"MY LUCK IS SLEEPING"

DOCUMENTATION OF BIOGRAPHIES FROM THE PROJECT

Peace and stabilisation through cultural dialogue and psychosocial support in Afghanistan

ipso
International psychosocial organisation

german cooperation
DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT

"MY LUCK
IS SLEEPING"

CONTENT

PREFACE

Ipso is one of the German Federal Foreign Office's closest partners in Afghanistan – and it has been so for years. What it does is peace-building and reconciliation in its purest and most effective form: through its counselling services, Ipso provides valuable measures against despair, social isolation and violence in a post-crisis environment. By doing so, it affects not only individual Afghans, but also families and entire communities.

The Federal Foreign Office started supporting Ipso's services within the Afghan health system in 2011. It is a thriving programme: among many other measures, it also provides an online counselling platform. It thereby reaches out to people who – for various reasons – cannot attend public health centres. In Ipso's cultural containers in Badakhshan, Balkh, Bamyan, Jawzjan, Nangahar and Laghman, workstations have been set up enabling people from all walks of life to actively seek counselling in a private environment. In keeping with Afghanistan's reputation as a media-friendly place, Ipso has also created an app making it easy to directly link to a counsellor on one's smartphone.

In addition, Ipso's new psychosocial and mental health clinic in Kabul recently opened its doors. The entire Afghan public – including returnees from abroad – will be able to make use of the private counselling sessions offered on its premises. Counsellors are trained to the highest standards of the profession and are superbly motivated. So far, more than 180 000 people have made use of its services.

This tremendous success story reverberates not just throughout Afghanistan but potentially also in other post-crisis environments. The Federal Foreign Office is proud to be Ipso's sponsor and encourages you to spread the word about its worthy cause. It is a prime example of Afghanistan and Germany cooperating to make Afghanistan a better place to live.

Friedrich Schröder
Head of Afghanistan Reconstruction and Development
Federal Foreign Office, Berlin




INTRODUCTION

How are you?" I asked Mr. Mahmoud who had come to collect me at the airport in Kabul after we had not seen each other for 6 weeks. "Madam", he responded, "My luck is sleeping".

I learned later Mahmoud had good reason to feel miserable; his mother was sick and medication was expensive; his wife was expecting a child – their fifth: his eldest son was about to sit university exams; relatives had approached him to propose marriage to one of his daughters and he did not know how to refuse, while wanting his daughter to have an education.

The notion that "luck is sleeping" in many ways encapsulates the work that we have developed with Afghans over the last 12 years. Our psychosocial counseling provides a confidential ‚space' in which to express themselves, as do the dialogues that our staff facilitate in a number of cultural containers across the country.

As Mr. Mahmoud's comment that his "luck is sleeping" suggests, many Afghans continue to maintain hope that life can change for the better, despite the many challenges they face.

The stories in this book reflect the lives of real Afghans who, unable to cope with the adversity of their daily lives, consulted one of our psychosocial counselors during 2012 and 2015. The accounts that they gave of their lives were transcribed, unattributably, by young Afghan journalists and then translated and edited for this publication by Dr. Hamid Simab, a physician and poet resident in Canada.

The people whose stories are told in this book approached us without hope. Most felt that they had little influence on their lives, over which serious challenges seemed to cast a shadow over their future. There were a range of reasons for these feelings; some people faced restrictive practices and limitations that prevail in Afghanistan's traditional society; some had been exposed to traumatic experiences, loss of family members, domestic violence or high levels of stress in their daily lives; some lamented their lack of employment or opportunities for educational opportunities: some faced acute poverty; others seemed to have lost hope in their peers, their family and themselves. All in all, those who spoke to us seemed to inhabit a victimized state of fear and anxiety.

Many of the men and women, young and old described family problems that often seemed to involve violence and disputes about differing perceptions of cultural values and traditional practices. Most of these incidents could have been avoided by dialogue as a means of understanding their predicament, and enabling them to reach out to others who might share their despair – and enable them to hope again.

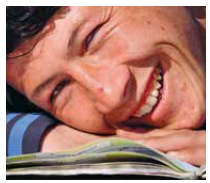
Afghans are of course not unique in how they react to conflict and instability, displacement and a rapid change in traditional society. It is difficult for many outsiders to imagine how they cope with the multiple adversity they face in their daily lives, whether due to poverty, physical circumstances or the consequences of social change in a context where the digital media put unprecedented pressure on traditional values and orientation. The stories here shed some light on the men and women who, in the midst of despair and confusion, found their way with the help of one of our counselors. Our psychosocial counseling approach aims to support these people to regain confidence and regain control of their lives with the help of a professional, empathetic counselor who shares their culture and language, who is non-judgmental and is interested in helping others.

Over the past 12 years, we have trained 350 such Afghan psychosocial counselors through a one-year course. Assigned after their training to health centres in all 34 provinces across Afghanistan, these counselors assisted more than 110,000 people through individual consultations, making a signficant contribution to the public health system. With support from the German Foreign Office, we took the next step and launched an video-online counseling platform to enable wider access for Afghans in need of help – especially those in more remote areas or those not willing to risk their anonymity – or even their lives – by going to a crowded health facility.

The Ipso team in Afghanistan and Germany is grateful to the German Foreign Office for their trust in our work and the support that enables us to continue to extend help to Afghans so that they might regain meaning in their lives.

Inge Missmahl
Founder and director of Ipso








THE TINKLING SOUND OF BELLS

With his thumb and forefinger he nudged his hat above his ears and cupped his hand behind one of them in order to be able to hear better. He listened attentively, concentrating on my lips. He kept clearing his throat as he talked, and with his other hand he now and then either stroked his sparse whiskers or wiped his puffy eyes with the tips of his fingers. He spoke softly. There wasn't a lot that he remembered from his childhood.

"I was fifteen and had just learned how to perform my prayers," he began. "When my mother used to see me on the prayer mat, she would beam with happiness and would go around, flaunting my accomplishment to all the village girls. Sometimes the girls would talk about me among themselves. It felt so good to be the centre of attention. I used to go to the mosque to learn the Koran and acquire religious knowledge. The brook which supplied the village with drinking water passed by the mosque, and whenever I went to drink from it, I used to see the village girls gathered at the banks. One would be doing the household dishes in the brook, another would be doing her laundry. There was this one particular girl with small eyes and radiant skin who caught my eye.

I would catch her every now and then casting glances my way from the corners of her eyes. She would mischievously throw water on the other girls her age and laugh out loud. Perhaps it was just me, but I felt whenever she saw me, her laughter would ring out louder. I liked walking close to the banks of the brook and would use any pretext to be there. I loved it when she realised I was watching her. I wanted her to feel that I was always close by.

"Months passed, and it seemed as if the waxing and waning of the moon in the night sky was keeping count of the days of our lives. Rajab and Sha'ban passed by, and Ramazan[1], the first time in my young life that I was fasting, had just begun. I had become an adolescent and my voice had just broken. It had become manly and resonant, and both because of his own advanced years and my pleasant-sounding voice, the mullah of the mosque chose me from among all his students to be the muezzin[2]. Whenever it was time to chant the azan, the call to prayers, I would climb onto the roof of the mosque. Laila, with her almond eyes and the little bells on her shoes, would come to the brook, feet tinkling, to fill her pitcher. She would walk slowly and I would listen to the jingle of the bells on her shoes, looking after her as she disappeared behind the wooden door three houses away from the mosque. Fasting wasn't easy on long, hot summer days, but for me they passed easily enough, one after the other. On laylat-ul-qadr nights[3] all the villagers, young and old, men and women, would come to the mosque and pass the night with prayer and recital of the Koran. The eftari and the sahari[4] would be collected beforehand from households who were offering a nazr[5], and we would all gather to cook and eat together.

"One day, we had all had sahari and the girls had taken the dishes and pots and pans to the bank of the brook for washing. I was standing on the roof of the mosque to give the azan when suddenly I heard airplanes in the sky. I looked up and saw an airplane spinning and plunging, then rising and plunging again until it crashed a close distance from where I was. It felt as if the plane had smashed into the girls at the bank of the brook and had levelled all the houses in the village. I frantically ran to the brook. The airplane was in flames. I called out to Laila and the other girls but no one replied. The only thing I saw was a little bell from Laila's shoe lying on the ground. I hastily picked it up and put it in my mouth. I was running towards Laila's house and spinning like a top. It was as if the fire-engulfed airplane was spinning over

1 Names of months according to the Islamic lunar calendar, used mostly in rural areas in Afghanistan. Ramazan [pronounced ramazahn], also spelled Ramadhan or Ramadan, is the Muslim month of fasting. Ramazan is the way the month is named in Afghanistan. –Tr.
2 The muezzin is the mosque attendant who calls out the five-times-a-day (or in predominantly Shi'a areas, three-times-a-day) call to prayer from the mosque. –Tr.
3 Laylat-ul-qadr nights are a few not-well-specified nights during the month of Ramazan when it is believed that God blesses the world and prayers are sure to be answered. –Tr.
4 The eftari and the sahari are the names of the two daily meals during the month of Ramazan. The eftari is the "break-fast", when the daily fast is broken at dusk, after the sun has set. The sahari is the small-hours-of-the-morning breakfast, when a meal is had before the first light of day in preparation for the long day ahead without food or drink. –Tr.
5 A nazr is a particular kind of alms, given by a person or a family for the fulfilment of a particular wish or prayer. It usually consists of cooked or uncooked food. –Tr.

my head. I could hear Laila's screams and the screams of the others. Everyone was frantically running here and there, but for me they were shadows passing before my eyes and disappearing. I don't remember anything anymore.

"Some days later I began to notice that nothing was like before. There was no longer any brook or any mosque, just walls all around me. Everything around me was strange; I didn't know where I was. Something was stuck in my throat that would neither come up nor go down. It wouldn't allow me to call my mother, it would just remain stuck there. I realised I must have swallowed the little bell from Laila's shoe. Clinging to the walls, I made my way to the patio outside and sat down. I was imagining airplanes in the sky crashing onto me and blasting my skull to pieces, bits flying around scattered everywhere. Dogs were sniffing at my hair and licking my forehead.

"I slowly began to recover and was able to walk unassisted. I asked my mother 'Where are we?' She replied, 'You lay there, not moving, for eight months, just staring at a single spot in front of you. We finally decided to supplicate Imam Reza[6] for your recovery. We sold the household belongings and leased out the land. We had to bring you to Iran.' I couldn't believe that all this had happened. I asked my mother about Laila. She replied, 'They were all left behind. We brought you here to recover. We'll return home soon.'

"My father had opened a cobbler's shop, and after I was well enough he used to take me along with him to the shop and teach me how to make shoes. Whenever I liked a shoe I used to set it aside so I could give it to Laila as a present when we returned. A corner of the shop was filled with all the shoes I had hoarded for Laila. I pleaded with my parents, 'I'm totally fine now, let's go back home!' but my mother used to reply, 'There is a war going on over there. We will go back for sure once peace returns.' It was not until twelve years later that my mother told me that Laila and a number of others had been killed when that plane had crashed into our village. The revelation overwhelmed me, and I relived the scene in my mind a hundred times each day. No longer could the cobbler's shop keep me busy, and no shoe for Laila could fill me with a sense of warmth and hope. Whole days would pass and I would do nothing but listen to the tinkling of little shoe bells in my mind.

"The years went by. My parents arranged my marriage with a cousin of mine. The fact that my wife is a kind woman and puts up with all my demons and quirks gives me a sense of happiness. My wife tries to keep me happy, but I can never forget Laila.

"We finally returned to Afghanistan and decided to settle down in Kabul. Not long thereafter I became the father of a beautiful baby daughter. Sometime later my mother passed away. After my mother's death I developed an insane phobia. I feared death, I feared to sleep, I feared my daughter, I feared my wife, I feared everything. I was even afraid of the cup of tea that was brought to me to drink. Whenever I drank tea I felt as if my veins wanted to throw up and were going to burst. Whenever I rose up from a sitting or lying-down

6 Imam Reza(765 – 818 CE) is the eighth Imam of the Twelver Shi'ites. His mausoleum is in Mashhad, Iran. –Tr.

position, I thought the ground beneath my feet was about to yawn and was going to swallow me up. I was afraid of losing control of myself, terrified that I might attack my wife and daughter and kill them. I spent the whole of one winter sleeping in a closet out of fear that I might harm them.

“Finally my family took me to a clinic where I talked with a psychosocial counsellor. Taking my hand and walking by my side, he made me realise that there was no danger in walking and that the ground was not going to swallow me up, even if we stamped hard on the ground with our feet. No longer did my veins feel like bursting when I had tea. I stopped to listen to the constant sounds in my mind that were tormenting me. Little by little I began to believe that there were many things I didn’t need to be afraid of, and that it was only me who had lost the nerve to face them.

“I am now back to cobbling and no longer listen to the tinkling sounds in my mind. I have taken the little bells out of my head and sown them onto my little daughter’s shoes. I now listen to her little footsteps. Whenever she stands in front of me and stamps her little feet on the ground to get my attention, I wish her a life full of beauty. I imagine her in a few years from now, when she would have blossomed into a young woman, in the house that I myself have built for us. In my mind’s eye I see her in her room, sitting in front of her computer. From this side of the door I call out to her, ‘My sweet daughter, keep working and study hard!’

“God never takes away something that we love,

but He gives it back in another form.”

MOBIL PHONE ROMANCE

The realisation came upon me that I was an immigrant Afghan girl born in a country where nothing belonged to me and I was entitled to nothing. It was as if I was born to be an object of scorn for people who lived happily in their own country. The sense of homelessness, the ridicule the Iranians poured on my accent and the way I dressed, whether at school, in the markets or on the streets, made me feel more and more helpless, awkward and confused. In class, I used to sit in my quiet corner and not look at anyone. I would tear out pages from my books and pierce the torn pages with the tip of my pen. When the teacher saw what I had done she would throw me out of the class. Despite all this, I managed to continue school up to fifth grade when I finally decided to flee my worries and just stay at home and help my brother. My brother used to work as a seamster. His job was to stich and throw what he was working on to one side. My job was to pick them up, iron them and fold them neatly.

