

# WILL I LIVE TOMORROW?

ONE WOMAN'S MISSION  
TO CREATE AN ANTI-TALIBAN FILM  
IN WAR-TORN AFGHANISTAN



SONIA NASSERY COLE



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CHAPTER 1

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“Oh no . . . No!” I heard myself shouting, “Damn it . . . no.” I *felt* silence, a deep, fierce silence. I replaced the phone on the desk, sat on the floor next to the wall, leaned back, hugged my face with slightly trembling hands—and I could not even cry. The voice, quiet and patient, that had answered from Farishta’s home had said he was sorry I could not talk to her. “Farishta and her family were all killed in a wedding. Bomb . . . yes, it was a bomb, mistaking the traditional wedding ceremonial of the gun firing in the air for hostile fire . . . and yes, it was bombs . . . yes, all of them, yes, Setara and Lala, Haidar . . . the whole family . . . yes, all are dead . . .”

On the Internet the BBC had simply stated, “The plane came and bombed the area.” The district governor, Haji Amishah Gul, told the British newspaper *The Times*, “So far there are twenty-seven people, including women and children, who have been buried. Another ten have been wounded. The attack happened at 6:30 a.m. Just two of the dead are men, the rest are women and children. The bride is among the dead.”<sup>13</sup>

I had read the news, and I heard Farishta’s soft voice, almost in a whisper: “. . . and I will name the place Poet’s Corner!” I saw the warm shadow of a smile on her tired, pale, beautiful face that lingered inside the vacuum of time. I heard my silent vow echoing in

every valley of my scattered thoughts, “And I promise, Farishta jan, that I will make a film that will tell the world about you and your Poet’s Corner!”

. . .

Whenever I visited Afghanistan, I felt torn. I stayed in comfortable hotels—not because they were luxurious, but because they were safer. One of these was a new five-star new hotel. Well-dressed waiters served tea. Well-to-do guests hung around the lobby, laughing and joking. The personnel at the front desk had thick foreign accents (Pakistani?). It was not surprising because during wartime, increasingly the majority of businesses were managed or owned by Arab or Pakistani outsiders.

Outside the glass and shine of the hotel, three decades of war had damaged the self-worth of many Afghan women; their stories of how they were tortured, mutilated, oppressed, and humiliated by the Taliban broke my heart. They had no careers. Young girls were disfigured by the Taliban’s acid sprayed on their faces. Kids without arms or legs or eyes had been brutalized by bombs or by humans. Old people stared at the ceiling, alone and helpless.

One day I left the hotel and walked to where those others—the not-well-to-do ones—lived and died. It was a sunny day, and it took me by surprise how cold it seemed to be, even in the heat of the afternoon. I continued to stroll along the narrow, uneven, dusty, and stone-spotted road bordered on one side by ten-foot-tall mud walls, and on the other by impoverished dwellings and shacks.

A few yards ahead of me there was a little boy, maybe nine or ten years old, in a white shirt and pants, holding his little sister’s hand. She was dressed in a faded black top and skirt over long pants. They were walking next to a garbage can covered with a piece of cloth tied around the top. There were sharp stones on the road; the children wore old sandals, the soles probably thin and ragged. Many others would not even have that.

The sun was setting, and I decided to return to the hotel. I thought I might have taken the wrong path, as I came to an isolated alley, uneven and dusty, with dirty water puddles and flies buzzing around. Old pieces of paper, soiled and wrinkled, had blown in with the wind. A dusty green bush protruded from behind a mud wall. And there, right in the middle of the road, was a woman, covered with a chadari (burqa), sleeping on the stone-pierced dirt ground next to a small child—a little boy who was curled up on a small white scarf, his head on his mother's blue plastic slippers, his little hands clasped together. The woman's bare, dirt-covered feet were on the dirt ground next to a jutting rock. The sleeping mother and child had their heads close to each other—both victims of circumstance on a small, secluded corner, away from the luxuries of life on this planet.

