Tears of Anguish

The Story of a Family in Transition, the Support of NGOs in their New Life

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Chapter 1

The grief
My mother shouted "Didn't I tell you a hundred times not to leave the Qala? What should I do to make you understand, that there are mines all over the village. What should I do to make you understand, that you could step on them and have half of your body torn apart. Is it not enough, that I have lost your father and brother? Do I also have to lose you, just because you are stupid and not willing to listen to what your mother tells you?" She cried while she shouted this. She was weeping and weeping. The last time I saw her weep like this was, when my uncle came to inform her, that my 13 year old brother had been killed due to the explosion of a mine just 200 meters away from the house of my uncle. I went towards her and tried to put my arms around her neck. I wanted to comfort her and tell her, that I was sorry. She pushed me away from her. I approached her again and again she pushed me away. But then she grabbed me and pulled me on to herself, pressing me against her chest. She started screaming louder and louder. I thought, that she would die, but then I had heard people say, that it was good to cry out, because then you would relieve yourself of the internal pain, which would then be easier to bear.

We had such a nice life in Kabul. My father was working in the Ministry of Agriculture. He went every day to his work and tried to help the poor farmers. He was an extension worker, who showed the people how to better plant their crops and how to nourish their fields. He received his modest salary with which he was fully satisfied. He worked after hours in a car workshop and received some loan for it. With this money, he was able to support us financially. We were not rich, but we also did not have to beg for our daily needs. Now and then my uncle would send us some fruits and vegetables from the countryside saying, that it was our share of the harvest. My father was always very thankful to him for his kindness.

I still remember, that my father hated to see the Russians and the communists try to change our society. He always told us at home, that we were Muslims and Afghans and that we would never let ourselves be subjugated by the communists and their Russian Masters. He had told our uncle to give his share of the harvest to the Mujahedin, thus supporting them in their struggle for freedom. I remember how my father chanted, when we found out, that Mujahedin had managed to take over Kabul. I remember, how he grabbed us and pulled us to his chest shouting, "Now I shall bring up my children as free Afghans and Muslims. Now I will be able to be proud of them seeing them nurture within an Islamic Society."

In the beginning, everything was good and quiet. The prices fell and everybody was very happy. But soon the problems started. Fighting broke out and everybody started leaving their houses. My father would listen at night to the Radio and shake his head. He kept mumbling to himself and saying "these stupid people will destroy the work of 14 years of Jihad. They will ruin everything. They will ruin everything...". Sometimes the fighting became very intense. At night we could not sleep. The thunder of ammunition and rockets would shake our house. We would all go to the basement and hide there, waiting for the
thunder to weaken. And then a rocket hit our neighbor's house. We wanted to go and see what had happened, but our parents would not allow us. My father went to help, but my mother stayed with me and my brother. Upon his return some hours later, he sat in a corner and did not say a word. We asked, what had happened, and he kept saying "nothing, nothing, nothing.......". I woke up in the middle of that night. I heard both my mother and father weeping. My father said, "not even one person is left. All of them were buried under the house. The rocket seemed to have hit the basement. I just cannot believe it. It is so cruel. How can they do that, how can they do that,......". But we did not leave the house. Our neighbors left all their possessions and escaped to Nangarhar or Pakistan, but we stayed at home. My mother kept telling my father to leave, but he would not listen. And we stayed on. And then the rocket hit our house. I thought in the beginning, that nobody had been hurt. But then I saw my father moaning and my mother shouting his name again and again. The neighbors came to help us. They took my father to the hospital. But he did not survive that long. I did not know what to do. I wanted to cry, but the tears would not come. I wanted to scream, but the sound would not come. I wanted to .... I felt a lump in my throat. I tried to push it out or to swallow it, but I did not succeed. My mother grabbed my brother and me and cried. Sometimes she would cry out and then she would stop. I kept wondering where all these tears were coming from. I had never heard my mother cry that much. It must hurt her very much. I always thought, that she was quite fond of my father, but she must have loved him very dearly.
Our neighbors helped us and we moved to the village, where my uncle lived. Even on the road to the village, I felt the lump in my throat. I still had not lost a tear. I kept thinking, that my chest would burst out any second. I wondered, why I could not cry. I am sure that some people must think, that I did not have any feelings. I was sad, I really was sad, but I could not cry.