The days and years passed one after the other. We were homeless, but we grew up and became taller and taller as the years went by. It was not only I who felt the anguish of being a person without a country. More than me, the dust of years of being without an identity settled on the heads of my parents, and with every humiliation they endured their hair turned greyer and greyer. Day in and day out, we Afghan immigrants were being insulted and humiliated by people who took pride in the immortal words of Sa'di, painted on large billboards at intersections and beside highways:

All men are members of the same body,
Created from one essence.
If fate brings suffering to one member,
The others cannot stay at rest.
You who remain indifferent
To the burden of pain of others,
Do not deserve to be called human.[1]

1 Translated by Edward Rehatsek (1819 – 1891). Sa'di (c. 1210 – c. 1292) was an eminent Farsi poet who lived and died in Shiraz, Iran. Sa'di's well-known lines, given above, decorate the entrance of the United Nations headquarters in New York. – Tr

It was some years before we heard that the Taliban had been overthrown in Afghanistan and that we could return to our country. Return we did. The signs of war and fighting could be seen everywhere and everyone seemed to be wandering around, perplexed and ill at ease. It was as if they were searching for something that could not be found. It was later that I realised that what everyone was looking for was peace of mind, something no one seemed to have – something Afghans have become so estranged with.

But I was much better because I was going to school. I took the Ministry of Repatriation school placement test and was placed three grades higher than when I went to school in Iran. Grade 8 was a new beginning for me. Business was not bad either. My brother's stitching and tailoring business was prospering and there were lots of customers. I helped him after school and the money I earned I kept for myself for clothes, toiletries and to spend with friends. In tenth grade I bought myself a mobile phone. No one was allowed to bring mobiles to school, but I would hide mine in my sock, above my ankle, and lower my trouser leg over it. On the way home after school, my friends and I would dial our own numbers for fun, but would change the last digit. When the call went through we would say nothing, just giggle. It was a lot of fun.

Little by little I started receiving return calls, because my number showed on the other side's call display. At first I wouldn't talk much with the return callers, but then the phone company launched a promotion drive, according to which they gave a credit bonus of 50 pools[2] for every minute of talk time. If I talked for one hour, I would get 30 Afghanis credit. The more I talked, the more credit I gained and the happier I was. And so, I was constantly on the phone.

Sometime later I noticed that there was one number that would call punctually at three in the afternoon, every day, but would not talk. The caller would remain on the line for around fifteen minutes and then hang up. All I could hear would be the sound of breathing, sometimes the sound of someone walking and the murmur of people talking in the background. For my part, I used to turn up the sound of a song playing on TV, or I would recite poems aloud from my books.

A month passed like this. I was very curious to know why the caller would not talk. Who could it be? I was thinking that perhaps it was someone who

2 A sub-unit of the Afghan currency, the afghani. One afghani equals 100 pools.

knew me and was afraid I would recognise his voice, or perhaps it was one of my classmates who wanted to tease me. Such thoughts occupied my mind for hours, but I couldn't arrive at a satisfactory answer. I got so used to the three o'clock calls that after half past two in the afternoon I would go into a state of waiting and expectation. If there was no call a minute after three, I would become worried and would dial the number myself, mostly to find that the phone I had called was switched off. I would receive a call immediately when the phone was switched back on. Finally, one day, after a few moments of silence, the person at the other end began to hum a popular tune. It was a man and he had a beautiful voice. I fell in love with his voice from day one. For two or three days he would just hum some tunes, but then, little by little, he began to talk. He asked about me. I gave him a false name and a false address of the place where I lived, and told him I was a student at a school I didn't go to. Nothing I told him about myself was true. He told me some things about himself, but I did not believe him either because I was sure he, too, was lying. The fact that he would only call at three o'clock sharp was quite a mystery for me, and whenever I asked him about it he would evade answering me and would lead the conversation elsewhere. I realised that he didn't want to answer that particular question, so I didn't insist.

A year passed and the regular three o'clock calls became part of my day. We gradually opened up to each other, and I told him the truth about myself. We talked about how we had grown attached to each other, and our conversations became more intimate. Often, after our conversations ended, I would think about him, about the way he had talked with me, the words he had used and his speech mannerisms. With every passing day I was becoming more and more attracted to him.

Three years passed, with 15-minute talks at three o'clock every afternoon of every day. Many times I asked to meet him, but each time he had a pretext and would convince me that the time was not yet ripe for it. Sometimes I would imagine what he looked like, and would fantasize about the clothes I would make for him. I was looking forward to the day I could do what I fantasized, so he could understand how important he was for me. I was very much in love with him, even though I really didn't know anything about him or his family. I didn't even know if he had given me his real name or where he came from. Despite all this, I convinced myself that all what he had told me couldn't possibly have been made up. When I graduated high school he told me that he didn't want me to go to university because he had a distaste for university girls. "All they do there is flirt with boys," he said. "I love you the way you are. I don't want you to take the concours exam[3] and go to university." So I accepted and did not sit for the concours. I continued to stich and sew, and my life revolved around the mysterious but lovely daily three o'clock phone conversations.

But the mystery had to be solved. I kept insisting that we meet, till he relented and agreed. But he first made me take an oath. "Read a verse from the Koran, and then swear on the verse you read that whatever you learn and whatever I tell you, you will keep confidential and will not leave me." After four years of waiting and fantasizing, I could contain my excitement no more. Unthinkingly, I agreed and took the oath. He gave me his personal details and told me to be at Pol-e-Charkhi prison[4] at three in the afternoon on the following day. "Give my name to the guards at the entrance, tell them you are my wife. They will bring you to me." From the moment he hung up I had a feeling of unease. My heart was thumping in my chest. On the one hand I was afraid of going to visit a prisoner I didn't know, of the prison itself, and what might happen if I went. On the other hand, what would happen if my family found out that I was in a sort of relationship with a prisoner? I was both scared and excited. My thoughts ran into a thousand different channels, and I really didn't know what to do. But curiosity – or was it something else? – overrode everything, and the following afternoon I left home on the pretext of going shopping. When I reached Pol-e-Charkhi prison my heart was beating so furiously that I felt as if it wanted to fly out. The stress was killing me. What was going to happen? Perhaps he was a savage criminal and had set up a trap for me … perhaps any other wild possibility? Then I remembered all the tender things he had told me. All that couldn't have been lies! Anyway, here I was and there was no turning back. I was going to go through with this, come what may.

I entered the prison compound and asked for him. I was told to wait there. I stood aside in the shade of the prison wall, so lost in a thousand thoughts that I didn't even see him coming. Suddenly someone stood in front of me.

3 Concours is the French word used in Afghanistan to denote the annual university entrance exam given to all high school graduates who desire higher education. – Tr.
4 The most notorious prison in Afghanistan, near Kabul. – Tr.

I looked up. A stranger with a kind face was looking down at me. He had a clean look, with well-groomed hair and thick black eyebrows over eyes with an intense gaze that made my heart tremble. He didn't look like a criminal at all. He came forward and took my hand. I wanted to pull my hand back, but he said softly, "The people around us must believe you really are my wife." In an agitated state I stood beside him. We found a rather secluded spot to sit down. I asked him why he was in prison. He replied, "It's a long story. I'll tell you over the phone. We don't have much time now, so talk to me about more pleasant things." His conversation that day was more flirtatious than on the phone, and he talked about love and romance. I don't know how that one hour passed, but it passed very happily. Time was up and the guard came and took him away, and I returned home with my head spinning and my mind buzzing with questions that had not been answered. After that initial meeting, I went to see him two more times on the once-a-month visiting days. I was feeling much closer to him and was praying silently inside that he be released as soon as possible, so we could get married and live together happily ever after – the kind of happy life I always dreamt about.

Three months after our first meeting he was released, and we were together most of the time. I felt very relaxed with him. We went to places where we could be intimate, and eventually there were few lines we did not cross. His hands would travel all over my body and he would explore my curves, but I was okay with that, because we had agreed that we would eventually get married.

A year passed like this. My cousin, my mother's sister's son, came for khwastgari[5]. I repeatedly refused, but my mother couldn't understand why I would not accept the proposed matrimony. Each time I would find some fault in my cousin and would try to justify my refusal to my mother. Each time I asked my lover why he would not send his family for khwastgari, he would reply that he still had personal problems to sort out before he could be ready for such a venture. His answers to my question "What kind of personal problems do you have that need sorting out?" were never satisfactory, and my queries became so persistent that finally he had to admit that he was already married and had a daughter. "But," he justified, "my marriage was arranged by my father. I have no feelings for my wife. You must wait while I arrange a divorce. But, till then, you must not leave me. You have taken an oath not to leave me, no matter what." I began to have doubts about his feelings for me and the commitments he had made. As my doubts grew, the threats started. "If you break your oath, I will upload all the compromising photos and videos I have of you online and I will provide copies for sale in the market …"

Life turned the ugly side of its face towards me. It was as if he had poured a bucket of boiling water over my head, scalding me to the core. Now I could not leave him, because I really was scared that he would do what he had threatened, something that would cause my parents to die of shame. I did not want to be with him anymore, but I was being blackmailed to continue my relationship. I was now paying the price of my folly with interest.

With every passing day I felt guiltier and guiltier. More than him, I hated myself. I was no longer the innocent, undefiled girl of a few years ago. No part of my body had remained inviolate by that cad. There was nothing I could do but curse the fate that had led me to cross paths with him. His voice now disgusted me. I did not answer his phone calls, but in order to keep the wolf away, I sometimes pretended through text messaging that I still loved him. Every now and then I forced myself to accept his invitation to meet and be together. Even in that situation, I was ready to marry him, even to be his second wife, in order to preserve some remnants of dignity for myself and spare my parents the ultimate dishonor. But now, all pretenses aside, he would have none of the marriage talk. Frustrated at my insistence, he declared, "Because we belong to two different religious denominations, I would become the laughing stock of all my kith and kin if I were to marry you."

That was the last straw. After hearing this I felt like a piece of fetid meat even stray dogs wouldn't want to eat. I had to cut off and throw away all the flesh and skin of my body his hands had touched. I sent him a last message: "I abhor you. Go ahead and publish far and wide whatever photos and video clips you have of me. It may be that they will serve as a warning to gullible girls like me not to fall for cads like you." I smashed my mobile phone to pieces and took up a knife to slash off my breasts which had been playthings in his hands. The pain was excruciating. I slashed the veins on my arm and closed my eyes to wait for the Angel of Death. Images of his penetrating gaze and welcoming

5 Khwastagri is a cultural tradition in Afghanistan, according to which a suitor's family formally approaches a prospective bride's family to ask for her hand in marriage. The response by the prospective bride and her family is not immediate. The final answer is given after repeated khwastgari visits. –Tr.

smile on the first day we met kept flashing mockingly through my mind, then slowly began to fade.

When I opened my eyes I was in hospital. My father was standing over me. “My daughter, what have we done to you that you had no mercy, neither on us nor on yourself? All our hard work, all our suffering, have been for you and your brother. Instead of being a source of strength and support for us in our old age, you break our hearts like this?” In that instant, I needed death to be my saviour. I didn’t want to face my parents with my shame. I couldn’t even bear to look at myself in the mirror.

I remained in hospital for two weeks. Every day, in addition to the doctors treating me, a psychosocial counsellor used to come to talk with me. As my condition improved, I was invited to her consultation room, and in the talks I recounted and understood all what had happened and had led to my being hospitalized. I decided that I could make a fresh start in life by concentrating on my hopes and ambitions instead of on my painful experiences of the past. The counsellor encouraged me to work towards my goals, keep myself busy and cut all links with my past.

I am now studying at the university and afterhours I work alongside my brother. I have no time to think about my past. I wish I knew at the beginning of my misadventures what I know now: that there are people who use others. I now believe that all human beings are not members of the same body. In suffering, each member bears its own pain.

We have to be careful to avoid wounds to the heart and soul that shake our belief in humanity.

DEVASTATED DREAMS

She looked so adorable in the little white doctor’s overcoat that her mother had made for her. At an age when other girls were playing make-believe with their dolls, Shabnam played make-believe with her adult family members, relatives, neighbours and anyone else willing to be her “patient”. And they volunteered willingly, amused that little Shabnam looked so serious as she played doctor, checking their pulses and listening to their hearts with her toy stethoscope, which her father had given her as a Naoroz[1] present. They could with difficulty keep from laughing out loud when little Shabnam, after “examining” her patient, used to say very gravely, “Mrs. Bibi Haji, you have not been taking your medicine regularly. You must not eat too much meat, otherwise your blood pressure will remain high.” Then she would write a “prescription” for the patient and go on to the next one.

Shabnam not only loved playing doctor, she loved books and anything that had to do with learning. Even before being enrolled in school, what she liked the most over any other toy were pens, notebooks and children’s books. At the beginning when she couldn’t read she pretended that she was reading, the way she saw her father reading his books. Everyone admired the pretty little girl. Whatever she did indicated intelligence and a keen mind, and everyone agreed that Shabnam had a promising future ahead of her. She was the pride and joy of her parents, especially her mother who had never been to school or learned to read and write. She had dreams for her daughter and was going to leave no stone unturned to help her daughter realise her full potential.

Years passed and Shabnam blossomed into a beautiful young girl. Families with eligible sons competed with one another in asking for her hand in

1 Naoroz, which falls on 21st March, is the Persian New Year’s day, and is a major cause for celebration in Afghanistan. –Tr.

marriage. Shabnam's mother received all suitors graciously and served them scented tea with biscuits she had baked herself, but her answer to one and all was the same: Shabnam was too young for marriage; besides, she was not going to think about getting married until she had completed her university degree. For Shabnam herself, marriage was the last thing on her mind. She revelled in her books and studies. Not content with what she learned at school, she took supplementary English language and computer classes, and many were the boys who could not compete with her in class but who dreamed of having her in their lives.

