Shir Khan's father weeping his heart out like a child. He tried to console him, but he just kept cursing the military for not giving his son leave so that he could be there.

Shir Khan was pleased that his wife didn't mention his father's foul temper on their wedding day. Maybe her family hadn't told her what a scene her father-in-law had made, and Shir Khan didn't want to mention it, except to explain that his father had been justifiably upset because one of his eldest sons had not been there.

Shir Khan visited his in-laws for shahsalami, or bride-groom's greeting, taking with him homemade cookies baked by his mother and sisters. This short visit led by the bride-groom himself for the first time was to mark the start of the formal bond of marriage. This was his first visit to his in-laws as a married man and he kissed the hands of his mother- and father-in-law and greeted the rest of the family, praying that no one would mention his father's behaviour at the wedding. No one mentioned it and the event went well, with bride's family proving to be respectful, which reassured him.

Luckily for Shir Khan, his father was in a good mood on the day of takhtjami when women from bride's family visited and brought presents. This takhtjami party was the last in a series of events marking the end of wedding ceremonies and the start of life as husband and wife. On this occasion, his father engaged with the male guests who accompanied the women and assured them how happy the newly-wed couple were. He even talked to some of the female guests in their own farsiwan language. By the end of the party, the house was littered with so many gifts that his mother didn't know where to put them.

On a hot day later in the summer, Shir Khan's father was sitting under the shade of a mulberry tree outside the house when a military armoured car pulled up by the side of the road. He got up, expecting his son to emerge, but instead an officer approached, addressing him as 'Kaka jaan'. After some polite questions to ascertain who he was, the officer took his arm and invited him to sit down again in the shade of the tree. He resisted, offering the visitor tea in his house. The officer thanked him but explained that he had something important to discuss.

'How is my son?' the father asked the officer. The man remained quiet and had a rather blank look on his face. Looking into the officer's eyes, he realised what had happened. Images of fire and smoke assailed him, with body parts lying scattered on the ground. He heard the deafening roar of rockets, tanks and jetfighters and found himself blinded by flashes of light and suffocating in smoke. Through the smoke, he saw charred objects that resembled burned logs, but when he focused he realised they were charred human bodies. All of them looked like his son. His dear, dear son. His body was everywhere. Death and destruction was everywhere. When he looked at the officer's mouth he thought that he saw smoke and fire. 'We belong to Allah and to Him we shall return' the officer quoted from the Holy Qur'an,

touching Shir Khan's father's hand gently. Despite the images of war that he imagined, he remained calm and didn't interrupt the officer. 'Please show me my son' he asked. The officer got up and led him slowly to the back of the vehicle, from which the soldiers had taken a coffin. The gently removed the lid, and all that the father could make out was a charred body blackened like coal. He didn't recognise his son at all, but then saw his photo on the identity tag on his chest. He took the tag, rubbed it to his eyes and kissed it. 'Close the coffin tightly with nails', he told the soldiers 'and don't open it for anyone, not matter how much they beg you'. The officer ordered the soldiers to follow the father's instructions.

Shir Khan's father stumbled home and went straight to the stable, which was empty. His heart ached and he was gasping for breath. He then went to the storage room and looked around, uncertain what he was doing. Did he want to confide in something? Did he want to whisper a secret to something? That his son's unrecognisable charred body was in a coffin outside at the back of an armoured car? 'Have you lost your mind?' his wife

called when she heard him stumbling around the store. When she came to find him, his expression told her some serious calamity had befallen them. He broke down and she gently took their son's identity tag and sat next to him with the door open ajar, and also began to weep.

Soon their house was full of relatives from all quarters. A grave was prepared and the mullah was waiting for the coffin. Shir Khan did not know what to do. He asked to see his dear brother's body, but the officer told him that the coffin had been closed at his father's order. He put on his police uniform and helped his father into clean clothes for the funeral prayers. It was all over by mid-afternoon, when the officer asked the family's permission to leave.

Shir Khan's wife had sleepless nights and nightmares after that. Every time Shir Khan woke up, he saw his wife pacing the room, sitting by the window watching the cemetery or looking up at the sky. She wouldn't tell her husband what her nightmares were about.

Traveller's birth

With the fall of the government in Kabul, fighting between opposition groups made it impossible to stay in the village, where there was constant shelling. Shir Khan hid his police uniform and left with his wife. He begged his father to go with him, but he didn't want to leave the house and land. Shir Khan couldn't stay in the village and realised he had to get his heavily pregnant wife to safety. They found a taxi leaving Kabul and jumped into the back seats. Shir Khan sat by the door with his wife in the middle and another woman on the far side. The husband of that women sat in the front passenger seat.

As they were driving through a barren part of the countryside beyond Jalalabad, his wife's waters broke. Shir Khan didn't know what to do. Luckily there was one other women in the car, but there was no time to waste. They were in the middle of nowhere. Shir Khan asked to taxi driver to stop by the road and the men left the car to discuss what to do. The two women were left inside the taxi.

Shir Khan asked the taxi driver if he knew of a clinic or village nearby, but the driver was not from the area and did not know. The other passenger was also from Kabul and had never been to this part of the country before. They looked for any sign of habitation and waited for another vehicle to pass by so they could ask. One of them finally spotted a car coming from the opposite direction and, as they began to wave it down, they heard a child's cry from the taxi.

Shir Khan's son was born in a taxi somewhere in a desert in eastern Afghanistan. They used whatever they could all spare to wrap the child up warm. 'He is a musaafer', the taxi driver remarked. 'Musaafer, a traveller'. Shir Khan chuckled. 'That'll be his name'.

The other passenger in the taxi told Shir Khan of a hospital in Peshawar for Afghan refugees. He offered to take him there, and when they'd arrived in Peshawar they went straight to the hospital, which was staffed entirely by Afghans. Were it not for the heat, he might have been in his own country. His wife and new-born son were taken in by a nurse who promised that they would be seen by a midwife.

Shir Khan paced the corridors of the hospital lost in thought. He realised that they had nowhere to stay, and knew that his wife needed a comfortable place to rest after the adventure on their journey. While pacing, a new patient was rushed in on a stretcher carried by a group of nurses, asking people to give way. One of them looked briefly at Shir Khan and then went on. For an instant, Shir Khan felt he recognized the man but, because he had a surgical mask on, wasn't sure. He went out to the courtyard as the sun

was about to set, thinking about options for the night when he heard someone calling his name. It was the same man who had glanced at him a couple minutes ago, who turned out to be one of Shir Khan's school classmates, now working as a nurse at the hospital. The man took him to his office offered him tea, while Shir Khan recounted the story of how his son had been born in the taxi on the way from Kabul. The man went out and checked with female nurses that Shir Khan's wife and son were well, although the boy had been born a little prematurely. When the nurse learned that they had nowhere to go, he offered to keep his wife and his child in the hospital for a few days, while they could also be monitored.

His friend took Shir Khan to his own house for the night and the next day helped him rent a room in the annex of a building not too far from the hospital. Shir Khan bought most of what he needed, including a second-hand cooker, for his room from the refugee market. Through his friend, Shir Khan got a job, initially as a guard and then as an administrator at the hospital.

He ended up living in Peshawar for about eight or nine years. With his salary from the hospital, he was able to rent a bigger house when his parents joined him the following year. The family lost more members in the year that he'd been away; his younger brother, a student, was killed by a rocket and younger sister, Zarlashta, had also died of a heart attack or a stroke which was said to have been caused by fear of rockets. To make matters worse, there had been a severe drought that had affected the harvest from his father's land, which had prompted him to finally leave the village.

Shir Khan's second son was born in the hospital in Peshawar where he worked. By then, he knew all the doctors and staff and was able to ensure the best possible care for his wife and the new baby. The news from Afghanistan wasn't good and their hopes of returning home looked remote, as the family resigned themselves to what may be a long exile. At age six, Musaafer began to attend a small school run by refugees. The house would become a noisy place when it was time to go to school, and peace only returned when he'd been packed off to classes.

In time, Shir Khan's wife gave birth to a daughter, at which point they decided that three children were enough – even though his father wasn't happy with the decision. After a couple of more years, the situation in Afghanistan changed and refugees started to return from Pakistan in large numbers. Shir Khan's parents were among the first to return and, after some rain and snow, his father hoped for a good harvest. He sent a message to Shir Khan urging him to return and build a new house in the village for his family. This was tempting, and Shir Khan and family packed up and, on his return to the village, used his savings to build a small two-storey house on a plot of land his father had purchased for him.

Rather reluctantly, Shir Khan went back to his previous office and, to his surprise, was immediately reinstated to his position in the police force. In less than a year he was promoted and issued a pistol with some bullets, for his own personal protection. His house was somewhat isolated so having the weapon was reassuring. Initially, Shir Khan would put the weapon under his pillow at night but soon more homes were built close to his, so there was a sense of community. Then he kept his weapon in a cupboard. His wife went back to her teaching job and life was looking up for his family.

The steel-hearted Taazi

Musaafer had made new friends in the village and had lots of fun with them, playing truant from school, playing marbles and sometimes gambling. One of these boys was the young brother of a man known as 'Taazi' – who wanted people to believe him to be the fastest and fiercest man ever born.

Musaafer and his mates would listen to Taazi's stories about raiding gambling houses, retrieving stolen goods from thieves, and keep robbers and bandits at bay. He claimed that all sorts of criminals were afraid of him and that he could control them.

Taazi told the boys that he'd learned his skills during the jehad, when he was the fastest moving on foot in the mountains, picked any boy or girl he fancied, regardless of their family background. He was, he said, the most feared commander and his rivals would shudder at mention of his name.

Musaafer would come home with stories he'd heard from Taazi's brother and Shir Khan told him to be careful and stop mixing with the family. Being in the police force, he knew that Taazi was in fact a notorious criminal. Musaafer however was transfixed by the stories of Taazi's heroism and the sway that he said he had over bandits. To get the boy to see sense, Shir Khan asked his father to speak to Musaafer. He listened to his grandfather respectfully and Shir Khan took this as a good sign. However, the following day Musaafer brought Taazi's little brother and the rest of his gang home and started gambling in the front room. When his mother returned from teaching at school, he forced her to make tea for his guests. The gang left just before Shir Khan returned from work, and he was furious when his wife told him what had happened.

Shir Khan faced a dilemma. His position in the police force meant that he could collect evidence of Taazi's crimes and have him sent to jail. That would remove his bad influence on the boys of the village, including Musaafer. But he knew that this might prove very costly in the long run, as hostility between two families could result in violence that could tear the community apart. He knew how easy it would be for Taazi to bribe his way out of jail and return to the village to seek vengeance against Shir Khan and his family. The safer option would be to leave the village and rent a house in the city, far from Taazi's bad influence. But this was not easy to achieve; his wife's teaching job meant that she'd need to travel from the city to work, and the family would need to abandon their house and live apart from their relatives. What is more, if they were to live in the city, one of them would need to leave their jobs and stay at home to look after the children, as there would be no close relatives at hand. Shir Khan felt stuck. His father and brothers urged him to stay in the village.

Banishment

Shortly afterwards, Shir Khan got a call while at work urging him to return home immediately. When he got back to the village, there were people around his house. His father had just arrived and looked pale and distraught. No one explained anything to him, but when he asked one of his neighbours, he simply said 'Go inside and see for yourself'. When Shir Khan entered his home, all looked normal at first. When he reached the door of the front room, however, he saw his wife lying in a pool of her own blood. A pillowcase with her sewing kit were scattered on the mattress that lay beside her. He looked at the window to see if a stray bullet had perhaps entered, but the glass was intact.

Shir Khan didn't know whether to scream, cry, or grab his pistol and put a bullet to his own head. Then he thought of the children. Musaafer appeared at the doorway and Shir Khan asked him 'Where are your brother and sister?' "He is on the stairs and she is in the back room.' Musaafer responded, rather casually. He rushed through the corridor to find his young son lying on the stairs down to the basement, with a stream of blood trickling from under him. He then went in to the backroom, but could not see his daughter. 'Where is she?' he shouted, before noticing her hair splayed behind the bed, with a pool of blood.

