1

Singing in the Wilderness

I DID NOT KNOW that I could feel this much sorrow without a body to bury. How heartsick can I become before I break down and weep in front of everyone? I wander about the camp with the blanket from my bed around my shoulders, searching for a spot where I can't be seen and can't be heard. And where would that be? I have been in the camp for three months. If such a spot exists, wouldn't I have discovered it before this day?

The camp is Woomera, or really my small part of Woomera, a section called November. I share November with hundreds of people from lands I have never visited, lands that are as mysterious to me as my own homeland of Afghanistan is to the guards who keep watch on us day and night.

We who are watched and guarded, we who are questioned, probed, doubted—we are all illegals. We have come to Australia without invitation. We have jumped the queue. I had not heard

an expression like that before I came to Australia—'jumping the queue'. It belongs to communities that place a very high value on orderliness, on due process. It's a good thing, of course, to value orderliness. The community of Afghanistan is only orderly now and again. But it was never my intention to jump this strange queue of which I had never heard. I don't think any of us here ever thought of stealing our way to the head of a long line of people patiently waiting to cross a border into Australia. Most of us would never have qualified for a place in the long line to start with. All I wanted to do was to stand up on the soil of a land where rockets did not land on my house in the middle of the night and hold my arms wide and say, 'Here I am. My name is Najaf Mazari. Do you have a use for me in this country?'

As I wander between buildings, I catch sight of the desert beyond the wire fences. I come from a land of deserts, but this desert is not the same as those of Afghanistan. It is difficult to say in what way it is different, but it is. If I were to fall asleep in the desert of Afghanistan without a soul in sight and somehow wake in the desert of Woomera, I would know in an instant that I was in a strange place. It is not only my eyes that would tell me, but my skin. The touch of the air itself would whisper it to me. My skin has lived all but six months of its 30 years inside a few square kilometres of Afghanistan.

I find a solitary place at last. I am in an alley, concrete beneath my feet. Before me stand tall steel bars dividing the compound—in which I am free to walk—from a building housing an office of the Department of Immigration. I have been in that office, but only once. I sat in a chair at a metal desk. An official of the Immigration Department took a seat behind the desk. An interpreter sat to my right. The official spread papers and

documents on the surface of the table. Some of the documents were mine, but they did not include a birth certificate. I have never had a birth certificate. Back in Mazar-e-Sharif, I have a taskera, which is more like a family history going back for ages. But no birth certificate. Very few Afghanis can produce such a document. What a country I come from! Strangers to the idea of queue-jumping, and on top of that, babies are born without anything in writing to prove that they exist!

I sit with my back against the wall of a building on my side of the bars and close my ears and eyes to all sounds and sights except for those inside my head. This is July, bitterly cold here in Australia, hot in northern Afghanistan. I see a sky full of stars—northern hemisphere stars. I see a moon above the dark outline of mountain peaks. I see a woman—my mother—setting plates on a cloth. I see the face of my older brother, Abdul Ali, and I see his stern gaze fixed on another face. The other face is mine, a much younger face than the one I wear now. I see a field of grass as high as a man's knees, dotted with wildflowers of red and yellow. Now the sky I see is blue and the face I am staring at is that of my sister, Latifeh. She's smiling, not just at me but at everything. I hear voices calling from a distance across a field. I hear the barking of our family dog, also a long way off. In this mood that combines despair and rapture, I begin to sing.

The song that finds its way to my lips is one that is sung at New Year by the Hazari of Afghanistan. New Year in the Afghan calendar falls in March when there is a hint of the coming spring in the air. Hamal is the first month in our new year, a word that can also mean 'pregnant'. Flowers are beginning to bloom at that time, bright red flowers with delicate petals. The song is usually sung by shepherds. I am not a shepherd but a rugmaker;

I have never sung it before in my life, although I have listened to it many times. I lift my head and send the words of the song into the air of Woomera. Perhaps this is the first time that these words and this tune have been heard in this land, unless some earlier Afghani attempted it. Afghanis came to Australia many years ago; they came here to work—more than 100 years ago, so I have heard.

So I sing. The words tell a story of youthful love and desire, and the mood is that of longing. I don't think of anything as I sing, but the words feel sweet on my lips, like the juice of some over-ripe fruit. It is a pleasure to use my native tongue in this way, exploring the shadows of language. There is very little poetry to enjoy during a normal day in camp.