In grade 12, Shabnam's main preoccupation was preparing for the concours university entrance exams. She had been oblivious to the war situation up till now, but chaos and insecurity were drawing closer and closer to where she lived, and now she dared not venture out of the house as frequently as she used to. She was getting more and more depressed, because she missed going to class, missed excelling among her classmates and missed learning new things every day. Ever since childhood, she had dreamed of studying medicine, but now the worsening war situation was making the realisation of that dream harder and harder. Suitors still kept coming for khwastgari, but not as frequently as before. The chaos and uncertainty of the war situation kept people's minds occupied with worries and issues of greater priority.

One day a prominent mawlawi[2] who was the commander of a large group of armed men came to Shabnam's house. Mawlawis were traditionally given reverence and respect for their religious learning, but the war situation in Afghanistan had elevated most mawlawis and mullahs to commanders of armed groups fighting the government, therefore mawlawis now were petty potentates who commanded respect, if not because of their traditional roles then because of the guns they controlled. The mawlawi who visited Shabnam's parents had come for khwastgari, to ask for Shabnam's hand in marriage to his younger brother who was a mujahed or "holy warrior". Shabnam and her parents were dismayed at the request, but it was unwise to deny the request outright, the way they used to do with other suitors. So they requested time to deliberate. The mawlawi was happy with the answer and announced that he would be back in a few days.

Shabnam and her parents did not have much choice. In most areas outside large cities, the decades-long war situation in the country had reared a generation of young men who knew nothing but violence. Now those young men were looking for wives. In the lawlessness and chaos of the war situation,

[2] Mawlawi refers to a senior mullah or Islamic cleric. –Tr.

having a beautiful eligible daughter was a great liability for a family. There had been many cases where the khwastgari by a gun-toting young fighter had turned to tragedy because the girl's family had refused the proposed union. Many young girls had been abducted from their families and forced into marriages they did not want, with harsh consequences for their parents. Shabnam's parents decided to make the best of a bad situation. So, it was with misgivings that they convinced themselves and their daughter that they had no choice but to accept the mawlawi's khwastgari. They took some comfort in the knowledge that Hashim, the mawlawi's younger brother and their prospective son-in-law, had been to school and could read and write. When the mawlawi came back a few days later, Shabnam's parents indicated that they would consent to the marriage on condition that Shabnam be allowed to pursue her dream of higher education, and the wedding be delayed until such time as she received her university degree. The mawlawi accepted hesitantly, saying that that would be an issue to be determined by the couple themselves. Thus, Shabnam's parents set a plate of sweets in front of the mawlawi, a traditional symbolic gesture of acceptance of the proposed union. From that instant onward Shabnam was considered betrothed to Hashim.

Shabnam had never seen Hashim before, but it was the accepted fate of girls in her situation to find themselves engaged or married to men they hardly knew. Knowing each other beforehand and deciding to marry based on mutual attraction and understanding was something that only happened in large cities, mostly to educated young men and women. It had been for this reason that Shabnam so very much wanted to go to university and pursue higher education. But the situation she found herself in now was a woman's lot, and she was resigned to her fate as long as she could pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. And she had been promised that she could.

Hashim, now Shabnam's fiancé, began visiting. They had to get to know each other if they were to spend a lifetime together. Shabnam didn't like the way he dressed, and there were quite a number of other things she wanted to see changed in him. She convinced herself that with time she would be able to change him. She was unhappy that Hashim was not at all keen on books and learning, but otherwise he seemed quite agreeable. Little by little, as time went by and they got to know each other more, Hashim began to show open resentment to the fact that his fiancé was so keen on going to university. Having been brought up with a mullah's mentality, he began talking about a woman's place being in the house and rearing children and taking care of her husband. Shabnam found herself getting into quarrels with her fiancé more and more frequently. She tried to convince him that it was wrong to believe, as Hashim did, that girls' education was of no importance, but Hashim used to quote religious scripture to the effect that men were superior to women and a good wife would submit to her husband's decisions without argument. Once he mentioned to Shabnam's mother, his mother-in-law-to-be, that it was a sin for a betrothed girl to insist on going to school if her husband-to-be did not desire it.

Going to school was not the only issue that prompted their increasingly bitter arguments. Hashim, who under the influence of his elder brother's religious teachings firmly believed in the male prerogatives of a fiancé and a husband-to-be, now interfered in almost everything Shabnam did. He wanted her to change the way she dressed and cover up from head to toe when she went out. He forbade her from talking to adult males, whether they were her cousins or classmates or family members of her girl friends. Shabnam was gradually filled with dismay at the thought that she was to spend the rest of her life with this man. She could only weep at her fate. Her mother was beside herself with grief at the thought that her daughter's future, once so bright and so promising, now seemed so dark and bleak. Shabnam's father soon passed away, out of heartbreak at his helplessness towards his daughter. Perhaps it was his sense of guilt that killed him. It was he who had always inculcated into his daughter's mind that it was a woman's religious duty to be obedient and submissive to her man.

The last straw was when Hashim forbade her from going to school. It was as if her dreams were blown up and her life lost meaning. How was it possible to quit school when she was a star pupil on the threshold of university? She was preparing to become a doctor, and now someone else was controlling her life and telling her not to go to school? With tears streaming down her face she told her mother that she could not carry on with the engagement, that she

could stand Hashim no longer. Her mother, torn between her love for her daughter and the enormity of breaking off her engagement, did not know what to say. To break off an engagement was no ordinary matter, especially when it involved powerful and vicious commanders of armed bands. But a mother's love overrules everything. She told her daughter that she would support her in whatever she decided, but suggested that they try once more to talk sense into Hashim.

The next day when Hashim came to visit, mother and daughter both sat down to talk with him. Shabnam's mother reminded Hashim of his brother's promise to allow Shabnam to pursue her dream of higher education, but Hashim replied that no such promise had been made. Shabnam was furious. She told Hashim outright that she didn't want to marry him and was going to cancel the engagement. Hashim flew into a rage. They had never seen this side of his character before. He began to kick Shabnam and beat her with his fists, roaring, "You dare to think about cancelling the engagement? You're as good as my wife, you think I will tolerate this dishonour?" Seeing her darling daughter being treated like that, Shabnam's mother screamed and rushed to protect her. Hashim turned on her and began kicking and hitting her too. "I'm a Taliban," he screamed, "I will kill you if any of you dare to raise your voice against me once more." With a last kick at Shabnam and her mother, he left the house.

The two women wept silently for hours. Even in a culture where violence against women was quite common, they had never been so abused. The physical pain of the blows they had received was nothing compared to the humiliation and emotional pain that Hashim had inflicted on both of them. But the unexpected brutality steeled their resolve. The engagement was as good as annulled and Shabnam was going to continue her education.

The following day Shabnam resolved to go to school. She cast aside the burqa that Hashim had forced her to wear and went out as she had before Hashim took control of her life. Her friends and classmates wondered at the sudden change, but she didn't feel she wanted to explain her reasons. She very much enjoyed school that day; it felt so much like old times.

Shabnam's mother left the house later in the morning. She had some shopping to do and some errands to run. But she had an uneasy feeling all day. It was late in the afternoon when she returned home. Shabnam should have returned before her and must be hungry. Perhaps she had cooked something for herself, her mother thought. As she stepped into the room where Shabnam usually sat and studied, she saw a pool of blood. Before the implication of the pool of blood could register in her mind, she saw Shabnam's lifeless body sprawled out on the floor. Her own piercing scream was the last thing she could remember.

A year later, Shabnam's mother found herself in a circle of people recounting their harrowing experiences in a support group facilitated by a psychosocial counsellor. With Shabnam's death she had lost everything that had meaning in her life. Hashim had destroyed all her dreams, all her hopes. There was nothing left for her to live for, she just wanted to die. But the psychosocial counsellor had helped her cope with her unbearable grief. Talking to other people who had a difficult and sometimes unbearable life, listening to them and supporting each other had lessened the weight on her chest.

Now, whenever she sees little girls go to school she gives them a pen or a pencil as a present. When they look at her with surprise in their eyes, she says softly, "It is from Shabnam. She wants you to go to school for her."

WHY LIVE?

Whenever I found myself alone I would compare myself with my peers and ask myself, "Why should I live?" The others had a thousand and one reasons for living. If they died, their parents would be beside themselves with grief. If I died, not only would my father not feel the least sadness, he would even be happy to have one mouth less to feed. My mother would be even happier in her grave, knowing that her daughter had left all her cares behind and had joined her in the hereafter.

I don't remember much about life with my mother. I do remember that every morning she used to wash my face and hands, comb my hair, and then sit on her wooden stool and comb her own hair. Whenever she squatted or sat on the ground, the tips of her hair would reach the floor. I would imitate her and sit on her stool, and insist that she comb my hair again, so mine could reach the floor too. At that age I liked to imagine that I was as tall as my mother, with long black tresses like her. How eager I was to grow up! Little did I know that those were the best days of my life, about to end.

With every passing day I grew older and learned about life and its customs from my playmates. They would talk about their families and what they did at home. One would say, "I fill the pitcher for my daddy, so he can perform his wuzu."[1] Another would say, "I find my daddy's spittoon and place it beside him when he uses naswar."[2]

1 Wuzu (also pronounced and transliterated as wudhu and wudu) is the obligatory ablutions, the ritual washing of hands, face and feet, necessary for performing the five-times-a-day Muslim prayers. –Tr.

2 Naswar is an addiction-forming snuff-like substance kept in the mouth for several minutes to absorb its nicotine, then spitted out. –Tr.

Every day they would talk about their families, especially about their fathers. When I came home, I used to ask my mother about my daddy. She used to answer, “Your daddy is in Iran. He will return next year.” I always looked forward to the next year, when my daddy would return and I could do something for him and be like the other girls and their families.

Time passed and finally my father did return. But he neither called me his ‘little girl’ nor did he treat my mother as his wife. He neither performed wuzu, for me to fill his pitcher for him, nor did he use naswar, for me to fetch his spittoon. He used to just sit on that wooden stool and stare at the mountains that loomed in the distance in front of him. Towards noon he would rise up and go outside. When he returned in the evening, he would often bellow, “The things that people say about you! You whore! Who did you consort with while I was away!?” My mother would not say anything, but tears would roll down her cheeks. One day I suddenly awoke from sleep to find my father standing over my mother sitting on the wooden stool. My father had a rifle in his hands with the tip of the barrel resting on my mother’s chest.

There was fury in his voice. “Who was the father of the baby you gave birth to and then strangled?” he kept asking. “Who did you sleep with?” My mother was stammering and kept repeating, “You are mistaken! It’s not true!” I leapt up and ran to pull the rifle barrel away from my mother’s chest. My father thrust his foot out and tripped me up. I fell. As I was getting up, I heard my mother scream, “Nargis! Stay away! You’ll get killed too!” My legs were trembling and I had to close my eyes. I heard the roar of the rifle shot. I couldn’t open my eyes. It was in a daze when I did open them. My father was gone and my mother lay on the floor, face down. A pool of blood had formed around her. I clasped her arm and shook her, and kept calling out “Mummy! Mummy!” There was no answer.

Sometime later the villagers poured in and took my mother away to the graveyard. My father was nowhere to be seen. My paternal grandfather took me to his home to my grandmother to take care of me. I missed my mummy so much! Before going to sleep each night I would hear the roar of the rifle and see my mother, tears running down her face, whispering “You are mistaken! It’s not true!” And she would come to me in my dreams …

Days and months passed, and I was growing up. The memory of my mother’s death was gradually fading from the minds of the villagers and from their daily talk when my uncle, my mother’s brother, appeared at my grandparents’ house and declared that he was going to the authorities to demand justice for his sister. My grandfather, knowing how the system worked, replied that opening a case with the authorities would mean that all the family’s belongings would be lost to the corruption machine. “The land that your sister inherited from your father we will return to you,” offered my grandfather. “Your niece is now ten years old, and according to Shar’ia law she is considered legally competent to give her consent. We will gather the village elders, and we will have them testify the validity of the land transfer document that we will give you.” There was nothing better that my uncle wanted, so he readily consented and forgot all about justice for his sister. In a couple of days, the village elders were gathered and they brought me to the gathering also. I felt very scared and uncomfortable and did not know what to do because I couldn’t understand what was going on or why I was there. They wrote something on a sheet of paper and someone smeared my thumb with some ink and pressed it onto the paper. A number of elders wrote something they called a ‘signature’ on it, and the paper was then given to my uncle who looked very happy. He folded the paper and put it in his pocket and left. Not once did he look in my direction or ask how I spent the nights without my mummy?

Three years after my mother’s death, my father returned to the village with his new wife and two children. They settled down in the deserted house my mother and I once used to live in, and my father came to claim me back from my grandfather. In actual fact, he wanted me back in his household because he needed a servant for his new wife and children. My job was to do all the household chores. In the mornings I had to bake bread in the pit oven, then do the dishes and the laundry. Sweeping, cleaning the house and tending to the babies were also part of my duties, as was bringing water and firewood from outside the house. My stepmother used to just sit on my mother’s wooden stool and do embroidery all day long. My father used to leave the house in the morning for some work in the village. His usual path took him past the cemetery where my mother was buried. He had not forgotten her. He remembered her

by taking out his frustrations on me and beating me up on the slightest pretext. An intense hatred for my father and my stepmother began to grow within me for the treatment they constantly meted out to me. I cried myself to sleep every night. This was my life, to labour like a slave and in return endure my father's beatings and my stepmother's jeers and taunts.

Two years passed like this. Several times I decided to run away, but every time I used to ask myself "Where can I go to?" I only had my maternal uncle who was no better than my father. Thus, I couldn't go and I couldn't stay. I could only exist.