‘Musaafer killed them’ Shir Khan’s father sobbed. ‘He killed my daughter-in-law and my grandchildren’. Who could know at this stage? Musaafer certainly let Taazi and his young brother into his home, and had been in awe of their stories of heroic derring-do. There was little doubt that Musaafer had brought this on his own family, but could he be blamed for the cold-blooded murder of his mother and his siblings? Realizing that Musaafer was now the only one he had, Shir Khan hugged Musaafer tight and urged him to stay calm.

Shir Khan went with a group of villagers to Taazi’s house, but they found a big padlock on the outside gate and the neighbours told them no one was at home. Taazi and his family had vanished. Shir Khan called his colleagues at work and asked them to contact the relevant police department. Police from the criminal investigation department arrived at the scene. The took photos of the victims, after which there was a funeral, to which everyone in the village came to pay their respects. They had already prepared the graves in the family’s ancestral graveyard where Shir Khan’s two brothers and sister were also buried. As they returned from the graveyard, Shir Khan thanked the villagers for their help. ‘I have to accompany the police now’, he told them. ‘When I am back we will set the time for the condolences’. With that he jumped into a police vehicle and left the village.

The questioning at the criminal investigation department was uncomfortable for Shir Khan. The investigators focused questions on his role as if he had himself killed his wife and children. ‘When was the last time you had a fight with your wife?’, one of them asked. ‘Did you ever see her with another man?’ was the most insulting question, as though he’d killed his wife in revenge for an affair she may have had. ‘What was your wife’s relationship with other teachers like? Did she do the shopping in the village? Were you ever suspicious of her, maybe fancying one of the shopkeepers or someone else in the village? Tell us more about your in-laws. Did you ever confront any of them? What was the problem with the children? Why did they get caught between you and your wife?’ There seemed to be no end to these nonsensical questions, and Shir Khan felt utterly exhausted. He regretted reporting the crime to the police, and felt that they were trying to label him as a murderer, rather than doing their job and finding the actual killer. He felt doubly broken by the treatment he got from the investigators. He felt in desperate need of some quiet space where he could grieve. The investigators kept him in a locked room in the police station overnight, and this was the most difficult night of his entire life.

Shir Khan felt separated from the rest of his family – their only connection seemed to be grief. They were grieving at home while Shir Khan remained in a locked room in the police station. His parents were torn between grieving the loss of their daughter-in-law and their grandchildren and

coping with Shir Khan's imprisonment. Shir Khan's father assigned some relatives to keep a watch on Taazi's house, which they reported remained locked while none of the family had been seen in the village.

At around midday the following day, the police had satisfied themselves with questioning and concluded that Shir Khan was innocent. They let him go, but had collected information in a thick file on Taazi and his young brother. One of the investigators told Shir Khan that there was already a lot of evidence against Taazi and his criminal network across Kabul, and that they'd deal with him but urged Shir Khan to stay clear of him.

On the way home, Shir Khan wondered why the investigator had tried to frighten him to stay clear of Taazi. Was it because they were scared or even in league with him? He felt confused and angry that such a criminal network could operate in the open. Grief and rage were competing inside him. He thought of how to avenge his wife and his children. He was upset that life seemed to be going on normally around him; the taxi driver who took him back to the village didn't even ask after his family. Life was so unfair, he felt.

On his return to the village, Shir Khan didn't have the heart to go to his house. He had asked his father to dispose of the blood-soaked rugs, beds, etc. but still couldn't enter the house. It seemed as though an irrational force was pushing him towards the house, where his little daughter might be waiting to run and jump to his arms and ask him what he had brought from the city for her. But he knew that there would be no one waiting for him, so went to his parents' house. It was full with mourners and, as soon as he arrived, the Mullah recited verses from Holy Qur'an and they all prayed for the souls of his family. A few of the mourners cursed Taazi. More visitor came as word went out that Shir Khan was there. He sat with his father on his right and his son on his left side, greeting mourners and thanking them for their sympathy. The Mullah went to the mosque to lead the prayer and Shir Khan's father and elders followed him.

When visitors had all left it was very late after the prayers, Shir Khan's father told him he had something important to talk to him about alone. They went to a room and shut the door behind them, asking Shir Khan's mother to ensure that nobody disturbed them. It must have been around midnight that Shir Khan and his father came out of the room. His father urged him to get some sleep. He couldn't sleep as what his father had told him had shaken him. At the crack of dawn, he went to his house. The front and back rooms were both empty, with signs of where stains had been cleaned from the floor and on the stairs. He could still see blood everywhere, and picked up the bullet cartridges. He found his pistol in its usual place in the cupboard, but the bullets were missing. He smelled the pistol. He looked around as if he felt the presence of a stranger, but there was no one else. He smelled the weapon again and looked at the cartridges and counted them several times. He went outside and looked around. He bent down as if he was looking for a needle and searched the whole courtyard. He went back inside and used the flashlight of his mobile phone to search, but the light made the traces of blood more evident. He went out to the hallway and only then saw something glittering against the light behind the entrance door. He picked it up. It was the last cartridge that was missing. He put them all in his pocket, turned off the lights and left the house.

His father was waiting for him when he returned and whispered in his son's ear. Shir Khan handed him the pistol which he promised to keep somewhere safe in the house. His father then gave him a little pouch. 'How about the police case against Taazi?', Shir Khan asked. 'Leave that with me. I will tell the police to scrap it', his father assured him. Shir Khan then went in to say goodbye to his mother. Musaafer was waiting for him there and they both said their goodbyes before leaving the house together. He found a taxi on the main road and looked around for one last time before leaving the village. As the taxi drove away he thought of the list of instructions he had left his father.

It was not easy for Shir Khan to leave his village for good. He had returned from exile hoping to rebuild a life, and had begun to achieve this before losing everything. He had no choice but to leave.

In the city, they boarded a bus whose destination was a remote corner of the country. Shir Khan was torn. His head was telling him one thing, his heart was telling him the opposite. He wondered whether his father was right in his assessment of the situation, and kept on thinking what he had told him, finding his views convincing. He didn't however feel strongly enough to jump out of his seat and ask the driver to stop the bus, saying 'I'm sorry but we boarded the wrong bus' and return home.

He hoped that he would wake up to find that this was all a nightmare, from the bloodbath, the police detention, the condolences and his father's crazy ramblings about. He would do a khatem, or a full recitation of the Holy Qur'an to try to break the nightmare and return to normal life. But there was no waking up. When he punched himself, he felt the pain which told him he was already awake. He touched the metal on the seat in the bus and felt the cold steel. Every time he found out that he was awake he felt more grieved. He thought about how his life had been improving, with a family and a good livelihood. But then suddenly everything was gone.

His little daughter was playing in the courtyard. She was following a little bird, perhaps a sparrow or a tit, hopping from one place to the next as she tried to catch it. The little bird hopped towards the wall and, as she followed it the wall begun to crumble. Shir Khan jumped to rescue his daughter.

He woke up as the bus was going through a steep bend on a mountain pass. At the summit, the bus stopped and the passengers got down to freshen up. Shir Khan sat on a rock, watching others splash water on their faces, while others made their ablutions or ate food they had brought with them. Shir Khan felt restless. He looked at Musaafer, wondering what would the rest of his life be like with his surviving son. He plucked the courage to ask Musaafer 'Why did you do it?' Musaafer's eyes said everything he needed to know.

His wife is stitching a pillowcase, while his young son and daughter play in the room. Musaafer asks his mother for something and she responds 'Let me finish this pillow case'. Musaafer goes into the other room, opens the cupboard and takes out the pistol and bullets, loading the weapon before going back to the front room and aiming at his mother. She raises her hands and urges him to be careful. The first bullet he fires goes through her shoulder. She gets up to take the weapon from the boy, but falls when the second bullet hits her. 'You killed my mother', his young brother screams before Musaafer aims the pistol at him. He runs out of the room and Musaafer follows him to the hallway, missing him with the first bullet as he flees to the basement. Musaafer follows him and fires, hitting him in the back so he falls on the stairs. Their sister starts crying and Musaafer aims at her but misses. She hides behind a bed as Musaafer stands over her and pulls the trigger. The girl is silent but he pulls the trigger again. The pistol is empty. Musaafer puts it back in the cupboard and leaves the house.

Shir Khan got to his feet. The whole world seemed to be turning around in his head, or maybe it was his head that was spinning. He couldn't think straight. But one thing was clear; his father was right to advise him he had no future in his own village. His community couldn't deal with this tragedy. He needed to make himself invisible, to disappear so that the village could forget and heal. Shir Khan needed to banish himself and continue his life with a killer in remote corners of the country where nobody would know them.

DAUGHTER

I was in the hotel waiting for travelers arriving by road from Iran. I'd asked the proprietor if he expected any people to arrive that night, but he seemed not to know. A man approached me to ask about a room so I directed him to the proprietor. He was difficult to understand and seemed distressed. Curious as to whether he'd stay at the hotel, I lingered for a while. Noticing me, he approached shyly, and I asked him about his travels. He let out a deep sigh, and then recounted of his journey to Iran.

I grew up in small village where life was tough and everyone relied on farming for a livelihood. There was no alternative. We were just able to grow sufficient food to last us through the harsh winters.

Around two years ago I married and through that a new chapter of my life would begin. Sadly, my joy as a husband did not last long - not longer than six months in fact. When my wife was three months pregnant, I decided to leave my family and village to try to earn money to provide for my family. With my father's permission and the blessing of my wife, I travelled to Iran where I hoped to find work and send money back so that the family might move from the village to the city of Herat.

With this aim in mind, I travelled to Kabul to obtain a passport. I soon realized however that this would be more difficult than I'd

imagined. Not only was the cost prohibitive, but I had to prove that I'd paid my municipal rates which, as I had no home in Kabul, was impossible. Even if I had obtained a passport, getting a visa for Iran was well beyond my means, and would require me to pay a hefty deposit that would only be reimbursed if I returned to Kabul after three months. My plan was to work in Iran for at least several years, so I resolved to try to travel 'informally' and use the services of people-smugglers.

The first stage of my journey was by bus from Kabul to Herat, which meant that we had to travel through areas that were disputed between the Taliban, the Afghan army and foreign troops. It was clear from the burned-out vehicles along the sides of the road that the fighting was intense and, as we approached Qandahar, the bus had to stop for hours while fighting raged close by. When we were eventually able to proceed, we saw many bodies lying beside the road. Finally we arrived in Herat late in the night, exhausted. I was told that we'd need to leave again before sunrise, before the gate at the border with Iran opened. A group of us was led by the smuggler to a place close to the border, where we waited until we were told to run through the fence as fast as we could. Once we'd crossed, we saw a vehicle waiting for us. Among our group was a family who were going to Iran to marry their daughter to one of her father's relatives. The young woman was clearly unhappy with this and became increasingly distressed as her father repeatedly threatened her.

Our unhappy group proceeded via a circuitous route to Tehran so as to avoid police check-posts. We split up when we arrived, each going their own way. I managed after few days to get a job carrying bricks up to the sixth floor of a building under construction. It was hard work and we were not treated well but, along the other Afghans I worked with told me not to complain or else I'd be reported to the police. It was the same in my subsequent jobs, on a farm working with livestock. As well as the tough working conditions, the Iranians I encountered treated Afghans as somehow inferior, insulting us on the street or in shops. Moreover, we were excluded from government medical services and the only option was to go to expensive private clinics – which was a reason not to fall ill! Like so many other Afghans, I learned to keep a low profile, living in constant fear of being caught and deported back to Afghanistan.

In the midst of this struggle, one night my father called me to tell me that my wife had given birth to a daughter. I was very excited and couldn't wait to see her, but realized that I needed to stay and work to provide for her and her mother. Unlike the poor girl who had been part of our group and whose destiny was to be married to an unknown man in Iran, I was determined that my daughter would be educated. Even though she was still very young, I already felt proud of her.

After two years of hard work in Iran in many different jobs, I had earned enough to return and called my father to tell him that I would be back in a week. I asked him to sell our land in the village and move to Herat, where my daughter would be able to go to school and I'd be able to find work and hopefully buy a small house. He agreed to bring the family to meet me in Herat.

