Cradled in Her Arms:
Stories of the Life and Work of
Palwasha Kakar of Afghanistan

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Acronyms

AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
PDPA	People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund

The First Prison Visit

Laden with food and blankets, thirteen-year-old Palwasha approached the prison where her father was being held. She was accompanied by her younger sister, Noshaba; a prison compound was no place for a girl to go alone. Mohammad Daud Shaheed, the girls' father, had been arrested at work by Communist Party (PDPA)[1] soldiers as part of a campaign to neutralize people who refused to join the party, especially those who had links to Muhammad Daud's[2] regime; Mohammad Daud Shaheed had a tribal connection to the president.

The family had recently arrived back at their rental home in Kunduz province. They had spent the winter in their permanent home in Jalalabad to be with family for a period of mourning following the death of Gafora, Palwasha's fifth youngest sister. Upon his arrival back in Kunduz province, Mohammad found that he had been demoted from principal of his school to the position of teacher. A member of the Communist Party had been installed as the new principal. Mohammad had taken this as a form of communication from the party, through the mouth of the education department, spoken in the language of fear and intimidation. His arrest took place the day after his demotion.

The visiting girls spotted their father in a small cell that was bursting with prisoners. Mohammad had been in prison for four days and his daughters saw that his beard had grown longer and he was still wearing his work clothes.

"That is my father," Palwasha told the prison guard, pointing into the cell. Mohammad approached his daughters with tears in his eyes as he was escorted outside by the guard. He did not speak much, except to say thank you for the food and blankets, and to ask that the girls bring a change of clothes for him on their next visit. Prisoners' families were responsible for bringing

[1] The Communist Party in Afghanistan was called the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).
[2] Mohammad Sardar Daud was the self-proclaimed president of Afghanistan and founder of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

food for them or else they faced starvation. The guard who was listening to the conversation between Mohammad and his daughters promptly interjected, telling them that prisoners were not allowed to have a change of clothes. Mohammad kissed his daughters on the head, asked them to tell their grandmother not to worry, and was taken back to his cell. Palwasha wondered how her father would find a place to lay the blankets out to sleep in that crowded place.

After she said goodbye to her father, Palwasha went to find one of the prison commanders. Through the connection of a family friend, a prior appointment had been made for Palwasha to meet with one of the top commanders. He had been waiting for her when Palwasha approached him.

"Why did you put my father in prison?" Palwasha confronted the PDPA commander boldly.

"Your father is a troublemaker."

"But what was his crime?"

"His crime is that he is a troublemaker." Repeating his words, the commander seemed as though he was trying to convince himself.

"If you can tell me what my father did to deserve this, you may keep him in prison. Otherwise, you should let him go." Palwasha spoke with a confidence that defied her age.

Perhaps the commander found the young girl's straightforwardness disarming. He told Palwasha and Noshaba to come back in a week, promising to decide whether or not he would let their father go free. Though Mohammad's fate was still uncertain, this was good news for the family.

The week of waiting between Palwasha's visits to the prison passed agonizingly slowly for the family. Palwasha saw how her mother, with the carpet of stability Mohammad provided

pulled out from under her, became overwhelmed by the prospect of having to take care of her nine daughters on her own. With no male in the household, Palwasha had to be as brave as the son her parents never had. But what frightened Palwasha most was how her grandmother's face had tightened and shoulders had stiffened with anxiety since Mohammad had been sent to prison. Already, two of her grandmother's sons had disappeared at the hands of the PDPA. Palwasha's belief that her grandmother was too old to absorb another major tragedy in her life made Palwasha ever more determined to get her father home.

Mor Jani

When Palwasha had been woken up in the night by excited voices in the kitchen talking of the PDPA coup,[3] about six months before the prison visit, she wondered what all the fuss was about. How could she have known at the time what this political event would mean for her own life? She could not have predicted that that evening would become a landmark, splitting her life into two parts: a time when she knew nothing of war, and the time after that, when no Afghan would live without it for generations.

Palwasha was born to a wealthy Jalalabad family twelve years prior to that night that changed everything. The level of human security her family had enjoyed up to that point had afforded her the luxury of growing up oblivious to the politics of her country. At the time, Afghanistan was governed by a constitutional monarchical system, ruled by King Zahir. Mohammad Daud seized power in 1973, when Palwasha was eight, and a new constitution was enshrined, promising a number of socially progressive reforms, including greater rights for

[3] Prompted and aided by the Soviet Union, the PDPA mounted a coup on April 27, 1978, deposing and killing Muhammad Daud and forming a new government.

women, freedom of the press, and regulations on businesses that would minimize the exploitation of workers.

When Palwasha was a child, her world consisted of her family's yard as well as the lane that led to her house, which was spotted with relatives' homes. Aunties, uncles, cousins and in-laws flowed between the houses from morning until evening. But the most cherished adult in Palwasha's life was her grandmother, her universe.

"Play with me, *Mor Jani*!"[4] begged an eight-year-old Palwasha, tugging hard on her grandmother's scarf to try to coax her off her path to the far corner of the yard where the guests were waiting. Raised primarily by her grandmother, Sahera Mahwe, Palwasha found it difficult to be apart from her for any reason, including when her grandmother led a *jirga*,[5] even though they took place in the backyard. Palwasha pleaded with her beloved Mor Jani: why could she not sit on her grandmother's lap during the meeting? Her grandmother assured her they would be together again very soon and gave Palwasha the special role of playing with the children of the disputants while the adults were busy with their discussions.

Still reluctant to let her go, Palwasha did not let her grandmother out of her sight. She climbed a tree and watched from a distance as Mor Jani greeted all of the disputants outside the room where the meeting was to be held. To Palwasha, both families looked the same, as they were from the same mountainous area and ethnic group; nevertheless, the families were divided by a conflict over a marriage agreement.

From up in the tree, Palwasha could survey the yard and see how it was different from other properties in the village. Her family's property was much larger than most and was divided into two distinct sections. There was the private family area, while on the other side was a yard

[4] Palwasha used the name *Mor Jani*, meaning "dear mother," to refer to her grandmother.
[5] A *jirga* is a council that has authority to resolve disputes. The jirga is used on various levels of Afghan society—local, tribal, and national—and is a traditional mode of conflict resolution.

with rooms where guests could stay. People would come from nearby in the village, as well as journey from distant regions, to meet with Mor Jani in a jirga. At the time in Jalalabad, this mode of conflict resolution provided the only alternative to unmediated confrontations between families, which would often otherwise result in killing or destruction of property. In this case, the young woman's family had spent a month living in a guest room in the Saheed family's yard, seeking safety from acts of reprisal by the young man's family.

As Palwasha looked out into the yard, she thought of how much she liked to be with her grandmother in the garden. Mor Jani was a well-known poet in Jalalabad. In the garden, Palwasha would listen attentively while her grandmother spoke to her in verse. The young girl spent so much time in the garden with Mor Jani that she began to memorize whole poems. At family parties, Palwasha enjoyed taking center stage and astonishing all of the adults with her ability to memorize poetry and to recite it fearlessly.

One time when it was raining hard in the garden, Palwasha asked Mor Jani why she planted seeds in the garden, even when it was hard work. Mor Jani answered her with poetry: it is my duty to get wet today because it means flowers will decorate the garden tomorrow.

Still in the tree, Palwasha could hear the prayer being said to open the meeting of the jirga. Although she could not see inside, she could picture where everybody must have been sitting. The mullah[6] who was leading the prayer would have been across the carpet from Palwasha's grandmother. Facing each other on opposite sides of the carpet would have sat representatives from each of the two families. Soon, Palwasha began to hear the lilting voices of the disputants. Occasionally, her grandmother's soft but powerful voice would transcend the others to remind everybody why they were there: not to shout at each other, but to understand each other better.

[6] A mullah is an Islamic religious leader.

Mor Jani would start by asking both families to articulate their perceptions of events in the dispute, then to state their positions. She helped them find common ground by highlighting any similar goals they held. The meeting of the jirga would last until both sides could agree on a solution, a process which could take several weeks. When an agreement was finally reached, Mor Jani would draft a contract to be signed by all parties, and everyone would share sweet desserts.

It was not until later on that day that Palwasha found herself again on her grandmother's lap. Palwasha was curious about what had taken place in the jirga and listened while her grandmother discussed the matter with Palwasha's father. On one side was the family of a young woman, who had promised the woman in marriage to the family of a young man. Since the promise had been made, the young woman had announced her preference to marry another man with whom she had fallen in love. The families were unable to agree on how to proceed: the woman's family wished to annul the original agreement, and the man's family requested they be given two of the young woman's sisters in compensation for the broken honor they felt they had endured.