Finally, one day, my father and stepmother were away in another village for a wedding. I was alone at home with my little stepbrother and stepsister. I couldn't find anything at home to feed them. I tried as best as I could to comfort them, but they were hungry and crying. Perhaps I was wrong, but I half suspected my stepmother of hiding the food in order to have a pretext for herself and my father to be nasty to me when they returned, because I had kept the children hungry. My pent-up frustrations got the better of me and I began to rampage around the house, smashing crockery, window panes, the wooden stool, whatever breakable I could find. Then I took a pair of my father's clothes, tied it up in a bundle, and locking my father's children in the room I left the house. I first went to my mother's grave to say goodbye, then headed for the direction that would take me farthest away from any habitation. I did not know where I was going, but I knew I could not turn back now. I was headed towards an unknown destiny. There was a lump in my throat as I reached the foot of the mountain.

I climbed and climbed and climbed, and, after the sun set, I stood on a ledge and looked back. The village I had left looked as small as the palm of my hand in the distance below, a small expanse that had devoured fifteen years of my life. It was getting darker and I could hear the howling of jackals not too far away. I was scared. Creeping into a cleft in the rocks large enough to accommodate me, I turned my face towards the direction of my mother's grave and put the bundle which held my father's clothes under my head. From between the two rocks I had wedged myself into, a few lights from the village twinkled below and the stars in the distant heavens twinkled above. My thoughts wandered. What was happening in the home I had left? What was the look on my father's and stepmother's faces when they found out I had gone on a rampage and then left the house? Suddenly the horror of my father coming after me hit me. What would happen if he followed my trail and found me? He would murder me, no doubt. In a frenzy of fear I rose up and groped my way further up the mountain in the darkness. I was no longer afraid of jackals and wolves. Being rent by savage animals was preferable to what my father would do to me if he found me.

At light of dawn I was nearly on the other side of the mountain, so I paused. It was getting light and I might run into strangers. There was no telling what would happen. I untied the bundle I carried and took out my father's clothes and put them on. With the scarf I had used to tie up my father's clothes I wrapped my hair and covered my face. Dressed as a boy, no one would take undue interest in me.

Leaving the mountain behind, I eventually reached a village I did not know. I was tired and hungry but could not risk asking anyone for food. I ate whatever edible I could find and pressed on, from hamlet to hamlet, from mountain to mountain. I did not know how long I could hide being a girl, but I wanted to put as much distance as I could between myself and my past. Finally, exhausted and starving, I arrived at a village where the people spoke and dressed differently than those I had seen up till now. I found the village mosque and crept in and curled up in a corner, and immediately fell asleep. When I awoke it was morning. I sat up, wondering what to do next. I was pursuing my scattered thoughts when a man who daily swept the mosque came in. Seeing me, he took me for a day labourer from another village who usually passed by, looking for work, and spent the night in the mosque. "Let's go to the fields if you want to work," he said. "The harvest is about to begin." Despite my exhaustion from my arduous travels and having had no food since the day before, I got up and followed him. The work was not too difficult and there was food. For ten days I laboured at the harvest and spent the nights in the mosque. Gulbibi, the sweeper's wife, was a kind and curious lady. She wondered why, in the heat of summer and despite the stifling work, I kept my face covered. I did not know what to say, and it was difficult to evade her increasing curiosity. I found it safest to confide in her, being a woman, so told her I was a girl. "My name

is Shirin," I lied. "I am an only child. The Taliban took away my father. I don't know what to do, I have no one to turn to. So I am going to Kabul to try to find out what happened to him." Gulbibi was sympathetic. "I, too, intend to go to Kabul in a couple of days to visit my mother," she said. "You can come with me." She gave me some of her own clothes, so I changed back into a woman's garments. The following day we set out for Kabul. I had never seen a big city before and felt very overwhelmed. Fortunately, I had a kind companion and felt safe. We found our way to a narrow street with small houses enclosed by high mud walls on either side. We entered one of the houses where Gulbibi's mother, an old lady, lived with a little girl of three or four years of age. "The little girl is my niece," explained Gulbibi. "My brother is an officer in the Afghan National Army. His wife died last year, leaving behind his little daughter who now lives with her granny, my mother."

The lie about the Taliban taking away my father was not very inconvenient, because no one knew where to look for him. Thus, weeks passed. Gulbibi returned to her village and I stayed with her mother and niece. They were very kind to me and I grew close to them. Three months passed and Gulbibi came for another visit. She took me aside. "I don't think you will ever find your father," she said. "No one taken away by the Taliban ever come back. You have no one and nowhere to go to. My mother and niece like you. Why don't you marry my brother and become part of the family? If your father ever shows up he will be happy to see you with a husband and a home of your own." What Gulbibi said made a lot of sense. I accepted the proposal and they made a call to the army unit in the provinces where Hassan, Gulbibi's brother, was posted. A few days later Hassan returned home. He was older than me, with a furrowed forehead and a serious and taciturn manner. He greeted me respectfully as a guest and later asked his sister about me. Gulbibi told him my story and added that I was a pleasant and good-mannered girl. "You are a widower," she told him. "You do not have the wealth to marry another wife the customary way. We know Shirin is a good girl. She will take care of you and our mother and your daughter. Who better to take as a wife?" Hassan accepted and a couple of days later the marriage was solemnised by a mullah with a couple of Hassan's friends as witnesses. And so I began my new life.

My husband is a quiet man who doesn't talk much. I, too, am a changed woman. I try to return the kindness Hassan and Gulbibi and their mother have shown me, and I have grown quite fond of Hassan's mother and his little daughter. They call me Shirin and never ask about my past life. I am happy because I sense that Hassan loves me and wants me to be happy. He is now posted closer to Kabul and once a week he takes leave from his work and comes home to spend time with me and his mother and daughter.

A year after we got married I bore him a son, Sohrab. After Sohrab's birth my husband and mother-in-law became even kinder to me. I knew that they loved and trusted me, and because of this I developed a feeling of guilt because the story they knew about my past was a lie. I also had a nagging fear that my father might someday find me and destroy the happiness I had found with Hassan. It pained me greatly that he lived in impunity, not far from the grave of the woman he had murdered. Such fears and agony always kept me ill at ease. I wanted to tell my husband the truth about myself, but each time I braced myself to tell him I would get a crushing headache which became more and more frequent as time went by. I was becoming more and more irritable and couldn't do my daily work as well as I used to. Finally I decided to seek help for my condition. I went to a clinic and they referred me to a psychosocial counsellor. I did not lie to the psychosocial counsellor and told her the truth about my past. During our meetings she explored with me all the details of my feelings since my childhood, and got me talking about my fears and hopes. After every session I felt better. The counsellor made me realise that I could only come to terms with my past if I left it there and didn't carry it with me to the present and the future.

I am a happy woman. Every day I sit on a wooden stool I have, just like my mother's, and nurse my son. Now, when I ask myself "Why should I live?", I have an answer. I should live to love and be loved. In the mornings I comb my stepdaughter's hair, I fill my mother-in-law's pitcher for her wuzu, and fetch my husband's spittoon for him. And I smile a lot more.

What a wonderful feeling it is, to love those around you and know that you are loved by them!

PILL BAG

It had become a constant nightmare.

Every night I would re-live the firefight with the Taliban, and I would dream of the bullets that pursued me, each a guarantee of death. Somehow, none of them hit me, but the terror of being pursued by death was always there. I used to wake up in a panic, drenched in sweat.

I served in the Afghan Security Forces for four years, dedicated to my job of being a defender of my people. I was so proud of what I was doing. At nights, when on duty, I liked to think of myself as the only person awake in a sleeping community. I felt like proclaiming from the top of the mountains "Sleep tight, sleep secure, I am awake to watch over you, to make sure that your dreams are not interrupted!" But it seemed that no one ever heard my message, not because of the sounds of the Taliban fighting and of our return fire, but because few people would have believed me.

The Afghan Security Forces were not looked upon as the most trusty of defenders. For years, ever since the communists took power in the 1970s and began to wage war on their own people, the Afghan Security Forces themselves were looked upon as the enemy. Things worsened with the corruption and lawlessness that came in the wake of the Karzai-government.

I had many times observed children in villages being scared of my uniform and the gun I had in my hands. I remember once we were ordered to assist the US-led Coalition Forces search a village for illegal weapons. The villagers were all terrified of us, especially the women and children. They hated and detested us more than they hated the Taliban. I had observed that whenever any of us, whether Afghans or Coalition Forces westerners, asked someone for a glass of water, they would wash the glass thoroughly after we had drunk because they believed it had been defiled by us drinking from it. We wanted to show them that we were their friends, not their enemy – to "win their hearts and minds" as the official catchphrase went. Once, we had some oranges in the military vehicle that had brought us to the village. I took some to give to the children and see them smile. The first child I saw was a little bare-foot boy of about four or five years of age walking on the dirt road. I called him to me and gave him an orange. His older sister, some ten or eleven years old, screamed at him "Don't eat it! Throw it away! It's poisoned!" She snatched the orange from the little boy's hand and threw it away as if throwing a live grenade. The girl's action – born of fear and mistrust – and the look on the little boy's face were like a knife plunged into my heart. I could only return to the vehicle and try to hide the tears that came to my eyes.

Of course, it was not always so bad. I remembered the old man, working on his land, who waved at us as we drove past; the school children who imitated the military and saluted as we passed by. But somehow, the image of that child and the orange that he never ate was etched into my heart. Why was everyone so mistrustful? It wasn't only that no one trusted us, the Security Forces. We, too, were constantly being told not to trust anyone. Our commanding officers always used to caution us, "Never trust these people. They might feast you in the evening, but later that night they will cut your throats." Our superiors taught us to mistrust the people, but who had taught the people to mistrust us? Why did the children run away from us? Perhaps because to them, there was no difference between us and the Taliban.

Sadly, the mistrust on our part seemed to be justified. Once in Kunar[1], we were conducting a military search operation. The local people welcomed us and treated us hospitably. Goodwill seemed to abound all around. We were feasted and a sheep was killed and served in our honour. On returning to our base we were ambushed and three of my comrades who were in the first vehicle of the convoy died on the spot. We were under fire from all sides. I had a gun in my hand but I was frozen with disbelief. I could not move. There had been so much goodwill just a while before! Another of my comrades pulled me behind a huge tree which sheltered us from the bullets, and we remained there until the fighting died down.

1 Kunar is a province in eastern Afghanistan, bordering Pakistan. – Tr.

After that incident I became paranoid. I saw enemies everywhere and was afraid of everyone. I was scared of my own shadow, of my own footsteps. The sound of trees rustling in the wind terrified me, and I was scared of my own voice, so much so that when on sentry duty I could not shout "Dresh!" [Halt!] to challenge the person approaching me, as was required. I was so much on edge that sometimes I would fire in the air for no reason at all. After some time, my condition became so apparent to everyone that my commanding officers granted me three weeks' sick leave to go to Jalalabad and seek help from doctors. I was very happy to go home and see my wife and children again, but nothing was the same anymore. I could not enjoy their company and I was no longer the same person to them. My family was extremely concerned when they realised my condition. My father suggested I go to Peshawar in Pakistan to seek better and more advanced medical treatment. After a thorough medical examination and many tests, the doctors in Peshawar gave me three months' supply of medications, all in the form of pills. I returned home to Jalalabad, and at the end of the three weeks' leave period returned to my unit in Kunar.

My comrades were glad to see me, but I became the butt of good-natured jokes as I pulled out my bag of pills to take my medication three or four times a day. They began calling me Pill Bag, and the name stuck and became my nickname. The bag of pills I carried around with me and the nickname that they had given me served to remind everyone that I was limited in what I could do. My commanding officers and comrades were considerate, and realising that I could not perform my duties as well as expected, I was excused from most camp tasks.

Two months passed like this, but there was little improvement in my condition. The commanding officers were getting impatient, since soldiers are expected to be fit and fight and do whatever strenuous work that is demanded of them, something I could not do. I, too, was despairing of becoming fit as a soldier again, so I began to think of leaving the military. Not being able to make up my mind, I applied for an extended leave of absence, and the commanding officers, knowing my situation, granted the request.

Returning to my family brought me no joy. I did not know what to do with myself. I had no heart to go outside the house for anything, so I passed the days at home, doing nothing and just making a nuisance of myself for everyone. The children's noises irritated me and I was always screaming at them. My poor wife didn't know what to do with me because more than once I resorted to violence and hit her. I didn't want to see the doctor again and stopped taking my pills. I was becoming more and more desperate and wanted to die. I began to have suicidal thoughts, with my thoughts increasingly straying to my military-issued gun, which I still had with me. It would make things so much easier, I kept thinking, but I could not bear the terrifying sound of gunshots.

I don't know how it would have all ended if one of my comrades, an old friend, had not happened to pass by. I had known Jamil since before we both joined the Security Forces, and we were in the same unit. Jamil was from Mazar-i-Sharif, in the north of Afghanistan, and our unit was stationed in Kunar, in the east. Depending on the security situation on the nearly 1,000 kilometre route, it usually took 2-3 days to travel between Kunar and Mazar-i-Sharif. Whenever Jamil went home on leave he would spend a night in my house in Jalalabad and we would talk till the small hours of the morning. This time it wasn't like before. I had no heart for talk, and Jamil could well see the change in me. He became so concerned at my condition that the following day, instead of leaving to continue his voyage home, he insisted that he accompany me to a doctor and wouldn't hear my reasoning that I didn't want to see one.

Jamil took me to the Jalalabad health clinic. There I first talked to a psychosocial counsellor. Instead of examining me like the other doctors, the counsellor at the clinic talked with me for nearly forty minutes. He drew out all the details of my situation from me, my dedication to my job, my experiences, my flashbacks, my fears, even my suicidal thoughts. At the end, instead of writing out a prescription for me, he asked me about my most pressing problem which I would like to resolve. It was my fear. The question was how I could face my fears, how I could stop avoiding them. I was so surprised, since I expected more prescriptions and more pills, instead I left his room being hopeful that I might be able to change something.

