

## VOORWOORD

Dit is het levensverhaal van een meisje, een vrouw die gedurende haar hele leven zowel tegen als voor iedereen lachte, maar achter elke lach een diep verdriet verborg. Een meisje, een vrouw die altijd gezond leek, maar in stilte pijn, zorgen en verdriet droeg. Een meisje, een vrouw die haar hele leven gaf voor anderen, maar nooit iets terugvroeg. Een meisje, een vrouw die alles had, maar daar zelden van heeft kunnen genieten. Een meisje, een vrouw die altijd gelukkig leek te zijn, gelukkig leek te leven, maar uiteindelijk ongelukkig overleed. Een meisje, een vrouw wiens wensen, zelfs de ongewenste, werden vervuld. Dit is het verhaal van mijn zus Tuba.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Tuba is een boom in het Paradijs. De kleding van de mensen van het Paradijs wordt gemaakt van zijn bloemkelken, de schaduw van de Tuba is oneindig, zo oneindig, dat een ruiter 100 jaar lang in zijn schaduw zou kunnen rijden zonder dat hij er al aan voorbij is. [Boechari, Sahieh al Jaami]*

*Waarom dit verhaal en voor wie?*

Dit is geen boek of roman. Het was ook niet de bedoeling om een boek te schrijven, omdat ik geen schrijver ben en mij niet comfortabel voel bij het schrijven van een boek. Ik lees graag boeken en ben altijd onder de indruk van de kwaliteit, schrijfvaardigheid en verbeeldingskracht van schrijvers. De vraag werpt zich dan op: wat is dit verhaal en waarom wilde ik het in woorden brengen?

Dit is een samenvatting van het leven van mijn pas overleden zus, gezien vanuit mijn perspectief. Haar overlijden heeft mijn leven, mijn gedachten en mijn wereld drastisch beïnvloed. Uiteraard ben ik niet de enige die een dierbare verliest. Velen ervaren hun eigen pijn en verdriet en ik weet dat iedereen op zijn of haar eigen manier met dat verdriet omgaat. Velen hebben hun manier van rouwen met mij gedeeld. Ik besef dat ik niet de enige ben die lijdt. Toch was ik niet in staat om het

rouwproces in te gaan zoals anderen dat deden. Huilen, mijzelf terugtrekken, de tijd nemen, reizen, lezen, drinken, boos worden, mijzelf verliezen, praten, mogelijkheden van bezinning opzoeken,... Ik heb de meeste manieren van verwerking geprobeerd, maar het leek alsof mijn rouwproces zich niet aan mijn wil voegde. Ik huil niet. Ik word niet boos. Lezen, mediteren, bidden—het hielp allemaal niet. Reizen, werken en studeren gaven mij enkel afleiding. Het enige wat ik voel is dat er iets van binnen mij opvreet, terwijl ik van buiten – zoals altijd – energiek en levenslustig lijk. Daarom besloot ik haar levensverhaal te schrijven. In de hoop dat dit mij zou helpen om het rouwproces daadwerkelijk te openen en in de hoop dat het schrijven voorkomt dat ik mijzelf van binnen verlies terwijl van buitenaf niets te zien is aan mij.

*Wat hebt u aan dit verhaal?*

Ik denk niet dat ik de enige ben die een doorbraak nodig heeft. Misschien zijn er anderen die ook op zoek zijn naar een uitweg, die zich ook in de knel voelen na het verlies van een dierbare.

Het spijt me. Het spijt me als dit stuk verdrietige momenten oproept. Het spijt me als u na het lezen van dit verhaal het gevoel heeft gekregen dat u uw tijd hebt verspild door de irrelevantie van dit verhaal voor uw leven. ik hoop echter dat mijn woorden een bijdrage kunnen leveren aan uw capaciteit om terug te kunnen denken aan mooie herinneringen van verloren dierbaren. Naar mijn mening verdienen de verloren dierbaren het om jarenlang te worden herdacht en gemist.

### *Hoe leest dit verhaal?*

Ik wil u meenemen naar de opvallende momenten uit het leven van mijn zus. De herinneringen die ik en anderen aan haar hebben - aan haar daden, haar waarden en haar *ups en downs*. Ik benader haar levensverhaal aan de hand haar naam, 'Tuba'. Zoals de paradijselijke boom 'Tuba'. Ik weet niet precies wat de levenscyclus van zo'n boom is, maar ik benader haar leven als een boom die bloei en verwelking kent—soms eenmalig, soms herhalend.

Dit verhaal bestaat uit twee delen. In deel 1 beschrijf ik haar levensverhaal aan de hand van een omschrijving van de levenscyclus van een boom (bloei en verwelking). In deel 2 reflecteer ik op haar leven na haar dood.