Mor Jani used her knowledge of Islam to judge which aspects of the disputants' behaviors and positions were consistent with the faith and which needed correction. In this case, she informed the young man's family that to request two daughters was unacceptable, as polygamy is not sanctioned by Islam.[7] Mor Jani's input resulted in the two families agreeing that the young woman's family would offer one of their other daughters to the young man's family, instead of the two that had been requested.

[7] This is the interpretation of Palwasha's grandmother.

Mor Jani's Home School

There was no limit to the sense of joy and security Palwasha derived from the company of her grandmother, so it was natural for Palwasha to wish that she did not have to share her grandmother's attention with fifteen other girls from the Bes'hood district of Jalalabad. Every morning, a section of the Saheed family's front yard (or a room in the house if it was raining or snowing) would be transformed into a one-room schoolhouse. Even at a young age, Palwasha was not inclined to simply accept the status quo. She asked Mor Jani why the girls had to come to their house for school. Mor Jani explained that there were no schools in the rural area where the family lived, which meant that the boys rode their bicycles to a school in Jalalabad city, and the girls would otherwise stay home. She went on to explain why it was important for her to be a teacher to the girls, telling Palwasha that not only did the girls have a right to be educated, the future of Afghan society relied on it.

Like many of the girls who attended her home school, Sahera Mahwe herself grew up in a household in which only the boys attended school. However, despite never attending school, she received an excellent education. Her mother, also an educated woman, insisted that the family hire the private teacher of King Habibullah's[8] family to teach Sahera and her siblings while the king's children were taking holidays. For a full four months out of every year while Sahera was growing up, she learned to read and write, understand mathematics, interpret the Quran, and to appreciate Persian literature. During the rest of the year while her brothers were at school, Sahera taught herself, devouring the books on the family's bookshelf. When the royal family's private teacher came back to Sahera Mahwe's home every winter, he found she had made very good use of the eight months, having surpassed her brothers in their studies.

[8] Amir Habibullah was king of Afghanistan from 1901 to 1919.

Palwasha pretended to play in the garden, but most of her attention was on her grandmother and the schoolgirls in the yard who were sitting on the carpet in straight lines. Too young to attend school yet, Palwasha wanted to be like her grandmother's students, learning all of the wonderful things being taught. She played around the outer edge of the carpet and eventually honed in on the row of the students' shoes, which had been placed neatly at the carpet's edge. The big girls' shoes intrigued her, and, without inhibition, she set off running around the yard at top speed, a pair of a student's sandals on her feet. Mor Jani excused herself from writing Pashto[9] in large characters on the chalkboard and called for Palwasha to return the shoes to their place. Having succeeded in her objective of getting her grandmother's attention, Palwasha put the shoes back with a sheepish grin.

Orange Flowers

Spring in Jalalabad was the season of the *naring gol*, or "orange flower." Mor Jani told Palwasha that the flowers hid all over the city the rest of the year and conspired to bloom all at once to overwhelm the streets with their bright color and intoxicating smell. The spring also brought the Orange Flower Poetry Festival in honor of the mass blooming.

Recognizing Palwasha's comfort with being in the spotlight at an early age, Sahera Mahwe nurtured her granddaughter's talents for memorizing and reciting poetry. One year, when Palwasha was nine years old, her grandmother entered her in the Orange Flower contest. Palwasha practiced the poem she would recite at the competition for weeks, while Sahera Mahwe coached her on her rhythm and the pronunciation of difficult words. She was the only child among a lineup of amateur Jalalabad poets to perform at the festival. The Saheed family was overjoyed when Palwasha received one of the coveted awards for reciting one of her father's

[9] Pashto is Palwasha's mother tongue and one of several languages spoken in Afghanistan.

poems. Succeeding at commanding the attention of a large crowd, including adults, important people, and males of all ages, Palwasha learned the power of her voice for the first time. On the way home from the poetry contest, she decided she wanted nothing more than to speak out to her country folk for the rest of her life. She began to dream about becoming an announcer on the radio, imagining her voice resonating throughout all of Jalalabad.

The Second Prison Visit

When her father announced that the family would be moving to Kunduz province because he had been offered a job as a school principal in the region, Palwasha accepted the news only because her grandmother would be coming along; for Palwasha, home was wherever Mor Jani was within arm's length. For the first two years in Kunduz, life was more or less as it had been in Jalalabad, though there was no throng of schoolgirls visiting the home, nor did Mor Jani conduct jirgas at the new home. The new street was not lined with more relatives than whose names could be remembered. However, the Saheed family was well connected with important people in the Kunduz government, which helped their social standing and meant that parties held at their home were always attended by many guests. Between friends and relatives, there was always somebody visiting, bringing sweet-tasting melons from the trees in their yards.

Palwasha never expected to find herself waking up in the morning, two years later, having to meet with a PDPA commander to hear his decision on whether he would release her father from prison. Everybody in the family knew, and so did Palwasha, that she was the only person who could go to the prison on behalf of her father. Though her grandmother was a respected elder in their community in Jalalabad, she was unknown in Kunduz and it would be risky for her to confront PDPA soldiers because of her tribal connection to Muhammad Daud.

Palwasha's mother could not be the one to visit the prison—as an adult woman she was more likely to be leered at than taken seriously. It was during times like this when the absence of sons in the family became glaringly apparent. Knowing she had no choice, Palwasha did not allow fear to paralyze her. However, while at the prison, a combination of nerves and nausea swirled the encounter into a blur. As she had remembered from the first visit, the commander stood much taller than Palwasha. She was, in fact, not much taller than the rifle he held at his side, yet Palwasha found the commander's gaze and held it. Soon, Mohammad was led out of the prison doors, still in his work clothes now stained with yellow and brown, tears welling in his eyes again this time as he laid eyes on his daughters. Palwasha and Noshaba walked home from the prison, each daughter flanking her father, his grip on their hands tight enough to squeeze their knuckles.

Changes in Kunduz

Palwasha's father became an insomniac when he returned from jail, pacing around the house while the family slept. However, one night, a few weeks after Mohammad Daud's release from prison, the whole Saheed family was unable to sleep on account of the loud chants of "*Allahu Akbar*"[10] in streets outside their home. Palwasha crouched down, looked out her bedroom window, and saw a throng of men running behind someone on horseback who was waving a torch. Her father moved quickly, gathering the whole family together in the front room. Peering out the window into the night, nobody could see who the men were who now flooded the starlit street. In the past year, the monarchy had been overthrown by the PDPA, and in addition, the Soviet Union had invaded the country. However, the turbans on their heads indicated that the

[10] *Allahu Akbar* is an Arabic phrase meaning "God is great."

men in the street were neither Soviets nor PDPA soldiers. Who was marching down the street waving their weapons now? What new chaos would they bring?

Over the next week Palwasha's family began hearing about friends and relatives who were killed because they were accused of allying with the PDPA. Afghan resistance fighters against the Soviet occupation who called themselves the Mujahedeen had begun to organize themselves in waging a *jihad*, or "holy war," against the non-Islamic occupiers. The night the family was woken up by the mob outside their house there had been a prison break at a nearby PDPA prison and Mujahedeen fighters were released into the Saheed family's neighborhood. Palwasha's family, like many others, had suffered consequences for their non-alignment with the PDPA. Now, the family, though Muslim, was afraid of being targeted by factions of the Mujahedeen that propagated a strict version of the faith. To protect his daughters, Mohammad Daud forbade them to go to school, where they would be vulnerable to Mujahedeen attacks because they were girls. After his experience in prison, it seemed prudent to Palwasha's father to keep the whole family inside the protective walls of the home.

Palwasha had been in school for as long as she could remember. Not being allowed to go to school was devastating news for her, not only because she enjoyed learning, but also because her very active social life relied on there being a school ground where it could play out. Worse, Palwasha still had her sights set on becoming a radio announcer, and missing two months of school could mean having to forego the whole year, which would set her back from achieving her dream. Keeping up with her classmates by reading Pashtun literature, as her grandmother had done in her youth, would be impossible in Palwasha's case; most of Sahera Mahwe's books had been left behind on the bookshelf in Jalalabad.

The only reading materials in plentiful supply around the house in Kunduz were outdated copies of the Iranian women's magazine, *Hafta Nama Zan*, "Women's Weekly Letters." So, Palwasha spent her days engrossed in the love lives of Iranian beauties who wore pantsuits and makeup. She was particularly intrigued by the advice column. Palwasha read the stories of women who were in love with men they could not marry, women adjusting to life with new in-laws, and women's troubles with balancing their families and their careers. She let the problems of the Iranian women roll around in her head and thought of what advice she would give them if they had been her sisters.