Jamil accompanied me back home and then left to resume his journey. "Facing my fears" was something new for me and I wanted to try it out. I began going out of the house in the darkness of night and walking in the deserted streets. The creeping fear inside me would rise and I could feel my heart racing, but I resolved to ignore my fears. I tried to listen to the different sounds of the night and not allow myself to panic. During the day I used to go far from everyone else and fire a few rounds in the air. The sounds of gunshots did not terrify me as much as they used to. I followed up with the psychosocial counsellor, and really enjoyed going to see him since I always would feel lighter and relieved afterwards. A couple of weeks later Jamil returned from Mazar-i-Sharif, and once more stopped by to see me. I was feeling and looking much better, so much so that I resolved to accompany him back to our unit. My comrades were all very glad to see me and I sensed that my paranoia was much less than before. I told my commanding officers about my visits to the psychosocial counsellor, and once a month they would grant me leave to go to Jalalabad to see the counsellor.

This was all two years ago. I am much better now and no longer take any pills. And no one calls me Pill Bag anymore.

LEAVING NIGHTMARES BEHIND

I longed for relief. Hatred was eating away at me inside out. I hated myself, I hated the world and everyone in it. Ah, to be able to slaughter everyone alive, then light a conflagration that would consume the whole world, then jump into the raging inferno myself! Perhaps that might bring relief!

Some time ago I was a casual labourer in Kandahar, happy in the thought that I was a man who could bring food to the table and support my family, which included my young sister Feroza, who was in her last year of high school. I looked forward to Feroza's graduation, after which she was to go to university and become the first girl from any family we knew who would be so accomplished. I liked to imagine the envy of the families we knew and was filled with a sense of pride for being the support that would make that dream come true. What heights she would reach after graduating from university were beyond even my imagination. Until that fateful day …

I had just arrived home, tired from the day's work. Somehow since that morning I had been feeling uneasy. I found my sister Feroza curled up in a corner of the room, sobbing. My mother's eyes were red with weeping but she had no more tears. No one would tell me what was going on, and in answer to my alarmed questions there was only silence. It was more than I could bear, so I screamed at my mother to tell me what had happened. Feroza ran from the room. My mother, between sobs, told me how Feroza had been raped by Rahim, the son of the baker who lived a few houses down the road. I didn't want to know how it had happened, but the very fact that Feroza had allowed herself to be in a position where she could be taken advantage of was reason enough for me to believe that somehow she was complicit in what had happened. Rape or no rape, my sister had been loose enough to let herself be

violated by that boy! I raced after her, with my mother and younger brothers and sisters racing after me. I shudder to think what I would have done to Feroza if I had caught her, but perhaps anticipating my reaction she had taken refuge in another room and had locked the door from the inside. I was kicking the door and screaming and cursing, and everyone else was screaming and wailing in fear of what was going to happen. My sense of violated honour was consuming me like a fire. For my sister to have lost her girlhood[1] like that to someone she wasn't married to, was a scandal I couldn't bear. How could I look the people who knew me – my friends, my relatives, the neighbourhood – in the eye? I frantically searched for a gun we had in the house, but I believe my mother, in the midst of her own personal torment and turmoil, had hidden it because she knew how I would react. I was going to kill both Feroza and that son of a whore, Rahim, who had brought this disgrace on me and my family. My predictable reaction was what was to be expected in traditional Afghan culture; in fact it would have been scandalous if I had reacted otherwise. The chastity of a family's female members is considered the sacred untouchable honour of the men of the family, and only blood can wash off the shame of one's women's chastity being violated. I could not find the gun, so not being able to get my hands on Feroza, I rushed with bare hands to Rahim's house. I was going to strangle the pig or beat him to a pulp with my bare hands, or I would be killed in the attempt. As I rushed out of the house, my mother and siblings screamed in terror, because they could foresee the outcome. Fortunately, perhaps also in anticipation of my reaction, Rahim's house was deserted and the door locked. I could do nothing except smash the window panes in my fury. All this commotion had brought the neighbours and passers-by to the scene, and they were curiously enquiring what had happened. This increased my sense of humiliation and I could just curse heaven and earth and head back home. My mother and siblings followed me. Perhaps we had all emotionally exhausted ourselves, since after a while everyone grew silent and was lost in thought. Each one of us was coping with the catastrophe in our own way. I was in a daze and didn't know what to do. My overriding emotion was one of shame. How was I going to face the world?

1 In Afghanistan, 'losing one's girlhood' is a euphemism for a girl losing her virginity. – Tr.

I don't know how long we remained like that. I was aroused by the sound of knocking on the front door. My younger brother came to tell me that a group of elders, headed by the local mullah, were at the door and wanted to see me. I asked my brother to show them to the guest room and joined them after a moment. The six or seven elderly men were seated on cushions when I entered. I greeted them with a brief salaam alaikum and sat down beside the door. There was silence for a moment, then the mullah began to speak. Like all mullahs, he began quoting from religious scriptures, then went into how it was important to make sure that the harm of what had happened was contained. Rahim had fled, knowing full well the weight of his foul deed. Rahim's father had approached the mullah and the community elders[2], vouching that he would bring Rahim home once the tempest of rage was over, and pledging that Rahim would marry Feroza in order to blot the shame he had brought on her and her family.[3] The mullah and the elders gave reassurance on their part that even if Rahim had fled, his family and home were there and would be answerable for the sworn promises that they had made. Worst case, they pledged, if Rahim could not be found and brought back, they would guarantee that Rahim's family paid yearly stipends to Feroza in redress of the harm that had been caused. There was little I could say or wanted to say. The mullah and the elders left in silence. I was still in a daze and my inner turmoil was such that I didn't have any words to express myself. There was no way I could think of accepting a yearly stipend in redress for the shame that had been visited upon me and my family. The storm of fury that was raging in my chest could only be assuaged by Rahim's blood.

Days passed, and every day I enquired of the mullah whether Rahim had been located and was being returned, and every day I got the response that they were still looking for him. As the days went by, the cold fury in my heart and mind turned to a feeling of emptiness. I was restless with not knowing what to do. I couldn't concentrate on anything, couldn't sleep or eat. I just wanted to be alone, to go somewhere where no one would see me, where I could forget that even I myself existed. I believed that the whole world was talking about us, about my sister's disgrace and our family's shame. When I went out of the house I kept my eyes on the ground, so I wouldn't have to look anyone in the eye.

Two weeks went by like this and I began to develop crushing headaches. I had a burning sensation in my stomach and my vision was beginning to be affected. When I walked I stumbled, as if drunk. My mother, going through her own agony, noticed that of all the family I was taking it the worst. She came to talk to me and gave me words of wisdom. "We cannot change what has happened," she said, "but you and I must both be strong for the rest of the family. They need us. You think it is easy on them? We cannot help them if we let ourselves go. Look at you! You must try to eat something to get some energy, then go and see a doctor or someone to get help for your condition." I listened to her and realised she was right. The world is a cruel place, but we have to live in it.

I went to the clinic and saw a doctor. He couldn't find anything wrong with me, but he noticed my disheveled appearance and agitated state of mind, and recommended that I see a psychosocial counsellor. During the very first session I had to open up and relieve my chest of all that was bothering me.

We talked for a long time, and I understood that all my symptoms of the past days were due to my inner psychological turmoil. I also understood how the values of my family, my tribe and my community had led me to react in that way and I started to feel with my sister instead of condemning her. The counsellor also recommended physical activity. I was skeptical but I began going on long walks. At home, instead of brooding I began to try out a different behaviour. Sure enough, before long I began to feel better. My appetite returned and I grew calmer. I was able to think more clearly, and although the inner anguish was there, I remembered my mother's advice to be strong for the sake of the family.

Two months had gone by since that fateful day. I was gentler with my family members, and talked things over with my mother and sister. She had not yet been able to set foot outside the house, because the taunts and meaningful glances of those who know of what happened were too much for her to bear. Now that I had weathered my inner storm I had to find a way to lessen the pain and anguish we were all feeling. I therefore consulted with my mother and

2 In the tribal and patriarchal culture of Afghanistan, having a group of clergymen and community elders intercede is an age old mechanism for conflict resolution. They command respect and their intercession is always thought to be for the greater good of the community. They cannot be ignored or turned down easily.

3 Having a rapist marry the victim has since long been the customary response to instances of rape and sexual scandal in Afghanistan. It is thought that formal marriage retroactively gives a semblance of legitimacy to an illegitimate sexual assault on a female victim or illicit sexual relationship with her, considered a source of shame and humiliation for the girl's family. The formal marriage therefore mitigates the atrocity by giving the victim's family the pretext of saving face. The future relationship between rapist and victim, and the fate of the victim-turned-wife is considered to be of secondary importance.

siblings, and we resolved to move to another city where no one knows us, to begin a new life and leave our nightmare behind us. Perhaps, I reason, in new surroundings we will be able to pick up the pieces of our smashed lives. And perhaps it will be there that Feroza will still reach the heights that are beyond even my imagination.

I am still hopeful ...

BIRDS CHIRPING ONCE AGAIN

Khanzad was in grade three when he learned that his father had been killed. His father had been a school teacher, and after the communists came to power he became a government functionary. Disillusioned with the communist government, he turned to the mujaheddin, the 'holy warriors' fighting against the communist government. The whole country was up in arms against the communists, and there was fighting everywhere. Khanzad's father had sent his wife and children to the safety of a refugee camp near Peshawar, Pakistan, while he fought with the mujaheddin. It was in a fire-fight against soldiers of the communist government in the Samarkhel area of Ningarhar Province that he was killed.

Khanzad, like most people in the Afghan countryside, didn't know his exact age. Dates of birth were never noted because few people were literate enough to write them down, or appreciate their significance for that matter. Women gave birth as they had throughout the ages, in their homes, without modern doctors or nurses or record keeping. Birthdays were never noted or marked, and age was calculated, when needed, from recollection of events close to the time of the person's birth. "So-and-so was born in late autumn, when the waters had started to freeze over in the mornings. It was the year Haji Sahib from Lower Village married off his daughter to his cousin's son, you remember? That was seventeen or eighteen years ago. So-and-so must be seventeen or eighteen years old now, right? Yes, that's right, eighteen." Khanzad was thirteen years old, give or take a year or two, when he learned of his father's death. Growing up in the heat and dust of a Peshawar refugee camp, he always remembered fondly the brief years he had gone to school. But that was another life before the communists and the war and fighting –

another world, now gone with the wind. There was a school in the refugee camp, but all it taught was the Koran and religious subjects. Still, it was better than nothing and Khanzad and his elder brother both got enrolled in it. Khanzad had always wanted to become a teacher like his father, but now it seemed he was on his way to becoming a mullah.

With his father's death, the family became destitute. There was no work in the refugee camp where they lived. Khanzad's father used to send money home every now and then, enough to keep his wife and children clothed and the pot boiling. Now there was nothing. Khanzad's mother was a strong woman. She was illiterate, but she was happy that her children were going to school. Now, with no way to make a living, she had to pull Khanzad and his elder brother Sherzad, two years older than Khanzad, out of school and have them work to feed the family. They began going to Peshawar city every morning by bus, hanging on to the back of the bus because they could not afford the bus fare. The bus keleenar or driver's helper, whose job it was to holler the bus destination to attract passengers and call out to the driver whenever anyone wanted to get off, would usually turn a blind eye to such clingers-on, as every day there was more than one passenger who couldn't pay the fare and he was sick and tired of quarreling with them. Khanzad and Sherzad used to jump off before the bus entered the crowded traffic of Peshawar because the traffic police would fine the driver and the conductor of the bus they had hitched a ride on, and the keleenar wouldn't allow them to ride the bus in the same way the following day. They walked the rest of the way – some two or three miles – to the crowded Peshawar bazaar. Khanzad had never been to the bazaar before, but Sherzad had been there once or twice so he was a bit more familiar. The two brothers had no experience of work and had no idea what to do, but there were many other children there too, begging or selling trinkets or otherwise somehow keeping themselves busy. Khanzad's mother had told her sons never to beg or steal, so they set about finding something to sell. That first day the brothers made no money, but they learned a lot about the market and its ways. Their mother was a wise woman and realised that her boys needed seed money, so the following morning she brought out all she had, which was barely enough to feed the family for two days. The boys, even though very young, understood the importance of the money their mother gave them and were careful not to lose it or spend it wastefully. That day they bought a box of chewing gum and a box of balloons which Sherzad blew up with his mouth and tied with pieces of string he had brought from home. In this way, Khanzad and Sherzad began their "business" selling chewing gum and balloons. By the end of the day they were tired and hungry, for they had not eaten anything since breakfast, but they were happy because not only had they gotten their seed money back from what they had sold, they had enough money left to buy a few loaves of flatbread and some onions and potatoes to take home to their waiting mother and siblings. It was with pride that the two boys returned home that evening.

They roasted in the glare and heat of the Peshawar sun, but they became tempered and street wise, and were able to feed their mother and siblings. They often went hungry during the day because all they could afford was something to take home at night. When Khanzad passed by restaurants and kebab shops he used to stop and breathe in the aroma of the delicious food that was being prepared. His dream was to own a restaurant and eat as much as he wanted of whatever delicious food he fancied. Khanzad thought that restaurant owners were the happiest people on the face of the earth, since only they could eat all they wanted, what they wanted. His fanciful dreams took wings when he passed by wedding saloons. How wonderful it would be if he were to be the bridegroom one day in a wedding saloon like this! Would he have a care in the world then? He usually came back to earth from his flights of fancy when he went home in the evenings. The family of six, Khanzad, his elder brother Sherzad, two younger brothers, their young sister and their mother, lived in a small mud-walled room. The older they got, the smaller and more cramped the little room became. Finally, Khanzad and Sherzad made enough from their hawking to be able to move to a larger place to live. Khanzad had always wanted a little room of his own, where he would be left alone to dream his dreams, but life was such that even a simple wish like that seemed impossible.