I remembered New York: beautiful sunsets and lazy afternoons, the lighted skyscrapers, fantastic balconies, friends and tea and tasty hors d'oeuvres—all seeming so ordinary and unremarkable. I looked down, not knowing why. Did I feel embarrassed? But it was not my fault. It was the product of war and those responsible for it. It was corrupt rulers and the greed of the powerful. Anger, sadness, and helplessness were filling my heart, and determination was building the strength in my soul and rising above the limitations surrounding me. This was probably one of my most important trips, as it gave birth to the idea upon which *The Black Tulip* started to form.

I ended up having lunch in a small restaurant that held only four or five tables. Farishta, the owner of the restaurant, ran the place with the help of her family: her husband, two children (a boy and a girl), sister, and mother. The woman was of medium build, with shoulder-length brown hair and beautiful but rather sad brown eyes, and yet the warmest smile brightened her tired face. The food was typically delicious, as true Afghan cuisine always is, and I could hear muted *Abs* and *Ohs* from the guests who were eating already.

As I waited for my food to arrive, I could not help but listen to the other guests who were talking about life and politics. Some sounded happy and safe and hopeful now that the Taliban were defeated. A

small sign in a faded gold-colored frame hung on the wall opposite: "Poet's Corner." I was intrigued, and when the woman brought my food I pointed to the sign and asked what it meant.

I thought for a moment her beautiful brown eyes welled with tears. But she only smiled gently as she stood there, silent.

"I was just curious," I said, trying to put her at ease.

"Oh no, it is just . . . just difficult to think about it . . . sometimes." Then she smiled and sat down as I motioned to her. The food was so delicious that I could not let it get cold.

And then she told me her story.

Before the Soviet invasion, her father had owned a bookstore in Kabul called The Poet's Corner. When she was eight or nine, as she and her younger sister Belkis watched, Russian soldiers came into The Poet's Corner, grabbed their father by his neck, and right there, in front of his daughters, murdered him and then burned down the bookstore. "My back was burned as I held my little sister away from the flame," she whispered to me now. "Holding her in my arms, I had to turn my back to the fire. I still have the scar on my back."

I was not shocked, since I had heard many stories of criminal actions by the invaders, but my heart was weighed down with sorrow, visualizing the two little girls watching that terrifying scene, feeling powerless and scared and alone. I noticed Farishta looking in some distant direction, a very light smile on her lips and the mist of tears in her eyes. "I want to open a larger restaurant in Kabul, where there will be an open microphone where people can speak freely and openly and read poetry. I shall name it The Poet's Corner."

*The Poet's Corner*, she had said, and she walked away to attend to her restaurant's business. This woman did not have freedom or money, but had thought of a fantastic plan for the people working for freedom. During my stay, I saw her and her family on more than one occasion. I never forgot that day and those moments when she talked about her dream. I could not forget her little girl Setara, who held my attention by expressing her innocent dreams and wishes.

When I returned to America, I stayed in touch with Farishta and

her family until that day when the phone kept ringing and the sad voice on the other end informed me of their deaths among other civilians. “A mistake,” he had called it, and the news articles called it the “wedding party bombing.” As the celebratory guns (in the spirit of fireworks) were fired into the air, a U.S. bomber mistakenly targeted the gathering from the air. About 47 people died.

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I put the phone down and just sat. Outside, clouds moved across in a horizontal wave, and I imagined Setara’s small hand reaching out as if the clouds were cotton candy. I remembered her giggles on the phone when I had told her of the new backpack I was going to send her. I tried to keep my eyes closed, but the small face of Lala, the little boy, with his innocent sweet smile, rushed in.

For days and nights to come, Farishta’s image kept reflecting in each windowpane I looked through. The scar on Farishta’s back would not bother her anymore. *I am going to get a larger restaurant, name it The Poet’s Corner, and every night we would have poetry readers and speakers of freedom.*

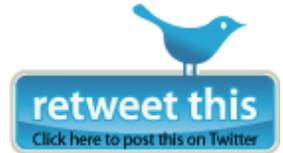
Her dream was now becoming my dream: to immortalize The Poet’s Corner and her life story. The forever flower I would place on



Putting up the sign for The Poet’s Corner with actor Amir Hosein in Wazir Akbar Khan (Credit: David McFarland)

her and her family's resting images would be *The Black Tulip*, my movie.

