

AT HOME FAR FROM HOME

Every time I close my eyes, I think about my past, my mind goes back to the years in Pakistan. Everything started while I was reviewing the intrinsic muscles of the larynx, and I heard my dad talking with a colleague of “*Medici Senza Frontiere*” about the sanitary emergency in Pakistan and their need for doctors from all over the world.

When he finished his call, I asked my dad the details about that. It was a 6-month humanitarian mission in Lahore where the Indo-Pakistan war was ongoing: they needed help with injured people. Hygienic conditions were pitiful and for this reason the victims of the military conflict were added to those who died from the infection. The local doctors weren't enough.

My dad was straightforward about his decision to leave, since he had the possibility to take a gap year. I was so impressed by his courage and fortitude: I admired him a lot, but honestly, I wouldn't expect anything different from him.

I started thinking a lot about what he told me, and I decided to collect information about that mission; it was actually a good occasion to learn new things and put what I was studying into practice. I looked outside the window and I tried to imagine how it may be. Would I save lives? Would it be an incredible adventure for me? One thing was pretty sure: I would learn a lot of things! It was a golden occasion so I decided to talk with my parents and leave with my dad.

It was my birthday and my parents and I were out at dinner, which was kind of weird considering they were separated and couldn't stand each other, but they used to make an exception one night a year. At dinner, I couldn't hold my thoughts and desires back, so the words just came out.

“Dad, please, let me come with you!”

“Are you joking, Isa?” he said uncertain.

“I know about the war but I'm not scared. I want to help people and start doing what I'm studying for. I've also done some research and I discovered that Pakistan is a fascinating place! I saw some photos of the Lahore Museum, of the big cannon in front of it, of the beautiful streets, houses and traditions. It will surely be an important and formative experience for me!”

“No way! It may be too dangerous for a girl like you down there. You don't know what to expect.”

“But I really want to help! Anyway, I'm an adult and I've decided to come.”

“You are right. You are old enough to take your responsibilities.”

I stared at my mom. She looked at me with no move. She didn't look like an enthusiastic person.

“Your father is right” - she added- “I don't agree at all, you're always the same girl with impossible dreams. But if you want to go, I won't stop you, it's your choice. If you decide this is your path, you're going to do it at your own risk.”

Her cold words and her attitude hurt me. She had always been stiff with me; she didn't consider me at trustworthy enough, I wasn't perfect. She never argued with any of my choices. Without saying a word, I stood up and left away.

The flight from Fiumicino Airport to Lahore was exhausting and I felt disoriented when I arrived over there. Dad decided to take me on a tour of the city, right after a quick stop at our house. We caught a taxi and headed to our apartment. I immediately rolled the car window down, as to set a connection with that new air I was now breathing. It was hot, but I didn't care too much. The first thing about Lahore that struck me the most was the noisy streets and places, but I don't know whether to call it a real noise. After all it was almost pleasant, and it put me at ease: the parrots seemed to be screaming at me, the breeze was blowing in my hair. I could hear people talking loudly, maybe they were arguing. I could hear reproaches and orders. At least this was what I suppose those people were saying. The only Pakistani words I knew were

“helu”, maded” and “kia kum dad kim se num maded?” that stand respectively for “hi”, “hello” and “do you need some help?” My father taught me these words when I was a little girl, as it wasn’t the first time he went to Pakistan. He had been there once, when he was a young doctor. And one more time with some friends, as a tourist. He used to tell me about his experience over there and every time his eyes shone like stars.

I felt like I was in a dream: I was admiring places that, even though they were so different from the ones I was used to, were beautiful all the same.

We met our guide: two twenty-five-year-old Pakistani boys, named Ahmed and Badar approached us and took us to our house. We arrived at the house: it was beautiful, so different compared to my home in Rome.

It was furnished with antique pieces of furniture, there was a wooden sideboard that had many small doors all colored differently with different geometric shapes. The beds had wooden headboards and the wooden wardrobes, carefully handcrafted.