I went to register as a returnee, and had to spend several days in a camp while my case was being processed. Even the most basic food was expensive in the camp, so I ate only bread, but this did not matter as I was looking forward to seeing my daughter for the first time. I'm waiting here to meet my family and begin our new life together in Herat. ●

THE TURNING PLANET

The kite catcher

Matin was the fastest runner. He could catch any kite that was cut loose in the air. When running after kites, he would completely lose track of time. Sometimes it would be late in the evening but he would still be chasing loose kites in the air. He would only stop running when it was too dark to see any more. Upon his return home, he would usually receive a beating either from his father or whichever of his uncles he ran into. These beatings, however, did not deter him from chasing kites, making them fly and fight. The *sheeshayee-tar*[1] or glass-treated string would leave such deep cuts on his fingers that they would take the whole period between the two kite-seasons to heal properly. His kite-fights were as popular as his running. If a kite was cut loose in a competition high in the sky, the whole village would know Matin would bring back that kite. They didn't want boys from other villages to catch their kites to fly them and humiliate them for their defeat. Kites had the fliers pride attached to them and wherever they flew, they carried this with them. If they fell into an opponent's hands, that whole sense of pride was threatened. Therefore, kite-fighting was a serious matter and not to be taken lightly.

Matin would make some of the most decorated kites. His small fingers moved with great speed and dexterity as he worked with bright colours to make his kites attractive. One that became very popular among his friends in the village had a pair of female eyes on both sides with dark edges making them look more seductive, and with bright red lips in the middle. In the sky it looked like the prettiest bride that ever let her face be seen in public. Matin would only fly this when there was no other kite anywhere near, as he was afraid of losing it to opponents. As soon as other kites appeared, he would bring his favourite down to avoid a challenge.

His kite became so popular that even boys form neighbouring villages in eastern Kabul approached him, offering significant amount of money for it. He was undecided; on the one hand, he wanted the money but, on the other, he didn't want to lose the status his village had achieved with that kite. To see its design copied by other villages was definitely something he did not want. As for money, boys in his own village offered him more to make them additional kites of this special type. Matin had earned a reputation as both the youngest and thinnest of all boys in the village, and someone who was able to do things the others couldn't. Even though he was only in year six at school, he was a serious competitor in kite-fights with much older children.

Matin made a lot of money in the year he'd invented the *naawe*[2], or the bride-kite as it became known among the boys. He bought better and strong glass-treated strings which could cut other strings like a knife. But this new *sheeshayee-tar* left much deeper cuts on his fingers. There were several fights between boys from his village and those from other villages, where some of the bride-kites had ended up, with those who had downed them refusing to return them at any price.

The same year, the year of the *naawe* kite, Matin bought untreated string and tried to master the skill of making his own *sheeshayee-tar*, but failed to achieve what he'd hoped for. So, he continued to rely on string bought from the bazaar, despite the damage this did to his hands. By the end of the kite-flying season, he resolved to master this new skill for the next season.

1 Sheeshayee-tar was glass treated string. The normal kite-flying string was treated by a paste that include powdered glass making the string feel think and sharper. The better the treatment the strong the chances of cutting the string of the opponent kite became.
2 Naawe means bride in Pashto.

In between kite-flying, Matin would take the family's herd of cows to graze in the meadows before and after school. He also went to the fields and cut alfalfa for feeding the animals at home in the evening. This was the season of *feremaani*[3] as the local villagers called it, the season of plenty. His father would hold a scythe with his toes and use his hands to cut the alfalfa into fine pieces to make *doroshta*, a mixture of alfalfa and hay for the cows. The smell of alfalfa would become a vital part of Matin's childhood memories.

It was when Matin was preparing to start his seventh year at school that his father received a threat from those opposing the government, warning him to either stop working for the Americans or face the consequences. His job was to drive trucks carrying supplies for US military bases across the country. The family assembled to discuss this threat and agreed that, given that Matin's father couldn't give up this job, the family should leave the village and resettle in the city. This meant that Matin too needed to abandon his friends at school and in the village.

The thought of enrolling in a city school however made him feel proud, and he was quick to let people know of the well-known school which he would attend. In fact, many people were surprised to hear he had studied for six years at an obscure village school. However, once he'd begun at his new school, Matin realized how much he missed the clean air of the village, his friends, the cows in the meadows, the colour and scent of the alfalfa. He craved the simplicity of village life, where he could go anywhere by foot. The city was, by contrast, full of challenges. Before he'd got to know his way around, he'd often get lost on the way to or from school. In time, he managed to memorise landmarks to help him find his way. Walking across the busy city streets was very different from wandering along the canals in the village, where trees overhung the gurgling water. He longed to go back to the village, but was warned by his family not to, given the threats his father had received. As a solace, he asked his father buy flowerpots so he could grow plants to remind himself of the verdant village. Even though the plants took time to grow in pots, it provided him with a distraction.

Another thing that Matin remembered with nostalgia was his resolution to make stronger kite strings for fights in the next season. He felt sad not be among his village friends and wondered if they would replace his *naawe* kite of last season. Such thoughts preoccupied him more than the issues he faced at his new school.

One day, Matin returned home from school to find only his young siblings there alone. When he asked where his mother was, his brothers and sisters gave confusing explanations, saying that 'something had happened' to their father. He'd understood that he was somewhere in the south or west of the country delivering supplies to bases. Matin was both confused and worried. After several hours one of their uncles arrived at the house and asked where their mother was. Matin didn't know, but one of the younger children said she had gone to hospital. With this, the uncle told them to be good to each other until their mother came home, and prepared to leave. Matin wanted to go with him but was told to stay at home and look after his young siblings. Matin realised something serious must have happened, even though he didn't know what it might be.

In the early evening, their uncle returned with food for the children, and explained that their father was injured and would be in hospital for a while. He told them their mother would be staying at the hospital and, instead, he would remain with the children at home for the time being. Matin asked how his father had been injured, but his uncle didn't explain much, mentioning burns and bruises. The children had the food their uncle had brought and were sent to bed. Matin found it difficult to sleep, wondering what had happened to his father. The following day, their mother came home to prepare food for them and then went back to the hospital. She too did not

3 Feremaani is the colloquial version of Feraawani, meaning plenitude, used to describe the spring as the nature produces an abundance of food for animals and humans alike.

explain much, causing Matin to wonder why he wasn't getting straight answers to his questions. He felt that no one cared about him and wanted to see his father in hospital himself so that he could ask him why he was not coming home.

After three weeks, one of his uncles agreed to take Matin to visit his father in hospital. He looked very pale and didn't speak as he lay swathed in thick bandages. After that initial visit, Matin began to visit his father once or twice a week. Later he learned that his father's lorry had been attacked near Kandahar and had caught fire as a result of which he had sustained serious burns. The doctors told the family that he would recover from his injuries.

Some weeks later, his father was discharged and brought home in an ambulance. He was carried on a stretcher to a room where he was carefully transferred onto a bed on which Matin's mother had put a soft mattress. Before leaving, a medic told Matin's uncle and mother how to regularly turn his father to avoid bedsores. It was only now that it dawned on Matin that his father couldn't move his legs. His father later explained that he couldn't even feel his legs. He had deep scars over his body from the burns. Matin felt very sad about his father's paralysis that, as the eldest child, would mean that he'd in effect be the head of the family even though he was still only fourteen years old.

A guest in the unknown

Matin had learned no skills that would enable him to find a job in the city. He was very skilled at playing marbles, as well as making and flying kites, but these would not earn a livelihood. The reality struck home when his father's salary was stopped, and Matin's uncles had to send hand-outs of food from the village to keep the family going. There was talk of finding an apprenticeship for Matin so that he could learn a skill and earn whatever he could for his family. But if he continued with his schooling, he'd only able to work part time which would barely earn him enough. His uncles kept coming up with new ideas; one suggested taking Matin out of school so he could work full time, but his father resisted the idea and insisted that his son continue his education.

The discussion about Matin's future continued both at home in the city and back in the village among his uncles. The festival of *Eid-e Qorban* brought the uncles and aunts to Matin's house, where a sheep was slaughtered as a sacrifice in the hope of improving the family's situation. The event also reassured Matin's father that, despite his paralysis and precarious economic circumstances, his wider family would support him. Unable to go to the mosque for Eid prayer, his brothers persuaded him to pray at home instead. He agreed but asked those who were able to go to the mosque to pray for him. On their return, they all went to his bedside, kissed his hand and wished him a happy Eid. They then slaughtered the sheep, dividing it into three equal parts, one of which was given to Matin's mother to cook for the immediate family, another third was distributed among the wider family while the third part was given to others in need. Matin enjoyed the company of other children in the house and played marbles and other games.

One morning shortly after Eid, Matin was playing marbles in the courtyard and as usual kept winning games. This upset his siblings, but he'd always return a few of the marbles he'd won so that the games could continue. When his mother called him, he assumed she was going to scold him for playing marbles, but instead she handed him a mobile phone and told him to talk to his uncle. 'Get ready, boy', his uncle said 'You're going away.' Matin asked where he was going and why. 'You're going on *melmastya*[4]',

4 Melmastya is entertaining guests but here 'going on melmastya' means 'going to be a guest'.

was his uncle's response, adding "A long *melmastya*", he repeated. Matin had no idea what his uncle meant by *melmastya*. He asked his mother she didn't explain either.

Matin's mother sent him to the barber for a haircut and, when he returned home, gave him a small pouch she'd packed. She told him to shower and put on clean clothes and a jacket, before performing his prayers. Matin also cleaned his shoes and put on a new pair of socks his mother had given him. In the late afternoon his mother cooked lamb which she had kept from the *qurbani* for her son, but Matin asked for home-made yogurt, which was a favourite. Matin had little idea of what lay ahead, and when his uncle might come and where he would take him. His father sat him down and told him to be alert, which only added to his misgivings about where he was being taken.

It was late evening by the time that his uncle showed up, and at once asked for food which was quickly prepared by Matin's mother. His relaxed manner reassured Matin somewhat. Having finished his food, Matin was subjected to another lecture from his uncle, who told him 'Be vigilant, it is time for you to be alert'. Matin then kissed his father's and his mother's hands in turn before bidding

farewell to all his siblings. He was then made to walk under the Holy Quran three times, as his mother held the book above his head. He then kissed the Quran and returned it to his mother before leaving the house with his uncle. His uncle bargained with a taxi driver about the price before they were driven to the western outskirts of Kabul, where they got down.

They walked up and down the road until his uncle found the vehicle he was looking for, a majestic-looking bus parked among rows of others. Among the others gradually assembling at the bus was a chubby man with a fancy wristwatch and a large ring. He seemed to recognize Matin's uncle and shook hands before looking at Matin and asking if he was the one travelling. Matin's uncle confirmed this and the man looked again at Matin, as if to judge his height. He then shook his head and said '*Sama da*[5]'. In response to the uncle's question if he should buy anything specific for Matin, the man assured him that everything had been taken care of and he shouldn't worry. He then walked off to the other side of the bus to attend to others.

'If you need anything, tell this man', Matin's uncle explained, adding that he'd be responsible for him and that he should listen and do whatever he was told. Matin nodded in agreement, but his heart was pounding. His uncle was still telling him things as other passengers started boarding the bus. Matin broke down in tears and pleaded with his uncle to take him back home. His uncle urged him to stay calm and not to make a scene, and board the bus 'like a man'. He was pushed into the bus and led to a seat where he continued crying and begging his uncle to take him back. His uncle watched him through the window of the bus, ignoring Matin's sobbing.

As the bus departed, Matin saw his uncle through a stream of tears, waving his hands and shouting something that he couldn't hear but wasn't going to listen to anyway. The bus gained speed as Matin realized that he had no idea where the bus was going. Eventually he cried himself to sleep as the bus made its way on the journey.

When Matin woke, most of the passengers in the bus were snoring and sound asleep. He did not know for how long he had slept or how far the bus had travelled. There was only darkness outside the windows, with no sign of life, not even a lantern. He wondered whether they were travelling through a desert. He felt strangely calm and his chest felt empty, as if everything had been taken out of it. He didn't feel the urge to cry now, but his thoughts wandered to home, where his father would be in bed and his mother perhaps sleeping by now. He wondered whether his uncle had already made it home to tell his parents that he was on the bus. He remembered all the happy times he and his brothers and sisters had enjoyed and the games they played. He fell asleep again.