I walked to the desk, dialed a travel agency, and booked a flight to Afghanistan. That day I started to write the script for *The Black Tulip*.



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## CHAPTER 2

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You may be wondering why I, who have lived most of my life in America, am so heatedly involved in a small country like Afghanistan, so let me give you a bit of background about me, to help explain how the movie *The Black Tulip* came to exist.

I was born into an intellectual family in Kabul. My father was a career diplomat (the reason for our various travels around the world); my mother was an educator, and their parents belonged to Afghanistan's progressive and revolutionary social circles. I guess when we are children, we each have specific characteristics that we nurture throughout our lives—and that make us who we are.<sup>14</sup>

I arrived in America at the age of seventeen with raw and wounded feelings because of what had happened in Afghanistan. I was the oldest in the family, yet still a child. Much later, the rest of my family left one by one.

But being who I was, I couldn't live a comfortable teenage life and enjoy the freedom I had found. As soon as I reached the United States, I resolved to change what could be changed, and I knew that Afghanistan must become free.

The United States was considered to be the most powerful country in the world. I was convinced that Ronald Reagan, the President of the United States, was also the most powerful person in the world.

So I resolved to contact him to help my country and get the Soviets out of there.

I decided to write a letter and appeal to President Reagan. To me, it seemed to be the most logical thing to do. I included my return address, and despite everyone else's skepticism, I believed that he would respond.

He did. He called me and invited me to the White House.

So I went to meet with him, and he listened to how people in Afghanistan were suffering under the Soviet invasion.

We talked about it all—a young girl from war-ruined Afghanistan and the president of the most powerful country in the world. It was incredible and unforgettable!

The conversation changed my life. Of course, I was asking for help for the Afghan people and our freedom. President Reagan said, "There is so much that you can do, and so little I can do."

Surprised, I looked at him, probably for explanation, and he continued: "One person can change the world. Do you want to be a person like that?"

My young voice expressed my thoughts in one simple word: "Yes!" And that was the moment that I knew exactly what I wanted to do in my life. President Reagan promised to help and support me in my humanitarian goals for the Afghan people. Humbly, I realized what a great opportunity it was for me to help my people and to be so seriously involved in working for humanitarian causes.

In the meantime, my actions as an activist were directed at organizing congressional testimony. This resulted in the arming of Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud's Northern Alliance freedom fighters, an indigenous Afghan resistance movement, with Stinger missiles to resist the Soviet invasion.

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the focus of my life once more became the needs of our devastated country—in particular of Afghan refugees, millions of whom were living in crowded camps in the countries bordering Afghanistan. Life was and is extremely difficult and heartbreaking for the Afghan refugees in Iran and

Pakistan. In Iran, the Afghans are treated with disrespect and discrimination.

I explored my way of fighting against the misconceptions about Afghanistan and its people, weighing the options that would best empower me in helping the people and country I loved so much. Through the years of my involvement in humanitarian issues, as I struggled to sustain the level of help that I could extract from other sources and what I myself could provide, again and again I was convinced that my natural inclination toward filmmaking would provide me with substantial help in what I had always felt to be the center of my life—finding the best ways that I could help my people and humanity.

I came to believe that films were the ideal tools that I could use to build bridges across misunderstandings to the path of humanity, leading to my humanitarian goals. I had made the documentary *The Breadwinner*, and now I wanted to make *The Black Tulip*.

I am fortunate and deeply grateful that my efforts during more than twenty years of humanitarian work have resulted in raising millions of dollars from the public and private sectors to help Afghan refugees, and to construct much-needed basic health facilities and services in the camps.

In May of 2002, in the wake of the U.S. and coalition response to the September 11 tragedy, I founded the Afghanistan World Foundation (AWF<sup>15</sup>), which continues to represent my essential humanitarian goals in life. A very important component of AWF is to provide and promote awareness of what the invasion, the atrocities of war, and the Taliban have done to Afghanistan, and what the people's needs are. Most of the needed services are to deal with problems caused by war and its aftermath. Besides the issues of refugees, there is the immediate danger of the thousands of mines scattered around the country.