As Palwasha stayed inside, entertained by the stories in the magazines, life in Kunduz inched further and further away from normalcy. The province was increasingly becoming a battleground for clashes between the Soviets and the Mujahedeen. News of another friend disappearing or being killed would prompt frequent discussions between Palwasha's parents about the future of their own family. Seen as targets by both the Soviets and the Mujahedeen, and forced to keep their daughters home from school, they wondered how much longer the family could stand to live like this. Since the PDPA coup and the Soviet occupation had taken place, many of the family's relatives and friends from Jalalabad had left Afghanistan. A few were beginning the process of resettlement as far away as Germany and the United States, while most had become refugees in Pakistan.

A Move to the Capital

Deeply devoted to Afghanistan but no longer satisfied with life in Kunduz province, the Saheed family considered its options. Palwasha's parents believed the insecurity would be temporary and their country would soon be restored to peace. Moving back to Jalalabad was not

an option because the city had become a Soviet stronghold. Palwasha's parents had recently visited the city to check on their property. They arrived to find the front door of their house swinging open. They spared Palwasha most of the details about the condition of the house, but over time, Palwasha pieced together that everything from the Persian rugs, hand-sewn wall decorations, silverware, and even the beds and heater, had been stolen. Also in their absence, the family's property had been divided up and redistributed by the PDPA. The prospect of becoming refugees in Pakistan would mean that Palwasha's education and that of her sisters was likely to be further disrupted, as her parents believed it would be more difficult to enroll their girls in school in the foreign country. Because Kabul was one of the few places that had been less affected by fighting between the PDPA soldiers and the Mujahedeen, Mohammad Daud decided to pack his family into the car and move to the capital city.

The drive to Kabul took six days, while in more secure conditions it would have taken two. As the car bumped over long stretches of the potholed road, Palwasha sat in the back seat peering out the window, imagining Mujahedeen soldiers behind every mountain.

During their time in Kabul, the family moved between seven rental homes in six years. There was always some reason they had to move out of each tiny dwelling: the landlord demanded too much money, the heater broke down in the winter, or water had begun to flow inside through a crack in the ceiling. Life at their idyllic estate in Jalalabad during Palwasha's childhood seemed a dream from the distant past. Mohammad was denied work as a school principal in Kabul because of his refusal to join the PDPA. To support his family, he worked odd jobs until he found a fulltime teaching job. However, the income from his position as a teacher was not enough to support his wife, mother, and children. Sending all of his nine daughters to school was a top priority, and one which conflicted with his steadfast desire not to collude with

the occupying Soviets and the PDPA. In order to pay for school fees, Mohammad worked as a teacher from eight o'clock in the morning to one o'clock, then as a secretary in an office from two to ten o'clock at night, all the while avoiding signing a Communist Party card.

Sisters

Palwasha rushed home from Rabbi Balki High School so she would be there when her sisters arrived from their schools. As they burst through the door, her sisters were laughing and talking excitedly. Palwasha thought how adorable they looked in their school uniforms: blue pants, white blouses, and white scarves tied around their necks. Palwasha greeted her sisters and prepared their bath water.

As Palwasha put her freshly scrubbed sisters down for an afternoon nap, her mother, Haneefa, called for her to come into the kitchen.

"Palwasha *jan*,"[11] her mother began, "you help our family so much looking after your sisters. Because our country is occupied by foreign invaders, your father is having trouble finding work that pays enough to support our family. You are the firstborn. We need you to do something more to help the family."

Palwasha nodded.

"You will tutor some of the neighbors' children after school. I have already spoken to Shima across the street. She would like you to teach her daughters to read and write."

As Palwasha spoke to her mother, a neighbor rushed in the door without knocking. He looked frazzled and upset. When he opened his mouth he addressed Haneefa.

"Come, come, you have to come! There has been an accident. A girl has been killed. I think it was one of your daughters."

[11] *Jan* is a term of endearment.

Palwasha knew it must have been Sabia, because her other sisters were asleep in the bedroom. Haneefa had given Sabia some money to take to the market to buy eggplant and tomatoes for the family's dinner, and she had run off, happy to have been given the special responsibility.

Palwasha ran with the man to a busy street a few blocks from the Saheed home. When she turned the corner, she saw her sister's shoes lying among smatterings of blood on the street. Her sister, the man told her, had been carried to the hospital by a witness. Palwasha asked the man if he would take her and her mother to the hospital.

Even lying on a hospital stretcher, Sabia, who was twelve, looked at least eighteen. She was envied by all of her sisters because she was tall, thin, beautiful, and so intelligent she made schoolwork seem effortless. Now, she was lying in a coma, unable to tell her family what had happened to her. The man who carried Sabia to the hospital told Palwasha and her mother that Sabia had been hit by a Soviet truck as she was crossing the street. She went under the truck while the driver kept going, swerving in the street at top speed. Because of his erratic driving, the man wondered if the driver had been drunk. In the end, it did not matter because the Soviets operated with impunity in Afghanistan. Sabia lived only a few more hours; the family mourned for thousands more.

The Radio Station

Ever since her arrival in Kabul, Palwasha had listened to Radio and TV Kabul. By this time, the content of radio broadcasts carried a strong PDPA slant, but nevertheless, the radio was a window through which Palwasha could look and understand the world around her. Palwasha's desire to become a radio announcer had been strengthened by her admiration for Saima Akbar, a

famous announcer on Radio and TV Kabul who delivered the Pashtun news with eloquence and grace. Palwasha imagined the sound waves of her own voice resonating throughout all of Kabul, filling the ears of every man, woman, and child.

Soon after graduating from high school, as many of her friends were moving on to married life or university, Palwasha began working as a volunteer trainee at Radio and TV Kabul. Palwasha was given the responsibility of reading the business news on the radio once per day. To quell her nerves the first few times she went on air, Palwasha would cast her mind back to her childhood, remembering her prize-winning poetry recitation. It filled Palwasha with confidence to remember how her grandmother told her she had a voice like a beautiful songbird. Early in her three-month training period, Palwasha was recognized as a talented announcer. Staff at the station told her she had a voice that "could be felt by all of Kabul." Saima Akbar, the announcer whom Palwasha idolized as a girl, took an interest in her and began to mentor her, and Palwasha quickly became a well-respected announcer.

When the training period was finished, the director of the radio station invited Palwasha to his office. As Palwasha sat down across from him, she saw a Communist Party card on his desk. Palwasha's eyes fixated on the card as he invited her to join the radio station as a permanent staff member. But her dream was crushed as soon as it had been realized. "First," continued the director of the radio station as he slid the unsigned card across the desk towards Palwasha, "you will have to join the Party."

When Palwasha got home from the station that day she went to her grandmother for comfort. Mor Jani congratulated her on being offered a position at the radio station, and told her she was proud of Palwasha for refusing to join the PDPA, even though it meant sacrificing her chance to be an announcer.

"You are a talented young woman with many gifts." Palwasha lay with her head on her grandmother's lap while her grandmother stroked her hair. "But, speaking on the radio is not the only way to share your gifts with all of Afghanistan, my child. There are other ways you can serve the people. Only a high school student, you are already a teacher to your sisters, and you even tutor your own students. I encourage you to go to university so you can work as a teacher."

Palwasha's grandmother always gave her good advice. Palwasha enrolled in the Faculty of Social Science at Kabul University and started school in March 1984. She attended the university at a time when half of its students were female.[12] During the four years Palwasha spent at university, life was so good she began to forget all of the insecurity she had lived through during the final years of her family's time in Kunduz province. Palwasha spent the time while she was in university going to the library with groups of girlfriends and mixing with her classmates in cafes after school, while her favorite singer, Ahmad Zahiz, played on the radio.

Cycle of Life

Early one morning as Palwasha was getting dressed for school, her father banged loudly on her door, asking her to come out quickly. Palwasha came down the stairs in her nightgown and bare feet to find a friend of the family standing in the foyer of the house.

"Come quickly," he implored Palwasha's father, "your mother has fallen down."

Not pausing to put on shoes, Palwasha followed her father and the family friend down the dirt road, across the neighborhood, to his house. By the time they had arrived, the body of Palwasha's grandmother had been placed on a guest bed, making it appear as though she had

[12] "The Women of Afghanistan," *Canadian Broadcasting Company*, 1 March 2005, http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/afghanistan/afghanwomen.html.

passed away peacefully in her sleep. At that moment, Palwasha felt the world around her begin to implode.

Palwasha had last seen her grandmother the day before; she could not have anticipated that it would be for the last time. She thought about how her grandmother had told her she wanted nothing more than to see Palwasha graduate from university. Palwasha was only months short of that day. Her grandmother had given her some spending money because Palwasha had passed her pre-graduation exams with honors. She recalled how her grandmother had felt like a strong pillar as she stood hugging Palwasha and giving her many kisses on the cheek. Now, Palwasha stood stunned, feeling as if everything that had been solid in her world had buckled. When she arrived home, Palwasha put a lock on the door to her grandmother's room, never to enter it again.