He was woken by the commotion of passengers as the bus stopped. Passengers got out to freshen up using water from a pipe, and some disappeared behind rocks to relieve themselves. Matin was scared at first but when he saw a few young people going behind rocks he followed them. Some of them used a stand pipe to make their ablutions and perform their missed prayers quickly before the bus got on its way again. Within no time they were all back in their seats. As they gathered speed, Matin plucked up the courage to ask a young man sitting next to him where they were going. He seemed not to know but said that their destination was Nimroz[6] province. Matin had seen it marked on a map at school but no matter how hard he tried to remember he couldn't work out where it was in relation to Kabul.

It was late at night when the bus arrived at its destination. By now Matin had worked out that the chubby man his uncle had met in Kabul was a people-smuggler. This man handed them some stale bread to eat. Matin managed to reach his uncle on his mobile phone, and he told him again to stay with the group and follow the smuggler's instructions.

5 Sama da means 'its fine' in Pashto.
6 Nimroz is a south-western province of Afghanistan which borders Iran and Pakistan.

Heat and cold

In the morning, after the smuggler woke them up, Matin asked him where they were going. 'To Iran', he replied. True to his word, a group of Baloch smugglers on motorbikes showed up to transport them across the frontier. Matin was given a school briefcase and was instructed to tell the Iranian police that he was going back to his studies, if asked. The first stage of their journey went smoothly and they did not encounter any police patrols. The Baloch smugglers took them to their own homes, which scared Matin a little. He tried not to talk to anyone, and his heart froze if a man looked at him, as he'd been told about some men's interest in young boys. And in this strange land where Matin didn't speak the language there was no one to protect him. He realized that he had to be vigilant all the time. He kept a watch on his surroundings even when the others slept. When he woke from sleep he tried to be and look alert. He was also careful not to be seen alone, staying close to the group of young men who had been on the bus from Kabul. He felt that his honour was at stake, and was prepared to shout for help if needed.

After three days with the smugglers, they were told to be ready to resume their journey. A small car was waiting, and Matin and three other youngsters were told to get in to the boot, which was then closed. It was pitch dark in the boot but Matin was somehow reassured by the presence of others with him. One of them, he had learned during the journey, was a Pakistani. They heard the car doors close and felt it moving, smoothly at first but then over rough terrain that bumped them around. With each lurch of the car, his head hit the lid of the boot, only to be slammed down again on the base. All four of them seemed to bounce around like balls, crashing into each other over and over again. They had all been told to be silent in case someone heard them in the boot, and if they were discovered they might be thrown into jail – a prospect that terrified poor Matin.

After several hours of bouncing around, the car stopped and the boys tried to get themselves upright as the boot was opened and they were told to get out. Having been in pitch darkness for hours, Matin couldn't see anything at first but, as his eyes adjusted he saw they were in a wooded area. The smugglers instructed them to go to the top of a nearby hill and wait there for a signal. Matin felt hungry but there was nothing to eat. He felt the last bit of food in his stomach had been digested by the motion of the car.

They waited all day but heard no signal from the smugglers. Some of them began to be scared, especially when one of the older men said that the smugglers might have abandoned them in a remote spot and might send thieves to loot them. It was late afternoon when a smuggler approached alone and told them to accompany him. He led the group to the top of a mountain and left them there. The group again felt uneasy, and some of them began to bury the money they were carrying in the ground and mark the spot discreetly with a rock. When night had fallen, they heard what seemed to be whistling, and then realized that someone was calling for them to descend. At the base of the mountain, they saw a bus parked beside the track. For Matin anything but the boot of a car was progress. Rather than boarding the interior of the bus, however, they were all told (not just the boys) to get into the luggage compartments along the side of the vehicle.

It wasn't clear to them in which direction the bus was being driven through which towns or cities. This stage of their journey lasted through the night and as day broke they were dropped off somewhere and led by the smugglers to a house. After a wait of about twenty-four hours there, the group was told to get into another small car. When Matin saw that the boot of the car was already full, he was relieved. But the driver asked the boys to conceal themselves under the feet of the men sitting as passengers in the

car. Matin ended up squeezed with another boy under the legs of someone on the passenger side of the car.

This was a long and painful leg of Matin's journey, but he knew that he simply had to endure it. When the car finally stopped, it was in a wooded area where another group of smugglers were waiting in an off-road pick-up. They were told all to get in the back of the vehicle, where the limited space meant they had to sit on top of each other. The vehicle moved through very bumpy mountainous terrain for hours through the night. They stopped in the early hours of the morning and were all taken to a house where Matin and his companions ate a simple breakfast for the first time in several days. They were then driven to another wood and told to proceed on foot, but to be watchful as there was a police checkpoint on their route. They managed to make their way through this area and were led to a small metal container which was very hot inside due to the midday sun. Despite this, they were told to stay inside the container and wait. Matin was frightened when one by one his companions fainted due to the heat, and he expected to pass out too. But he resisted the urge to break out of the container and get some fresh air for fear of what may result. Being caught by the police was one thing, but he was also afraid of sexual abuse. It was this that kept Matin in that container - there was no other choice.

They were by now in Iranian Kurdistan, and the weather was bitterly cold. They were kept there for a couple of days and fed only biscuits and boiled potato if they paid their hosts. The smugglers indicated that snow-covered desert ahead was the frontier between Iran and Turkey that was marked by a barbed wire fence that they would need to cross. Matin had no idea what to expect and wondered if he would be able to slip through holes in the fence without hurting himself. He was deep in thought when his mobile phone rung.

It was his family calling from Kabul and their news was not good. Matin's father who had been bed-ridden and paralysed since the attack near Kandahar had died. Matin was overwhelmed with grief and wept quietly so as not to attract attention. He faced a real dilemma; should he abandon his journey and return home to care for his mother and siblings, or should he continue on his way, as he had come so far? His heart was pulling him back to his family but his companions, when he'd told them the news, urged him to stay the course and press on with the journey.

Trick game

'Climbing on the back of a donkey brings singular shame', his uncle's words spoken just before he'd set out on his journey, echoed in Matin's ears *'Climbing down brings multiple shames'*. He'd understood his uncle's message to be that leaving one's home and family was somehow shameful but abandoning the journey half-finished and returning empty-handed brought greater shame. Although he longed to be back with his family to grieve their loss together, his uncle's advice stayed with him.

'Go straight in this direction' ordered the smuggler at around eight in the evening, and Matin and his companions started walking through thick snow, not knowing what might lie ahead. They were told they would recognise the border as it was marked with a barbed wire fence. The had to walk fast in that cold to keep warm but the wet snow soaked their trousers and shoes, making the going difficult. The smugglers had told them little about the terrain, simply indicating the direction in which they should walk, so they didn't know what to expect. Some of the group were worried about wolves, assuming that the smugglers wanted to get rid of them. Matin was afraid that they may have been sent to their deaths in the snow.

In the early hours of morning they reached the barbed wired fence at

the frontier. It seemed impenetrable, but they eventually found a small opening, big enough for a fox. Matin, being the thinnest and the smallest, went first and made through the fence with a few cuts on his arms and tears to his clothing. He barely noticed that he was bleeding in several places, given the cold and his fear of being caught. The others who followed him through the same opening suffered even worse from the sharp points of the barbed wire.

Once they were through the fence, the sun came out and a smuggler appeared and told them all to follow him to a nearby stable. They were hoping to warm up, but the stable was partially open and very cold due to the icy wind. The stable was a cold welcome to the door of Europe, thought Matin as he shivered with cold, disappointed and tired after the night walking through the snow-covered desert. He'd heard so much about Turkey being a developed country that he could not understand why the stable was so primitive. Shivering with the cold, one of the boys found a door that gave on to a space where cows were sheltering, and which was much warmer. Despite the strong smell of cows and dung, they all moved into this space – and held their noses.

In the morning, the group was led to a wood, where they spent the day and the following night out in the open. Sheltered by the trees from the cold wind, they were able to keep warm by moving around. A smuggler then arrived in a small car with an open back, where he told them to get in and provided a tarpaulin to conceal themselves. The car was driven through mountainous terrain, and it was really cold in the back as they sped along. When the car halted, the driver told them to proceed on foot to evade check points on the road ahead. Despite his apprehension at the danger, Matin was relieved to be out of the car and walking. As they began the ascent of a snow-covered mountain in the dark, the moon helped light their way. None of them were fit enough to walk up the steep slope for long, however, so

they had to walk in stages, taking short breaks to catch their breath. After several hours, they reached the summit, where they stopped for a while despite the cold. Below they could see the lights of towns, with the lights of cars on the roads. Not having footwear for the terrain, some of the group slipped and fell on the way down and sustained cuts and bruises that hurt more due to the bitter cold. It was a terrifying experience, and they helped each other down as the wind whistled across the slopes.

At the base of the mountain was a small town, where they were all put on comfortable buses where they were able to enjoy tea and coffee and let their clothes and shoes drying out. Some of the group tried to treat their cuts and bruises, while Matin fell fast asleep, exhausted from his experience. After some time, the bus arrived in a much bigger, prosperous place that the smuggler proudly told them was Ankara, the Turkish capital. They were taken to a newly-built house that seemed not to have been occupied previously, and was cold and cheerless. The smuggler then offered to take some of the group on the next stage, but explained that they could not all travel together as it was too risky. Matin had to decide quickly whether to join the initial group to move or to stay with the rest and travel with remainder of his companions. Hoping that the further away he got from the region of Ankara the safer it might be, he elected to join the first group and boarded a bus which took them to Istanbul without facing any difficulties along their route.

In Istanbul the group was asked to pay half of the agreed sum for their journey to the smugglers, if they were to continue on their journey. Having paid, Matin boarded a small bus with those who had also settled their dues, and they were then told by the smugglers to prepare themselves for the next stage of the journey that they referred to as ‘game’. Matin was soon to discover that there was more than one type of game; the guaranteed game was expensive, while the ‘trick game’ came without any guarantee. If they were put on a vessel or a vehicle with the collaboration and knowledge of the driver that was a guaranteed game. If they were smuggled onto a vessel or into a vehicle by stealth without the pilot or driver knowing, that was the ‘trick game’. The added risk of the latter was that if they were discovered, they could be thrown overboard or abandoned by the road at any stage of the journey.

Giant waves

They waited for a while until one of the smugglers took a group of them on a bus which travelled for about four hours to the woods on the coast. The weather was not good, so they had to wait for the 'game'. The smugglers told them to help inflate the boat and, not understanding why, Matin assisted in pumping air into the craft that was about two meters long and just over a meter wide. They then fixed a small petrol outboard motor to the craft and, to Matin's surprise, were all then asked to get on to the wobbly boat. There was hardly room for ten people but thirty-two people were crammed on, making it very unstable. As they pushed off from the coast, Matin said what he felt might be his last prayer, as he couldn't see how the fragile little craft would make it to the coast to which they were heading. The sea itself frightened him, as this was the first time he'd seen it, let alone been on the ocean waves. He could nothing but only the high waves approaching like mountains. The boat would slow down and lurch with every wave and then plummeted down to the other side, each time making Matin's heart race. It felt like a nightmare. Water splashed into the boat and his fellow passengers tried to bale as much as they could using their shoes, only for another wave to fill it again.

A ship appeared on the horizon but the smugglers steered away from it, and it disappeared. As the boat started moving again, the ship approached and people on board fired warning shots and made some kind of announcement on a loud-hailer. Matin knew that these were being addressed to their boat, but could not comprehend what was being said. When the ship continued to approach them, the smuggler became agitated and threw his mobile phone and whatever he had in his pockets into the sea. The warning shots ceased and a long pole was extended to their little boat, which was pulled towards the larger ship. Matin was by now very frightened and complied with instructions to disembark from the boat and get on the deck of the ship. He expected a beating from the armed police on the ship, who also shone a very bright light on the group as they huddled on deck. Unlike his experience of police in Afghanistan, these men simply asked the new passengers to relax.

All thirty-two people were transferred safely from the inflatable craft to the ship, which docked at a port from where they were taken to a camp. The smugglers behaved as though they too were travellers, concealing their true identities and pretending that this was their first time in Greece. After a couple of days in the camp, the smugglers quietly told them that there was no point in staying in that coastal camp, advising them to escape to travel to Athens, the capital of Greece. They left the camp very discreetly, pretending they were just going out for a walk, and gathered at a ferry station, where the smugglers bought tickets for them, charging them three times the actual price. They boarded a multi-storey ferry which Matin found very intriguing, like a multi-storey building with restaurants and cafés moving on water. They journeyed through the night on the ferry before docking in Athens.