**Deel 1**

**Tuba**

*“het leven dat ze gaf”*

## **Bloei; ‘de geboorte van een pareltje’**

Tuba (haar roepnaam) werd geboren in een samenleving waar velen een zoon wensten als eerste kind.<sup>2</sup> Tuba werd geboren uit een moeder die geliefd werd door haar man. Richting de buitenwereld stelde hij zich streng op, maar vanbinnen was hij zacht. Hij was een moslim, maar bovenal een Soefi.<sup>3</sup> Als rechter, advocaat en juridisch adviseur heeft hij zijn hele leven gewijd aan het dienen van de samenleving. In tegenstelling tot de toen dominante traditie waarbij de geboorte van een zoon werd gevierd, werd de geboorte van

---

<sup>2</sup> *In vele niet-westerse landen is de zoon als eerste kind zeer gewenst. Een dochter trouwt en verlaat het ouderlijk huis terwijl een zoon blijft in de ouderlijke woning, in die woning een gezin sticht en samen met dat gezin voor de ouders zorgt.*

<sup>3</sup> *Het soefisme (de mystieke stroming binnen de Islam) legt de nadruk op liefde, innerlijke zuivering en het overstijgen van het ego om spirituele verlichting en eenheid met God te bereiken. Het pad van een soefi is er een van transcendentie, liefde en spiritueel ontwaken buiten de materiële wereld. (Rumi, The Essential Rumi)*

Tuba toegejuicht door zowel haar ouders als andere naasten. Hoewel ik als tweede kind de eerste jaren van haar leven niet herinner, heb ik gehoord dat haar geboorte leidde tot een groot feest in het huis van mijn ouders. Ik hoorde dat mijn ouders samen met familie en vrienden op zoek gingen naar de beste naam voor haar. Haar geboorte werd als een parel uit het paradijs beschouwd. Daarom werd ze naar de paradijselijke boom 'Tuba' genoemd.

Ik herinner mij wel onze kindertijd. De tijd dat we samen speelden, samen naar school gingen en samen moeder hielpen met het huishouden. Vanaf die tijd was zij een soort beschermer. Ze beschermde mij tegen al mijn stoute en ongehoorzame gedragingen. Wij moesten de kamers en gangen stofzuigen en opmaken. Terwijl ik speelde, deed zij het meeste werk, terwijl moeder ons beiden complimenten gaf. Tuba en ik wisten dat bijna

al het werk door haar was verricht, maar zij verklapte dat nooit.

Er kwamen twee andere broers. Tuba hielp moeder ook met het opvoeden van onze jongere broers. We groeiden op en gingen naar de middelbare school. Ondanks dat ik betere cijfers haalde, kreeg zij zelden kritiek van onze vader, die zeer streng was als het ging om onze schoolprestaties. Ze was geliefd, zo geliefd dat mijn moeder haar 'moeder' noemde en mijn vader 'zusje'. Toen zij de leeftijd van 12-13 bereikte, mocht zij van onze vader zelf bepalen of zij wel of niet een hoofddoek ging dragen. Ze besloot geen hoofddoek te dragen en kleepte zich modern en stads. Ik herinner mij dat onze familie (met name die uit het platteland) kritische opmerken maakten dat onze vader – die als een leider regels en voorschriften predikte – zijn eigen dochter liet kleden als een stadsmeisje.

## PREFACE

This is the life story of a girl, a woman who spent her whole life laughing both with and for everyone, yet behind every smile hid a deep sadness. A girl, a woman who always seemed healthy but carried pain, worries and sorrow in silence. A girl, a woman who gave her entire life to others, yet never asked for anything in return. A girl, a woman who had everything, yet was unable to enjoy it. A girl, a woman who seemed to live a happy life, but ultimately died unhappy. A girl, a woman who was granted everything, all her wishes, even the unwanted ones were fulfilled. This is the story of my sister Tuba<sup>1</sup>, 58 years old, born in Afghanistan, buried in England.

---

<sup>1</sup> *There is a tree in paradise named Tuba. It is a hundred years old. The clothing of the people of Paradise is made from its calyxes, the shadow of Tuba is infinite, so infinite that a rider could ride in its shadow for 100 years and not yet pass it.*  
(Bukhari)

*Why this story, and for whom?*

This is not a book or a novel. I never intended to write a book, as I am not a writer and don't feel comfortable in that role. I love reading books and am always impressed by the quality, skill, and imagination of authors. So the question is: what is this piece, and why did I want to put it into words?

This is a summary of the life of my recently deceased sister, as seen from my perspective. Her passing has profoundly impacted my life, my thoughts and my world. Of course, I am not the only one who has lost a loved one. Many people experience their own pain and sorrow, and I know that each person deals with grief in their own way. Many have shared their ways of grieving with me.

Yet, I realize I am not alone in my suffering, but I found myself unable to grieve as others did. As is known, crying, withdrawing, taking time, traveling, reading, drinking, getting

angry, losing oneself, talking and attending moments of reflection. I tried most of them, but it seemed as if my grieving process wouldn't bend to my will. I don't cry. I don't get angry. Reading, meditating, praying; they didn't help. Traveling, working, and studying gave me distractions. The only thing I feel is something eating me from within, while outwardly, I still appear energetic and full of life, as always.

So I decided to write her life story, hoping it would help me to open my grieving process.

*What can you gain from reading this piece?*

I don't believe I am the only one who needs a breakthrough. Perhaps there are others who are also searching for a way out, feeling trapped after the loss of a loved one.

I am sorry. I apologize if this piece brings up painful memories. I apologize if, due to its irrelevance to your life, you feel reading it is a waste of time. But I hope that, through my

words, I have contributed to recalling beautiful memories of lost loved ones. In my opinion, lost loved ones deserve to be remembered and missed for many years.

*How does this piece read?*

I want to share the remarkable moments from my sister's life, the memories that I and others have of her, her actions, her values, her highs and lows. I approach her life story through her name, "Tuba", like the heavenly tree "Tuba". I don't know exactly how the life cycle of such a tree unfolds, but I envision her life as a tree that experiences blooming and wilting, sometimes just once, sometimes repeatedly.