Come and let us go to Mazar, dear Mullah Mohammad,
To see the field of tulips. Oh, my sweetheart!

Go, tell my beloved, "Your lover has come;
Oh beautiful narcissus, your suitor has come."

Go, tell my beloved, "Good news, your beloved has returned;
Your faithful lover has arrived."

Come and let us go to Mazar, dear Mullah Mohammad,
To see the field of tulips. Oh, my sweetheart!

Come, oh my sweetheart, I am mad with love for you.
I am destroyed, longing for your ruby red lips.

I don't kiss the rim of the wine goblet;
I am in anguish and I am heartsick for you.

Come and let us go to Mazar, dear Mullah Mohammad,
To see the field of tulips. Oh, my sweetheart!

Before I have finished the song, I become aware of a group of immigration officers watching and listening from the balcony of the building beyond the steel bars. They must have heard my song from their office, then stepped out onto the balcony to search out the source. A glance tells me that they are listening with pleasure. There are smiles on their faces. Naturally, I stop singing when I notice them. It is not because of embarrassment that I stop, although that is partly true; it is because the song is a private matter between me and the heartsickness that drove me to seek out solitude.

The interpreter who was in the office with me for my interview some months back is amongst the officers listening from the balcony. He calls down to me, 'Sing it again! It's beautiful!'

But I shake my head. 'I can't,' I say, in Dari.

The officers ask him to ask me again, but again I shake my head and this time make a brief explanation in Dari.

'I am not a singer.'

Once this is interpreted, some of the officers nod, understanding my reluctance to continue; others make a gesture with their hands and shoulders as if to say, 'Such a pity.'

The officers and the interpreter drift back into their office. I gather my blanket around my shoulders and shuffle back to the dormitory. On the way, it strikes me that all the words I had employed in my long interview with the immigration officer and everything I have said to the officers and guards since, have not made a fraction of the impact on them as my song. For a few minutes, I was not merely one of hundreds of down-at-heel nuisances from some hellhole in Central Asia, but a man with something to offer, a song to sing and maybe a tale to tell that might be worth listening to; a tale that might even be true.

I have not lost the burden of my sorrow by the time I reach the dormitory, but its weight is a little more endurable. Maybe these Australians will let me become a complete man again. Maybe they will let me use my brains and muscles and heart and soul in some worthwhile way. What do I know of life? I know that life is work. I know that a man rolls up his sleeves and labours. I know that he must preserve his dreams.

For the first time in months, I can hope. And it's good to feel hope come to life again in my heart. I think of the red flowers around the mosque at Mazar-e-Sharif. I think of how they bloom each year, no matter how many rockets explode over them.

2

Fire in the Night

I AM ABOUT TO tell the story of an explosion, or really, the story of two explosions and of the deaths that followed.

Like almost every Afghani, I have witnessed a number of explosions in my lifetime, always unwillingly. Afghanistan has been a type of explosion laboratory over the past three decades. In the 1980s, the Russians tried out bombs and exploding devices in Afghanistan that came fresh off the drawing board. We Afghanis had the undesired honour of being among the first human beings on earth to be blown to pieces by this state-of-the-art Russian weaponry. The mujahedin, the sworn enemies of the Russians, also had very up-to-date mortars, bombs, mines and rockets, provided by the Americans and the Saudis. The arsenal of the Taliban came from all over the world; whatever they could buy, they used. When the Americans bombed the Taliban (and many people who had nothing to

do with the Taliban) after the destruction of New York's Twin Towers, Afghanis once again enjoyed the awful privilege of being killed by ultra-modern high explosives. I have had the opportunity all my life—not that I ever desired it—to gaze at the impact of explosions on buildings, machinery, bridges, streets, the countryside itself and on human beings. Whatever the damage to buildings caused by explosives—and it is an ugly thing to look at, homes that once had the honest task of keeping the rain off people's heads now standing like decayed anthills in the desert—the buildings can be created again, and the bridges and the mosques. The old tinsmith I saw in the marketplace of Mazar-e-Sharif turned inside out by a mortar explosion could not be remade. When people are broken as badly as that man, or as badly as many others I have seen—old men, young men, mothers, small children—they are beyond fixing, all of them.