Matin's first impression of Athens was how prosperous it seemed. It was also very expensive, and he worried about how much he was spending. This led him and others to fall for a 'trick game', through which some smugglers broke into a container that they all entered. After a long period of remaining stationary, the lorry on which the container was loaded started moving. Matin felt happy that they were proceeding further into Europe. After several hours the truck on which the container had been stopped and the doors were opened and people entered to remove the contents, getting closer and closer to Matin and his companions who were hiding at its back. They all decided to leave the container at once, so those unloading were

surprised to see some twenty people jumped down and walk away. The driver was speechless. After walking some distance, the group tried to find out which other country they may have reached, but were crestfallen when they discovered that they were in a different neighbourhood of Athens.

Matin realised that they had been tricked, but didn't know what to do. He felt as though he was on a turning planet where you end up in the same place you started. He and his companions had lost money without making any progress on their journey. The guaranteed game was twice as expensive but perhaps worth it given this experience.

As he weighed his options, Matin was approached by yet another smuggler asking if he'd be prepared to join another smaller group for another 'trick game'. He accepted without thinking, and soon found himself with six others concealed in a small space between roof tiles that were being transported on an articulated truck. The vehicle stopped and started several times before the rear doors were opened and, with lots of shouting, some of the tiles were removed from the back. Matin and his fellow travellers remained very quiet, and the truck doors were closed again before it moved off, stopping and starting before occasional gentle swaying movements, prompting Matin and his companions to guess they were on a ship.

The voyage seemed long, and the group had to rely on biscuits for nourishment, using empty water bottles in which to relieve themselves. After about three days the truck again moved, travelling down a steep ramp that made the fugitives fear that the tiles might break free and bury them all. Finally, after travelling in a more stable way, the truck stopped. This time Matin and his companions were more careful and waited several hours before making an escape. They managed to contact the smuggler by phone and he told them to wait until the early hours of the morning before trying to leave. When the time came they shifted and smashed roofing tiles until they reached the outer tarpaulin around the bed of the truck, which they cut with a broken bottle.

When they emerged from the truck, they'd been told to follow the main road in any direction. After walking along the road for some hours, the group reached a train station, where they managed to buy tickets to the city centre. It was only then that they became aware that they had reached the Italian city of Milan. There was no word from the smugglers, so Matin and the others collected as many discarded newspapers as they could to make themselves comfortable at the doorway of a church, where they slept in a huddle. From the next day on, collecting newspapers was their main activity during the day, and the church doorway became their temporary home in Milan.

The mirage of a destination

Matin and his companions walked around the city by day, hoping to run into one of the smugglers. One day, they heard some people speaking Pashto, and discovered that they were in a similar situation but had made a plan. With their help, Matin and the others bought train tickets north further into Europe. After boarding the train, they sat in a carriage full of students so that they'd be less conspicuous. They then changed trains at least twice, before arriving in a big city. Having found some Afghans who there and asked their advice, they were told to give themselves up to the police. They did so and were taken to another smaller city further north. Matin spent some months there and was allowed to pursue his education in school which had a hostel. His first priority was to learn the language so that he could settle down, meet new friends and make the country home. However, sometime after his interview with the police, his application for asylum was rejected by the first court. He was told that he had a very strong case as a

minor. The verdict of the second court was however the opposite and his case was rejected. This was a big blow for Matin, who began to feel life in the hostel restrictive. As a minor, he was subject to strict supervision by a carer who monitored his activities and where he went; he couldn't skip classes or stay out late from the hostel.

Matin found an immigration lawyer to represent him, and was reassured that he would handle his appeal. Matin however was worried and missed his family back in Afghanistan. The grief over his father's death seemed to affect him more now he'd 'arrived' in Europe. He felt guilty at not being a good son to his father, who had had to borrow a lot of money to pay for his journey to Europe. What is more, his father at the time was bed-ridden and no longer earning a living, so did not have the ability to repay the debt. The fact that his father had done everything he could do to ensure his son's future made Matin felt useless at not being able to do anything in return. He had not even attended his father's funeral. He wondered whether his asylum application had been rejected because his father was somehow disappointed and angry with him. He began to have dark thoughts about harming himself as a punishment for being a bad son to his father and mother. He regretted having listened to his uncle and left his family, even though he knew that they'd had to leave the village because of the threats his father had received at the time.

In the hostel, Matin felt very lonely. At times he missed the companionship and adventure that the journey had given him. He felt cut him off from his Afghan friends who had been resettled in other cities that he was unable to visit due to the restrictions imposed on him. None of his fellow students at the college spoke his language and, although his language skills were improving, he struggled to express his feelings and sense of frustration.

The occasional short phone conversations he was able to have with his mother and family back in Afghanistan were a lifeline, but it was expensive and he had limited means.

Things did not seem to be going well with his appeal, and Matin receiving several red warning letters from the authorities indicating that he could be deported anytime. Each letter seemed like a sentence, and his temporary identification document had the same message stamped on it. In time, he completed college and his new language was by now fluent, but he was not allowed to work until his immigration status was clear. As a result, he was not able to gain experience. When these restrictions were lifted and he was allowed to work, no one would employ him due to his lack of work experience. Eventually he found a job in a small pizza shop, which distracted him somewhat from all of his worries. The fact that he was very good at his job and had begun to earn some money and send funds back to his mother and speak to her on the phone regularly lifted his spirits. He also enjoyed interacting with people and his colleagues in the pizza shop, who seemed understanding and accepting. If by mistake he gave someone too much change, he marvelled that they'd return this to him. Outside of work, he saw how the less fortunate and disable were cared for - what a contrast to the situation back in Afghanistan, Matin thought!

When he met a European girl who fell in love with him, Matin's life was transformed beyond his imagination. He had not experienced love from anyone up until then, but here was someone who seemed really to care for him. For the first time since leaving his family, Matin felt happy and positive about the future and the official red letters ceased to worry him.

His mother sounded happier on the phone too. Matin was able to send money home for medical treatment she needed as she seemed to be recovering. She began to talk about finding a suitable Afghan wife for Matin, even though he was still a teenager. His mother thought it was a good time for her to start thinking about it so all the suitable young women didn't marry others. Matin did not of course tell his mother about his girlfriend,

knowing that this might break her heart and think that he'd turned his back to his own family and the conservative society he'd grown up in.

One busy day at work at the pizza restaurant his phone rung and, when he answered there was initially silence. It was a familiar number, but Matin didn't know who'd called. He thought it might be his mother who perhaps had done something to the phone to mute it by mistake, so raised his voice but that didn't seem to help. After listening a while longer, he was able to make out the sound of women weeping and sobbing in the background. Gradually, he could discern more and wondered what might have happened to his family that so many women had come to visit them. He then called his mother's number only to be told by the person who answered that she had died.

Destination real

Matin was consumed by grief with this awful news. He stopped working at the pizza shop and locked himself in his room. He felt that his last strong bond with his home cut and he could see no reason for living. No one else in this world meant that much to him as did his mother. His sense of guilt re-emerged, and he mulled over how his family had incurred such a degree of debt to send him to Europe, hoping he would become their 'walking stick', as elderly people would say back in the village. This walking stick now felt that he had no one in the world who could comfort him. He wouldn't even be able to say goodbye to his mother before she was laid to rest. He had been unaware that she was gravely ill, and it was as if she disappeared with one short movement of the eyelid. After the loss of his father, she had become the centre of the family in his mind. It was as if the lid of a fragile pot was broken permanently.

Matin's colleagues in the pizza shop who knew what had happened tried to help him, to no avail. So too with his girlfriend. He managed to return to work where he initially barely spoke, focussing on earning money to support the rest of the family back in Afghanistan. One late night, when the shop went quiet, Matin saw all his colleagues still in the shop. When he changed and was ready to leave, he saw all of them sitting in a circle. They called him to sit with them. His employer was among them. His employer told him that they had all gathered to hold a quiet memorial for Matin's mother. Matin was very touched. The care he got from them made him feel better. Gradually, he began to interact more with his colleagues and come out of his shell. Things seemed to be returning almost back to normal, and the pizza business was busier than ever. Matin was pleased to be able to support the education of his brothers and sisters back home.

At this time Matin received another official letter instructing him to leave the country within a week. He wasn't really concerned, having received such letters in the past, and his lawyer told him not to worry.

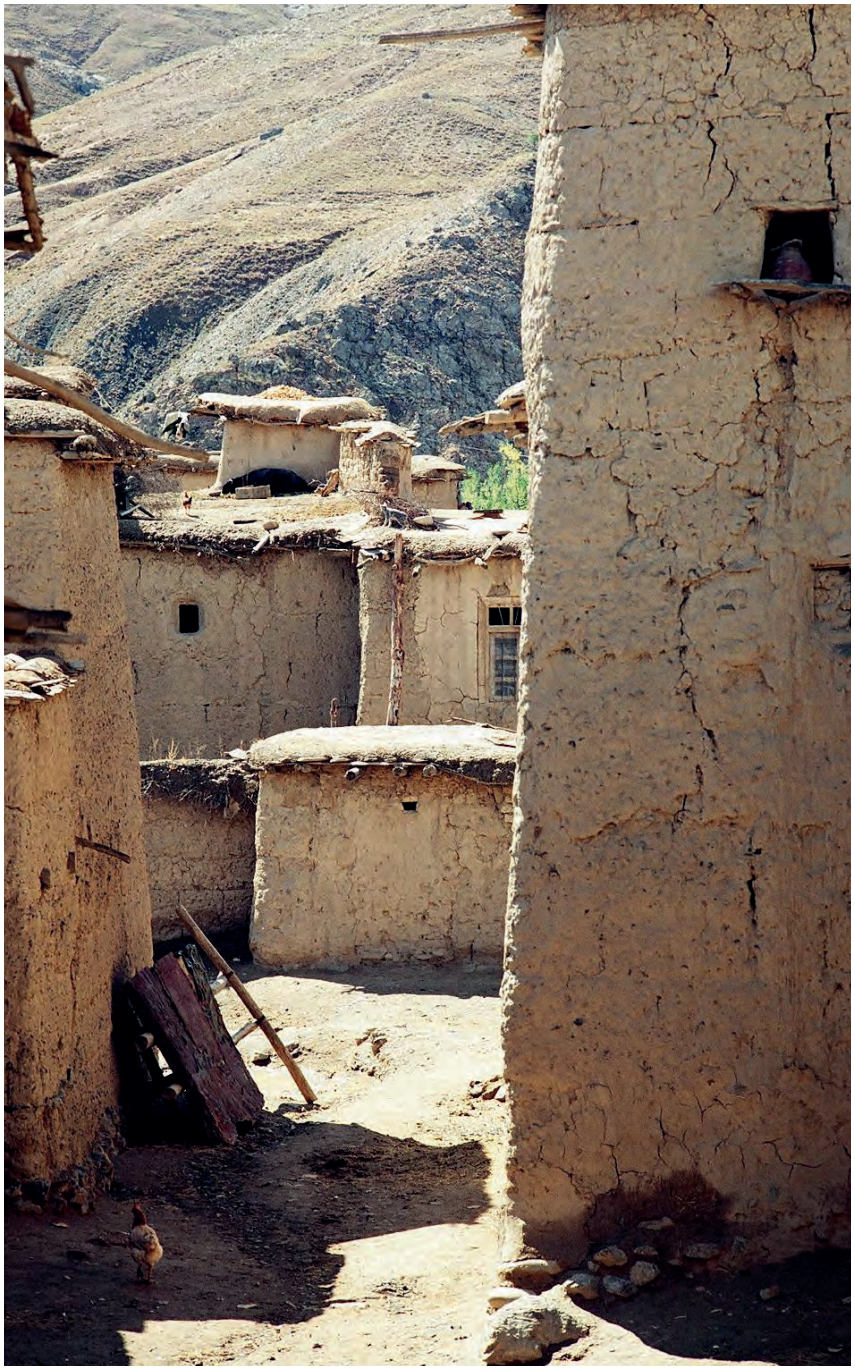
On a particularly busy day in the pizza restaurant, Matin was struggling to keep pace with multiple big orders coming in, having prepared the dough and other ingredients in advance. As he put pizza after pizza in the oven, he sensed that the place was crowded. At first, he thought that the police who he could see were there to order pizza, so continued with his work. He heard his name spoken twice and went forward to ask if there was any problem. Eight police officers had taken positions around the shop. They confirmed his date of birth and his identity and then asked Matin for his documents. He showed them his temporary identification document which the police took and asked him to accompany them.