There were times when I would lie awake in bed and let the tears run down my face as I turned my country's suffering over and over in my mind. I would imagine the little scared faces of children on dark

and forlorn streets and dirt roads and in burned and broken homes. I would see them carrying water on their backs from far away, just to survive. I would see the images of horrible creatures walking around day and night in my homeland, brutalizing the people and destroying our national treasures.

I stared at the television in disbelief as these mindless and self-centered Taliban placed explosives at the feet of the Great Buddhas of Bamiyan. With one stupid motion, they destroyed the only existing Buddhas of this height and amazing artistic structure, the only ones of their kind in the world. They needed to use more and more explosives to complete the murder of the world's unique historical treasures.

As I bitterly cried, I felt sorrow, a deep sense of unrecoverable loss, and an incredible anger. I felt the need for revenge against the Taliban, the ignorant, criminal, godless subhumans. They not only had taken this historical treasure from our people and our country, they had also stolen this universal wonder from the world.<sup>16</sup>

Again, my very first reaction was to say, "Why doesn't anyone do anything about it?" Then I said to myself, "I am that somebody; I will do something about it." Thus, exposing the Taliban and their inhuman actions in Afghanistan became a quest for me, which would be best accomplished through a motion picture. I knew that this would be a dangerous attempt, but if I could really show who they were and record the reality of life as it was there, it would be an international blow to their cowardly power and their deplorable image.

But it was important to make sure the film was authentic and that it was made on location—in Afghanistan.

The Taliban, those mindless and fanatic enemies of culture and human decency, had managed to destroy over 70 percent of the schools, disable the health care facilities and literary centers throughout Afghanistan, and strip women of their human rights as they were publicly insulted, humiliated, brutalized, and disfigured—all during a relatively short period.

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I spent years studying and working to become a filmmaker, spending endless hours on any set that a director would allow me to observe and learn from. I was sure that realistic and truthful films would help convey the needed information to those who were eager to know what is happening in our world, and encourage them to do something about it. I wanted to use motion pictures for the following purposes:

- ♦ to bring the plight of Afghan women to light;
- ♦ to broadcast the realities of life in war-torn Afghanistan;
- ♦ to help people in the refugee camps become visible in the eyes of the world;
- ♦ to fight against the corruption, ignorance, and violence imposed on the people of Afghanistan;
- ♦ to help innocent people by giving a voice to the voiceless and telling the stories of their lives;
- ♦ to provide health care in places where it is desperately needed;
- ♦ to provide educational programs and schools;
- ♦ to attract influential and powerful individuals who could support AWF's mission and help raise funds for the necessary programs through their popularity, goodwill, and financial capability;
- ♦ to deal with the problem of land mines in Afghanistan. Most of these mines were hidden in Afghanistan by the Soviets. They are a long-term health hazard and the cause of heartbreaking, horrible outcomes for the people and the country. They will continue to pose a danger for decades to come.

Skilled in the craft of filming, I put my life on the line and set out to do what I was meant to do: to film the hidden beauties of my country and the overwhelming brutalities imposed upon its people by outsiders. I wanted to let the world see them and hear their voices;

to show their way of dealing with the tragedies of war; to reveal the nature of the patriotic Afghan people's resistance against tyranny; and to let them show how their rich culture is surviving through all this misery.

I hoped that as the audience left the safe, dark cinema halls after two hours of uninterrupted watching and thinking, they would be changed individuals—touched by the events, informed about the truth, and motivated by compassion to support the cause of human rights, especially the rights of the tortured women of Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> I hoped they would be willing and ready to share accurate information about Afghanistan and its people with the world.

The screenplay for *The Black Tulip* evolved out of a series of coincidental experiences during my previous AWF-related trips in Afghanistan. In 2003, I went to Afghanistan to gather evidence and materials for promoting support for humanitarian needs in connection with AWF. At the time, I made a documentary called *The Breadwinner*.<sup>18</sup> It was based on the real-life story of Farouk, an eight-year-old boy who sold newspapers and calendars to support his entire family of seven, since his father had been disabled in war. When the documentary had been completed, I felt that I could not have shown the realities of life in Afghanistan so objectively, or explained my views and reasons for getting help for my people, in any other way but through film. The power of film was overwhelming. What originally was meant to be just for the Board of AWF ended up being very effective—resonating so deeply that it was shown at numerous international film festivals, at major think tanks, and to the U.S. Senate: proof of how a film could be used to shake up the conscience of the audience and help them truly grasp the reality of what is shown to them. This short documentary happened to influence a wide arena of audiences as it swiftly and efficiently expressed my message.