In Part one, I narrate her life story, portraying it as the life cycle of a tree. In Part two, I reflect on her life after her death.

**Part 1**

**Tuba**

**“The Life She Gave”**

### ***Bloom: 'The Birth of a Pearl'***

Tuba, as she is affectionately called, was born into a society where many preferred a son as their first child<sup>2</sup>. She came into the world as the daughter of a mother beloved by her father—a love he kept hidden for years, but could no longer contain during her illness and after her passing. Her father was a faithful man, outwardly strict but inwardly soft and loving. Though a Muslim, he leaned more toward Sufism<sup>3</sup>. As a judge, lawyer, and legal advisor, he dedicated his life to serving society. Unlike the dominant tradition at the time -where the birth of a son was celebrated-

---

<sup>2</sup> *In many non-Western countries, the son as the first child is highly desirable. Traditionally, the daughter leaves the parental home after getting married and the son remains, establishes a family and takes care of his parents.*

<sup>3</sup> *Sufism (the Islamic Mystics) emphasizes love, inner purification and transcending the ego to achieve spiritual enlightenment and unity with God (Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*).*

Tuba's arrival was joyfully welcomed by her parents and close family members. Although I was her younger brother and cannot recall the early years of her life, I've heard her birth was a grand celebration in our parents' home. They, along with friends and family, enthusiastically searched for the perfect name for her, believing her to be a pearl from paradise. That is why she was named after the paradisiacal tree, *Tuba*.

I do remember our childhood—those times we played together, went to school hand in hand and helped our mother with household tasks. Even then, she was my protector, shielding me from the consequences of my foolery and unruliness. We were tasked with cleaning the rooms and hallways. While I often got distracted and played, she did most of the work. Yet, when our mother praised us both, Tuba never revealed how much more she had done.

As more brothers joined our family, she took on an even greater role, helping our mother care for our younger brothers. We grew older and entered high school. Despite my better grades, she rarely faced criticism from our father, who was strict about school performance. She was beloved—so much so that our mother called her "Lovely mother" and our father "Little Sister".

When Tuba was around 12 or 13 years old, our father left it up to her to decide whether or not she wanted to wear a headscarf. She chose to and dressed in a modern, urban style.

### ***Wilting? 'A lonely (school)girl'***

I cannot recall her ever having a close friend. It seemed as though she didn't need one. We, her three brothers, were her playmates, her companions both at home and outside. We went to school together and played on the schoolyard as a group. Sometimes, we would leave her behind to go off with our own

friends. Whether it troubled her to see other girls playing together, I don't know. Whether she missed having girlfriends or sharing conversations only girls have, I cannot say. Even outside of school, she had no friends of her own. When we, her brothers, played with the neighborhood boys, she would return home to help our mother with household tasks. Whether she felt lonely, I do not know. From a young age, she learned to cook, iron clothes, clean rooms, host guests and converse with adults. Whether she minded these responsibilities, I cannot say. But she never complained. On the contrary, it seemed as though she enjoyed the work and helping others. When our mother's friends visited, she entertained their children. They loved her, often gathering around her, singing songs or playing games. While we spent our afternoons doing homework, she busied herself with household tasks. Only after everyone had gone to bed, would she finally

sit down to do her own homework. Whether she disliked this, I do not know, but it seemed like a lot for a girl her age.

### **Blooming '*Adulthood, independent*'**

She blossomed, embracing her youth, freedom, and the modern, vibrant life that set her apart of many of her peers. At 18 years old, we finished high school and faced national exams. I assumed I would outperform her. To my surprise, we both achieved the scores needed to enroll at the Technical University. We started university together but chose different fields of study. During breaks, I often noticed her keeping an eye on me, which I sometimes found annoying—it meant I couldn't misbehave with my friends as much. After her first year, however, she switched paths, leaving her technical studies to pursue a career in teaching. This decision allowed her to start working earlier than me. It wasn't long before

she blossomed again. Despite our father not requiring her to contribute to household expenses, she would often bring home delicious pastries from a well-known bakery. When the fruit vendor or ice cream seller came by, she bought treats for everyone. She had enough money to be generous, sometimes helping me with pocket money or covering the cost of a shirt or pants I had bought on credit. She even gave me money to settle debts.

When I got married and my daughter was born, a strong bond quickly formed between them. My daughter became her little companion, often sleeping over at her place and spending more time with her than with us. She seemed to have a natural connection with children. Even the children at her kindergarten adored her. She often spoke fond of them and carried their photos with her.

As time passed, she developed a close circle of girlfriends and enjoyed spending time with them. She began wearing makeup, dressing stylishly, and going out with her girlfriends.

*"Tuba was my colleague and friend. We went to work together. When we arrived at school, she would always start by greeting everyone, the security guard, the housekeeper and the cleaning staff. She would discreetly slip them some cash, a few bills every time. As we walked through the hallway, she would stop by each classroom, cheerfully calling out, 'Hello, children!', and warmly hugging the teacher. By the time she reached our own classroom, half an hour had often passed. Before I could complain, she'd always say, 'Sorry my dear, but this is just who I am. Without this little ritual, I just don't feel right'. Then she'd give me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. By lunchtime, she would always make it up to me with a special kebab meal, just for me, as compensation for her rituals". [friend & colleague]*

She bloomed and embraced life. She thrived, enjoying every aspect of her life, her work, her girlfriends, and at home, her little companion (my daughter). The dishes she prepared were beloved by all of us, and our extended family and friends equally delighted in her cooking. Perhaps what she loved most was the appreciation others had for her culinary talents. No matter how much time or effort it took, it never seemed to bother her. Cooking was her way of bringing joy to others, and she found immense happiness in that.