Because Sahera Mahwe was a respected community leader and a well-known poet in Afghanistan, her funeral proceedings were public events. News of her death was broadcast on television throughout Afghanistan. Despite the danger associated with traveling in the country, people came to Kabul from all of the places where Sahera Mahwe had touched lives. The day after her death, thousands of people gathered for prayers in a large hall that had been rented by the family. The family mourned for forty days, refraining from listening to music, watching television, and going to parties. The women wore black head scarves. When the forty days were over, Palwasha continued to wear her scarf for forty more.

Palwasha's graduation from Kabul University was bittersweet: sweet because of the knowledge that she would soon begin work as a teacher, bitter because her grandmother was not there to witness it. Still going through her own process of mourning, Palwasha refused to have a graduation party. On her graduation day, Palwasha visited the headstone her father had built for

her grandmother. Kneeling before it, she read a line from one of her grandmother's famous poems which her father had engraved into the stone, "If you come visit my tomb, tread carefully, walk slowly near my broken heart."

The Proposal

After Palwasha had came home from her grandmother's grave, her mother entered her bedroom and found her lying on her bed reading a novel. Haneefa sat on the edge of Palwasha's bed and told her that a young man by the name of Kabir Kakar had asked Palwasha's father for Palwasha's hand in marriage. At the time, Palwasha knew very little about Kabir and his family, except that she had recently overheard her father discussing him with her grandmother.

"Had it not been Noshaba whom Kabir and father had discussed?" Palwasha asked her mother. She hoped that what she overheard had indeed been true, that Noshaba, not Palwasha, was the potential bride.

"You are correct, Palwasha, it had originally been Noshaba whom your father discussed with Kabir. He had suggested your sister to Kabir because your father felt you would not be receptive to the marriage proposal. However, yesterday, when your father met with Kabir, Kabir insisted that he was in love with you, not Noshaba. It is for this reason that I insist you at least consider him."

Palwasha wondered out loud how a person she had never met could be in love with her. Her mother told her that Kabir had seen Palwasha years ago at a wedding party, and he had been asking people about her ever since.

"Has *Baaba*[13] promised him anything?" Palwasha asked her mother.

[13] *Baaba* is a name commonly used for "father."

"No, in fact, your father told Kabir how you have been unwilling to accept proposals lately. He said he would ask your opinion but warned Kabir not to get his hopes up."

Palwasha thought about her life. She knew, because she was finished with her education, that now was the right time to get married, but she wondered what married life would mean for her. Palwasha grew up in a house where she had been afforded many freedoms, mostly because of the influence of her grandmother's liberal values. Her upbringing was unique among Afghan girls; she had been permitted to climb trees and encouraged in her education. Her parents not only relied on her to look after her sisters, they often asked her opinion when it came to family decisions. Would her husband ask her opinion, or would he try to make decisions for her? What if her new in-laws wanted her to live with them? Palwasha knew that Kabir was from a traditional family, so what concerned her most was what he would think of her desire to work as a teacher.

Life as a Married Woman

The first years of married life were indeed trying ones, but for entirely different reasons than Palwasha had foreseen. Much to Palwasha's relief, Kabir was fully supportive of her career ambitions. However, Kabir and Palwasha spent only twelve days together immediately after their marriage before Palwasha started work as a teacher in Kabul; Kabir took a well-paying bank job in Kunar, a province in eastern Afghanistan. Within her first year in Kabul, Palwasha gave birth to her first of four sons, Abdulsamad Kakar.

Nearing her one-year wedding anniversary, Palwasha was walking down the road to Kali Fatula High School, where she taught the upper levels of high school. At the time, there were more children in Kabul than room for them in schools, which meant that school buildings took

on many improvised forms to accommodate as many children as possible. In order to meet the demand, the high school occupied a series of rented storefronts in a small block.

Though her students were dismissed from school at one o'clock, Palwasha would normally stay at work until mid-afternoon, planning the next day's lessons and meeting with students for extra help. One day, a female student lingered after school, wanting to talk about a problem she was having with her family. Palwasha invited the girl to walk with her as she went to pick up her son. The girl explained to Palwasha that her parents had arranged for her to get married in two months, which would mean that she would have to withdraw from school. This was a familiar story to Palwasha as many of her female students failed to reach graduation.

Palwasha knocked on the door of one of the storefronts associated with the school. An elderly woman answered and transferred Abdulsamad into her arms. The woman was the mother of the school's night security guard and lived in one of the storefronts, along with her family. Palwasha handed the woman a pouch containing payment for the babysitting.

Instead of going straight home after work, Palwasha carried Abdulsamad for over an hour to reach a communication booth where there was a phone capable of connecting to Kunar province. As she approached the phone store, Palwasha became more and more nervous. This was a weekly ritual. For months now, almost every time she turned on the radio Palwasha heard about missile attacks by both the Mujahedeen and the PDPA in Kunar province that killed scores of people every week. Every time before calling Kabir, Palwasha imagined herself a widow, like her sister, Noshaba, whose husband had been killed by a Mujahedeen missile attack two months before.

As usual, when Palwasha heard Kabir's voice on the phone, her eyes welled with tears of relief. Her husband had survived another week's violence.

“Hello, my darling,” Kabir spoke when he came to the phone.

“Hello, my sweet.” Palwasha had to shout so that Kabir could hear her, which meant that everybody in the telephone store could hear the conversation. Because of the lack of privacy and time, the couple went straight to the topic foremost on their minds.

“Kabir, why do you not come to live with me in Kabul, where it is safe?”

“Who will support our family, Palwasha, if I have to leave my job at the bank?” Kabir replied, also shouting across the weak telephone connection.

“We will live on my teaching salary, Kabir.”

“Palwasha, I would rather stay here where missiles fly and where I can only talk to you once per week, than come to Kabul where I would be forced to join the PDPA and be made to kill my own countrymen. I would not be able to bear killing Afghans, even if they are the Mujahedeen. You know, so many of our friends have chosen to live in Pakistan. I wonder if that might be the right path for our family, too.”

“Kabir, how will we survive as refugees in Pakistan? At least we have work in Afghanistan.”

The conversation always went the same way, with the couple discussing ways to resolve the dilemma of how to live together in a safe place, and where they would have an income. As often occurred, the telephone connection would be lost, putting a premature end to their conversation. Palwasha would walk home, knowing that her sense of relief would last only until she turned on the radio.

The Basement

One afternoon in early 1992, Palwasha set out for the bazaar with her sister, Noshaba, to buy some meat. Palwasha and Kabir were still living apart, so Palwasha and Noshaba had moved back into their parents' former home in Kabul. Today, on the sisters' walk to the market, they found the streets were void of the normal afternoon bustle. To their surprise, when they arrived at the bazaar, the shops were closed and there were no vendors lining the streets. The sisters looked at each other, exchanging expressions of both alarm and bewilderment.

"Was it not last week that we danced in the streets to celebrate the end of the civil war?"[14] Noshaba asked Palwasha.

"Yes, I heard about it on the BBC. The war is over."

"Well, how would the BBC explain this scene?" Noshaba replied. "It is the second day of freedom for Afghanistan, and there is nobody in the streets."

At that moment, Palwasha remembered that in the morning she laid in bed listening to the sound of gunfire in the distance. She attributed it to a celebration of the end of the war, but she realized now that perhaps the guns had been firing for some other reason.

When the sisters arrived home, they turned their transistor radio to BBC and waited for the world news. They learned that intense fighting had broken out between various factions of the Mujahedeen in Kabul.[15] Residents were rapidly fleeing the capital.

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[14] The Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, but the PDPA retained power in the country. Muhammad Najibullah, leader of the PDPA, became president of Afghanistan, but was bitterly opposed by the Mujahedeen who continued to fight for control of the country.

[15] After Najibullah gave up power in April of 1992, a struggle for power ensued and the civil war continued. A major faction involved in the struggle for the capital city was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Islamic Party, who was at odds with the coalition of Mujahedeen groups controlling Kabul. The coalition factions in Kabul were led primarily by Burhanuddin Rabbani of the Islamist Movement, and Ahmad Shah Masood, a leader of the Northern Alliance. For more detailed information, see Frank A. Clements, *Conflict in Afghanistan: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003).

Without their husbands it was unsafe for Palwasha and Noshaba to travel outside of Kabul. Palwasha reasoned that the basement would be the safest place to stay until the violence subsided or if the house was hit by a missile. But because the basement had only one door, if soldiers were to enter there would be no means of escape.