And then we came to the village. Everybody who saw us seemed to know from the expression in our faces what had happened. They accompanied us and we moved towards the Qala. And then I saw my uncle appear from behind the wall. He looked completely pale and moved towards us. He grabbed my brother and me in his arms. I felt a pressing need to cry and then the first sound in two days came out of my throat. I screamed and screamed. I did not want to stop and I could not stop. They took me in their arms and they pressed me. But I would not stop. I felt the lump in my throat ease and continued to cry. It felt good to cry. I thought I would live only if I cried; and I cried.

My uncle was a very nice person. He always had been very kind to us and had sent us things that would make us happy. He kept assuring my mother, that she was like his sister. If we had lost our father, than we still had him. He would take care of all of our needs and would support us, as long as he lived. His words sounded soft and warming in our ears. But we did not know, what the future would bring us.
Chapter 2

Joy and Sorrow
The days passed and we slowly learned to cope with the changed situation. We were no longer living in the city. The village life had a different pace. People were a lot friendlier with each other. The peace in the village was amazing. Sometimes I thought, that I was in a different country. There was no sign in the village of political differences. Everything seemed to be working very well. My mother was always very sad. Some times I would wake up in the night and see my mother sitting on her bed and weeping. She wept and wept, but would not raise her voice lest it would wake us up. She did not know, that I already was awake and listening to her sobbing. I wanted to help her, oh how much I wanted to comfort her and tell her, that she had me and my brother. That she would soon get over the death of our father and would learn to appreciate her life. But I knew, that my words would never convince her and she would continue to be sad. And then I remembered, that it was good for her to cry, because then her heart would ease and the pain in her chest would not be as bad.

One day, I thought about going to school. But there were no schools around. I longed for the books to be held under my arms and for the time, that I could be on the way to school. I longed for the nights, in which I would lie on my stomach and do my home work. Oh how I missed being in the class and chatting with my class mates. Oh how I missed that. I talked to my mother about my wish and she was very thoughtful and supported me. The following day I heard her talk to my uncle, who told her, that the next school would lie at a distance of five kilometers from the village. But there were other children also going to the school and we could join them. Thus we would find support and security on the way to the school.