*"Since I came to live with you, her kind and welcoming nature helped me quickly feel at home in this new environment. We never saw each other as a sisters-in-law but always as sisters and friends. I felt that she treated me, as the first daughter-in-law of your family, with dignity. She never forgot our wedding anniversary and called me every year on that day". [my wife / her sister in law]*

## **Blooming or Wilting? ‘The Civil War’**

The civil war and the street battles in Kabul didn't deter her from shopping and dining out with her girlfriends and colleagues. Like many women, she quickly adapted to the rules of the Islamic regime, wearing a headscarf. Yet, like many urban girls, she tested the boundaries, doing just enough to remain within what was tolerated. She continued going to work and excelled in her job.

At home, however, things were different. Most of the fighters from the new regime came from the northern provinces, including the region where my father was from. As one of the few from that area in a senior position, he earned their respect. Our house became something of a guesthouse, where at least ten guests would dine every evening, and some would even stay overnight.

Tuba took it upon herself to host them. She cooked their meals, prepared their beds,

provided them with clean clothes, and ensured their laundry was washed and ironed. She knew them better than I did, and they knew her better than I ever could. They saw her as a kind sister. When they came for brief visits to my father, Tuba would wait for them in the hallway, insisting they stay for a meal. I sometimes overheard her telling them, *“Just because you’re away from your family doesn’t mean you’re without a home. This is your home, and I am your sister”*. Most of the guests, often villagers, would thank her shyly and praise her hospitality before heading to my father’s chamber. Only then would she start cooking.

Every morning, I was waked up early by the sound of sweeping and the splashing of water. Looking outside, I saw Tuba cleaning the garden and hallways with others. She did this every day until the service car honked outside. Then, she rushed to grab her bag,

snatch a piece of warm bread from the kitchen, take a sip of water and head to work. I often wondered why she did this daily and what purpose it served. But it seemed she enjoyed organizing, delegating tasks, and seeing the results of her efforts. She was like the manager of a hotel or guesthouse. It wasn't her obligation, yet I never heard her complain about the work. She took pride in serving others, and we -and many others, were happy beneficiaries of her selflessness.

*'Behold the shade of Túbá, the tree in paradise, and rest well; Lay your head in its shadow and sleep, without lifting it in pride'. [Rumi]*

Those guests often returned, bringing a basket of fruit as a token of appreciation for Tuba's hospitality. On multiple occasions, I heard visitors mention how Tuba's warm

welcome made them feel instantly at home from their very first visit.

*"When I fled Afghanistan with my parents as a six-year-old boy, I didn't know your sister or your parents very well, and I barely remembered them. But thirty years later, when I traveled to Kabul for my research, I visited your home. Although I didn't know anyone, Tuba greeted me at the entrance with such warmth that it caught me by surprise. She embraced me and introduced me to your parents. From that moment on, she insisted that I bring my suitcase and assured me that as long as I was there, I didn't need to stay anywhere else". [Cousin]*

### **Wilting, 'Civil War, Oppression'**

The civil war spread through the streets of Kabul. Every neighborhood had turned into the territory of a warlord, and they fought with tanks and guns to claim every street. Everyone was trying to find a way to escape

Kabul. I decided to flee abroad with my wife and daughter, while my youngest brother left for India to pursue his studies. For the first time, we left our family home, which had a profound impact on both my mother and Tuba. For my mother, it manifested in various health problems, while for Tuba, it took the form of sorrow, worry, and despair. In an instant, Tuba lost not only two brothers but also a close adult friend (my wife) and a little companion (my daughter).

*"When you left, the situation got even worse. Because the neighborhood where you lived was relatively safer than the rest of Kabul, I temporarily moved into your house. Tuba missed you and had only one brother/friend with whom she chatted for hours -sometimes about you, sometimes about girls, and sometimes about the situation. Tuba and I, as girls, were not allowed to go outside. So, we sought refuge within the walls of your house. Cooking, chatting, praying, and doing her Sufi*

*rituals. She almost daily sent a plate of food to the neighbors. She cooked so much as if you, your brother, wife and daughter were at home. But she gave it to the poorer neighbors. This way, she felt as though you were eating together." [friend / sister-in-law sister]*

When the Taliban took power in 1995, life became even more difficult for Tuba. She was no longer allowed to work and could hardly leave the house. While I was staying in a refugee center, I received her first letter - a letter filled with despair, sadness, longing, and tears. Instead of fully understanding her pain, I wrote back to her about our own struggles: the uncertainty of the asylum process, our cramped room, and our unclear future. I asked her not to burden me with her sorrow. From that moment on, her letters only spoke of happy days, how healthy our mother and father were, how one brother wasn't troubled by the Taliban, and how well she herself was doing. But from others, I learned

that out of despair, sorrow, and loneliness, Tuba had embraced a spiritual (Sufi) lifestyle. She prayed frequently, slept little, woke up early, helped the poor, neglected herself, and accepted whatever came her way.

### **Blooming, *'Reunion with Brothers'***

After five years, I was finally allowed to travel. I went to Pakistan to visit my parents, sister, and brother because the Taliban had taken control of Kabul. When I saw Tuba, she appeared weaker, smaller, and more emotional than before. Yet her sweet smile, passion, enthusiasm, and hospitality remained unchanged. For the first time, I saw her tears of joy seeing me again. She shared with me the difficulties women faced under the regime, but expressed relief that another brother was now with the family, easing her worries about our parents' well-being.