That evening, the sisters and their three young children descended into the small basement room as soon as they began to hear loud explosions in their neighborhood.

Unprepared to take shelter in the basement, there were few reserves of food in the house. Palwasha was pregnant, which meant that after living on small portions of vegetables and bread for ten days, she reached a state of desperation in which her desire to satiate her appetite overcame fear of the Mujahedeen.

While in the basement, Palwasha could only imagine how the landscape had been transformed by the explosions, which had been unrelenting since she had taken refuge underground. When she climbed from the basement and stepped outside, she found piles of rubble where homes had once been. One of Palwasha's neighbors, who was the only other person in the street, told of how her own son was killed when a missile hit their home. She warned Palwasha to go back inside immediately as the Mujahedeen had been kidnapping women and girls in the area. Before Palwasha turned to go, the neighbor woman relayed another story, this one of a neighbor's daughter who jumped to her death from her parents' balcony as the Mujahedeen entered her house on the ground floor.

On her short walk back to the basement, Palwasha picked up some small stones. For the rest of the afternoon, she tried to distract her sons, Ahmadmasih and Abdulsamad, now one and three, from their hunger by showing them games to play with the stones. That night, as usual,

Palwasha slept on the floor with her pregnant belly facing the ceiling, cradling Ahmadmasih in one arm and Abdulsamad in the other.

Women's Unions

After spending two months in her basement in Kabul, Kabir came to meet Palwasha, and the family relocated to Jalalabad. For the first two years in Jalalabad, Palwasha worked as a principal. Since the Mujahedeen had begun their in-fighting over control of Afghanistan, repressive social norms had permeated Jalalabad and become institutionalized in the school system, which made working for the Ministry of Education hard to bear for Palwasha. As soon as she received a job offer from the local United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) office, Palwasha began her work as a health educator in the nearby villages.

Despite living simply in Jalalabad because she had to leave all of her possessions behind in Kabul, Palwasha saw how the women in the village she was visiting had far fewer material comforts. They lived in small, crowded dwellings, had little education, many children, and not enough food to feed them. In her UNICEF job, Palwasha knocked on doors looking for pregnant women to talk with about breastfeeding and how to remain healthy.

On one of her visits to the village, Palwasha met with the village mullah under a tree.

"As you know, I have been working with pregnant women and new mothers in the village for a number of months. While the health of new mothers has improved over this time, I feel that without addressing some of the women's other needs such as education and nutrition, my efforts at promoting health for breastfeeding mothers will be in vain. Recently, I have been speaking to some of the local women about organizing a women's *shura*.[16] I would like to hold a meeting

[16] *Shura* is an Arabic word meaning "consultation." In this context, it refers to a village council of decision makers.

with the women of the village to see if forming a women's group is something they might like to do."

"What will be the purpose of this women's group?" the mullah inquired with a tone of skepticism.

"The objective will be for women to have a forum for deciding, together, what kind of assistance they would like from outside nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]. Without a voice from the village, it is difficult for NGOs to know what the priorities are and what programs to offer."

The mullah narrowed his eyes and considered what Palwasha had proposed. He told Palwasha that he would allow her to hold the meeting under the condition that the women's group not become a catalyst for transgressions of the village's social norms and cultural traditions. He added that he did not expect many women to appear at the meeting. Nevertheless, Palwasha asked the mullah to announce at the mosque that the meeting would take place the following Monday.

Palwasha spoke to as many of the village women as she could about the upcoming meeting. Many of them found it difficult to imagine an association of women like the one Palwasha described to them. What role could they play in changing their circumstances? One woman told Palwasha that the idea was bound to fail: surely no one would be willing to walk all the way to the village health clinic for the meeting.

The following Monday as she walked to the village, Palwasha wondered what she would find when she arrived at the health clinic. She hoped the women would be enthusiastic about the meeting, but she realized the tremendous challenges of convincing them that they, themselves,

could be agents of change in their own community. She knew that the union would fail without the enthusiasm of the women.

When Palwasha arrived at the clinic, she had to wade through a crowd of nearly fifty women simply to get to the door, and fifty more to get to the front of the clinic's main room; the building was overflowing. She soon realized that there were many faces in the room that she did not recognize. Women not only from the village in which Palwasha had been working had appeared, but there were women present from villages throughout the entire Sukorod district.[17] They heard about the meeting by word-of-mouth and made a significant journey to get to the clinic.

In time, the women's union grew so large that its members chose to elect representatives from each of the village areas to sit on a union council. Over the next three years that Palwasha worked with the representatives, she noticed changes in the women and in the communities. The women became more self-assured and spoke with greater confidence. The faces of children who came to the meetings with their mothers began to get plumper, their eyes brighter, and their smiles wider.

Darkness Descends

Early one morning in 1997, Palwasha stood outside her house waiting for the car that would pick her up and take her to meet the women of Sukorod district, as was her daily routine. Today, Palwasha's brother-in-law arrived instead of her car.

"I have been waiting for my car for over an hour now. I am beginning to worry about my driver," Palwasha said as she greeted her brother-in-law.

[17] Sukorod is a district in the province of Jalalabad.

"It is not your driver you should be worried about, my sister. It is our country we need to worry about now. As you know, the Taliban[18] have already captured a number of provinces to the south, along with the capital city. Now they have come to Jalalabad. This morning there were announcements on the radio that women are not allowed to work, and that there will be harsh punishments dealt to those who disobey."

Palwasha turned around and walked back into her house, not sure what to make of the news. Perhaps the arrival of the Taliban would finally bring some security to the country that had been at the mercy of in-fighting between Mujahedeen factions for four years now. On the other hand, what was this about women being prohibited to work?

Forced to stay home from work for the next three months, Palwasha began to understand the true nature of the Taliban. Kabir was occasionally away on business trips, and their boys continued to go to school during the days. With little to keep her mind busy, Palwasha worried. What would become of Afghanistan with most of the country now ruled by the Taliban? Isolated at home, Palwasha had no way of knowing what was happening to the women of the Sukorod district women's union. She knew that even if the women were managing to meet undercover, without Palwasha to liaise with UNICEF, there would be no way for them to get any help from outside of their village.

Unable to work, Palwasha had lost an essential part of herself. While gazing at the outside world from her window, she saw a woman from down the street being chased by a Talib man, and finally being beaten with an iron cable. Helpless, but unable to look away, Palwasha felt her heart turn black.

[18] The Taliban had captured Kabul from Masood and his mujahedeen forces in September of 1996. This defeat sparked the resurrection of the Northern Alliance, comprised of Masood's forces and those of General Abdul Rashid Dostum. The war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance continued through 2001, though the Taliban effectively controlled the country by 1999. They imposed Sharia law on the country, and brutally suppressed the rights of women.

Palwasha had some idea of the changes that were taking place in Afghanistan—especially those that affected her mobility—but isolation kept her from knowing firsthand what the country had become. When she did leave the house, the view was blurry from under her *burqa*.[19] Until she got used to the garment, Palwasha often tripped and fell because she was unable to see the path in front of her clearly.

Prohibited from leaving the house without a close male relative, it was through Kabir that Palwasha now interacted with the world outside her home. Kabir would come home from business trips full of stories about how women throughout the country were being affected by the Taliban's policies. Though the stories were morbid, Kabir would spare few details; he knew how strongly Palwasha felt about knowing the truth about women suffering in her country.

After their children had gone to bed, Palwasha and Kabir sat in the living room speaking in soft voices. Tonight, he told her about a girl named Najeeya. Najeeya's mother was widowed and had no close living male relatives, so Najeeya occasionally accompanied her to the bazaar, when they could afford to go, for provisions. One day when Najeeya and her mother were walking home from the bazaar, they were followed by a Talib man. When they arrived home, he approached the two and addressed the mother.

"Since the girl has no father, I will tell you that I intend to marry her."

Najeeya's mother argued with the man. "My daughter is only eleven. She is not mature enough to be a wife."

"Well, of course, I am willing to offer a handsome sum in exchange for such a young beauty," the man said, handing Najeeya's mother a pouch full of Afghanis.[20] It was enough

[19] A *burqa* is an outer garment worn by a woman. It covered her from head to toe, including her entire face, though there was a small opening—usually covered by netting—for her eyes. The Taliban forced women to wear the burqa in public.
[20] Afghanis are the national currency in Afghanistan

money for Najeeya's mother to afford to buy food for her and her daughter until Najeeya's thirteenth birthday, at which time the Talib man would come back to claim her.