The day finally came, when my uncle took my hand and that of my brother and we went to the school. The way was so long. We walked and walked. We paused to rest and then continued to walk. It seemed like an eternity since we had been on the way. We seemed to climb up hills and come down the same. We seemed to pass small streams and jump over small ditches. We never seemed to reach our goal. My uncle kept comforting us and saying, that we were city kids and not used to such long walks. But we would soon be accustomed to it and would get used to such long walks. The moment of relief finally arrived and my uncle said "Here we are. There is the school". I looked for the school, but could not find any. I looked for the sign board saying the school, but in vain. And then I asked my uncle, where the school was. He pointed to some trees, under the shade of which large numbers of boys and girls were sitting. The teachers were standing and teaching. There was no building, no classes and no large black boards. My uncle shook hands with the head master and told him about our fate. The head master slowly shook his head and looked with sad eyes at us. He seemed to assure my uncle, that we would receive all the necessary support. But I did not listen to what he was saying. I looked at the children sitting on the dust under the trees. I wondered to which class I would be sent. I wondered who would become my best friend. I had so many thoughts. I kept wondering and wondering. I remembered my class in which there had been nice tables and chairs. I
remembered the huge black board and the kind teachers. I remembered Nasrin, my best friend, who disappeared together with her family. They had said, that they had gone to Jalalabad. I was deep in my thoughts, when I heard my uncle calling my name. I turned to him and responded. He pointed to the head master, who was asking me a question. I looked at him and said "excuse me?" and he again asked "What is your name my dear daughter?" I said "Wagma". Then he asked me "How old are you dear Wagma?" I said "Ten." He asked me, how many classes I had visited and I said three. He said, that he would put me on the third grade and hoped that I would like it. I said yes and looked at my uncle. He had a beautiful smile on his lips. In that fraction of a second I thought, how nice he was and how kind he looked. Yes, he even looked very handsome to me. I thought "Third grade. I will be going to the third grade. I will again go to the third grade". I was happy. Yes I was happy. I was very happy. I was so deep in my thoughts, that I did not hear, how my brother was placed and suddenly asked him "to which class will you go Ibrahim?" and he said "to the sixth grade". It sounded so much. I wondered, when I will go to the sixth grade. Will I ever manage to reach that level? I was so happy, that I hardly noticed the long walk back to our village. I kept thinking about going to school; about doing my home work; about having a best friend in the class; about.... As soon as we reached the Qala I ran to my mother and threw my arms around her neck. I shouted, "I will go to the third grade mother, I will go to the third grade, to the third grade..." I could hear my mother laugh. For the first time since an eternity. She grabbed me on to herself and said, "that is good my dear, that is good". I was so busy with my own jubilation, that I hardly heard her asking my brother about the school and his answer to her. I did not see, how she tried to hug him and wish him success at school.
The next day, my mother put some bread in a cloth for my brother and I and said, that we should eat it in case we should get hungry. My uncle took my brother to the side and told him to carefully watch for me. He should not allow me to leave the path and should do the same himself. He said, that there were mines all over the place, that could kill us, if we stepped on them. I asked, what mines were and he said: "these are explosive devices, which are hidden under the ground. The Russians had planted them to kill the Mujahedin, who would not knowingly step on them." I could not understand, how the Russians would want to kill the Mujahedin, who just wanted to get freedom for their country. But there were so many things, that I did not know. So I did not ask.

Altogether we were 15 children walking to the school. One of the girls was about my age. We soon got to talk to each other. I liked her instantly. We talked all the way to the school. She told me about the teachers and the students. It was so interesting and I just listened to her. I hardly said a word. Just nodding and nodding. The school was beautiful. The teachers were kind and the classmates interesting. Marzia turned out to be my classmate, which made me specially happy. I felt very comfortable with her and I seemed to like her very much.

The days passed and I liked my school more and more. The long walk was tiresome, but with Marzia it was joyful. We always watched for the path and never walked away from it. But the boys were naughty. They ran around and chased each other. It was one day during one of such games, that we heard a loud explosion and the scream of the boys. All the children ran towards the boy, that was hurt and I ran too. I could not believe it. The boy lying on the ground was my brother Ibrahim. I felt a chill go through my whole body. I did not know what to do. He lay there moaning and everyone seemed to be looking at him, no one seemed to be doing anything. My thoughts went to my mother. How could I tell her. How could I explain to her what had happened. It did not even occur to me, that Ibrahim was older than I and I was not responsible for him. And again I thought, what I could say to my mother. Wasn't she sad enough. And now this. How would she take it. I hardly thought about Ibrahim, even though I loved him dearly. All my thoughts were with my mother. It was like in a dream, as I saw the boys trying to carry him. The 15 minutes walk to the Qala seemed like an eternity. I thought, that we would never reach the Qala. And then I saw my uncle running towards us. One of the children seemed to have run ahead and informed him of what had happened. I looked at him and looked again. I could see the same familiar expression in his face, that I had seen, when we came from Kabul and he had walked towards us. For the first time, I thought it must be quite bad, that my uncle has this expression on his face. It must be quite bad. And it was bad. They found a donkey and put Ibrahim on it. They took him to the hospital, where they hoped to have him treated. I searched for my mother, but she could be found no where. I asked for her, but no one would tell me. I entered one of the rooms and saw a number of women gathering around someone. It was my mother. She just lay there. She seemed to be dead. I screamed and ran towards her. I shouted "oh mother, please don't die, please don't die. I
have only you left in this world. You can't die on me mother, you can't die" From a
distance I heard the voice of one of the women, who pulled me to herself and comforted
me by saying, that my mother was not dying. She had only been shocked and is presently
unconscious. I had never seen her unconscious. I could not understand, how a person
could become unconscious. I freed myself from the arms of this stranger and threw myself
onto my mother and shook her saying. "Mother wake up, wake up mother. Please wake
up." They gave her something and she reacted to it. A little later she woke up and sat on
the floor. She did not say a word. People talked to her, but she would not respond. People
comforted her and said that Ibrahim had not been very badly hurt, that he would soon
become well. But she would not answer. She was just staring at the wall. She seemed to
be looking for something inside the wall. I followed her gaze, but could not see anything. I
took her in my arms and tried to comfort her. But then I broke into tears. Tears, which I
could not control. I felt that I was being stupid. I should try to cheer my mother up, but
here I was crying and making her even more miserable.