There was a terrace from which you could enjoy a beautiful view. The houses were tiny and all very colorful. From the terrace you could also see the huge bazaar. We freshened up, and put our bags down. One hour later we would meet again our guides that would lead us to the museum in Lahore: we had decided to visit it because we thought that there would be no people. The building was majestic, the entrance looked like a castle: it included three arches and two white columns accompanied inside a fortress that seemed to be made of terracotta, with a big central dome and two smaller ones on the side. When we arrived in front of the building, I was delighted. Then, when we approached the ticket office, we realized that the crowd in front of the museum didn’t let us get to the entrance, but we could look at the impressiveness of the building, anyway. We decided to come back to visit the museum in the evening.

Another place struck my attention: the Anarkali Bazaar. Those typical colorful markets of Lahore made the city lively. The streets were dirty and the floors near the stands were covered with colorful carpets; on every corner there were merchants who tried to sell fruit, carpets, jewels; on the buildings large signs of Lahore's most popular shops stretched out.

We approached the threshold of a tent that was selling pilaw, fried rice with mutton and spices, a Pakistani delicacy. It was now lunchtime, and hunger was rising. After lunch, we entered in a shop of handcrafted glass lamps. The seller was a nice old Pakistani man. He showed us his most beautiful lamp, the glasses were all colored, with silver, platinum and gold finishes, all cost 20,000 rupees (a real deal!).

While we were paying, we heard somebody screaming. I leaned out and I heard someone calling for help in Urdu (my dad recognized that word, meaning "help"). I rushed to the person I had heard screaming and I found out he was a young boy. He must have been 15 years old: his black and messy hair made him look like a little hedgehog and his black eyes were dark as the night. He had an amber skin and he was taller than the boys of his age, but when tried to approach him he walked away. I tried to ask him his name, but it seemed he didn’t understand my language. So, I called my father and, when he went closer to him, I noticed that he was not reluctant. At the beginning I couldn’t explain this behavior, but then I realized that I was in Lahore... that wasn’t Italy! During my research I remember reading an article about discrimination against women in Pakistan, but I didn't give it too much importance. Now I found myself having to face this issue. Meanwhile, my dad was starting to medicate the boy’s wound: it was a wound on his left arm. It had a deep cut and a little infection treatable with antibiotics. Once my father finished taking care of him, he asked me to bandage the wound. And again, the boy stepped back: he was rejecting me. At that point I lost my temper and I told him that if I didn’t bandage his arm, the infection would spread with serious consequences.

He finally gave in and accepted my help, so I asked him if he spoke English. He nodded, but he stayed mum.

“What’s your name?”

“Aamir...”

“Hi Aamir! I’m Isabella, but you can call me Isa. How did you get this wound?”

“I don’t know.”

“How old are you?”

“15.”

He wasn’t very talkative.

“Where are your parents?”

He didn’t answer.

“I understand... Let me take you to the place where you live. I have to make sure you have a rest. Do you want to show me the way?”

I motioned my father to go home alone, but he shook his head in disapproval.

“Isa... how did you come up with it?! We’re in a foreign Country. I would never leave you alone here, especially with a random person you’ve just met!”

“Okay... okay... but please keep distance, even Ahmed and Badar can follow us if you want. Please let me try, at least...”

My father was doubtful, but I was so determined that he eventually let me go forward.

I was escorted. The two “guards” were a bit suspicious, but also surprised by the initiative I took. Aamir pointed with his right arm to the West, where the sun set and the Earth is still hot. He took us in a middle-class district and he showed us his house: it was a nice place, maybe I had worried excessively. I decided to greet him and I told him that I would come back the next day to check his wound. He smiled at me and turned away. On our way home, every step I took, I noticed passers-by staring at me as if I was a shady person, I didn’t understand why, nor did I pay too much attention to this.

When we arrived home, we started to prepare our dinner and I was dead tired. At the market Dad had bought some cheese naan, a typical Pakistan bread with cheese, just to have a snack for dinner.

“I see you are thoughtful and quiet; I caught a glimpse of this from far, how did it go?” he asked

“Not very well, Aamir wasn’t very friendly. Why, do you think it is?”