The authorities of the country where Matin lived said that they only deport those asylum seekers who commit a crime. Matin had no criminal record so could not understand why he'd been singled out after six years of

living in a country where he was working and paying tax and had learned the language.

He had no time to understand what had gone wrong, as he was quickly put on a plane in handcuffs with a group of other Afghan deportees. The plane took off. Matin realised this was the first time he was on a plane. He looked out of the window in search of anything recognisable. After all, he had risked everything to travel through all these countries by land. Now he was covering the same countries comfortably on board a plane. He saw some snow which reminded of the difficulties of his journey. He didn't see any barbed wire fences. The thought of barbed wire fences made him laugh. Six years ago he had travelled through these countries to Europe empty-handed. Now he on his way back to his own homeland equally empty-handed, he thought. But then he realised that six years ago he spoke Pashto and some Dari. Now, he spoke another useful language in addition fluently. He thought about all the new skills he had learned which he could put to use. 'Fire hardens iron', he remembered his uncle telling him before his departure. 'But hardship shapes a man'. He left as a child but he was returning as a skilled man

Upon arrival in Kabul the handcuffs were removed as he disembarked. He was overwhelmed by breathing the air of his homeland, and where he would now have to re-build his life. This is the country in which his father was nearly burned alive in his truck just for working to support his family; the country in which his dear mother lost her life because she couldn't be properly treated; the country in which the guillotine of the threat against his father would now cast a shadow over Matin's head; the country in which the chubby man who smuggled Matin out must by now be many times richer. With these thoughts racing through his head, Matin got down on his knees and kissed the earth. ●



A WORLD OF WHISPERS

Hearing

Sharif was Faqir's first child. His first marriage hadn't given him any children, and his first wife died of what was thought to be ta'oon or plague, although she suffered from persistent coughing. Their wedding was said to be a whole concert of the bride's coughing. It seems more likely that she died of tuberculosis, which was prevalent in those days. Faqir's father soon found him another wife through relatives in Paghman and Sharif came to the world not long afterwards. The boy was all smiles and Faqir, who had felt like a real faqir (meaning 'poor') after losing his first wife, felt a change in his destiny that made him feel more like a ghani (rich). Some felt that his excitement after Sharif's birth was childish and unmanly, but others forgave him after the disappointment with his first marriage.

However, his excitement was rather short-lived. Sharif was a few months old when Faqir noticed that the boy wasn't responding to him normally. He wanted his son to be alert to his father's footsteps and shout baaba (father) as soon as he saw him. He wanted the boy to respond to his call. But Sharif only responded if one caught his eye or spoke to him in a loud voice. At first Faqir thought his son didn't care for his father, but he behaved in the same way with this mother. Sharif wondered what was happening to his little son.

It didn't take long for his wife to have his second child, who was much more alert and turned his head to follow sounds. The new baby cried to be with his mother when she spoke to him. They realised then that Faqir was hard of hearing. When his mother told people this the whole village concluded that Sharif was kar (deaf). His name soon had an adjective, and he became known as Sharif-e kar , or the deaf Sharif. Kar was going to be part his identity. Outside of earshot of the family people simply called him kar or kar-e Faqir - Faqir's deaf son.

When Faqir first heard this, he was angry and upset. He didn't know what to do to remove this stigma of his son's disability and, by implication his too. Any such disability brought with it social stigma, in the belief that it was God's punishment for sins of the child's parents or grandparents. Whenever Faqir's father went out, he had to deal with this stigma. He wished he could stay at home like his wife, but his family would starve if he did not go to the fields every day to tend his crops. He had no option but to face the world.

In time, he managed to overcome these feelings, drawing on the realization that their other children were normal and had no disability. Even if he was being punished, it was limited to one child, and his son was only partially deaf. He began to feel a little more at ease with himself and joined in gatherings and jirgas in the village. He was consulted over the distribution of irrigation water and was invited to take part in the hashar (collective work by the community) for dredging the water channel and for spreading compost in the fields. Emboldened, he asked his fellow villagers to help maintain the roof of his house ahead of winter and they rallied around. His wife cooked food for those who helped and he again felt part of the village community, even though attitudes towards his son were the same. Maybe he'd simply got used to hearing his son being called kar and it didn't bother him as much as before.

When Sharif reached the age for school, it was not an easy decision to enrol him. His parents were filled with trepidation, but his mother felt that her son's hearing might improve when among other children of his own age. The only option was to send him to a village school that was quite some distance away and meant he had to walk for an hour each way. As there were few other children from their village going to the school, Sharif usually had to walk alone through other settlements along the way.

Starting at school introduced Sharif to the cruel outside world. His teachers made no allowance for his poor hearing and tended to speak normally, so that he was unable to understand them. When he failed to respond or repeat something, they punished him. His classmates also teased him, calling him Sharif-e kar at the top of their voices to his face. He couldn't understand why this disability was his fault – he had been born like this. But he suffered from the endless teasing, which affected his confidence and his education.

Sharif realised that he had to find a way to deal with the teasing, and over time learned to become very alert to his surroundings. He found a way to distinguish who was speaking and who not, and over time taught himself how to lip-read. This helped to reduce the teasing, and his family and teachers thought that his hearing might be improving. Even though he knew this was not the case, he encouraged this impression so that he'd be accepted as 'normal'. He didn't do brilliantly at school but managed to pass various exams by a decent margin. The subjects which he failed were languages; Pashtu, English and Arabic. He put it down to his own weakness in languages, but the truth was that none of the teachers spoke the languages themselves.

Despite his poor teachers and mixed exam results, Sharif managed to get through secondary school, but there was prospect of continuing his education. A relative offered to enrol him in a vocational school where he would learn to become a mechanic. Faqir agreed and Sharif was thrilled at this opportunity. He began to think of how rich mechanics were, how they owned their own houses and could also afford a car, which was unheard of in the village. One mechanic in the village had been really successful and often used to have famous musicians like Hamahang (a famous musician at the time) perform at this parties. Sharif's family did not approve of this depraved lifestyle, but Sharif couldn't help wishing that one day he would be able to enjoy similar luxuries.

Despite continued problems with his hearing, Sharif was able to complete the mechanics training at the vocational school. He went on to work as a mechanic at the Jangalak factory, and every morning boarded the staff bus in his suit, returning to the village in the afternoon. His only concession to traditional village life was to cover his head, initially wearing a cap which he soon replaced with a posh qaraquli or a lambskin hut.

Sharif's father was relieved that his son's employment it meant that he could provide for himself and not rely on the family. He was also proud to see his son boarding the factory bus to go to work each day. How many people in the village had the privilege of a bus specifically stopping to take them to work?

Faqir found the daughter of a relative in Paghman as a bride for Sharif and they duly had an engagement party, Sharif would buy some supplies from the bazaar and visit his in-laws every other shab-e juma (the eve of the weekend). This habit was noticed and got people in the village talking, and they used to tease him about the visits to his prospective in-laws. He didn't mind this, as he was proud that people should know that someone had agreed to let him marry their daughter.

On the day of the marriage, there was an argument between Faqir and the bride's father over toyana or dowry. He argued that he couldn't afford what the bride's family were asking for, while they were adamant that the

young woman couldn't be married unless there was an appropriate payment. Relatives from both families became involved, some mediating and others taking sides. The debate went on for quite a while without any agreement, and even the mullah's intervention failed when he was firmly silenced by Faqir. He didn't trust the man and was sure that he'd side with the bride's family. The argument became quite heated and people raised their voices, which meant that poor Sharif could hear everything. He was worried that, by being so stubborn, his father would jeopardise his marriage and wished that he could persuade him to be flexible. It would however have been very inappropriate for him as a bridegroom to get involved or have a quiet word in his father's ear to reassure him that he'd in fact saved enough money for his toyana. Instead, everyone, young and old, literate or otherwise, seemed to have an opinion on the issue and would tell a story or recite a poem that they felt to be relevant. It seemed to take forever before the issues was finally resolved and the mullah was finally able to read the sermon and conduct the nikah or the official sermon of the marriage.

After marriage, Sharif's status in the village improved, and he came to be seen as someone who could live independently and provide for his family. He grew more confident and his disability bothered him less, not least because his wife's family had accepted him as he was. His new wife went out of her way to assure him that she didn't mind, even though it worried her. Both of them were concerned that their children would not inherit the condition, and were relieved that their first child, a son born on the Persian New Year or Nawroz seemed to have good hearing. When Sharif clicked his fingers close to the baby's ear, he immediately responded. To mark the day he was born, the little boy was named Nawroz.

A year later, their second child was born in the fasting month of Ramazan, a time associated with mercy and forgiveness. To mark this, in consultation with the mullah, Sharif gave him the name Rahim. In time, the family grew, with five sons and two daughters.

Exile

Nawroz and Rahim were both going to school when President Daud Khan was killed. He was replaced an unknown man from Ghazni. Sharif continued with his job at the factory but he was uneasy about the new regime. A number of people disappeared from his village and from the factory, and he later learned that they'd been arrested by the new government, which was supported by the Soviet Union. None of those who disappeared returned, and it was said that they had been killed because they were not members of the ruling party and were therefore considered to be 'reactionaries'. Sharif believed it when one of his colleagues was called to the sazman-e awalya, or the office of the political party, and later saw him leaving in handcuffs flanked by two big men. The man was never seen again. No one knew what he might have done wrong, but it was said that some people were picked up simply because they'd been seen going to the mosque to pray. Sharif was very careful with his prayers after hearing this. While he took his faith seriously, he realised that he had to be very discreet - he was the breadwinner for a big family, after all.

Their younger brother joined Nawroz and Rahim at school at this time. None of the boys showed much academic prowess, and they all struggled to pass the annual exams. Then there was a second coup that saw the party leader overthrown by his deputy and then murdered. The new regime was even more brutal in suppressing any opposition. Not long after this there was an even bigger political earthquake when the Soviet army invaded the country. Sharif felt very conflicted; he wasn't sure whether to leave the


GNQA MOTOR

country, as many others were doing, or to continue his work at the factory. Unable to decide, he stayed.

One of the men related to his in-laws in Paghman had, he heard, joined one of the resistance groups and was actively recruiting others in the community. Sharif wasn't sure how to react; he obviously didn't want his children to join a struggle that may risk them losing their lives to well-armed and trained Soviet soldiers. On one of his periodic visits to Paghman he met this relative and explained that his sons were too young to join an armed struggle. He was finally persuaded to let them join in a supporting role, with Nawroz and Rahim helping with the cooking at their base.

Sharif swore his relative to secrecy about this arrangement. When the boys were no longer seen in the village, none of the family said anything. Some wondered whether they might have been picked up by the government, but they seemed too young to represent any threat to the regime. What is more, the family didn't seem to be worried about their disappearance. Few imagined that they had joined the mujahideen, given their tender age, and thus their whereabouts remained a mystery to the villagers.

Sharif felt that this move had enabled him to hedge his bets. Two of his sons were on the side of Islam with the mujahideen but not exposed directly to fighting. He continued to work at the Jangalak factory in which the Soviets had invested heavily and was now manufacturing new products. One of these was pressure-cookers that were sold at subsidised prices. Staff of the factory could buy these at a special low price, and Sharif brought one home. His wife cooked in it and word soon went around the village about how marvellous the pressure-cookers were. The other villagers were keen to get their hands on one too, and soon the whole village was hissing with the sound of pressure-cookers from Jangalak in each and every home. Sharif's reputation soared, as people found that they could easily and quickly cook camel or buffalo meat, which was much more affordable than lamb or beef. Tinned meat was by then being imported from the Soviet Union, but people were suspicious and believed that it was haram. So too with plastic-wrapped chicken that they called murgh-e shaheed, martyred chicken and avoided at all cost.

While the Soviets flooded the cities with canned food, the villagers relied on their pressure-cookers to cook meat. Sharif's boys occasionally sent messages to their father to reassure him that they were well as they travelled up and down the country working in the mujahideen kitchens. When Sharif suggested to them that he'd find them suitable wives, they both urged him to hold off until the war was over. For him, that seemed a long way off.