Not only did I return, but our youngest brother also came back from India. We spent

beautiful days together in Pakistan, and since he decided to return to Kabul to get married, our parting felt less heavy. By then, the family had fled Afghanistan and was living in Pakistan. A year later, I visited them again, this time with my wife and children. I saw Tuba blooming once more: the same cheerful Tuba as before, always smiling, loving with the children, and endlessly hospitable.

***Wilting, 'loneliness, all brothers gone'***  
They had to return to Kabul because they couldn't obtain a visa for Pakistan. Under the Taliban regime, the rules only became stricter and more extreme. My brothers encountered problems with the regime and were forced to flee the country, leaving Tuba behind with our parents. She became the sole caregiver for our ill mother and elderly father, who feared dying without his sons by his side. At the same time, she had to manage the

household, which was essentially a guesthouse.

Tuba took on a new role. She was no longer just the daughter of the family; she became the "man" of the house. She did the shopping, welcomed guests, cooked, cared for our mother and father, and managed the rental income from our other houses and shops. Once, I shared my concerns with her over the phone: *"What would you do if father had a heart attack in the middle of the night and needed to go to the hospital, or if mother's condition worsened and she needed urgent medical help?"*. She reassured me, saying she had enough friends and acquaintances she could rely on, so I didn't need to worry. From that moment on, I prayed for her health, because if she were to fall ill, one of us would have to return to Afghanistan to care for our parents.

Tuba never complained; she always said she was doing well. Like all women, she wasn't allowed to go outside, but sometimes, at dusk, she would look out through a small window. She remained the leader of the family, and whenever someone from Europe visited, she always presented herself as healthy and cheerful. It seemed as though Tuba wanted everyone to believe she was happy. *Was she truly happy as the head of the household, independent, a caretaker, admired by all?*

### **Blooming, 'freedom, hope, marriage'**

When the Taliban were finally gone<sup>4</sup>, Tuba, like many other Afghan women, regained her freedom, hope, and a sense of a future. She could go out again, work, dine at restaurants,

---

<sup>4</sup> *In 2001, after 9/11, the Taliban were unwilling to hand over Bin Laden to the United States. With the help of an international alliance, the Taliban were ousted, and a relatively free and democratic government came to power in Afghanistan.*

shop, and meet her friends. She once more had the freedom to choose what to wear. Although all her nephews and nieces had left, she regarded many of the children at her school as her own. We, too, were able to travel back to Afghanistan, and Tuba blossomed again, radiating happiness.



It was time for her to think about her own future. She married a very kind man, but on the condition that it wouldn't be her who moved into his home, but he who would come to hers. This was not only against Afghan tradition, but the fact that she continued to work while her husband stayed at her parents'

house, was also highly unconventional. By doing so, she ensured her parents wouldn't be left alone and made things easier for us, as there was now a man in the house.

She loved her husband, and they were more like close friends than a traditional Afghan couple. When I visited them, I saw them cooking together, laughing, joking, and showing everyone how deeply they loved each other. They were happy.

Her husband didn't work, but thanks to her father's support, they didn't have to worry about household expenses. Still, Tuba was concerned about her husband's inability to find a job. She ensured he pursued higher education, learned English, and gained computer skills -all funded with her own money.

She seemed happy, but it was evident that her husband staying at home added to her responsibilities. However, it didn't appear to bother her much. It felt as though she

genuinely enjoyed taking care of others, including her husband, as if she found purpose in helping him succeed.

*'...difficulty is a blessing in our lives because it makes us realize that we have been leading impure lives. As a result, we turn to the correct and holy path'.*

*[“Don't Be Sad” Al-Qarni]*

### ***Wilting, ‘Infertility, uprooting’***

Tuba was happy with her husband, but she suffered from the fact that she couldn't have children. She once complained that it was more painful for her to be constantly confronted by people asking why she had no children, than the longing she herself had or that of her husband. She once expressed regret about her marriage -not because of her husband, but because she couldn't bear children, and because her husband didn't have a job. Still, she didn't often show this.

By then, our mother's condition had worsened. When we wanted to arrange home care for her, Tuba refused. She wanted to do everything herself for our mother because she saw it as a daughter's responsibility. The death of our mother affected her deeply. She lost not only her mother, but also her friend and housemate. Tuba now cared for our father, becoming his caregiver and confidante. But our father was so devastated by our mother's death that he followed her within five years. That was when I first saw Tuba truly feel alone and desperate. It was then we noticed the first signs of illness and depression in her.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions and the return of the Taliban, we were no longer able to travel to Kabul, but we noticed that Tuba had lost the desire to stay in that house. We did everything we could to see her live a happy life from afar: we suggested that she would move to an apartment, and even after that, we

suggested her to move again, but it didn't help. For the first time, we heard her complain about life and her sorrow. She had lost her peace and patience. She no longer wanted to stay in Kabul. While we were working on getting her out of there, we made sure that Tuba and her husband left Kabul and fled to Pakistan. We wanted to give her some hope for the future. When the process of her formal sponsorship began and the chance arose to get her to the United Kingdom, she settled in the capital of Pakistan.