My family moved to the city of Mazar-e-Sharif in 1980. We had been living in the small village of Shar Shar high in the mountains up until the time of my father's death, and would have continued to live there as long as my father desired. The decision to move to Mazar-e-Sharif was made by my older brother Gorg Ali, who became the head of the family once my father had died. It was his plan to build two houses on a large block of land just inside the gates of the city and settle there for the rest of his days. What he had in mind was a small farm where he would keep a few cattle and harvest the orchard that already existed on the site. It was to be a type of paradise, on a small scale. The land itself was family property through my father's marriage to the second of his two wives.

Let me tell you a little about Mazar-e-Sharif itself. It's a small city by world standards, but fairly big for Afghanistan. It had

a population of 110,000, while the largest city in Afghanistan, the capital, Kabul, had shrunk from 1.3 million people to no more than 700,000 people by 1988, with all the troubles in our country. Afghanis are a people of the outdoors, by and large. We farm, we herd livestock, we grow crops, we mine gems, we keep orchards. Almost 80 per cent of all Afghanis make their living by growing, harvesting, digging and herding. Even the traditional Afghan trade so close to my heart, rug-making, is sometimes carried out in the open air. So we Afghanis have never been an urban people, never relished living in bustling cities. In many ways, we are the people we were hundreds of years ago, and even hundreds of years before that.

Mazar-e-Sharif is in the far north of the country, close to the borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. To reach the city from the south, you must either cross the mountains of the Hindu Kush that run deep through the heart of Afghanistan, or else go east from the Hazarajat (the age-old home of my people, the Hazara) then head north. That way, you skirt the heel of the mountains. Mazar-e-Sharif lies in the broad valley that falls away to the east in Turkmenistan and eventually subsides into the desert of Peski Karakumy. It's as cold as the arctic in winter, very hot in summer. The city is famous as the burial place of Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet, and is also the great centre of the Afghan rug trade—a fact that was to make the world of difference to the direction my life took.

We built two houses of mud brick on our 500 square metre block of land. The houses were erected along the western boundary, an Afghan version of what in Australia would be called semi-detached houses; a common wall, but separate dwellings. On the northern boundary stood a smaller house,

a bungalow, for guests; a kitchen and tandoor; a woodshed and a stable. In the centre of the expanse between the two groups of buildings a pool was situated, overhung by a single tree. A pool such as ours was a feature of all Afghan homes, so long as the owners could afford it. And if you could manage a tree to spread its branches over the water of the pool, so much the better. For all Middle Eastern peoples, a pool of water is not just an ornament; it is a thing of beauty in itself and a symbol of the life that water makes possible. A separate small reservoir provided water for household use. This little reservoir was filled each week from a channel that flowed directly from the river. The entire block of land was surrounded on all sides by a high, mud-brick wall.

My family took pride in the home and life we had made for ourselves in Mazar-e-Sharif. Although we had not distanced ourselves from the fighting altogether, we were well away from the fiercest sites of battle in the south. We were not a family of political firebrands; we were suspicious of all the grand claims of salvation made by the government, by the Russians, by the mujahedin. For us, salvation meant a place where we could worship and work. We were a roll-your-sleeves-up family. We believed that people made themselves happy by working, saving, building, providing for the future. The Hazara had spent centuries fighting for their place on God's earth but it was never the sort of fighting that is fuelled by political ambition, the desire to build an empire, subjugate other people. My older brother, Gorg Ali, used to warn us to steer clear of all political parties, all political disputes. He had an instinctive distrust of fiery speeches, as if he could see that the passion and anger in the arguments of one political party simply aroused the same

sort of passion and anger in another party.

'Anger is a hammer,' he told me. 'It has only one task—to strike hard, and strike again. And your enemy's anger is just the same.'

I don't mean to say that he was without any convictions; no, it was just that he could see how easily people argued themselves into a situation that could only end with guns being loaded and knives being drawn.

At the time of the explosions that brought an end to this little paradise in the north, my family was made up of my older brother, Abdul Ali; a younger brother, Rosal Ali; my brother-in-law, Hassan, and my sister, Latifeh; Abdul Ali's wife, Zani-lala (as she was called); my mother; and myself—at 16 years old—the second youngest child. On the day of the explosions, we were feeling especially secure.