Obviously, the message of my next movie was going to be an outlook upon what was happening in the lives of innocent people, a family like any other in the world, on a battlefield known as

Afghanistan. It would also focus on the war competition between good and bad powers under the rules of Jungle Law. My film would reveal the unseen facts at a time when violence, fanaticism, and corruption were shamelessly knifing the already wounded nation of Afghanistan.

Once I heard Farishta's story, I knew the story I would have to tell. Writing the screenplay came fairly easily. But how to make such a story a reality—and shoot it in the most dangerous country in the world?



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### CHAPTER 3

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The tragic death of Farishta's family weighed down my soul. It was very difficult to eat in a restaurant without remembering her words and her family.

In Kabul, I had stayed in the Intercontinental Hotel. I will never forget the day when I went down to the hotel lobby for tea and to wait for a meeting concerning AWF. It was a quiet afternoon. As I sat at a table, I noticed another woman who seemed to be waiting for someone, also having tea at the opposite table. She had on nicely fitted black trousers, a stylish red blouse, and a small red headscarf partially covering her beautiful dark hair. Her dreamy dark eyes gave a memorable beauty to her attractive features, and looking up, she smiled. She was seated elegantly with her legs crossed, and I could not help but notice her high-heeled black sandals revealing beautifully painted red toenails—clearly an act of bravado, since for years and years now in Afghanistan, women had not been seen in public with toenails colored red peeping from open-toed sandals. At least, I had not seen them.

She somehow reminded me of Farishta.

I started a conversation with her, telling her she looked beautiful, and asking if she was also waiting. She replied, yes, and that she was there to audition for a tea commercial. She had been a refugee in Iran; it had been a terrible experience, so she had gone to Pakistan

for her acting career and was now back in Afghanistan. She expressed her opposition to the Taliban and I said that made two of us. We laughed. An actress!

I asked if she was still acting.

She said yes.

I told her that I was making an anti-Taliban movie for Afghanistan. Would she be interested in a role?

“I just did play a role in an anti-Taliban movie in Pakistan. Yes, I would very much like to play the role in your anti-Taliban movie, too.” She said this very calmly and with conviction.

I had found my lead actress. We exchanged contact information and said our goodbyes, as each of us had our own schedule of things to do on that warm, dusty day.

Elated, I walked out of the hotel and, without paying attention to where I was going, wandered into the back alleys of Kabul, away from the huge Dubai-style buildings. Soon my wanderings brought my heart low again. It was so desperate and so sad, such a terrible way to live.

A little girl with short-cut reddish-blond hair was playing in the old doorway of a mud hut. Her sweet face, marked with dust, bent over a very old doll dressed in a dirty white overall. With one small hand she had covered the doll’s eyes and face, and she seemed to be talking with the doll—as if she was protecting her doll from seeing the brutal, ugly world around her. My eyes filled with tears. My own beloved doll had a beautiful dress. On one of my birthdays, I had a wedding ceremony for her. I can still remember my parents’ laughter, my friends giggling, and the safe feeling around us.

I felt like writing a poem about the little girl and her doll, and I smiled sadly as I thought of a dream called *The Poet’s Corner*, a perfect place to stop in and read such a poem. Ah, what a dreamer I am.

Time passed, and I thought and saw much more. After a few days, my AWF-related work was done, and by the time I returned to the United States, I knew exactly what I was going to do. I had learned more about the life and death of Farishta’s family, I had

found my lead actress to play her role, and I was going to make that movie, which was already becoming fully fleshed out in my mind.

I started writing the script for *The Black Tulip*. I called the actress I had met in Kabul, and we discussed her role as Farishta. We talked a few times during the following year, making sure that when the time came and I was in Afghanistan we would get together for the further details of the movie.