At this time, the way that Sharif spoke began to change. He tended to whisper, as if he was conveying secrets to those he could trust. Most people did not realise that his whispering was to ensure that government spies didn't come to learn the whereabouts of his sons. They assumed that his hearing had further deteriorated and he thought he was speaking at a normal volume.

Sharif had high hopes for his children, who were a source of great pride. He began to think that he could walk into any person's house and ask for the hands of their daughters for his hero sons. He ignored his son's poor performance at school – better they were brave than brainy, he felt. He often thought what heroes they had turned out to be, which most other villagers had failed to see.

Return from death

At the same time, the risks that his sons faced preoccupied him. His father Faqir suddenly died after a short illness. Although elderly, his father seemed perfectly healthy. Only occationally he found it difficult to digest his food

and complained of indigestion and stomach pains. One night, after eating a healthy portion of rice cooked softly as Shola with vegetables, he felt well sated. He then had two cups of sweet tea and recounted some stories to the family, as he often did. On this evening, he dwelt on the importance of unity to keep the family strong. By the end of this he was tired and Sharif's mother had to remind him to take some rest. Faqir complied with a smile, as she often told him that he would stop making sense if he spoke for too long.

Sharif's brothers and their wives (yes, they were all married by now) took their leave and went to their rooms. Sharif's wife, too, took her leave to go and prepare the bed. Sharif sat for a bit longer with his father and, in a whisper, gave him news of the boys. His father then went to bed and Sharif went to his room but didn't feel like sleeping. He sat at the window and stared at the sky. His wife was asleep and Sharif stayed at the window, wondering where his sons were and what they were doing. Were they asleep, he asked himself, thinking that mujahideen would be vulnerable unless they remained alert all the time. He finally fell asleep leaning against the window, with his sons still in his thoughts.

At dawn, the morning breeze woke Sharif from a dream about his sons.

He felt cold and sneaked into bed in the hope that he might continue this dream. When he heard the azaan or morning prayer call he got up to make his ablutions. On the way, he saw his mother emerge from her room and knock on doors to wake the rest of the family up. He didn't initially hear what she was saying, and went closer, but still couldn't hear her. In the darkness, he was unable to read her lips, but it was clear that she was agitated. He followed his mother into the room she shared with his father. It was then that he saw his father's inert body and realised that he had died in his sleep.

He and his brothers went to inform the rest of the family and before long the house was packed with mourners. Sharif's married sisters arrived with their husbands and children, while other relatives opened their doors to welcome those who had come from farther afield to pay their respects. Sharif understood that his uncles and brothers had arranged to hold the funeral that morning. He looked at the crowd of relatives from the village and beyond, as well as his father's close friends. Only two people were missing: Nawroz and Rahim, Sharif' sons. He felt as if something inside him collapsed and he broke down in tears.

After Faqir's death, Sharif's mother became the centre of gravity for the family. One night, after they had eaten together and were preparing for sleep, a shadowy figure appeared in the courtyard of their home. Sharif's mother called out, thinking that it was one of her sons. With this more figures appeared from other directions and soon the house was surrounded by men wearing hoods or with their turban wrapped around their faces to conceal their identity. All of them were armed. They searched the house and, finding Sharif's younger brother who worked at a government construction enterprise, dragged him out into the courtyard. Sharif's mother begged them to release her son but they ignored her. Sharif pleaded with them, saying that his own sons were with the mujahideen, but they also ignored him. A group of the men disappeared into the darkness with his brother while a few of them stayed behind and pointed their guns at the family, telling them to stay in the house.

As soon as they had vanished into the night, Sharif's mother and the other women of the household started to wail and cry. It felt as though the house itself was moaning and even Sharif could hear the din. He didn't know how to get in touch with his sons to inform them know what had befallen their uncle. He could not understand why men in whose ranks his sons served had abducted his young brother. As well as fearing for the safety of his brother, he expected his sons would be blamed for the abduction. Sharif wondered whether his sons were on the wrong side and missed his children all the more. He also felt indignant that the mujahideen would dare to drag his brother out of the house in front of the whole family. He began to think of how to take his revenge by getting his sons back, and hopefully out of harm's way.

His brother never returned. Rumours had it that the son of the village butcher who had joined mujahideen had killed him. Maybe he did this because he felt inferior to Sharif's brother, or because his victim had taken a Russian jeep to work. Or maybe he was driven by envy for his looks, which many girls in the village remarked upon. Who could know.

Sharif's mother and sister-in-law dismissed these rumours and continued to believe that the young man would come home. They waited for him while his bones were chewed by stray dogs on open ground in some remote spot. She was not prepared to accept the death of her son and kept his work uniform on a hanger in the house, so that he would be able to report back to work before they terminated his contract. She could not accept that her son's contract had been terminated by a volley of bullets. Despite having two sons with the mujahideen, there was nothing that Sharif could do to comfort his mother in her grief.

After these dramatic events, Sharif was taken ill and admitted to a

government hospital in Kabul. Initially, he was diagnosed as having appendicitis but a second doctor suggested that he had a blocked intestine. His cousins and younger brother were waiting for news at the hospital. As the doctors argued among themselves as to what was wrong with him, Sharif faded in and out of consciousness. The doctors agreed to seek the opinion of a senior doctor and proceeded to attend to other patients. Their superior arrived in the afternoon of the following day, by which time Sharif was delirious and in poor shape. His verdict was that Sharif's intestine was indeed and blocked and urgent surgery was required. He explained this to Sharif's relatives and asked any of them to sign a consent form and purchase blood for the planned operation. But neither Sharif's brother nor the cousins had money to buy blood. When they told the doctor this, he suggested they donate blood themselves. They were scared by the prospect of giving blood for Sharif. Seeing them all go pale at the thought, he told them simply that if Sharif was to survive the operation they either need to buy blood or donate. Then he got on with his duties and left them alone.

Nobody was prepared to let anyone take blood from their body, which they feared would result in death. Nor were they willing to go home to get money to buy blood from the blood bank. While they were arguing between themselves, the doctor kept checking what they had decided, as he realized Sharif's condition was by now serious. He explained that the twisted intestine was septic and this could result in Sharif's death unless they made up their minds and acted. They went to see Sharif to check whether the doctor was telling the truth and agreed that he looked dead already. So why waste money or your own blood, some of them argued.

After another day without action, Sharif's became very pale which provided his relatives with further evidence of his death, they said. At this stage a distant cousin who was a teacher turned up at the hospital, having just heard about Sharif's illness. As soon as he heard what the problem was, he took off his jacket, threw it at the cousins and said he was ready to donate his blood. They all urged him to think again, but he ignored them and sat down to donate blood, challenging them to be man enough to do the same. None volunteered to do so. Sharif's younger brother felt like a coward. The teacher was shaming him, so he summoned the courage to come forward and donate his blood. The doctor was quick to extract what was required for the operation.

On the operating table, Sharif's pulse had slowed down dangerously, and the doctor told them that there was very little hope of saving him, but he'd proceed with the operation regardless. He looked as though he knew what he was doing and Sharif's brother felt reassured. In his heart he was praying that the bag of blood he'd given would not go to waste.

The operation took some time, and after a couple of hours the doctor came out with a big bowl full of dark material to show the family. He explained that these were parts of Sharif's intestine that had turned septic and had therefore been removed – to them it looked as though Sharif's belly had been removed. He was placed in the intensive care unit with drips attached to his veins. When they went to see him, he looked as though he was dead. Sharif's cousins asked his younger brother why he'd donated blood if he was dead. What was the point?

They were waiting for word from the doctor to take Sharif's body home for burial. But It was in the early evening when he gave out a loud moan - his first sign of life after several days. The cousins looked at each other, not sure what to say. They watched as Sharif gradually returned to life, aware that they had no hand in his recovery and would likely face the scorn of the entire village for their cowardice. They realised that they needed to do something to cover their failings, so stayed at his bedside from now on.

As the anaesthetic wore off, Sharif was in agony. The cousins urged the doctor to do something to relive his suffering, so he gave him an injection to

temporarily ease the pain. Sharif still seemed rather delirious, talking to Nawroz about his grandfather and uncle and scolding Rahim for not paying more attention to his family. He seemed to notice his younger brother at his bedside, but apparently did not recognise him, and promptly shut his eyes again.

When Sharif regained consciousness, his cousins were quick to congratulate him on his recovery. Later, when he heard the full story from his brother, he felt deeply grateful for the distant cousin who had not hesitated to donate blood to save his life. He was at this stage overcome by a wish to see his children at his bedside. He realised that they were probably not aware of what their father was going through as they cooked or passed time in a refugee camp in Pakistan. Only God knew what Nawroz and Rahim were up to while Sharif was in hospital.

Disappearance

Having recovered his strength, Sharif returned to work at the factory. Times seemed to be changing since the Soviet army had withdrawn and there was talk of advances by the mujahideen. Powerful long-range rockets were fired out of the Kabul and fighter jets seems to be in the air constantly. People talked about how the regime was engaged in a last-ditch effort to defeat the mujahideen, using all the weapons that the Soviets had supplied. The President started talking about the importance of Islam while investing in new mosques. Along with many others, Sharif was sceptical.

The government managed to hold off the mujahideen to rural areas, while they had control of all major cities. The truth was that neither all mountains were empty nor all cities were actually under government control. Many urban centres had shrunk significantly and the outskirts were disputed. In some places, two parallel administrations seemed to co-exist - one between 8am and 4pm and another during the night. Government soldiers and police would guard the main roads until 4pm, when mujahideen fighters who emerge to monitor traffic and plant mines, as well as to collect taxes or ushur as they called it.

Sharif was disappointed to hear on the radio that a mujahideen attack on Jalalabad had been repulsed by the government, as it set back his hope that his sons would return home. In reporting on this major battle, government media routinely boasted about an ‘independent defence’ in order to convince the population that they could survive without Soviet military support. This soon lost its meaning and people started making fun of such reports.

Despite the eroding power of the government, there was no sign of major advances by the mujahideen, who remained divided. Their leaders signed at commitment to unite during a visit to Mecca but this made little difference on the ground in Afghanistan. Along with many others, Sharif was disappointed at the failure of his fellow-Muslims to keep their word. What was worse were reports of infighting between the mujahideen factions. All the while he had no news from Nawroz and Rahim, whose commander had reportedly been killed. Sharif was worried whether his successor would honour the agreement to keep his sons away from active combat.

With reports of the UN involvement in trying to broker peace, Sharif became more hopeful and prayed for an end to the war, as did many others in his situation. He began to whisper about a peaceful future. By now the whereabouts of his sons was no secret – everyone in the village knew and he wasn’t afraid to admit that they were with the mujahideen, as were the relatives of a number of other families. Many others had left to live in exile in Pakistan.

As it turned out, Nawroz and Rahim had also settled in a refugee camp in Pakistan run by the mujahideen. It wasn't clear when they'd gone to Pakistan but Sharif was relieved that there they were well away from the frontlines.

There were whispers on the radio of the UN people visiting the country. Yet prices of basic items in the bazaar kept going up, even though salaries were static and payment was often delayed. This put pressure on all households, especially the poor. The government looked weaker and weaker by the day and there were reports of members of the party fleeing the country. Things came to ahead when the President disappeared.

Ragtag mujahideen fighters poured into the city as government soldiers deserted their posts. Those newcomers who did not have arms stole weapons and began to loot government premises. Sharif felt that his prayers had finally paid off and that those who were brothers in faith to his sons Nawroz and Rahim's had prevailed. In the village bazaar, he kissed the cheeks of mujahideen fighters he encountered, wishing them success. He invited some of them to eat, but they seemed interested in other, more important, things.

When he went home to check with his wife whether they had sufficient supplies in case the boys returned, his wife was surprised at his childish excitement. Sharif could not sit still, going from the kitchen to the living room to the front door. He kept watching the gates, in the hope that they might be swung open by his sons returning with friends. He imagined welcoming them all home. He was constantly restless, whispering if there were people were around or not. He even whispered to the wall, to empty rooms, to beds and mattresses, to his cup of tea.

He asked his wife to give him money to buy more supplies so that the house had everything that could be conceivably needed – crockery, cutlery, food, lanterns and more. When he'd had enough of the he would walk

around the village and stop any passer-by and ask about the return of his son, about the return of true Islam and Allah's will. He felt full of things to say, to plan, to do. This filled his head with noise, as if all living things were shouting in his mind.