“I told you that here things work differently; just give him more time.”

“Maybe you are right. I only have to get used to this new reality, but I think that it won’t be a quick process. Today, for example, while we were coming home, everyone gave me strange looks. Almost disgusted. I know that we’re in a completely different Country, but at the same time I can’t get over it.”

“I know, Isa, here things are different. Women can’t do a lot of things that men can do. Women can’t walk alone: they must respect the rules of their husbands. Here we must respect some rules, some religious rules. In theory, you should put the veil, but I will never make you follow religious rules that are not those of your religion. When I was young and I came here, I saw a girl aged 13 getting married to a man who was about 50 years old. Do you think that she decided it? I mean, no one wants to marry a man almost 40 years older than you! Can you understand what I want to say? Things are different, people are different, life is different. In Italy you, a woman, are free to marry who you really love. But this is not the point. The point is that here you are like a white flower in a field of violets. Everybody looks at you, but at the same time you are different.”

“Oh mamma, Dad! I didn’t know all of these things. Now I can understand why Aamir doesn’t want me close to him, and why people look at me like I’m an alien. I am grateful for everything you have done to me and for everything you give me every day.”

“You’re my daughter and I’ll support in everything you firmly want. Now, are you ready to go to the Museum?”

“Oh no! I have completely forgotten! Sorry Dad, but I’m too tired... we will go there another day.”

“Fair enough. I’ll ask Ahmed and Badar to postpone it.”

The next day was a Sunday morning and I knew that the following day I would start my job. Thinking about it made me a little nervous, but I wanted to face one problem at a time. At the top of my thoughts now there was Aamir and I had the intention to go and see how he was: knowing that he lived far away from me, I woke up early.

I told my father that I wanted to check how Aamir was. He didn’t agree at first, but we agreed upon asking Ahmed and Badar to accompany me. My loyal and super protective companions arrived to pick me up, so I went out.

Going out into the street I could happily see that the morning was the only moment where I could breathe in Lahore; the sun was still low and a fresh breeze blew on my face, ruffling my hair. On the street, to my immense joy, I was greeted by the scent of freshly baked chapati. After more than one hour I turned the corner and reached where I was supposed to meet Aamir, but there was no trace of him. So, I went to the bazaar, which was pretty close, to buy some spices. The previous day I had seen very fragrant ones I absolutely wanted to buy. Their smell completely captured me until I saw Aamir. At first, I thought that he was shopping too, but... he certainly didn't take things from the stalls in exchange for money, but from a lady's purse! As soon as he saw me, he was visibly surprised. Near him there was a small group of four other kids who looked down on me, with the same suspicious-looking that everyone had had towards me since I arrived. Aamir whispered something to his friends and walked over to me.

“What are you doing here?” He asked me sourly.

“I'm here for shopping, plus I have to check if your wound has started to heal.”

“I don't need your help. I'm fine by myself, he replied, withdrawing his arm.”

I didn't know why he treated me so badly, but I was starting to get nervous. I checked and folded the boy's forearm. I took a deep breath and answered him in the gentlest voice I could find.

“Why don't you tell me what you were doing and maybe take me with you?”

At first, he glared at me, but then definitely replied:

“Okay ... But first you have to be able to keep up with me!”

He jumped on a stack of wooden crates in front of him and he started running. His friends started to follow him. I started to follow him too. Ahmed and Badar were trying not to lose my sight, running as fast as they could.

I ran breathless and I hardly noticed the wonder that surrounded me: a long colorful avenue with red, yellow, green marquees; on every corner I smelled a different perfume that mixed with the previous one. The showcases of some shops had wood mannequins wearing dresses in bright colors and of the most extravagant shapes and fabrics. During the run I hit the baskets full of fruits on the stalls and I also flayed my elbow against hanging rugs, but, whatever happened, I would not stop. I decided that I would continue to follow him and I would not lose sight of him, not even for a minute.

Suddenly he turned around, and with his great surprise he saw that I was still behind him, so he picked up the pace. His friends followed suit, and so did I.