Years passed. The Russians left Afghanistan and a couple of years later the communist government was overthrown by the mujaheddin who took over

the country. Many refugees looked forward to returning to their country, but very soon the mujaheddin in-fighting made them realise that their misery was far from over. Then came the Taliban, and wonderful stories of how they were able to bring peace and justice to their long-suffering land began to spread among the Afghan refugees. Many refugees were happy and wanted to go back, but they had been in the refugee camps and away from their homes and villages too long to be able to just pack up and leave. What kind of life would they be returning to? With all the destruction in Afghanistan, could they pick up the broken pieces of their lives back where they came from? Khanzad's mother wisely decided to send her eldest son, Sherzad, to find out whether it was safe for the family to return to Ningarhar and work on their land. Sherzad travelled back to the village of his childhood, but did not stay more than a few days. The village was half-deserted, as few people had returned. Everything was in ruins, the fields had become deserts because of lack of tilling and irrigation during all those years, and to make matters worse, the country was going through a drought which shrivelled and dried up whatever grew from the soil. The family decided to stay in the refugee camp in Peshawar and for the boys to carry on with their "business" of selling trinkets.

And so, life carried on without change for another few years until the Taliban were toppled in Afghanistan and the US-backed Hamed Karzai government came to power. For Afghans everywhere, whether inside Afghanistan, in refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan, or in the diaspora around the world, this was the beginning of a new chapter. Khanzad and his mother and siblings returned to Afghanistan after sixteen years, full of the vigour of trees at the beginning of spring and ready to make a fresh start in life. Life was hard, but they worked harder and everywhere there was optimism in the air. Cultivation of poppies for extracting opium had become widespread under the Taliban, and it paid well. Khanzad and his family sowed poppies and got good money for it at harvest time. For them, it was just another crop, only it paid better. But things began to change after a while. People returning after years abroad as refugees began to realise that their troubles were far from over. The Taliban were toppled but not eliminated. They reappeared in the countryside, weapons in hand, and demanded harvest tax as well as different sorts of religious taxes for continuing the jihad, the holy war against the infidels who had occupied their Islamic land. They encouraged poppy cultivation, as they could both raise more taxes and benefit from the trafficking of opium to Europe and elsewhere in the West. On the other hand, the government was trying to stop poppy cultivation, but government functionaries were corrupt and they could be bought in order to turn a blind eye to their poppy fields. You couldn't hope to get anything done without bribing government officials. Life began to get harder and harder, and the following year, the Taliban began forcing the farmers to grow poppies. People were talking about something called the mafia, and how the mafia and the Taliban were working hand in hand to force people to produce more and more opium. Khanzad didn't know what the mafia was, but he knew that if he didn't do what the gunmen who came around and inspected the fields every now and then told him to do, there would be trouble. That second year the poppy crops were good, and even though they had to pay a lot of taxes to the Taliban gunmen, they still made good money. Before long their mother found suitable girls for both Sherzad and Khanzad to marry and the money they had made, plus some more they had to borrow, was spent on their weddings and setting up their own households.

The following year the security situation worsened. The government wanted farmers to not grow poppies and government soldiers went around destroying poppy fields. The Taliban, on the other hand, were forcing people to grow poppies to produce opium, and if they didn't the Taliban beat them up, made them pay heavy fines, and sometimes killed them because they had sided with the government. Sherzad and Khanzad did not know what to do and were both terrified as to what would happen. They chose to sow wheat and food crops instead of poppies, and worked on their fields with plow in one hand and a rifle in the other, on the lookout and ready to defend themselves if the Taliban gunmen were to appear. At nights they couldn't have restful sleep because of fear of the Taliban coming for them in the dead of the night.

And so it continued, season after season and then year after year. The protracted stress of living with dread and the continuous lack of refreshing sleep began to take its toll on Khanzad. He developed crushing headaches which gradually affected his mood. He became depressed and irritable. He couldn't

stand his family or the crying and screaming of his baby child. Gradually his depression and irritability changed to violence and everyone was afraid of him. He had changed and he himself knew it and hated himself for it, but it seemed he couldn't do anything about it, especially as it seemed to get worse with the passage of time. Khanzad sought help from doctors, but all they did was to give him pills to help him relax and sleep. The pills didn't work. He was becoming desperate.

One day, fatigued in mind and body, he sat in contemplation beside a stream in the village. The sun was shining and the birds were chirping in the trees, but Khanzad's mood was sombre. There was no enjoyment in anything for him and he felt angry with all the world for no specific reason. A group of health workers were visiting the village, administering polio vaccine drops to children. Khanzad watched as the group went from house to house. Presently some members of the group came to take a break where Khanzad was sitting in the shade of a tree and struck up a conversation with him. It wasn't long before Khanzad was telling them about his problems, his worries, his lack of sleep, his fatigue and despondency. One of the health workers asked him whether he had seen a psychosocial counsellor. Khanzad had never even heard of psychosocial counsellors, so he asked questions and became more and more interested as the polio vaccine worker told him that psychosocial counsellors dealt less with the body and more with problems in a person's soul and head. Khanzad decided that that was what he needed. The following day he asked around and found the clinic where the psychosocial counsellor worked. He talked with him for a long time and asked him detailed questions about his life, his past, his worries and his fears. No one had ever asked him about these things before. Khanzad realized that all the pills and syrups had not helped him and he decided to stop taking them. He understood how this stressful situation with all the threats, the fear and decisions which crop to plant had changed his family life. All he wanted was to live a peaceful life with his family. Therefore he started to talk to his wife and children again, explained to them what he had understood and how important they were to him. It wasn't long before he felt better and sensed that he had turned a corner. The sunny days were now really bright and he could hear and enjoy the chirping of the birds in the trees once more…

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

I was in grade three of primary school and no older than nine years of age when I became a "bride". We were living as refugees in Iran then, and I remember one day returning home from school to find the house full of women in festive clothes singing and dancing to music. There was a lot of bustling and a feast was being prepared. Wide-eyed with wonder, I went in with no idea of what was going on. Seeing me, the guests greeted me with more attention than I was used to, adding to my sense of wonder. I sought out my mother to ask her what was happening. She took me by the hand, hurried me to her room and handed me a beautiful new dress. My amazement increased. "Hurry up," said my mother, "put on this dress and I'll help you do your hair and face. Everyone is waiting for you. You're getting engaged today!" I couldn't understand what that meant, but I knew it was a momentous event. My overriding emotion was fear of the unknown, and I began to cry. The rest of that day and evening I can barely remember, since I didn't even know how to feel.

It was my father who had decided to betroth me to Samandar who was seventeen years my senior. My father was a man full of himself, and although he was a good provider, he seldom thought about the emotional needs of his family. The fact that I was a child and that I may have had my own hopes and dreams was something that did not even occur to him. He decided whatever needed to be decided and tolerated no dissent. He wanted me to be married to someone who would always be capable of providing for me, and Samandar was such a person. Samandar was healthy, strong, and a hard worker who did not shirk from any work, and the fact that he was so much older than me made no difference to my father. Although not a rich man, Samandar had saved quite a considerable amount of his hard-earned money, and now he gave several

million tomans[1] to my father to indicate the seriousness of his intentions. My father happily accepted the money and I was engaged to become Samandar's wife. It was understood between them that I was too young to be a wife, and Samandar had accepted to wait until I grew up to be able to fulfil the duties of a housewife and eventually a mother.

With his easy-found wealth my father took on a haughty air with those around him and began to enjoy himself more. He wore new white clothes which were freshly pressed each day, worked less and attended the mosque every day for afternoon and evening prayers. For me, little changed at the beginning. Samandar did not make any demands that immediately affected my life, and I continued to attend school as usual. As we approached the end of the school year, a classmate of mine found out that I had been engaged to marry someone and told everyone about it. The other girls began making fun of me and calling me "auntie". We were the same age, and their ridicule went to the core of my feelings. I was so hurt that after a time I could bear it no more, so I stopped going to school after finishing grade three.

I felt lost. I couldn't be a child and have friends and go out and play like the other girls my age. I couldn't be a schoolgirl because I cringed at the jeers and fun-making of the other girls. And despite being engaged to be married, I couldn't be an adult because I was still a child and couldn't enjoy the company and pastimes of the adults we socialised with. So I became despondent and fretful, and reacted with venom whenever there was any mention of Samandar, because to me he was the reason why I was being called "auntie" and had had to leave school because of it. Apart from that, I hated Samandar because we had nothing in common, and when he visited I didn't want to see him or speak with him. I passed the days at home, losing my appetite and interest in things around me and becoming ever more depressed. My mother became alarmed at my condition and the loathing I showed for Samandar, and when she found out that I did not want to go to the regular Iranian school the following year because of the jeers and taunts of the other girls, she had me enrolled in a school for Afghan refugee children. The classrooms and books and teachers at this school were not as good as in the Iranian school, but the other girls did not make fun of me so I was able to make some friends and be somewhat happier.

For four years, from grades four to eight, I went to this Afghan refugee school. Samandar did not have the slightest interest in my going to school. He was just waiting for me to grow up and become old enough to be his wife. I loathed and dreaded him. He was hulky, and his fat round face and bushy beard terrified me, and I could not tolerate the thought that I was going to be his wife and live with him till the end of my days. I knew that marriage was a lifelong commitment, and the only way out of it was either death or divorce. For this reason, ever since I learned what marriage and divorce meant, I thought more about divorcing Samandar than marrying him. I used to tell my mother that I hated Samandar and didn't want to live with him. My mother was terrified when I said that, not because of the way I felt but because of how my father would react if he heard it. My father was prone to violence and physical abuse, and more than once had resorted to hitting my mother and me when we tried to tell him that I did not want the marriage he had arranged for me.

I finished grade eight and was now as tall as my mother and could do the household chores as well as her. Now that I was grown-up Samandar began visiting more frequently. On weekends he used to come to see me with bags full of fresh fruits which my father relished. He was the happiest of all with the devotion and generosity of his son-in-law-to-be, and as I had grown up enough, my father and Samandar began to discuss the wedding.

To make a long story short, nothing I could do could persuade my father that I did not want the marriage. It was a woman's lot, my mother comforted me, and the only thing we could do was to submit. I knew the bitter truth of what she said, since there was no sympathy anywhere for female rebels. Besides, what alternative could I propose? Running away was unthinkable, since it was a man's world and a lone woman had nowhere to go to. Stepping out of the house alone and without a legitimate reason would be jumping into a sea of sharks. Not marrying at all was not an option, since it was a woman's destiny to marry and serve her husband and bear his children. Meeting someone I would have liked and wanted to marry was out of the question, since we women lived sequestered lives and associating with adult males outside the close family circle was taboo. All a woman could wish for was a healthy husband who was kind and a good provider, and Samandar was such a man. And so, we

1 A toman is an Iranian currency unit. Currently (summer 2015), nearly 3,300 tomans is equal to € 1 – Tr.

were married and I went away to live with Samandar.

I was resigned to my fate, and my life was a continuous feat of stoic suffering and endurance. Years passed. I brought Samandar children, but my loathing of him did not diminish. My husband was a hard-working man, patient and kind, but I could never come to terms with the fact that he was an illiterate ignoramus and seventeen years older than me. I could never forget that it was because of him that I did not have the kind of childhood memories others of my age had, and it was because of him that I had to drop out of school after grade eight. During all the years our children were growing up, Samandar and I never had a friendly husband-and-wife conversation. We were always quarrelling and I never agreed with him on anything. Our children grew used to the way we spoke and lived with each other. Perhaps they thought that was normal married life. All this resentment had to show itself somehow, and I lived the life of a shrew, in general making life difficult both for Samandar, for myself and for everybody else. I admit that because of my inner resentment and conflict I did things that I am ashamed of now.

Twenty years passed and my eldest daughter was getting married. As the preparations for the wedding progressed, vivid memories and feelings of my own life at that stage came back and began to haunt me. I began to re-live the dread and loathing I had felt before my wedding and did not want my daughter to go through what I had. My daughter was twenty – I had been barely fourteen when I married– and I had made sure that she had had a lot more say in who she was going to marry than I had, but the spectre of a life of suffering and misery for my daughter, like my own past life, clouded my judgement. So I resolved that my daughter's wedding would not happen. On the following morning I made my resolve known to a group of women of the family who had gathered to work

on the preparations for the wedding. "Nabila is not going to marry anyone, ever," I announced. "I'm going to send back the gifts that Kazim (my prospective son-in-law) has sent and cancel everything." The women were dumbstruck and looked with amazement, first at me and then at one another. Qamar Gul, a matronly lady whom everyone in the family respected for her levelheadedness and the sound advice she gave to others, spoke up. "Are you out of your mind!?" she asked incredulously. "Do you know what you are saying?" I couldn't reply. Perhaps I really didn't know what I was saying because there was no reasoning, no plan, behind my outburst. I had merely vocalized my inner feelings, pent-up from a lifetime of suffering and resentment. My thinking was hazy. I could hear Qamar Gul's voice telling me that I was ruining my daughter's life, that I had to let go and allow her to seek her destiny. Somehow, with my irrational outburst, the floodgates inside me had opened. I could only sob and sob; it seemed like I couldn't stop. All the other women were quiet as Qamar Gul continued to speak with me softly. As I sobbed, my whole life glided in front of my mind's eye. I had spent twenty years of married life living in aversion and acrimony. I remembered all the mean things I had done to flush the anger out of my body and mind, without success. During all this time Samandar had never resorted to violence or abuse as most men would have done, but had remained patient and forbearing. I realized that there were many things that are beyond one's control, and "what can't be cured must be endured." As Qamar Gul spoke, I realised that I could have avoided much pain and suffering if I had been kinder, that I had made many mistakes, but now I was on the verge of making a greater mistake that would affect my daughter's life and happiness. Qamar Gul was a wise woman. She realised that my irrational behaviour and uncontrolled sobbing were indications of a deeper problem which she couldn't reach. She kindly recommended that I speak with a psychosocial counsellor she knew. I was grateful for the advice because now that I had sobbed my heart out I was feeling calmer and could think more clearly. I decided to take her advice.