That evening there many more armed mujahideen in the local bazaar but no sign of Nawroz or Rahim. Sharif wondering why his sons were taking time to return. Had they forgotten their way, or did they not have money to pay for the trip? If they were travelling on foot, how long would it take to arrive from Pakistan? All his whispers ended with questions.

Sharif felt far too excited to sleep that night and ventured out a number of times, accompanied by his younger brother or wife to lead him back if needed. In the end, his brother padlocked the gate and kept the key. Sharif resorted to going on to the roof to keep a lookout. Or to calm his nerves. He kept walking up and down until dawn, when his brother unlocked the door so they could go to morning prayers.

Sharif couldn't concentrate on his prayers, and whispered things to God. When the time of prayer was over he started whispering to people only to get blank smiles in response. Never in his entire life had he felt as excited. He kept going out shopping, inviting people back to his home. His wife wondered where on earth he had got that much energy. He asked her money, this time to buy one more tin of cooking oil. As he left, he saw a neighbour and joined him walking towards the fields, not to the shops. As they sat down under the big mulberry tree, Sharif resumed whispering. To any passer-by, the two must have looked as if they were part of the trunk of the ancient tree.

The two men talked about politics, now that there was no-one to watch and listen or report them to intelligence. They were happily chatting and Sharif completely forgot about the cooking oil he had to buy. It felt like a meeting of two liberated souls who had lots to share. They were so deep in conversation that they didn't notice the ground shaking or a roar. A massive ball of fire that seemed to come from nowhere shattered the trunk of the mulberry tree and both men disappeared into the smoke and heat of the rocket that hit them.

Sharif's family members had heard the impact and went to look for him, thinking he was still in the bazaar. They didn't find him there, but his brother came across a piece of flesh attached to a part of Sharif's jacket. He realised that Sharif had not been in the bazaar, and a neighbour's child told him that he'd seen two men sitting under the tree when the rocket hit. He looked around and found a few more pieces of human flesh but wasn't sure which belonged to Sharif and which to the neighbour. As he did this, villagers were fleeing the area. He continued collecting the body parts in a bedsheet, and soon had a bloody pouch to take to the cemetery.

There was no one to accompany him there or perform prayers, so the body parts were buried with no ceremony, with no mullah to recite a prayer. The whole village seemed by now to be on the run. His brother found a shovel and slowly dug a grave. He was sweating, digging in stages, upset that no one had stayed to help with the burial, but simply fled for their own safety from the rockets. They didn't even seem to notice that the ancient mulberry tree, a favourite meeting spot for the elderly, had been reduced to a splintered blackened stump. Normally a burial would be attended by a lot of people from this and neighbouring villages, but Sharif's end was a lonely one, despite him being and important elder.

When the dust had settled and the villagers started returning to their homes, some made sarcastic remarks about Sharif. One cousin asked whether he might have been killed by a rocket fired by one of his sons. For some, this seemed possible, as rockets are said to be blind and don't distinguish between friend and foe – they kill everyone. Maybe it was Nawroz or Rahim who put the deadly rocket on its stand, got it ready or even fired

it towards the village. Or maybe it was fired by the people for whom his sons had cooked – who knows?

Coming back to chaos

A long time passed with no news of Sharif's sons. His widow begged their relatives to help find out where they were. It was not until the following spring that they both appeared at the door. Their mother was thrilled to see them, and they asked whether their father was at work. Sharif's brother took them on one side and quietly told the young men what had befallen him. Nawroz and Rahim were both overwhelmed with grief and cursed the mujahideen for firing rockets in this way. They explained that they had feared what would happen when the mujahideen entered Kabul and so decided to stay behind in Pakistan and not accompany those for whom they had cooked.

The boys visited their father's grave, which was also his neighbour's grave given how it had been impossible to separate their body parts after the attack. But the fighting was relentless and the condolence ceremony they hoped to arrange could not be held as rockets were still being fired and it was dangerous. Despite this, some villagers who lived nearby visited during lulls in the fighting to express their condolences. So great was the confusion that many villagers barely noticed the return of Sharif's sons or did not recognise them.

Nawroz and Rahim hardly spent any time in the village, however, and were effectively on the run. *Mujahideen* factions kept launching rockets and firing in the direction of each other's positions, without considering the fate of ordinary people or their property. There were periodic 'truces', but none lasted more than hours before it was broken by one side or the other, each blaming the other group for resuming the fighting. People had to bury the unwashed bodies of their relatives or neighbours, as death became a normal event.

Nawroz and Rahim had anticipated disagreement between the various *mujahideen* factions given the wide differences between them which they'd seen at first hand in exile. They were worried that infighting might result in the kind of atrocities committed by the forces during the occupation. The kind of atrocities that had in fact led to their exile. Their experience with the mujahideen convinced them that their leaders were not driven by the wish to liberate the country. Along with most other refugees in the camps in Pakistan, they had learned about the true nature of these *mujahideen* factions, whose leaders were hungry only for power and wealth. No one had been able to predict when and where fighting between these groups would start and who would end up as victims. Nawroz and Rahim had to try to piece together their lives in the knowledge that the very movement they had joined would end up killing their father and their uncle.


COROLLA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ENDLESS JOURNEY

Endless journey

I was introduced to Hussain by a friend who owns a gallery in Herat, where I live. My first impression of Hussain as he emerged from his shiny car was of a tall, well-dressed man. It was he, I had been told, had an interesting story to tell about his journey to Finland. Hussain seemed tentative as we settled down to talk inside the gallery, but soon got into his stride as he began his story.

'When I was fourteen years old my elder brother and I made up our minds to migrate to Australia. Our family life was happy and we were well-off but we dreamed of the opportunities that life abroad seemed to offer. In order to realize this dream, we set off for Kabul to get Indian visas, thinking that we could proceed from there to Malaysia, Indonesia and finally by boat to Australia. On arrival in Delhi, however, I was turned back by immigration for being under age and put on the plane back to Kabul. My elder brother was able to continue his journey alone. Disheartened, I went back to school in Herat, while continuing to think of how to travel abroad to get a better education. I embarked on a law degree at Herat University and, in my fourth semester told my parents that I needed to go to Kabul to see if I could get a scholarship to continue my studies in Iran. Little did they suspect that in fact my plans were more ambitious'.

Hussain sighed before continuing, 'I embarked on a journey whose end I did not know. It was easy to cross from Kabul into Pakistan and, with the help of people-smugglers, travel on to Bam on the border with Iran. At this stage, things became more challenging, as we had to travel on small tracks in vehicles loaded with dozens of people trying to sneak into Iran. At times, I asked myself what I was doing taking such risks, but then took courage from the thought of the opportunities I might find ahead. Although there was a chance that I'd be identified as an illegal immigrant, I took the train from Yazd to Tehran without being detected. My brother had by then reached Australia and, through smuggling networks, tried to arrange for me to travel to Finland, which had heard was likely to provide asylum. Through this network, I was able to cross from Iran to Turkey where, after passing through the city of Van, I reached Istanbul - the most beautiful city I'd seen in my life. I had only a few days to enjoy it, however, before being taken to a beach on the Mediterranean coast, where smugglers put as many as 30 people on to flimsy inflatable boats. Many of the migrants were afraid, but the smugglers threatened then with guns before pushing the boats out into the open sea. Luckily for us, it was calm and we were able to reach an island in Greece, although we noticed helicopters flying overhead monitoring our and other boats.

I was excited to have reached Greece, but my hopes were dimmed by the sheer number of migrants who had also arrived. I had to wait in line for almost 12 hours to get a ticket onward on the ferry to Athens, the Greek capital. From there, we were taken quickly via Macedonia to Serbia, where we were sent by the authorities to camps. I remember that it was bitterly cold as I waited to hear whether I'd be able to proceed further north into Europe. The camp authorities insisted on taking biometric records, which made me fear that I might not be able to continue on my journey to Finland'.

At this point, Hussain paused and took a deep breath before saying quietly 'then it was Slovenia. I was travelling then with a friend and we'd agreed that we'd first spend his money and then mine. Both my money and my mobile phone were with him. As we waited to in a long line to get permission for our onward travel, we decided to take our chances and jump over the border fence. I managed to get across but, when I turned around I saw that my friend had been stopped by the police. We were separated and had neither money nor phone, but realized that I had to keep moving. Due to the kindness of strangers, I was able somehow to reach Austria and used my last two euros, called my brother in Australia. He was able to contact a friend to provide me with money to enable me to travel onward to Germany, where my cousin was living with his family not far from Berlin.

On my way there, I met a young Afghan from Bamiyan who was alone and very anxious. He told me that his friend had abandoned him on the way. Even though I was only 19, I felt the need to help him, so we travelled together. We continued our journey, but were unsure of the destination and ended up at an unfamiliar station, where the train ended its journey. Sensing our confusion, a conductor looked at our tickets and explained that they were invalid. In response to her question as to whether I had money to buy a valid ticket, I said no. She called the police, who found 200 euros in my pocket. I expected that the police or the conductor would take this cash, like the Afghan police, but instead she issued us with valid tickets and explained how we could reach our destination by changing trains. A kind German man who witnessed this exchange spoke to me in English and then spoke to my cousin by phone to tell him that we were on our way.

When we arrived at our destination, my cousin was waiting at the train station and took us to nearby restaurant, where I was re-united with the friend who I'd been separated from in Slovenia. We talked for hours about our journeys and the prospects of migrants like us. Although my friend from Bamiyan decided to stay in Germany and take his chances, me and my other friend decided to try to get to Denmark, Sweden and then Finland.

We managed to get through Denmark and reached Malmo in Sweden. I called Afghan friends in Stockholm to arrange to meet them there. On our arrival there, as we were looking for our friends, a group of Swedish police came to question us. They asked us whether we had claimed asylum, explaining that we could go to jail for six months if we were undocumented. After lots of discussion and arguments, me and my friend decided to let them take our biometric data and remain in Sweden.

And do a new chapter of my life began, as a refugee in Sweden. Although I had been in my second year of University in Herat when I left, I claimed to be 16 and in 7th grade in school, as this would improve my chances of being able to remain. I realized that it would take many years to complete my studies in Sweden, while being separated from my family back in Afghanistan.

Many of the Afghans I met there were depressed and some were taking drugs to try to relieve the pain of the uncertainty they faced. In order to justify their flight, many argued that the insecurity in Afghanistan meant that it was not safe for them to return, but the Swedish authorities disputed this. In reality, many faced economic and social problems back in Afghanistan, or were worried about their reputation if they were deported. For me, however, I was reconciled to the prospect of returning in the knowledge that my family would not judge me.

Also, I found it hard to adapt to the Swedish way of life. For example, I saw a man who was cooking food while playing with his dog – something that I found shocking. Even the Muslims that I met seemed to behave differently - I saw Somali girls in hijab when I went to a swimming pool, which for me was really strange. The weather in Sweden was also a challenge, with almost 10 months of winter. This was especially hard during Ramadan,

when I had to fast for almost 20 hours. Added to this, as I had to be at school from 6am to 5pm every day, I was not able to play football as I had in Afghanistan. After a year and eight months there, I consulted my family about returning to Afghanistan'.

But what about your dream of settling in Finland? I asked Hussain.

His response was a firm 'No'.

Hussain went on 'This is where I grew up and studied and where I can be among my family and friends every day. I feel respected among my community'.

I asked him 'would you leave your country again?'

He did not hesitate, saying 'never again, unless it was to study – and I would return to Herat' adding 'I would suggest to those Afghans who think of travelling abroad for new opportunities to think very carefully. Is it worth spending a great deal and risking one's life along the way?'

Ipso (www.ipsocontext.org) is a German nonprofit humanitarian organization developing and implementing sustainable structures for the provision of psychosocial and mental health care services. This includes research, monitoring and evaluation. The second key aspect of Ipso is to initiate cultural dialogue and to support local social and cultural identity (www.ipso-cc-afghanistan.org).

Contribution from the project:
Unterstützung der Entwicklung der afghanischen Zivilgesellschaft durch die Förderung psychosozialer Kompetenz als Voraussetzung für gesellschaftliche Teilhabe und soziale Integration

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