He conducted me to a district where “houses”, a sort of, were devoid of most of the hygienic services and a roof; the inhabitants, in fact, used blankets to cover themselves from the rain and the sun. He finally stopped and stared at me with a glancing smile. I asked him which of them was his shelter, and he pointed to a cot on his right. At first, I thought he was joking, but then I realized it was the stark truth. I was starting to understand the real life those people had to deal with: children left to their own devices who lived in gruesome conditions. Would these young men grow up with any points of references? God only knows what their future would be like.

“Is that your house?” I asked.

“Yes...” He replied shyly.

“Then, why did you make me believe that you lived in another place?”

“Well, because I don’t know you, and I don't trust you...”

Deep down, I knew that there was another reason... I was a woman. Anyway, I was there just to see his wound. I asked him to sit down and I started to remove the bandage from his forearm. I tried to do as carefully as I could, but I saw that the medication made him nervous. As soon as I saw the wound, I noticed that it was infected, full of dust. It needed to be cleaned and treated with antibiotics. Despite Aamir didn’t want me to touch him, in the end he let me do my job. When I finished, I said:

“Aamir, you must be quiet and don’t move your arm at least for two days, okay? Tomorrow I will get back to check your wound.”

“Can I ask you something?” He interrupted me kindly.

“Yes, sure.”

“Why are you so kind with me? That is to say... even though I treat you badly.”

“That’s a good question. Look, I’m a doctor, and we help people in difficulty, even if people don’t want to. You don’t realize the risk that you are running, Aamir.”

“I won’t be told by a woman what I have to do with my life... I thank you for being kind with me, but I don’t need it, clear?”

His statement didn’t need any answer and, sadly, I decided to go.

I looked for my companions and I saw them moving anxiously, looking around, probably they could not find me either.

“Where were you Miss Isabella?”

“Sorry, I lost sight of you, could you take me back home?”

“Yes, of course.”

When I arrived home, I realized that in the hurry I had forgotten my medical bag. I was worried, but could not return there again. However, at the military camp, they would have everything I needed.

I knew that the next day I should start my mission there, so I spent the afternoon at home mulling over the last 24 hours and at night talking to my father about the day, while ironing my white clean uniform. I woke up at six o’clock, I had already made my father breakfast when he woke up: that would put him in a good mood. We left home and went to the military camp by our rented car. On the way there, I was looking outside the window, thinking about Aamir, I just couldn't get the way he treated me and the things that he said to me out of my mind. I came to the conclusion that if he didn’t want my help, despite all of my efforts, I wouldn’t give it to him. Once we arrived at the camp, I immediately noticed that there wasn’t anything: we were in the middle of nothing, in the fields out of the city. The only view caused me a certain confusion that even today I could not describe: I felt a void inside of me. If I wasn't there for a humanity mission, probably I would feel at peace with myself, but I was there to save lives and I was more agitated than ever. During my years of studying, I had never helped anyone, despite having often fantasized about the great happiness that he would bring to me. In the vast, dry land I had in front my eyes, there were tents here and there. I entered one of them and I saw a nurse, waiting for me.

“Hi, are you Isabella, right? We were waiting for you!” She said.

“I am very honored to be here. What’s your name?” I asked in an excited voice.

“I’m Anna. I didn’t expect you to be so young.”

“I have worked for this organization for sixteen years. Today your only task will be taking care of the wounds of some soldiers. Come with me.”

At first, I was disappointed, I was hoping to do a little more, but I didn’t protest, I felt that being there I would give my contribution. Anna showed me all the various tools that I already knew.

In a bigger tent there was the so-called “waiting room” in which dozens and dozens of people were waiting to be helped. I started by calling a man with a nasty wound, even though lower limb was in pretty bad condition: about 15 stitches were enough to suture the wound. I was

obviously happy to help, and I wasn't expecting to perform an open-heart surgery, but... One at time the people came into my tent and they came out satisfied, and that made me feel satisfied, too. I didn't stop for a moment. Around lunchtime I went out to see my father. A few meters near the exit of the tent, I saw a familiar face, and I realized only after a few minutes that it was Aamir. But how did he find me? I had no words and for some reason I didn't feel flattered nor restless because of his surprise visit.