The following day Qamar Gul took me to see her friend. The psychosocial counsellor listened patiently to Qamar Gul's introduction and explanation, and then to my story. In exploring and sharing my feelings about my early forced marriage, the sufferings I had endured and the resentment I had against my husband I started to understand that I could have avoided much pain and suffering in the past if I could have seen that we cannot change the past, we can only change the present and the future. Together with the psychosocial counsellor I started to explore how I could change my situation. She emphasised that I myself had to change if I wanted to come to terms with myself and find peace and happiness with my family.

On the way home I was lost in thought. Not once during all these years had I once sat down and had a rational conversation with my husband. Not once had I tried to clear the brush and overgrowth of my biased feelings to reach out and have an understanding with my husband in order to secure the happiness of our children. I decided that was where the change should begin.

Things did change. At home that evening I told Samandar I wanted to talk to him. He was surprised and initially a little alarmed, because I had never spoken to him in that tone before. But he soon realised that it was a different person who was speaking with him, and I will never forget the look of puzzled happiness that appeared on his face. We talked late into the night about all the things that were wrong between us. He appreciated my honest words and we discussed the reasons for me feeling so horrible and being so unfriendly. On his part, Samandar admitted that he had been wrong in wanting to marry a girl so much younger than him and not taking account that I might have had my own hopes and dreams. But, we both agreed, we were all products of our shared culture, and at the time powerless to do anything about it. That night, for the first time, there was a warmth and glow of understanding between us that had never been there before. The happiness of our children, when they realised that the family atmosphere had changed, was priceless.

Now, after all these years, I can say that I am at peace with myself and with the people around me. How I wish I could have talked years earlier to the psychosocial counsellor to gain this introspection! It could have spared me and my family so much heartache.

But still, I am happy. Better late than never.

EVERLASTING MAGIC

Ever since I can remember I was a rowdy child and a bully. I loved to fight and harass other kids my age and younger. Many were the times when parents of other children came to our house to complain to my father that I had snatched their kids' lunches or had taken something from them by force, or given them a bloody nose. No amount of screaming and scolding from my mother or thrashing from my father could make me change my ways. I never liked going to school or doing any classroom activities. As I grew older, I would often play truant with a few equally roguish boon companions, and instead of being in class I would spend hours either doing one sort of mischief or another with them, or going to the cinema to watch Indian action films. We all loved to identify with the thugs and rogues in the films we watched, and we copied their dress and mannerisms and the way they talked and acted. Later on I took up playing cards and gambling with dice, as well as smoking and taking an occasional puff of hashish. As I grew older my parents despaired of ever disciplining me and I often brought them to grief with my wayward behavior. I was expelled from one school after another, but I didn't care as I never did have much liking for school anyway. Gradually I gained a reputation for delinquency, and family friends and relatives began to avoid me. I was never invited to their houses and rarely participated in family gatherings. But I didn't give a hoot, because I took pride in my reputation as a 'tough guy' and saw myself as being above all those who surrounded me. Things reached a point where my father threatened to throw me out of the house if I didn't come to my senses and mend my ways. He wanted me to take school seriously, so I began to crawl along with my studies. At my father's insistence I enrolled in an afternoon maths class to help with my grades, and my father was quite happy when he saw that I attended the course more diligently than he expected. However, the reason for my diligence was different from what he thought, as contrary to regular schools where boys and girls were segregated, there was no segregation in the afternoon courses that were being offered, and there were quite a number of girls who attended. I loved eyeing the girls and making passes at them at the slightest opportunity.

There was one girl in particular who caught my eye. She stood out from the rest not only by her looks but by her grace and elegance. She was not of the giggly type who invited flirtation and cheap passes, but had a certain dignity which I found both daunting and alluring. Up till now I had never given a second thought to making a pass or a pointed comment aimed at a girl within her earshot, but with this particular girl, Khatera, I somehow couldn't summon up the courage to make a jab. I was intrigued; this had never happened to me before. The more I saw Khatera and the way she conducted herself, the more fascinated I became. It was not long before she completely preoccupied my thoughts and I couldn't get her out of my mind. During class I would sit somewhere where I could see her, and when she left I used to follow her home. In the mornings I used to lurk somewhere near her home and wait for her to come out, then follow her to school, and in the afternoons stalk her on her way back home. A change had come over me. Where I once used to molest pretty girls with gibes and make passes at them[1] I could now not tolerate any boy in any way annoying Khatera. As I shadowed her, I more than once confronted boys whom I saw making passes at her and got into fights with them. Khatera had not noticed me before that, or if she had she had ignored me with her calm dignity, but now I was happy that she was aware that I was always shadowing her and in a way acting as her bodyguard. I still couldn't muster the courage to speak to her, but I knew I was head over heels in love with her. I was looking for an opportunity to somehow break the ice with her. For now I could only express my feelings by ever more jealously guarding her against shows of interest by other boys. So the next time I saw someone approaching her I went in for the kill. I beat up the poor guy badly. A crowd of people

1 Behaviour such as stalking girls and women and subjecting them to jibes and mocking comments is somewhat common amongst young men in cities in Afghanistan. Young men and women are segregated from puberty in schools and social gatherings, and such behaviour on the part of young men is, in a way, an attempt to open a channel of communication with a girl where other –normal – channels have been blocked by social and cultural norms. – Tr.

gathered around us to save him from me, and soon everyone knew that the dustup was over a girl, and Khatera came into focus. I knew she would be furious, as decent girls from respectable families never courted that kind of attention. Sure enough, she didn't go to school or come to the afternoon class the following day. I felt really miserable as I had wanted to impress her but had ended up hurting her. When I saw her two days after the altercation my mind was in turmoil. I couldn't tolerate the thought of being in her bad books and had to make amends, but how? To my utter astonishment she walked straight up to me when she saw me and said "I would like to speak to you after class." I was dumbstruck. Not only was I not prepared for her approaching me, I was amazed at her courage and strength of character, since it went against the norms of accepted social behavior for young girls.

I don't know how I passed the couple of hours before the afternoon class ended. I knew she was going to talk about the fight of the other day, but how was I going to explain it, how was I going to apologise? More importantly, how could I make her understand what kind of feeling I had for her? I was both ecstatic at the thought of finally being able to speak with her and dreaded the coming meeting. Finally the class was over and we all headed home. I knew we had to find some place away from prying eyes and wagging tongues to talk, so I followed her, waiting for her to open the conversation. We reached a place where not many people were passing by, and she stopped under a tree. "There may be other girls who enjoy being stalked by young men, but I don't," she began. "Have I ever given you the slightest indication to think that I am interested in you, the slightest encouragement to make you follow me wherever I go? With the fight you got into the other day you have dragged my name in the mud, and now my parents are talking of not allowing me to attend afternoon classes and chaperoning me to school and back home every day." I didn't know how to respond, how to articulate my feelings. I could only blurt out "I love you" and tell her that whatever I did was because I loved her so much. She looked into my eyes. "Do you know what love means?" she asked. "If that is the way you feel, you have chosen a poor method of

communicating it. I'll give you a piece of advice: girls are more impressed by character and manners and intellect than by shows of toughness and thuggish behavior. If you have the slightest respect for yourself or for me, you will stop acting like a villain." With that she turned around and walked away from me.

I was stunned. I wasn't disappointed at the way the conversation had gone because I didn't expect anything much different, but it was an eye opener. Her straightforward message made me look into myself, and I realised that I was indeed nothing but a thug and a villain and not worthy of a girl like her. I decided then and there that I was going to make myself worthy of her attention and to win her on her own terms. I delved into my school work with new determination and disconnected myself from the boon companions of my wild past. Soon I rose to the top of my class and everyone was absolutely amazed at my transformation. My parents couldn't believe it was the same me. There were no more people knocking on our door to complain about me, my parents heard no more of the fights I had got into, and school reports were glowing. I couldn't tell them that Khatera was the magician who had done what no one else had been able to do – to change me – and what she had said that day after the last fight I got into had been the magic wand. Khatera herself noticed the change in me and I could see approval in her eyes. Soon we were exchanging greetings and sometimes making small talk. I was on top of the world, and it was not long before I could talk with her with a confidence I had never known before, different from the kind of macho confidence I had been used to.

A few months later we both finished high school and went on to university. I chose to study art and painting because I knew Khatera adored art, and for me it was a way of getting closer to her. Sure enough, we now had more things to talk about and before long I could talk to her about my feelings and hopes for the future. It was the happiest day of my life when she admitted that she too had developed a tender spot in her heart for me and accepted that I send my mother and sister to her house for khawstgari. We got engaged and I was king of the world. The magic she had worked on me not only made me love her more than ever before, it made me excel in whatever I undertook. Soon I qualified for a scholarship abroad, something that was given through competition to the best of the best. I went to India and during the three years I studied there we were in constant contact and our talk was only about love and how much we missed each other. Three years later I received a degree with honours in art, and returned triumphantly to Afghanistan. My transformation was complete; I was now loved and respected and looked up to by all who knew me, and I owed it all to my beautiful Khatera. We and our families were all eager for us to marry and begin a happy life together, as there was no further reason for delay. The wedding date was set and preparations began in earnest. Life was beautiful and our hearts were singing.

Then came that call. It was early in the afternoon of a summer day when my mobile phone rang. It was my sister at the other end and her voice had a strange ring to it. She asked me to come immediately to the hospital, but wouldn't tell me why – just to hurry. Sick to the pit of my stomach, I rushed to the hospital, feeling as if leaden weights were tied to my feet. At the emergency section I found not only my sister and mother but Khatera's family there also, all in tears. The sick feeling consumed my whole being. My tongue was dry as a parched desert and I couldn't form the words to ask what had happened. They told me Khatera had been hit by a vehicle driven madly by lawless militiamen and was in a coma. I would have collapsed if they hadn't rushed to support me. It was as if life was ebbing out of me, not out of my Khatera. I don't know how long it was before a doctor came out. I couldn't move but the others swarmed around him. As if in a dream, I heard the doctor say "We did our best, but the head injury was too severe for her to survive. I'm sorry."

I have little recollection of the days that followed. There was much weeping and wailing all around, but the others tell me that I was eerily quiet and just stared in front of me. They buried my Khatera, my guiding angel, and with her they buried my hopes and dreams. But I couldn't believe it. Once out of my stupor, I went around looking for her. She was there, everywhere I looked; she lived in everything she had touched, in every place she had stood or sat or had passed, in every word she had spoken. I couldn't see her because she hadn't come home yet, so I would wait. It took me weeks to come out of denial and back to reality. Then the pain and despair of my loss struck me with full force. I passed days beside her grave, kissing her tombstone and weeping

at her memory, or speaking with her pictures at home. There was no zest for life in me, I wanted to join my Khatera in death because we could not be together in life.

My family and friends were extremely worried about me and tried all they could to bring me back to normal. It was very difficult for them, because I had lost interest in life and could not be bothered or interested in anything that went on around me or they could offer. After some time someone suggested that they take me for counselling. I was indifferent, as nothing mattered to me anymore. The first day I was taken by family members to meet the psycho-social counsellor I didn't even listen to him, as I was lost in my own recollections. Then slowly, during subsequent meetings, I was able to open up and start answering his questions. He was asking about Khatera, and hearing her name energized me to begin talking about her. The knot in my heart and mind and tongue loosened and I began to talk about my love and my loss, about the magician who had transformed me, about the angel who had been my guiding star, about my dream girl who had been a fairy princess, a queen of beauty, elegance and dignity. The tears flowed, but the more I talked the more energized I became. Soon I was looking forward to my subsequent appointment with the counsellor and didn't need anyone to accompany me. I was on the road to recovery.

Khatera continued to live in the magic that she had worked in me. She had transformed me from a blackguard into someone she could trust with her heart. I resolved that because she continued to live in my heart and guide me with her spirit and her memories, I had decided that I would live in a way that would make her proud, the way I would have done if she had been alive and living with me. Long ago, on that first day she spoke with me and waved the magic wand of her memorable words, she had asked me "Do you know what love means?" I can now look her spirit in the eye and say with confidence,

"Yes, my love, I do. Love means living the way you would have wanted me to." Khatera's magic continues.

THE SUBLIMINAL MESSAGE

Why couldn't God give my mother any boy-children? This was the question I often asked myself as I was growing up in the damp, dark hovel my father had assigned to my mother and us, his daughters. My mother was my father's first wife, and for whatever reason she kept bringing him girl-children. I was the sixth and last, and perhaps I was the last straw that broke the camel's back. My father was desperate for a son, not only because he needed an heir to inherit his portion of the estates that he and his three brothers had inherited from their father, but because, I suspect, he had a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis his brothers who each had fine sons they were very proud of. As a daughter, I never knew my father. He was a cruel and haughty man who drove my mother and us, his six daughters, out of the grand house we lived in after my mother brought him his sixth female child – me. He married a second wife soon after he drove us out of the house, and, as God would have it, his new wife brought him sons one after the other. I have never been able to understand God.

We grew up as the proverbial 'poor relatives'. Apart from seeing that we were not total outcasts and had a hovel to live in, and providing us with a monthly allowance that was enough for us to get along with, my father took no further interest in how we did. As my sisters grew up they were married off with my father's token blessings and minimal intervention. My mother was a patient woman who reared us single-handedly. Her undeserved suffering she attributed to God's will, and she was content with that explanation. Perhaps it was just as well, because I knew how she suffered. In order to cope with her inner turmoil and the feeling of inadequacy her husband had given her, she made belief that I was a boy and dressed me up as one since I was two or three

years old. Therefore, I grew up as a tomboy with a confused sense of self-identity. I thought of myself as a boy, so it was difficult to play with girls, and when I wanted to make good friends with boys I was reminded that I was a girl and had to abide by the cultural confines which drew lines of conduct, even for children, that couldn't be crossed. Thus, I became increasingly solitary and withdrawn.