Kabir relayed the story of another young woman whom he had heard about during his travels in southern Afghanistan. Before the Taliban had captured the country, Dirkani, a girl of sixteen, had been sent by her mother to collect water for her family. When she arrived at the well, the son of one of the community's prominent religious leaders was also there. Once Dirkani had filled her bucket, the young man, who had three buckets himself, asked Dirkani if she would mind helping him carry one of his buckets back to his house. Dirkani told him she was sorry she would not be able to help; she could not risk worrying her mother, nor could she be seen walking with a man to whom she was not related.

"Oh, your mother will never know. My house is very close," the young man attempted to persuade her.

Reluctant, but somewhat excited by the attention paid to her by the young man, Dirkani agreed to help him with his third bucket.

When they arrived at his house, Dirkani noticed that the house seemed empty. She set the bucket down outside the front door.

"Won't you carry it into the kitchen for me," the young man asked Dirkani, "instead of leaving it here for my mother to carry? Then you can go back to your mother."

Dirkani obeyed this request. Once she stepped inside, the man locked the front door behind her.

When Dirkani told her parents what the young man had done to her, they knew there was only one course of action they could take to redeem the worth of their daughter. Believing that

no other man would ever consider her a suitable wife, they decided that Dirkani would have to marry the man who had raped her.

The young man's family repeatedly denied that their son had raped Dirkani, and threatened to ruin her reputation in the village should Dirkani's family propose marriage again. However, unable to imagine any other path for their daughter, Dirkani's family continued to pursue the marriage proposal. Once the young man's family made it known in the village that Dirkani had been raped, the local Taliban stoned her to death for what they considered immoral conduct.

The next day, Palwasha wrote down the stories of Najeeya and Dirkani and hid them in a drawer in her house. As she was doing so, there was a knock on the door. Kabir answered the door to find the director of the Jalalabad UNICEF office, Palwasha's former employer, standing there. Kabir did not object to inviting a man into the house to meet with Palwasha because he knew this man was a trusted colleague.

Sharing tea and almonds, the UNICEF director addressed Palwasha. "As you know, when the Taliban came, we had to let all of our female staff go. This meant that we had to drastically scale down our programming. We have recently negotiated a deal with the Taliban that will allow us to hire some of our female staff back to carry out a child immunization program. Palwasha, you were one of our most valued staff members. Will you consider coming back to work?"

Palwasha's eyes lit up with exhilaration. She was overcome with excitement. Finally, she would be able to work again.

When Palwasha looked over at Kabir to see his reaction, she saw his furrowed brow. A long moment passed before he spoke.

"Palwasha, my love, what I want most is for you to be happy and for you to be able to work again. But I am afraid working will be very dangerous for you, and it could put the safety of our family at risk. Remember the story of Dirkani? As one of the only women working in Jalalabad, you would be giving the Taliban an invitation to make an example out of you."

Mahram

Palwasha spent the next day in the bazaar with her eldest son, Abdulsamad, shopping for the Eid ul-Fitr[21] holidays. As the pair emerged from a shop where Palwasha had bought a sweater for Abdulsamad and some cloth from which she planned to sew holiday clothing for her other sons, a Talib man approached them. With his hands hidden behind his back, the man interrogated Palwasha.

"Where is your husband?" the man demanded.

"He is at work," Palwasha replied indignantly.

"Where is your *mahram*?"[22]

"This is my mahram, my eldest son," Palwasha insisted, pointing at Abdulsamad, who was nine years old at the time.

"He is too young to be your mahram," the Talib man scolded Palwasha while simultaneously bringing his hands out from behind his back to raise an iron rod in the air. At that moment, a man came running over to the scene from across the street; he was the tailor who had been sewing clothes for many years for Palwasha, and he stood beside her now. Inexplicably, the tailor's presence prompted the Talib man to lower the iron rod and walk away.

[21] Eid ul-Fitr marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan in Islam.
[22] *Mahram* is an Arabic word which in the context of Islamic law refers to either a woman's husband, or a post-pubescent male to whom she is related but not allowed to marry. The Taliban required that women be escorted by a mahram at all times while in public.

Always an Educator

Choosing to take the risk to start work again, Palwasha spent the week after the Eid holidays at the UNICEF office being trained in how to give vaccinations. She and the other women at the training were kept on a separate floor from the other staff so that they would not come into contact with any men while at work.

Palwasha would journey to the villages to do vaccinations, bringing Abdulsamad along as her mahram. She intentionally wore a burqa that was faded and tattered, hoping that it would make the Taliban think she was an old woman and that this would engender more merciful treatment. Abdulsamad would hail a rickshaw to take them to a station where they could hire a car. The car would drive until the road ended, at which point Palwasha and Abdulsamad would finish the journey on foot, walking for an hour along a dirt path to the village, carrying a cooler full of vaccine.

For the first few days, Palwasha stuck to her job description, doing little else but giving immunizations. But over time, Palwasha began to chat with the mothers as she vaccinated their children. Somehow, although Palwasha was educated and an outsider to the village, and though their burqas masked their facial expressions, Palwasha built a trusting rapport with the women. Because she had the privilege of education, Palwasha's life had been different from the village women's lives in many respects. However, they all found common ground in the fact that their lives had been drastically altered since the arrival of the Taliban.

It was draining on Palwasha to hear endless stories of women who were concerned for the education of their daughters but were unable to do anything about it. She could not stand to see the work her grandmother had done to educate women undone by the Taliban, who were

systematically reversing all of that progress by withholding education from the younger generations.

One hopeful day, a group of village women who had some religious education confided in Palwasha that they had started to gather their girls together in one of their homes to study the Quran. They had heard there was some tolerance within the Taliban for the education of girls, as long as it did not go beyond religious teaching. Palwasha saw an opportunity to help these brave women who had never worked as teachers before, by imparting to them some of what she knew about how to be an effective teacher. She set up secret meetings with the women to coach them on how to run a home school of the kind her grandmother had conducted when Palwasha was young. The women eagerly welcomed the training.

Emboldened by the fact that the religious home schools in the village seemed to be undetected by the Taliban, Palwasha began filling the cooler of vaccines with Pashtun readers that were lying unused at the UNICEF office since the arrival of the Taliban. She showed the women how the readers could be slipped behind the girls' Qurans at their home schools.

One evening after she arrived home from work, Palwasha was anxious for Kabir to come home; she wanted to talk to him about something that happened to her that day. When Kabir arrived, his typically warm face was icy. He trembled as he told Palwasha that as he had climbed out of his car at work, a Talib soldier hit him on the back of the knees with a stick and he had fallen to the ground. While he was on the ground, the man told Kabir that no self-respecting man would allow his wife to accept male visitors to her husband's house, and that he should consider this a warning.

"They must have found out about the meetings you have been having with the director of UNICEF at our house," Kabir told Palwasha.

“We meet at home because the Taliban will not allow me to interact with any of my male colleagues at the office!” Palwasha was angry that her husband had been hurt, and at the thought that someone may have been informing the Taliban about her.

“Kabir, there is something I need to tell you, too. Today, when I was in the UNICEF office, Anuja, one of the foreign staff members, came into the room where I was gathering educational materials to bring to the village. She told me that they had received a threatening phone call from the Taliban saying that they know about the home schools.” Palwasha knew in her heart that based on the recent incidents, the only sensible thing was to stop going to work for a while, so when Kabir put voice to her thoughts, she simply nodded her head and sobbed.

On the Edge

Eating dinner in the courtyard of her apartment compound was one of the few pleasures in Palwasha’s life now that she was again confined to home. However, few places, including her own home, were truly safe for Palwasha during this time—as she was reminded one evening when the family’s dinner was interrupted by a neighbor’s shaking voice. The woman from upstairs leaned out her window, telling the Kakars that a group of Taliban soldiers had knocked on her door moments ago, demanding Palwasha. The neighbor had instructed the men to go around to the main door of the apartment complex; Palwasha lived in one of the other units.

As soon as the woman finished her sentence, a loud knock was heard on the outer door. There was little time for the family to absorb what was happening around them, but Kabir acted quickly. He instructed Palwasha to rush downstairs, run across the inner courtyard, and hide in the neighbors’ house while he delayed opening the door to the men outside.

Palwasha pushed past the neighbors into their home. Afraid, but gracious, the young couple hid Palwasha in their attic. She squeezed between the wall and the chimney and covered herself with blankets, muting out the world around her. It was both comforting and frightening to no longer be able to hear the shouting voices of the Talib men, who were now inside the apartment compound.

Smothered by the blankets, Palwasha retreated into her own head, thinking first about her family. What were the Taliban going to do to them? Palwasha thought especially about her youngest son, who was just a small baby.