### **Blooming, 'Back to normal, hope'**

I went to visit her in Pakistan. She was happy to be away from the Taliban regime. She didn't miss Kabul and enjoyed the freedom to go outside again. Tuba and her husband lived in an apartment where most of the residents came from Kabul: men and women who had studied, were urbanized, and no longer wanted to live under the strict Taliban regime.

She had a group of women she kept in touch with, with whom she walked, picnicked, and went shopping. I saw the old Tuba again: cheerful, kind, and helpful. Every evening, she would send a plate of food to the neighbors and the building manager. She was concerned about the children and young people who stayed at home and couldn't go to school. One evening, we came up with a plan to take all the children and young people from the building to the city and a park, so they could at least have one day of fun. Before I went to bed, she had gone door to door to discuss the idea with the parents. The next day, we went to the park with two minibuses, and I saw Tuba taking care of them like a mother. When we returned, the parents thanked me on behalf of their children (as if I had arranged it!).



For the first time, I noticed that Tuba longed for Europe. I told her that life in Europe wasn't easy: learning the language, integrating, working. She said she would accept everything, because she wanted to be with her brothers, see them happy, and then die peacefully. Once, she said she did not want to witness the illness or loss of her brothers. I wasn't happy with what she said and responded that, although I wished her the best, I hoped her wish wouldn't come true.

*As if God listened to her and fulfilled all her wishes, even the less pleasant ones;* Their stay in Pakistan was not without obstacles: issues with the police, extending their visa, language barriers, no work, and no income. Despite all these difficulties, Tuba was happy, grateful, and focused on her main goal: *"To reunite with her brothers and then die peacefully"*. I thought this was my own interpretation of her wish, but as her friend told me over the phone after her passing, it turned out this was indeed her desire.

*"Zafar (my nickname), it's very hard for you, your brothers, and for me that Tuba is no longer here, but her last and most important wish has been fulfilled. Tuba had wished for years to die before you. She always said; 'I can bear anything, but I don't want to witness the sorrow, illness, or loss of any of my brothers'". [friend/colleague]*

Years ago, when I visited Kabul, I told her about my trip, the airports, the flights, and the

different people you encounter, along with the funny things you see in terminals and layovers. She said that she once wanted to experience getting lost in the crowd at an airport, not knowing where to go or which flight to take. That wish was also fulfilled. My brothers made sure she could travel to Dubai for a few days (which was possible with an Afghan passport). Upon arrival at Dubai airport, my youngest brother, who had accompanied her, was not allowed to enter Dubai due to some kind of administrative misunderstanding. Tuba was allowed through customs, but my brother was not. Until we (my other brother and I) arrived in Dubai, she remained lost in the terminal, not knowing where to go. When I met her there, I reminded her of her wish.

Finally, her (and our) great wish was fulfilled. She and her husband were granted permission to come to the United Kingdom. The first few months, she was happy and cheerful, glad to

be with her brothers, cousins, and nieces. We were also happy because the guilt – that our only sister had such a difficult life while we were here in the West – lifted from us. We no longer had worries.

But this didn't last long. Within a few months, we saw signs of despair in Tuba. She seemed to prefer Afghanistan and Pakistan over life in the West. Tuba seemed lost. She no longer had any friends or colleagues, no poor neighbors to help with pocket money or a plate of food. She no longer had any reason to be concerned about others. Tuba no longer suffered the miseries of others by helping them. She no longer had many visitors or guests at home to welcome, cook for, wash their clothes, or help with money. She lost quite a bit of weight and was much more brief on the phone. She once expressed her feelings towards the middle brother as following:

*“My image of the West is totally different from what I thought. Everyone here is busy. I have to start over and build a new life to achieve what I thought. I don’t want others to take care of me. I want to work, I want to teach...”*

We (the brothers) were concerned, but thought it would pass. We thought she was going through the same situation we had gone through at the beginning (an identity crisis, a new environment, a new culture).

*“In the last few months I saw Tuba deteriorate drastically mentally and physically. She rarely laughed and talked like our old Tuba. The only thing she had left of that old Tuba was her sweet, wary look at me. As I drove away, I saw her standing behind the window praying that I would go to work safely. When I came back she ran downstairs to be the first to hug me. It seemed like she was hiding something. A*

*pain, a pressure, or something, but shared nothing. Even not with me either... [Brother]*

We didn't see that she was ill, that she had lost the will to live, that she was in constant waiting for her final wish: *to die before witnessing the sorrow, illness, or loss of any of her brothers.*

Her husband didn't notice this either.

*"In the last months, when I had to go to work, she would stand on the stairs, looking at me as if it was for the last time, and ask if I had the key to the house. In the last months, she didn't feel like cooking, and when I came back at the end of the day, she would be lying in bed totally covered with the blankets".*  
*[Tuba's husband]*

### **Wilting, ‘*Hidden Decline*’**

Tuba began to slowly wither, her bloom slowly falling apart. We didn't realize that she was losing her essence. Tuba could no longer provide the protective shade she once did. She noticed that no one needed her help or support anymore. We didn't see that she was working on her return -back to the place where, like the tree she once was, she could mean something. A place where she wouldn't lose her value and could offer her shade to others again.