I was thirteen years old when my body began to change into that of a woman. It became awkward to go about dressed as a boy, so I think my mother had to convince herself of the reality that I was a girl and had to revert to dressing up as one. I felt very uncomfortable wearing girls' clothes, and what friends I had began to make fun of me. Most of the time I spent at home with my mother, who, because of the damp conditions of the hovel we lived in, was in constant pain from all kinds of joint inflammations. Her one wish in life was to see me married off happily, "so I can die without worry", she used to say. She talked about the time before I was born, about the grand house she used to live in with my father, and about my father himself. What I heard about him made me detest him more and more, but there was nothing I could do. I could only listen to the stories of the wealth and comfort he shared with his second wife and the sons she had borne him.

I was fifteen years old, going on to sixteen, when the first *khwastgar* came around and knocked on our door. It was for my cousin Khalid, my mother's nephew, and there was no reason to refuse. My father gave his nonchalant consent, and it wasn't long before I went to live with Khalid as his wife, dressed in a hand-me-down bridal gown which one of my elder sisters gave me. I was determined to be a good wife to Khalid and a good daughter-in-law to my aunt and uncle, so from the first days I rolled up my sleeves and delved into the housework. The work around the house and serving my in-laws filled up my day, and I rarely had time or was usually too tired to spend much time with my husband when he came home from work. Khalid worked as a taxi driver and usually came home late in the evenings. He did not make a lot of money, but I was happy his work was not too strenuous, because he told me that on some days he spent long periods of time sitting idly in the taxi waiting for a fare. At the beginning he was quite affectionate with me and would tell me about the

places he had gone to and the interesting things he had seen during the day. When we were alone in the evenings I would put my head on his shoulder and he would stroke it and run his fingers through my hair like a comb.

Within a few months we had our firstborn. I became even more busy with the demands of a newborn baby, so it was some weeks before I noticed that Khalid had become somewhat distant from me. He had less to say to me and we no longer slept in the same bed. I slept in our room, beside Saleem's, my baby son's, cradle, and Khalid slept outside in the hall. This I attributed to Saleem's crying in the middle of the night and Khalid's desire not to be disturbed. But as time went by Khalid became colder and colder towards me, so I suspected that there must be something else.

One day I was looking for something in his car when I came upon a fancy notebook. It was filled with writing and drawings of flowers, candles,

butterflies and hearts and arrows. Between some of the pages I found dried flowers and flower petals. I had never been to school and couldn't read, but the drawings and the dried flowers did not need any literacy to be deciphered. I took the notebook to the neighbour's daughter, Farzana, with whom I was on good terms and who went to school and could read and write. She read the writings in the notebook and confirmed my suspicions. From then on I couldn't sleep. Many a night I remained awake, sitting beside the doorpost that separated our room from the hallway. In the dead of the night, when everyone was asleep, I could hear Khalid speaking softly into his mobile phone. I couldn't hear what he said, but from the way he talked it was evident that he was speaking to a woman. On another occasion, he had gone out and forgotten his mobile phone. I took the phone to Farzana to check the text messages. What she read convinced me that my fate was going to be no better than my mother's. I couldn't stop my tears. My husband was exchanging fervent love messages with a girl. I couldn't even imagine Khalid being capable of using the kind of impassioned love language he was using to communicate with his girlfriend, as the most tender moments he shared with me was when I had my head on his shoulder and he was combing through my hair with his fingers. And even that was long ago. There was nothing I could do. I had given him a son and was capable of giving him more children, but apparently he wanted a trophy wife, someone beautiful and literate and accomplished with whom he could talk of love and passion and dream dreams.

I went through my daily chores and attended my baby like an automaton. I lost weight and looked and felt miserable, but not once did Khalid ask me if there was something wrong with me. Saleem was growing bigger but now he gave me little joy. Even his father took less notice of him than before. A boy was all my mother had wanted to secure her happiness, and I had Saleem, but the happiness that I sought, the happiness that every woman seeks, was a mirage for me. All I could do was wait until Khalid himself chose to tell me what my fate was going to be. And it was not long before he brought it up.

At home one night a few weeks later, he casually told me that there was a girl he was in love with and wanted to marry. I was dumbstruck by the sudden and casual way he had revealed what I already knew. In answer to my incredulous look, he explained that he had always wanted a literate wife, someone who was more in tune with a "cultured" lifestyle, was able to read and write and use a computer and smartphone – someone who, all in all, was more "polished". He told me he had married me only because his mother, my aunt, had wanted it. Knowing I had none of the accomplishments my husband desired, there was nothing I could say. I retired to the solitude of the bedroom in which I slept alone with my child, and wept.

The days went by and I dragged myself around the house as I went about the household chores. There was a heavy weight on my chest and with each step I took I wanted to lie down and close my eyes forever. But that was not possible, since Saleem wanted my attention and there was food to prepare and everyday things to see to. I didn't speak much with Khalid because there was nothing I had to say to him and little he had to say to me. I did notice, however, a few days after he made the announcement about his intention, that he had begun to look sullen and crestfallen, as if my mood had infected him. I wasn't sure why, but I didn't believe it was because his conscience was bothering him. It could only mean that things were not going according to plan. A couple of weeks later I found another chance to take his mobile phone to Farzana to check the text messages. It was with a kind of wicked satisfaction that I learned that things were indeed not going well between him and his lady love. I felt happier, but the tired feeling, the lack of heart in anything I did, continued. I was not eating much, so before long I didn't have enough milk to suckle Saleem and he, too, began to suffer. This alarmed me, so I went to the clinic. The doctors focused on the fact that I had been losing weight and appetite, and did a lot of tests, both on me and on Saleem, to rule out conditions such as tuberculosis. But the tests all came back negative, and the doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. Then one of the doctors asked me about my home environment. I hesitated to give him details, but I did admit that I was having problems at home and that my weight loss and lack of appetite had begun after I developed problems with my husband. The doctor suggested I go to the mental health section of the clinic and speak with the psychosocial counsellor.

In the talk with the counsellor I held nothing back. I told her that my troubles had started with the discovery that my husband loved someone else and the dread that what had happened to my mother might also happen to me. The psychologist, a kind lady with an attentive demeanour, made me understand that my weight loss and loss of appetite were indeed the results of the psychological stresses that had built up with my past life experiences and had been triggered by the discovery of my husband's emotional detachment. And we discussed that although we cannot overcome all the short-comings we have in our lives, we should not give up for lack of trying. I was encouraged and determined after these talks to take better care of myself and my life, to become myself "more polished".

I returned home inspired and full of new energy. I had indeed let myself go and had been inattentive, both to my appearance and to my household. I resolved that things were going to change. I cleaned up and tidied the house, cooked something Khalid liked, bathed myself and Saleem, and before Khalid returned put on a nice dress and a touch of makeup. Even without trying, I looked less sullen than before. Khalid's face showed surprise when he returned home that evening. "What's going on?" he asked with interest. "Nothing," I answered. "I went to see the psychosocial counsellor and she told me I was depressed, so I thought I would brighten up the place a bit." Khalid did not say anything but I sensed he was pleased with the clean and tidy look of everything around him. We ate together, and for the first time after a long while, I enjoyed the food that night.

The following days things gradually improved. I kept to my resolve and always made sure that both myself, Saleem, and the house were presentable by the time Khalid came home, and always remembered to freshen myself up and put on a touch of makeup. Khalid still seemed dejected, but his mood was improving too. We now talked more than before, and although we both had our inner turmoil, things seemed to be coming back to normal. One day I asked him when the *khwastgari* for his new wife was going to take place. He waved his hand dismissively and said he had changed his mind and it was not going to happen.

I still didn't know what had happened between Khalid and his girlfriend, but the improvement in the overall situation after I resolved to bring a change to my life encouraged me to continue along the same path. Things began to return to normal, and Khalid no more spent the nights in the hallway, speaking softly into his mobile phone. I resolved to learn to read and write and asked Farzana to help me. She began giving me lessons, and despite the demands of housework and childcare I made good progress. Farzana encouraged me to enrol in a literacy course and before long I was sitting in a class for adults and aside from learning to read and write I was learning basic mathematics and also getting information about health and housekeeping topics. After I was able to read and write simple things, I asked Farzana to teach me how to use a computer and a smartphone. Before long I learned how to go onto the internet and find and select songs on YouTube. All this I tried to keep secret from Khalid.

My second son, Faheem, arrived a few months later. When he was a few weeks old we threw a customary *shab-e-shash* party[1], and for the party I borrowed Farzana's laptop to play songs from the internet. The look on Khalid's face when he saw me find and play songs on YouTube was priceless. He was speechless when later I read out a simple poem from a book. That night, when we were alone, he asked me how I had done it. I lowered my head so he wouldn't see the tears in my eyes. The wall between us seemed to be finally coming down. "I will tell you only if you answer a question," I said. "What question?" he asked. "What do you want to ask?" "You told me you were in love with someone and wanted to marry her," I asked. "Why didn't you?" He was silent for a moment, then quietly began to speak. "Yes, I really was in love, or thought I was. And I did want to marry her. But I hadn't told her that I was already married. When I proposed to her I had to admit that I already had a wife, but I assured her that I was going to divorce you before I married her. You know what her response was? She slapped me in the face and asked how long it would be before I tired of her and found another woman? Not long after, she got engaged with someone else and broke off all contact with me." We were both silent. Finally he broke the silence. "So," he asked, "how did you learn to read and write and use the computer?"

"I did it for you," I said softly. "I heard your message."

1 A party more or less like a baby shower in Western culture. – Tr.

BAKHTAWAR'S LIFE

After one hour talking, Bakhtawar had still many things to say. While she was tapping with her finger on the cup of tea and staring at the small waves inside the cup, she opened her lips and started to talk again: "When I think about my childhood, I have to admit, I was born at a very bad time. People were very poor and illiterate. Taking care of sheep and farming were the only two jobs you could do. My childhood teeth fell out while I was tending sheep. Sitting on a rock and closing my eyes, I pulled out my tooth and threw it toward the sun, saying: 'This wooden tooth is for you, I want iron teeth.'

Every day I used to take the sheep to the mountains. I was afraid of the fox. Later when I grew stronger and became smarter, I took some charcoal from the fireplace, drew a moustache and a beard on my face and wore my scarf like a turban to look like a man, like my father …

When I was born, my grandmother named me Bakhtawar (Lucky Girl) to bring my family good luck. But I didn't bring good luck to them: My father was murdered during service and we never found out why. My grandmother told me that his tomb is in Kart-e Sakhi in Kabul.

After the death of my father, my mother married another man and lived far away from us. I don't remember how her face looked like - I just remember she wore a green scarf the day she left us.

I took my sheep very far in the mountains and while sitting beside a spring of water I saw my face with beard and moustache in the clear water. Making my voice strong, I shouted my name. My voice echoed in the mountains. This way I felt like the soul of my father was with me and I wasn't afraid. I was 10 or 11 when my grandmother died. Our uncle took me, my brother and sister to his home. Life became very hard. My uncle's wife didn't treat us well. My brother went to Iran. My elder sister fled to my mother's home and after some time, she got married. I remained alone with my uncle's wife and her insults and her scorn. After a few years, my brother returned home from Iran. My uncle married his daughter to him and married me to his son. Everyone started their own life.

Shortly after that the revolution occurred and armed fighters took my brother away. Soldiers surrounded our village because we had rebelled against the government's rule.

One night we escaped from our village and only took a horse with us. We traveled for several days until we reached a place close to the Iranian border. There we were caught and taken to a refugee camp. I was pregnant and my first child was born. The sorrow for the loss of my brother was fresh. I didn't pay attention to what was going on in my surroundings, I don't even remember how much pain I suffered during childbirth and how long we stayed in the refugee camp.

Finally, we settled near a chicken farm, my son was growing up and the sorrow for my brother was fading. But I could not get pregnant again. The doctor said that I could not have any more children because of the infection I suffered from after the birth of my son due to the dirty environment.

Because of this reason my husband chose another wife and my son and I had to live alone. I brought up my son by myself and we finally left the chicken farm. My son started construction work. Our life was becoming better and I was saving some money for his marriage.

We came to Kabul. My son was working and was happy with his job. He used to tell me: "Mother! I compensate all your hardships and difficulties. I will do my best for you to be comfortable. He was happy and I was happy for his happiness. But this didn't last long. A suicide bombing took him from me. I didn't even see his body. After his death, I only saw one of his shoes and a tomb in which only a part of his body was buried, not his complete body.

I cried from the morning until the evening and my head was close to bursting from pain. I was fed up with life and was wishing my death. It was in the fortieth day after his death that someone came to me and asked why I was crying

and said: ‘You cannot bring your son back to life by crying.’ He took me to a nearby clinic where they offered therapy without prescribing medicine. The counsellor listened to my painful stories and after each appointment I felt relieved. I learned to think more positive, to see what I could do to improve my life.

After the first appointment, I planted a flower in my son’s shoe to grow a flower instead of his foot. Later I cut its small sprigs and planted other flowers beside it. Now I have a small garden of flowers.

Sometimes I sell some flowers to florists. Sometimes I take some flowers with me to Kart-e Sakhi cemetery and put them on anonymous graves. One of those may be my father’s grave.

“Except our own breath, nothing belongs to us, even our family and belongings might be taken from us one day. But as long as we breathe, we should value our own self and create happiness in life. That happiness can be everything: for example, a flower that is planted and taken care of in memory of someone – this relieves you.”

Purpose: 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). Recently, Ipso established an online counseling service to provide culturally appropriate psychosocial counseling services to help-seeking people all over the world (www.ipso-ecare.com).

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