After quite some time, I pulled myself together. My mother was shivering and trembling.
They brought her some blankets and wrapped them around her. I sat on the window niche
and stared at the yard. And then I asked one of the women. "How far is the hospital ?"
They told me that there was no hospital around. There was a clinic at a distance of around
25 kilometers, which was operated by one of the NGOs. The doctors there tried hard to
assist the people, but they had only limited means and they were not well equipped for
such cases. I did not say anything and continued to stare at the yard. I thought about my
brother. I thought about Ibrahim, who had always been so kind to me. Will he die like
father? Will he be gone. Will I not see him again. These were the questions going through my mind, as the woman was explaining to me. And then I heard the children come and shout, that they had returned. The first question, that went through my head was, they came back too fast. And then I heard my mother scream. She screamed, saying that her Ibrahim was dead. "My Ibrahim, my one and only Ibrahim is dead. I will never see him again. I will never hold him in my arms. I will never bring food and drinks to him. I will never help him with his home work. He is gone. He is dead. He has left me for ever." She cried and wept. She sobbed and threw herself into the arms of the ladies. She pulled at her hair. She wanted to hurt herself. She kept shouting, what had she done to have to pay for it in this manner. People told her to have faith in God and that it may be for the best. People tried to comfort her. But she would not stop.

My uncle came to me. The tears were rolling down his face. He looked pale. He took me in his arms and whispered "He didn't make it. The way was too long. He lost too much blood. We didn't make it. Oh God, we didn't make it. Oh my dear Ibrahim, now you have joined your father. Now you are gone. You have found peace with your father. Oh my Ibrahim...".

They buried him in the family grave yard. My uncle cried all the time. He kept saying to the older guests, that Ibrahim had died in his arms. He said, that he would never forget the final words of Ibrahim, who insisted on seeing his sister. He wanted to be with his mother and sister, but instead he was in his arms.

The ceremonies were soon over and we tried to go back to the so called routine of our life. After one week of break, I went back to school. I told my teachers and class mates about what had happened. But they all seemed to know. They showed me a lot of sympathy and looked with kind eyes at me. I heard the teachers talking to each other and saying, that my poor mother must be suffering quite a lot. First the death of the beloved husband and now that of the son. It must be quite difficult.
Chapter 3

The NGO
The days and weeks passed. Slowly our life found a new rhythm. A rhythm in which Ibrahim had only a place in our minds and thoughts. He was no longer there. I could no longer seek his support when I needed it. I could no longer lean on him in the hour of need. He was gone for ever.

The school was interesting. Marzia had become my best friend. We walked everyday to the school. In the beginning, I tried to close my eyes, when we would pass the place where my brother had been injured. But soon, I could pass along with open eyes. The teachers were now specially kind to me. They always tried to help and support me. I never was punished. Of course I saw to it too, that they would have no reason to punish me.