The President of Afghanistan, Babrak Karmal, had made a special visit to Mazar-e-Sharif probably at the insistence of the Russians, who controlled him. What the exact purpose of the visit was, we didn't know. Perhaps the Russians wanted to show that Karmal could roam the nation freely (he couldn't), or that he was very popular in the north (he wasn't). It would have all been to do with some strategy of the Russians, and really, of no interest to my family aside from the fact that Karmal was accompanied by a huge force of Russian troops, making it very unlikely that our region would see any fighting between the mujahedin and the Russian-backed government forces for a time, so we thought. In Afghanistan at that time, feeling secure was never a long-term thing; a few days of security, maybe a month, gave us the feeling of being on holiday. We enjoyed our meals a little more than usual; we joked more often; such simple

things, but important. We'd heard some fighting during the day, but it was far off to the north. How much happier I would be now if I had taken some time to reflect on the nature of this civil war that had raged for five years up and down Afghanistan. For truly, it was impossible to feel safe when battles could change course in a matter of hours. Neither the Russian-backed government forces nor the mujahedin cared much about innocent bystanders. In fact, the whole category of 'innocent bystander' didn't exist in Afghanistan in the years of civil war. Both sides expected that it would be necessary to kill civilians, or at least that it would be too troublesome to avoid killing them. Neither side acted with any real conscience.

On the day of the explosions, it had been my intention to stay the night at my Uncle Ibrahim's house, some distance from my own home. Strangely, I found myself distracted and restless all that day, unable to settle. Instead of remaining with my uncle and his family, I made some excuse and began walking back home. The restlessness was all to do with a foreboding that hovered above me like the dark clouds of a winter sky. It was the type of foreboding that you want to be rid of, want to argue away; you tell yourself that it is all nonsense. I had known such forebodings before, sometimes in matters that were of no great importance, sometimes in matters of life and death. The forebodings are not mystical; I don't want to give the impression that I am gifted in some way. Indeed, I believe that many people experience these feelings, although not everyone pays as much attention to them as I do. I didn't believe that the troubled feeling in my heart was to do with the war, though. I had no idea what it was to do with. An animal foraging in the mountains will sometimes lift its head from grazing and look around to the north, the south, the east,

the west. It has caught no scent, it has glimpsed nothing, yet some instinct has suddenly disturbed its peace. It returns to its grazing, a little unsettled. Some distance away, a hidden hunter fixes the crosshairs of his rifle sight on the head of the beast. The hunter's finger rests against the trigger. When he is ready, he will fire.

On my way home, I stopped at the Shrine of Ali to pay homage to the son-in-law of the Prophet. I kissed the shrine and prayed, hoping for some relief from the dark feelings that so plagued me. But there was no relief. It was now sundown. I said to myself, 'Ah, Najaf, what is it to be? Return home? Or should I go back to my uncle's house?' In the end, I turned my face toward home, tears of melancholy running down my face.

My mother was surprised to see me; she had expected me to remain at my uncle's house. And she could see that all was not well with me. She could see the sadness in my eyes, and the fearfulness.

'Is there trouble?' she asked me.

I didn't attempt to explain but instead glanced away, as if my thoughts were occupied in some other way. What could I have said that wouldn't distress her? Her heart was still broken after the death of Gorg Ali a year before, and would stay broken for the rest of her life. I had no desire to burden her even more.

We ate our evening meal together, gathered around the cloth on the floor that served as our dining area. Our meal was the common fare of evening in Afghanistan: rice, pallou, a beef curry, fresh bread, then very hot tea followed by the fruit of the season. Everything was normal in our household. We chatted, mentioned plans for the coming day, spoke of the visit of Karmal to the city, spoke a little of our belief that the mujahedin would keep to the mountains, wished each other a sound sleep and a safe awakening, and prepared for bed.

It was that period of summer when the nights remained hot. On such nights, it is the custom of Afghanis to sleep outdoors. My mother laid out toishaks—the cotton-filled mattresses that we use in Afghanistan—and erected a tent of mosquito netting above each. When I stretched out under my thin, summer blanket, I could hear the distant and muffled sounds of cannon fire in the mountains blending with the angry buzz of the thwarted mosquitoes hungering for my blood. Then in the heat of the night, I slept.

The noise of the first explosion was astonishingly loud. I had heard explosions before, of course—some nearby, some more distant—and I knew the sound they made. But this was far louder, I was inside this explosion. I heard the voice of my brother Abdul Ali raining curses on the head of Karmal, who had brought this catastrophe down on us. But that I was indeed in the midst of a catastrophe was something I had yet to fully understand. I attempted to get to my feet but found it impossible to make my legs obey my brain. My mother was screaming at the top of her voice, calling the names of her children.