She withdrew, stopped attending parties, and had no desire to laugh or talk. We didn't understand that Tuba was all along working on her last wish: *to die before witnessing the sorrow, illness, or loss of any of her brothers.*

Two days before her death, my wife and I visited her house in London for the first time. Tuba was small and frail, and she didn't want to talk, even to us. We walked a little with her,

and I noticed the despair, the hopelessness, and the depression in her. She was constantly coming up with negative scenarios to worry about: becoming ill, losing the house, her brothers' health problems, her husband not achieving everything, not being able to learn the language, or drive. My wife and my brother (both doctors) tried to reassure her, but in vain. We didn't realize that Tuba was looking for something to worry about, yet her attempts to resolve them led to nothing.

She didn't talk about the pain or illness she had, but she was taking several pills for depression, blood thinners, and painkillers. Her husband said she often forgot to take her medication. She denied that anything was wrong, saying everything would be fine, but at the same time, she admitted that she didn't know what to do. Perhaps she didn't want to burden us, or perhaps she wanted her last wish to be fulfilled: *to die before witnessing*

*our sorrow or loss. And maybe, it seemed, God listened to her wish. We spent two days with her and said goodbye on Sunday morning. As always, she wished us a safe journey, following the usual rituals: holding the Quran in her hands and throwing water behind us. When we got home, I called her, and she showed me that she had taken her medication as promised. (I wish instead, I had asked her to promise me to focus on the future).*

The next morning, on Monday, I called her. I promised her that the next time I would take her to London City alone, and I would buy her those wide trousers and white sneakers. I wanted to make her the old, modern Tuba again. She laughed and said “*Inshallah*”. I wish I had stayed a day longer with her. Because that Monday, when her husband came home from work, he found Tuba lifeless in bed. What happened between our phone

call and his return remains a mystery. Whether she had been aware of a sudden death or felt pain, no one knows. Tuba was gone. Even though I spoke several times that evening to my brother, sister-in-law, and brother-in-law and knew that Tuba was no longer alive, I secretly hoped that she would wake up again.

In the early morning, before it fully sank in, I left with my wife for London. Because Tuba had died alone at home, we had to wait for the forensic investigation. Three days full of confusion. Three days of staring blankly at each other. Three days of answering phones and receiving visitors without being able to explain exactly what had happened. Three days of keeping our backs straight, even though they had long since broken. Three days without shouting, crying, or space for all those "why questions". Three days avoiding emotions rather than expressing them.

When the investigation was finally concluded, I strangely felt relief. Relief because I could finally see my dear sister, even in her lifeless body. But for me, it was too late. I wanted to cry over her body, scream and collapse. But it didn't happen. I had already shut down. I was already lost. But it didn't matter anymore.

Tuba was gone. Tuba no longer existed among us. Tuba returned to the place where she always belonged, where her shadow could protect and help others, where she could offer hope to those in need. But perhaps it wasn't just her choice. Maybe it was her body, her soul, that finally understood she was no longer able to do that. She no longer had the will to live because she could no longer achieve what she had found so important: *caring for others, offering support, and being responsible for her family.*

It seems that she reached a point where she, perhaps unconsciously, felt she no longer had value in this world. She had no reason to keep fighting against the pressure of feeling useless.

And maybe, it seems, it was her time to let go, to be freed from that burden, to leave her sorrow behind and return to where she belonged. But at the same time, it could also be that she only now truly became aware of the life she had lived, with everything she had gone through -the difficult choices, the sacrifices, the worries for others. Maybe it wasn't just her body's choice, but also the realization of the life she had led, that led her to hide her problems, her pain, and her illness. It remains a mystery. What we do know is that Tuba found her way in her own way, and perhaps that was God's way to find peace in the chaos of her existence.



**Part 2**

***Brothers***

***“The Silence She Left”***

Tuba, indeed had something wrong. She did not know that her brothers also had a last wish: *to see her happy beside them, to share a life, to laugh, cry, and talk about the joys and pains of life.*

She could never have known how deeply her loss would affect her brothers, how much guilt they will carry with them, the desire to secure her happiness, because they themselves felt the weight of an incomplete life. Tuba was unaware of how important her presence was for her brothers, how she filled them with light, hope, and certainty. Without her, without her shadow, her brothers feel suffocated, lost, and uncertain. They don't know how to move forward without her constant care, support, and love. Her loss was not only an end for her but, for them, it was the loss of their anchor, their mother, sister, and confidante. A world without Tuba feels empty, dark, and fearful.

As for the question of why she died, it is something that has no simple answers. Everyone leaves eventually, and that is the inescapable reality of life. But perhaps the question is not why, but rather how we see her life and what her meaning was to us -that is what truly matters. In Tuba, we saw something divine, something pure and powerful. She struggled to express it, perhaps because of the obstacles in her life, her sorrow, or her own struggles. But in her kindness, helpfulness, and care for others, in her unconditional love for her family, she carried the essence of something extraordinary. She was, for her brothers, a beacon of love, hope, and strength, even if she did not always understand that herself. And now, after her passing, that path remains open for her brothers, reminding them of the love Tuba had for them and what she meant to them.

As her youngest brother puts it:

*The lacunae she left, can never be filled again.... While the hearts are in pain and eyes are in tears, I admire and am proud to possess such beautiful memories and reflections of her; A big tree that gave us both, shade, and fruit; A book that taught us wisdom, perseverance and love; A mother who wore the badge of honor and stood alone to care and serve the humanity,... While I firmly believe that death is definitely not the end! throughout this difficult time of trial and pain, I learned and realized that death is the start of another stage of reality and essence, that one enjoys for what he/she leaves behind as a legacy in the earlier stage (life), and then is loved and remembered in the next!*

She left a void, but she is always present in our hearts and souls.