One day, we saw a car coming towards our school. People came out. There were Afghans and foreigners among them. We asked, who they were and were told, that they were representatives of an NGO. I asked what an NGO is and was told, that they were humanitarian organizations trying to support the people and the country. We asked what they wanted and were told that they would be interested in constructing a building for our school. Everybody became very happy. We smiled at the guests and tried to be nice to them. They took pictures of the classes. I hoped, that they would come to our class and take our pictures, but they did not come. I asked my teacher, if the school will also have tables and chairs like in Kabul. But was told, that most of these organizations had far too little budgets to be able to include tables and chairs for the schools. Upon asking he was comforted, that they might provide these, but could not promise. I liked the guests. They looked very sincere in what they were doing. "They must be very kind people", I thought. An then they came towards our class. They looked at us and took pictures. I just could not hold back the question and I raised my hand, as I had been taught by the teachers. The teacher allowed me to talk and I asked the NGO men : "I walk for one and a half hours every day to school. My village is very far away. Can you build us a school in my village?" They smiled at me and slowly shook their heads, saying "We cannot promise you little one, but we will try". I knew that this was a negative answer. My hopes went down, and I sat back in my place.

That day when I returned home, I talked to my uncle and told him about what had happened at school. He smiled at me and said, that he was happy for us. I told him of my question, but he also shook his head and said. "My dear Wagma, there is war in some parts of Afghanistan and the Government is not able to do anything for the people. It is these organizations, that try to help Afghanistan. They mostly bring the money from other countries and spend it in our country. But their money is not enough. So they cannot do everything they want to do and everything, that the people would like them to do. Therefore, I don't think that there will be a school in our village. So you have to continue to walk the distance to your present school". I did not say anything and sat in a corner.

Suddenly I heard my mother raise her voice. She had not talked for such a long time and
then suddenly she said: "Could these organizations not clear the mines, so that our children do not die stepping on them". She said this and broke out in tears. She cried and wept. But nobody would comfort her. Everybody in the room seemed to just be looking at her. I went to her and put my arms around her neck. I did not say anything, I just held her. Slowly and slowly she calmed down. But her tears did not stop for a long time.

Some days later I heard my aunt ask my uncle, what he had done regarding the mine clearer and was told that he had visited them and asked for a clearance of their area. "But they comforted me and told me, that they could at earliest come in some six months to clear the area. They complained, that they had too limited means and would require a long time to clear each area." My aunt asked him, if he had told them about Ibrahim and the mines on the way to school. She was told, that he had, but it had not helped.

They did not notice, that I was listening so they discussed for quite a long time. My aunt was extremely furious at the NGO, but my uncle tried to calm her down and say, that these were also human beings with limited means and only two hands. "We could also not hold too many things in one hand, could we?" He said.
Chapter 4

The Spring has arrived
The months passed and our life passed along with it. My mother lived a kind of normal life, even though, most of the nights, she found no sleep. I slept with her in the room. During the cold of winter, I laid down close to her and enjoyed the warmth of her body. She would wake up a number of times during the night and try to cover me with the blanket, lest I felt cold. She would then kiss me on the cheeks and lay back to sleep. Very often I would wake up, when she kissed me and would watch her just lying there beside me. She would not notice, that I was watching her and would lay there thinking. Some times I could see her wiping away her tears and I would know, that she crying again. I wanted to help her and comfort her. I wanted to do anything to reduce her pains. She was unhappy. She was so unhappy, and I could not do anything to help her. I tried to be kind to her, but it seemed not to help her. She was unhappy. She never mentioned my father or my brother. She often just looked at me and I knew that she saw in me the only thing she possessed in her life.