Palwasha also thought about her home. Were the soldiers searching it? Would they find her at the neighbors'? She began to imagine the treatment she would endure if the Taliban were to find her, but her gruesome thoughts were interrupted by her mother's cries now penetrating the attic walls and her blanket fortress. When Palwasha began to hear her sons' voices, too, she instinctively went to them, leaving her hiding place.

When she entered her home, Palwasha was relieved to find that the Talib men had gone and that her children were still there for her to grasp in her arms. Her mother was holding the baby, just as Palwasha had left him, only her mother's face was now bloody from a blow she had endured. Palwasha's husband and brother-in-law were missing. Since the soldiers had failed to find Palwasha, they had taken the two men instead.

Kabir was released from prison after five days. Before leaving prison, he was forced to sign a document stating that he understood he would be put back in prison if Palwasha ever worked outside the home again. Now that the Taliban knew about her, the couple felt it was no longer safe for Palwasha to be in Afghanistan. Heartbroken to leave her country, Palwasha went to live with relatives in Pakistan. After three months living in one room of a cramped and stifling

apartment with her four sons,[23] Palwasha reunited with her husband in Pakistan, where they decided enough time had passed that they could live in Afghanistan once again. To be safe, they relocated to Herat province, in western Afghanistan, where Palwasha hoped she would go unrecognized by the local Taliban.

Herat

It took some time for the Kakars to establish themselves in Herat. Palwasha started to work for the Herat UNICEF office and was usually home to greet her boys when they arrived home from school. One afternoon, Abdulsamad entered the house after school, his head hanging exaggeratedly, as though weighed down by his turban. He unwound the cloth from his head, yelling, "I'm never going to put this on again!"

"What has happened to you?" Palwasha asked her son, who was normally very even-tempered.

Abdulsamad held out his hands and Palwasha saw that a purple bruise stretched from one side to the other on each one.

"What did they do to you?" Palwasha asked her son.

"They hit me with a stick in front of everyone." Abdulsamad crumbled on the floor beside his mother.

"Why did they do that, my son?"

"Because I took off my turban. It was very hot outside and it was wrapped so tightly. I had a headache."

[23] Palwasha's sons, Abdulsamad, Ahmadmasih, Abdualla, and Abdulahad, were born in 1989, 1991, 1993 and 1999, respectively.

“Abdul jan, you know better than to take off your turban at school. What did you expect to happen?” Palwasha was exasperated, both with her son and with the actions of the school teachers.

“So you like the Taliban, mummy jan? You’re on their side?”

“No, Abdulsamad, but you must understand, we all have to learn to live with the Taliban while they are in our country. However, I do feel like going to your school and having a word with the man who did this to you.”

“Mummy jan, please do not do that. They will not listen to you. In fact, if I was your husband, I would keep you inside the house, safe. I would not let you do any dangerous things, like work at UNICEF.”

Her son’s words stung Palwasha’s heart. The safety of her children was her first priority, but many of her choices had not reflected that. Under the Taliban, to be safe was to be without agency and voice, a fate that Palwasha could not accept. To work for what she cared about also meant putting herself and her family in danger. By this point, October 2001, it seemed everybody who had the means had left the country, and those who stayed were scared into silence. Who, if not she, would have the bravery to act?

Another Displacement

Later in that week, the anger and fear that had been brought by the week’s events had cooled. On Friday, the day of rest in Islam, Palwasha tried her best to create an environment in the home that would allow the family to come together. She woke up before her husband and sons, collected their clothes to wash, cleaned the house, and began to cook a meal for the family. When her sons emerged from bed, she involved them in the preparations, sending one to the

bakery for fresh bread, and another to lay a mat on the floor where the family would eat. She kept the other two by her side, giving them smaller tasks such as mixing the eggs for omelets and placing the sugar dish on the mat. Kabir helped by going to the bazaar for milk. When everyone had finished their tasks and the omelets were ready, the family gathered around the mat in the living room, pouring tea for each other and chatting about the week. Abdulsamad's turban incident became fodder for Kabir's good-natured teasing.

As the family finished their meal and began to clear up the dishes, they heard a loud explosion. The house began to shake. The Taliban stored weapons in a warehouse just down the street from the family's home; perhaps it had been hit. Not bothering to clean up, the family moved into the basement, where they stayed for an hour until the explosions subsided.

When Kabir saw that two of the windows in the house had been blown out by the explosions, he made the quick decision that his family would have to leave Afghanistan. Palwasha and Kabir were aware of the events of September 11, 2001, and had been expecting coalition forces[24] to begin their campaign of military force. However, after all of the displacements the family had undergone, they failed to imagine that their apparent liberation from the Taliban would necessitate the need to run again. However, with bombs exploding in their neighborhood, they were neither free nor safe. Not even in their home. Not even in Herat. Not anywhere in Afghanistan. The question now was where to go. The border with Iran was closer to Herat than the border with Pakistan, but because the family did not know how long they would be out of the country, the best option was to go where they knew they would have a place to stay, with family in Pakistan. So, within the hour, they packed their car and began the perilous drive across southern Afghanistan to reach Chaman at the Pakistan border. The drive lasted six

[24] "Coalition forces" refers to an alliance of countries that participated in the initial land and air attacks on Afghanistan with the purpose of driving out the Taliban. The majority of the force was composed of personnel from the United States and the United Kingdom.

days. The face of Palwasha's second-born son, Ahmadmasih, turned white and he did not eat for the duration of the drive; he was too frightened by the sound of the explosions. His face did not regain color until the family arrived in Pakistan.

The Kakar family stayed in Pakistan until late in 2001, after the coalition forces had declared the fall of the Taliban in Herat. Instead of re-establishing themselves in a new place, the Kakar family decided to return to their former home in Herat.

Women's Stories

Opportunities for women to work outside their homes were increasing in number in the urban areas of Afghanistan with the Taliban now driven out of power. However, life for working women could still be dangerous, especially if they were seen as being critical of local warlords who gained a substantial amount of power in the absence of the Taliban. Women who worked for NGOs were often the targets of threats and violence. Palwasha thought she might work as a teacher again, as new schools were built and more and more children began to attend. However, when she heard that the recently established Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) was hiring new staff, Palwasha paid a visit to their offices.

The AIHRC was established after the signing of the Bonn Agreement[25] as an institution charged with promoting human rights in Afghanistan. Palwasha knew that the extent to which Afghanistan would be able to address past human rights abuses would determine whether former victims and perpetrators could come together and build a new democracy. She wanted to contribute to changing the culture of warlordism into one in which the rule of law and human

[25] The Bonn Agreement was the product of discussions between prominent Afghans who met in Bonn, Germany, in December 2001. The agreement was a plan for governing the country until democratic elections could take place.

rights would permeate the national consciousness. When she inquired about a position as a Women's Rights Officer at the AIHRC, Palwasha was hired instantly.

The next day, Palwasha began her job writing reports documenting women's stories of human rights abuses. Women visited Palwasha in her office in high numbers and, never willing to turn a woman away, Palwasha worked long hours to listen to their stories. She would not stop at simply documenting the stories, as was her official mandate. If a woman who came to her was in danger or the abuses were ongoing, Palwasha would go through various channels to help ensure her safety, a process that demanded much effort and creativity, but was rarely fruitful. Because the rule of law had yet to be established, it was never clear how perpetrators should be dealt with. As she had done even as a young adolescent, Palwasha boldly confronted men who used the power of intimidation—warlords, corrupt police officers, and certain judges—with courage and confidence, doing everything within her power to obtain justice and safety for her female clients.

On the day that marked her two-year anniversary as a Women's Rights Officer, Palwasha was visited by Ahmed, the husband of one of her former clients, Rokshana. This time when Ahmed came to take his seat in Palwasha's office, he placed his now motherless child in the seat that Rokshana had occupied on previous visits. He used to visit Palwasha only to accompany Rokshana when she was seeking help. Now, months later, and after Rokshana's death, he was there to find support.

Rokshana was a teenager when her family chose her first husband. As soon as they were wed, Rokshana went to live in his village, located very close to the Iranian border. It was not long after they began their lives together that her first husband disappeared, his whereabouts unknown to anyone, including Rokshana.

While her husband was missing, Rokshana lived under the control of her brother-in-law and mother-in-law, in their home. Weeks, months, and eventually years passed as she waited for her husband to return, wondering where he had gone, and even whether he was dead or alive. During one of her visits to Palwasha, Rokshana confided in her that she endured daily beatings at the hands of her in-laws.

Stories of both physical and emotional abuse were not uncommon in Palwasha's office. Palwasha heard many individual stories, but she did not see them as isolated cases. She sometimes doubted the effectiveness of her work, feeling that her small efforts—though substantial for one person—were dwarfed by the pervasive social norms which subjugated women in Afghanistan.