'What has happened?' she cried. 'In the name of God, what has happened?'

I couldn't move. I gazed in horror at the devastation around me. My eardrums were aching. I saw Abdul Ali, Hassan and Zani-lala running in the direction from which my mother's cries were coming, running into the darkness. With that image fixed in my mind, I heard the long, shrieking sound of a rocket descending—a sound I knew. Even as I lay in my crippled state counting off the seconds before the rocket landed—I knew that five or six seconds would pass before impact—I could not make

myself believe that this new disaster was intended for us; God would not permit it!

The second rocket exploded with an even more violent roar than the first. My ears ached as if scalded. I saw my mother running in the direction of the road, screaming for help from the neighbours. I saw the fingers of one of her hands hanging loose in a stream of blood. I saw one of my brother's cattle dead and torn in the rubble. I saw on the ground a human shape with a ragged, red hole where the chest should be. Of my brother Abdul Ali, I saw nothing. My hearing was gone.

Over the next few minutes, the images that reached my eyes were like those in a silent movie. Shapes appeared out of the silent darkness, then disappeared, reappeared, disappeared. Strange things were happening in my head. Images that had nothing to do with what was happening floated into my mind, then lapsed and drifted away: the sheep I used to tend as a boy; my father's body being prepared for burial; Gorg Ali peeling an apple with his knife, using only one hand.

It seemed to me that death was approaching like a visitor who would take up residence in my body and dull my pain and take away all my memories. As I waited for the visitor to arrive, a thought came to me with great force and clarity. For all I knew this was to be the final thought of my life.

Only poetry would do justice to that thought, but I offer it here to the reader with my apologies for lacking the skill to make it as vivid as it was at the time:

> *If I were the owner of a hundred palaces, they would remain where they stand for I leave this world with just the skin that is wrapped about my bones.*

I am telling this story in 2006. The rockets exploded in 1985. In the 21 years that have passed since that night, I have returned countless times in my mind to the silent darkness and watched the shadowy figures growing closer to me, receding, swallowed by the night. I watch myself as if I were a spectator. I see myself lying at an angle across the toishek, the mosquito netting hanging in shreds. I can hear my very thoughts. 'Get to your feet, stand up, run for your life . . .' I see myself reaching down to wrench my legs into action. I see my hand held before my face, dark with blood. And then this strange film I am watching ends and my normal memory takes over.

I awoke in hospital. It took me a minute or more to understand this. My right leg was heavily bandaged. I was aware of pain, but what impressed itself on me even more than the pain was the contrast between this brightly lit room and the darkness of the night that I had escaped from.

Within a few minutes of regaining consciousness, my Uncle Ibrahim came quietly into the room and sat beside me in a chair. I could see from the expression on his face that he had something bad to tell me.

'Your brother Rosal Ali has been killed, God receive him,' he said. 'Hassan, too, has been killed, God receive his soul. Abdul Ali is badly wounded, but he will live. Your mother has suffered a terrible wound, but she too will survive, thank God. Latifeh and your sister-in-law have been spared, thank God for their safety. Alas, your home is destroyed.'

It took me hours of thought after Uncle Ibrahim had gone before I could properly understand what he had said to me. I could recall his exact words, but their meaning didn't come. When I understood at last, I cried out and moved my head from

side to side on the pillow to make the meaning go away. But the meaning stayed. Again and again, I cried out. A doctor came and looked closely at my face, then shook his head and said, 'Be brave.'

I thought most of all of Rosal Ali. He had caused me so much anger when he lived, but that anger somehow made me love him more now than if he'd pleased me every day of his life. I had wanted to see him live long enough to become more responsible, to become a brother I could be proud of. I would not have the chance now to be proud of him. It hurt me deeply to know this.

In the days that followed, I lay in bed attempting to master the pain in my leg and the pain in my heart. That my mother and my older brother had survived was a blessing, and yet I could barely manage to think of my mother's agony at the death of my younger brother, coming only a year after the death of her firstborn son, Gorg Ali. I thought of many times in the past when both brothers were still alive. I wondered what my fate was to be in this land of Afghanistan, where war succeeded war. I had time, too, to recall my father's death many years earlier, and his funeral. That seemed the beginning of this journey I was on; this journey that asked so much of me and of my family.