The spring arrived and the work of my uncle on the farm land intensified. He would leave early in the morning and would return late in the afternoon. The rainfall was good, but my uncle kept complaining about his work. One day he was talking to my aunt and I heard him complain about the lack of fertilizer and improved seeds. As usual my aunt referred him to the NGOs, who were working in this area. He should contact them and try to get their support. But my uncle said: "I did contact them and they were distributing seeds and fertilizers to some of the farmers. But I could not receive anything. They said it was bad luck. Maybe it was bad luck. They told me to be happy, that at least the Karez, which led to my land had been cleaned and I was benefiting from it." My aunt was not satisfied with the answer and insisted, that if he would contact them again, they would support them. She mentioned, that "these NGOs usually discuss their policies with the Shuras. Why didn't you contact them through a recommendation of the district Shura?" She continued
to insist, but my uncle was patient with her and told her that there were "thousands of farmers, who would like to benefit from the work of these NGOs. But these NGOs cannot solve the problem of all the people. Sister, I am trying to explain to you, that we cannot expect everything from them. We have to try to help ourselves and try to do something for our life. I know, that your life is difficult and you would like to have some financial security, but we cannot have these at this time. We must be patient." Saying this he left the room and went out to the courtyard. He stood there on the other end of the yard and looked up to the sky. I knew, that he was praying. I wondered what his prayers were. Oh how much I wished that I knew, what he was thinking at that moment.

One evening I sat with my mother and enjoyed the full moon, when my uncle came through the gate. He greeted us and I ran towards him. I threw my arms around his neck and he kissed me on the cheeks. Then I returned to my mother and sat close beside her. She put her arm around me and I pressed myself against her. My aunt asked my uncle, how his day was and my uncle responded: "I met Mahmud today. He had just returned from Ghazni city, where he had been visiting a skill training center. He has just completed six months of training in carpentry and is now hoping to be able to open a workshop in our village. He thinks, that he will have a good income. He will even work for neighboring villages. If he has learned well, I think, that he will be very successful, because there really are no carpenters in our vicinity. He said, that one of the NGOs had organized the training."
The teachers were very competent and sincere. At the end of his training they gave him a set of tools to help him to open his own workshop. He was very thankful for it. My aunt asked him, if this NGO could not start the center in their area. The population was also quite high. My uncle responded, that based on Mahmud's report "the investment costs for such centers are very high. It would not be possible to establish such centers in every place." My aunt asked, if my uncle could not go to Ghazni to learn a skill too, but my uncle just shook his head and went into the house. My aunt looked at my mother and she just raised a shoulder, not saying anything. She was again quiet. She was deep in her thoughts. I wondered, what she was just thinking.
Chapter 5

The future
Beginning of the spring meant, that I would go to the new class. I was no longer in the third grade. I went now to the fourth grade. I started new subjects such as geography and history. I liked it. I liked the fact, that I went to higher classes, in which I studied more subjects. The teachers were happy with me and Marzia seemed to love me very much. We always sat together and played together. Even in our village, I would visit her at home and we would play together. She was a really good friend.

Over a year had passed since we moved into the village. I now enjoyed the life here. I enjoyed the peace and tranquillity within the village. Now and then I would hear of fighting going on in Kabul. Even though I missed my life in Kabul and the luxury of the modern times, I was happy to be away from the sounds of gun shots and rocket explosions.

My mother had learned to do embroidery and was busy with it all the time. People would buy the embroidery and sell them in Pakistan or other countries. She earned just enough to be able to cover some of the costs for my school and the cost of purchasing new clothes for me and sometimes medicines, when I was sick.

My uncle was just as kind as always. He sincerely seemed to love me. His wife had just recently given birth to a lovely little boy, who spent hours and hours in my arms. He was very cute. Everybody said, that he was just as his father. But I could not see the similarity. Maybe because the face of my uncle was covered with his beard.
My aunt lived across the courtyard of the Qala with her husband and children. She visited us very often and always had a smile for my mother and I. She often would give me sweets and cookies, that she had baked in the Tandoor. She loved me. I knew that she loved me, even though she would not show it as often as my uncle.

We had learned to cope with our situation. I loved my mother and she loved me. Now and then I thought, that even my mother had noticed, that she was not quite alone and she had others, who cared for her and stood at her side. No one would take the place of my father or brother for her, but others could relieve the pain, that existed within her heart after losing the two dear ones.

It was early in the morning of a Friday, when I went out of the house and looked at the corn and wheat fields in front of our Qala. I looked as far as my eyes could see. I looked and looked. I knew, that my vision had its limitations. I wondered what the future would bring for me. I wondered, what the future would bring for us.....