After nine years had passed with no word from her first husband, Rokshana's brother-in-law demanded that she leave his home, turning her out into the street. Unfamiliar with the laws, Rokshana accepted a handwritten note from her brother-in-law, authorizing her break from his family. One year had passed since she had returned to her parents' village when another man had been found for her to marry, Ahmed. It had been a long time since Rokshana had felt truly happy, but with Ahmed she felt confident that her life was finally turning around.

As all Afghans' lives had been, Rokshana's life was drastically impacted by dealings at the level of international politics. Soon after Rokshana gave birth to her first child with her new husband, an agreement proclaiming the release of Afghans in Iranian prisons was signed by Hamid Karzai, the president of the Afghan Interim Government.[26] It was not long before Rokshana's former husband arrived back in Afghanistan after a decade in an Iranian prison where he had been serving a sentence for smuggling drugs across the border.

[26] Karzai was later elected president in October 2004.

One of the final times Rokshana visited with Palwasha, she expressed her fear that her first husband would come for her. He had filed a claim in court to get her back, and Palwasha helped the couple liaise with the judge who was presiding over the case. Palwasha informed Rokshana and Ahmed that although divorces are rarely granted without the husband's permission, a woman is entitled to divorce her husband if he has gone missing for four years or more. In Rokshana's case it had been nine years; however, Rokshana had not realized that she needed to have her divorce sanctioned by the courts in order for it to be seen as legitimate. Still, Palwasha was hopeful and encouraged Rokshana to file for an official divorce from her first husband immediately.

Receiving calls from the hospital was not an aspect of her work that Palwasha looked forward to. It usually meant that one of her clients had received physical injuries so severe they warranted medical intervention. She was surprised one morning to receive an urgent call on behalf of Rokshana, summoning Palwasha to the hospital. Despite Palwasha's optimism, Rokshana's case had taken a drastic turn for the worst.

What Palwasha witnessed at the hospital has become etched in her memory. She found Rokshana lying on a stretcher with 95 percent of her skin burned. Before she fell into a coma, she confided in Palwasha one last time. That same morning, Rokshana answered a loud knock at her door to find a group of thugs hired by her first husband to retrieve her. They were wearing police uniforms. Rokshana tried to appeal to the armed mob to leave her alone, insisting that there was an ongoing legal process to determine which man she ought to be married to. When they threatened her with their guns, she agreed to go with them if they would let her have a moment to gather some clothes.

In the hospital room, Rokshana slowly moved her eyes to Palwasha and whispered, “I’m sorry.” That one phrase was enough for Palwasha to know what Rokshana had done, a practice that had become all too common for Afghan women with nowhere to turn: self-immolation. Rokshana died two days later.

Rokshana’s story was tragic, but no more so than the stories of many of the women who visited Palwasha’s office. On her way back to work from the hospital, Palwasha experienced a range of emotions, from deep sadness to anger, along with a strengthened desire to do what she could to help other women avoid Rokshana’s fate. Back at her office, there was a line of women outside her door.

It was not long after Rokshana’s death that Ahmed came to see Palwasha. He came after working hours, but he did not have to explain why he was there; as Rokshana’s support person, he had earned his place in Palwasha’s office. However, he did explain himself by saying, “I am here for Rokshana. She would have wanted me to thank you for listening to her story.”

Sowing Seeds

It was well past dark when Palwasha arrived home the evening Rokshana died. She found herself wandering in the front yard, not sure what had prevented her from going straight inside to greet her family. After a few minutes, Kabir spotted her in the garden.

“Palwasha, what are you doing wandering around the garden at this hour? Please, come inside.”

Palwasha stared blankly at her husband, failing to answer as she grasped the petals of a flower between her fingers. Kabir took his wife’s hand and sat her down outside the front door.

“I’m concerned about how your job is affecting you. You listen to the most horrible stories all day and don’t leave work until late in the evening. You come home and act like a zombie. Last Friday when we went to the park, it was a beautiful day. You should have been happy that it is safe enough in Herat for us to go to the park as a family, but I didn’t see you smile once all day.”

“Kabir,” Palwasha answered, “do you know how many of my female clients have died? I have stopped counting. How many times will I have to go to the police station and explain to them that we have new laws in this country and a constitution based on human rights? They want to grasp on to the days when they were accountable only to the local warlords. They say, to my face, that they know they are now accountable to the government in Kabul and the Afghan people, but when I am gone, they keep on with their old ways. We are a now a democratic country, but those with the most guns still have the most power.”

Kabir, as usual, offered a sympathetic ear. “Palwasha, I understand your frustrations in dealing with the warlords and their cronies. But remember, it has only been a few months since the presidential elections; it takes more than voting to establish a democracy. Don’t you think there is power in educating in human rights those who wield the gun?”

“Yes, I firmly believe there is,” Palwasha answered.

“So, keep exercising it. Slowly, slowly, things will change in Afghanistan. You cannot hope to change a society ruined by a quarter century of war and warlordism in two years. Have patience, my darling. In the meantime, why don’t you start writing down some of the women’s stories in a creative way, on your own time, like you did during the Taliban. That might help you relieve some of the sadness you keep inside.”

After nearly three years as a Women's Rights Officer, Palwasha was offered the position of Regional Program Officer at the AIHRC in early 2006. The new position would mean that Palwasha would no longer be responsible only for women's rights, but for the broader mandate of human rights, as enshrined by the 2004 constitution.[27] She would oversee staff working in the areas of children's rights, transitional justice, monitoring and investigation of human rights abuses, human rights education, as well as women's rights. Taking the promotion would mean that Palwasha would have to accept yet another period of displacement from her family, as she would be required to move back to Jalalabad, the city of her childhood. When Palwasha accepted the position, she and Kabir decided that she would take Abdul Ahad, her youngest son, with her, while Kabir and their other three sons would remain in Herat.

On her way to Jalalabad, Palwasha stopped to visit her grandmother's grave in Kabul. It was a cold, winter day when Palwasha stood in front of the place her grandmother was buried. She remembered the line from her grandmother's poem that had been engraved on Sahera Mahwe's tomb, but the tomb had since been cracked in half; only the words "tread lightly near my broken heart" could be read. Palwasha thought about how her grandmother had, in many ways, died with a broken heart. At the time of her death, Sahera Mahwe was troubled by the fact that she had outlived three of her sons, that her family line would be terminated for lack of grandsons, and that she had failed to see the widespread education of girls in her lifetime. She had admired the social progressiveness of pre-Islamic revolution Iran, and had hoped to live to see the day when women's rights would flourish in Afghanistan.

[27] Article 7 of the Afghan Constitution reads "The State must abide by the UN Charter, international treaties and international conventions Afghanistan has signed, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." See Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, "Evaluation Report on General Situation of Women in Afghanistan," http://www.aihrc.org.af/rep_eng_wom_situation_8_march.htm.

It was approximately one year after her grandmother's death when violence between Mujahedeen factions forced Palwasha to go into hiding in her basement, marking the beginning of Palwasha's own troubled times. Since then, war and repression have been defining features of Afghanistan. The coalition forces' military campaign and the subsequent International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)[28] promised democracy, security, and a legal framework based on human rights, but during her time at the AIHRC, Palwasha has observed that the population is increasingly controlled by the intimidation of warlords who continue to reign throughout the country. She knows it is difficult to promote liberalized attitudes towards women's rights without the basic rule of law. In 2006, she accepted the senior staff position at the AIHRC with the knowledge that women who work outside the home, especially those who hold a position of influence, are increasingly becoming targets of violence.[29]

With the Afghanistan of her childhood a distant memory, and with the dream of a secure country governed by the rule of law still in the future, Palwasha left her grandmother's grave site. Her sons were growing up and their futures were weighing heavily on her mind. Steadfast in her commitment to remain in Afghanistan up to this point, for the first time, Palwasha began to entertain the thought of moving to another country where her sons could experience life without war and instability, and could receive an uninterrupted education. On the other hand, the thought of leaving all of the aspects of Afghan culture that Palwasha cherished—the people with a strong sense of respect, loyalty, neighborly generosity and honesty, the open bazaars, the stunning desert and mountain landscapes, the delicious food, Jalalabad's orange flowers in spring—was

[28] The ISAF is a coalition of personnel from various countries mandated by the United Nations to stabilize the country. NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] took over the command of ISAF in 2003.
[29] For example, Safia Ama Jan, the Director of the Department of Women's Affairs in Kandahar province, was killed in September 2006.

difficult to contemplate. How could she leave the country that had "cradled her in its arms?"[30] For now, Palwasha will keep in her mind the memory of her grandmother planting seeds in the cold, heavy rain, and will continue on her own journey of sowing the seeds for tomorrow's garden.

[30] Palwasha's own words.

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