*“Goodbyes are only for those who love with their eyes. Because for those who love with heart and soul there is no such thing as separation” [Rumi]*

-----

*My reflections* on Tuba's passing and the empty space she leaves behind are, of course, intense and full of love. The loss of a loved one, especially a sister who played such a crucial role in my life, indeed creates an enormous gap. It feels as if I am in a tsunami, where everything that was once familiar has suddenly disappeared. Her presence, her care, her love, her shadow that always hung over us, has shaped me. Without her, everything seems different.

Whether the question "Why now?", is understandable or not is hard to say. It often feels unfair when someone who has given so much and deserved a time of peace suddenly slips away.

I find myself in a search for meaning in the chaos of loss. I will continue to strive to live in the way she did, and to offer her shadow to those who need it. I will, and must, build a world without her presence, but that world will always be tinted with everything she meant to me and my brothers. Her memories, the love she gave, her care for others, these remain with me, and in that sense, she continues to live on in everything I do.

The loss will always hurt, but by building the world she helped shape for us, by following the way she lived, I will give her an immortal place in my heart. Her spirit, her love, and everything she meant, will continue to live through me.

*'The bond between true friends transcends time and space, their love is a thread that connect them through the ages'. [Rumi]*

I will try to embrace the essence of Tuba's attitude towards life: her boundless care for others, her strength to give love, even when she herself did not always have everything she needed. The way she often put herself in the background, yet always found the strength to rise again, is something special.

I want to be like Tuba, the one who provides that endless shadow. By continuing her caring and supportive role in the world, I want to be like Tuba for others - a source of support, love, and protection, even when I am struggling myself. In this way, I wish to carry forward her legacy. By following the values and love Tuba expressed in her life, I want to not only continue to give meaning to her life but also give myself the space to grow and

find strength in giving to others, even when I sometimes feel like I have nothing left. The journey she made, from shadow to light, from giving to feeling empty, and ultimately rediscovering herself, is also my path now.

*'Behold the shade of Túbá (the tree in Paradise) and sleep well; lay thy head in the shade and sleep without lifting thy head (haughtily)'. [Rumi]*

By remembering her with so much love and beautiful memories, I want to show the deep bond we had. In her life, she was a source of strength for others, and in my memories, she lives on as someone who made an unforgettable impression on me with her caring nature, dedication, and ability to always give. Tuba also reminds me as an example of good citizenship from a societal perspective. Her work as a teacher for 40 years, her social lifestyle, and her adherence

to the laws and rules of society highlight her contribution to the community. Her life as a teacher was an expression of her dedication and care for the next generation.

Dear Tuba, dear sister; your memories are engraved into my mind as follows.

ایینه شدی ترا کمی دود گرفت  
ماهی که شدی ترا غم رود گرفت  
یک شاخچه گک غزل سرودی اما  
تا غنچه شدی خدا ترا زود گرفت

*When you became a mirror, caught in wisps  
of smoke, Reflections held secrets, delicate  
and broke.*

*As a fish in the river, you swam deep and  
free, Yet feared the river's drying, its ebbing  
mystery.*

*You sang a gentle ghazal, soft as a dove's  
wing. Each note a whisper, a sacred song to  
bring. But the wind snatched your voice  
before the song's end.*

## **AFTERWORD**

This was the story of my sister Tuba, “the lucky unlucky one”. Her story may sound deeply touching, but in sharing it, I have tried to show the complexity of her life, her role as the undeniable shadow for others, her struggle with her own sorrow and loss, and ultimately the way to return to where she came from, to paradise. With the image of Tuba as a tree that once provided shade in paradise, but ultimately had to wither and bloom, I attempted to reflect the cycle of life and the unyielding nature of her care for others, even when she herself silently suffered. I firmly believe that she is now in paradise, a place where she has not only found peace but can once again fulfill that role of care and protection. I see her as one of those who did good and avoided evil, earning her a place in paradise.

*'And let there arise from you a group that invites good and calls to righteousness and forbids what is wrong. And they are the ones who are successful'. [Holy Qoran 3:104]*

This was my manner to honor her life -by giving her the space she deserved, where perhaps she no longer only provides shade, but also becomes a source of peace and restfulness. Undoubtedly, my brothers, Tuba's friends, have their own beautiful memories of her. Undoubtedly, my brothers and her friends may be struggling with her loss more than I am. And undoubtedly, they too are grappling with accepting and processing this loss. Perhaps they don't recognize everything I've written, or maybe they see those moments differently. But I wanted to create my version of her life, and I didn't want to burden them by asking them to revisit memories. I hope they have already found a way to cope with this loss and haven't

shut down as I have. Yet, this shutting down is precisely what led me to decide to write her life story.

By writing her life story and reflecting on my belief and vision of her paradisiacal rest, I sense a feeling of closure and ultimate reconciliation within myself. It allows me to see her as someone who fulfilled her purpose on Earth, despite the difficulties, and now has found a place where she can give rest. Through writing her story, I have been able to cherish her memories and her influence on my life and that of others, taking them with me on my own journey. I have given her a place in my heart and my faith. Tuba's life was one of giving, caring and love. Those values will always stay with me, even as I have to continue without her shadow.

## ***This was my sister's story***

*Made possible thanks to the invaluable support of my children, siblings, family, friends, and colleagues. Their shared experiences, memories, and compassion gave me the strength to put Tuba's story into words.*

*Zafar  
Rotterdam, November 2024*