He came up to me and he said:

"Hi Isabella."

"Hi Aamir."

I reluctantly answered, I was still a bit angry with him for how he had treated me.

"I came to return your bag with your things, inside there was the flyer with the address of the camp and I thought that coming here would be the least."

I frowned and he continued:

"I'm really sorry for how I treated to you and what I said. I'd like to make it up to you. Maybe when you come to the city we can go out for lunch and I'll make you taste some of the specialties that Lahore offers."

"Aamir I'm so glad you want to make it up to me, but I have to work all day today, we work all week here: my day off is Tuesday."

"Okay, get ready for a breathtaking tour then."

"For me it's okay, but you have to tell me where and at what time to meet."

"Let's meet up in front of the Lahore museum at midday, nearby there is a very tasty place to eat, but I want it to be a surprise."

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow Isabella."

He jumped on an old lorry he had come by, driven by some of his adult friends or acquaintances. As soon as he left and I was alone, I felt lost and empty, but happy at the same time: the fact that he had come to apologize made me glad. Something had scratched away the harsh surface of his heart and this left me with a smile floating on my lips.

A mysterious kind of affection started growing inside me.

After lunch, I went back to work, a man had broken his breastbone, so I had to do a total body cast. The rest of the work was uneventful and at the end of the day I could see that I was happily tired but also a bit agitated.

I waited for my father to finish the surgery and then we went home together.

"I met Aamir today." I said, telling him what happened on that day.

"I'm very surprised, something like that is pretty unlikely to happen. He must have a great need he has just begun to be aware of" he replied.

I completely agree with him.

The next day I woke up calmly and began to arrange a couple of things in the house. When it was time to go out, I went to my father to tell him that I would go out to see Aamir. At the beginning he said that it could be dangerous, but after thinking for a few minutes he agreed: he had been young too, and he immediately thought that he was exactly like me. Brave, fearless, curious, generous. Just like me.

I went to the Lahore Museum and in front of it, I saw Aamir, who was astride the cannon in front of the entrance. As soon as he saw me, he got out and came to meet me. Once inside, the first thing I noticed were the magnificent stained-glass windows, it was almost like being inside a church in Italy. Inside we saw some very ancient sabers and Aamir was like captured for some reason, he felt like he was tied to every single element that was exposed. We also saw sacred books, statues, some frescoes and iconographies. I realized that I found more interesting the way Aamir felt connected to the Earth and his culture than the museum itself. When we arrived in front of a dress that belonged to a saint, Aamir lit up, opened his eyes widen and put his hand on the necklace he had around his neck. He must have always worn it, but I never noticed

it. Once the visit was over, we went out and Aamir, as promised, took me to this little place, truly enjoyable. We ate delicious dishes and he told me about some typical things of Pakistan.

When we had to say goodbye, I said to him:

“I had a very good time Aamir, I hope I can see you again soon.”

“I hope it too, Isabella.”

“Call me Isa, just Isa.”

“Okay, bye, Isa.”

So, I headed home and found my father waiting for me.

“Honey, how was your day?”

“It was a very good and positive day; we went to the Lahore museum and after that we ate together. I noticed that he was very fascinated by every object, he really loved his country. I also start to love living here, I start admiring this culture and I’m starting to feel very attached to this place.”

“Well, as you could see life here is different. however, I'm happy that you are starting to appreciate living here. And I’m happy Aamir is more open towards you.”

“How was work, instead?” I asked, curious.

“Today more people arrived at the camp. I’ll never get used to suffering. Nobody could. In the next days you’ll deal with more serious patients.”

I was still for a moment, struck by the words he said about the people at the camp. I was looking forward to coming there and give some help, trying to learn from his and the other doctors.

“Now, tell me about your visit at the museum.” He added.

“You have no idea how wonderful it is... Inside there is a marble floor that is sublime.”

“I am really happy for you, one day we will go there together if you want.”

“Sure. You look exhausted dad. I'll make dinner, you go take a shower.”

I prepared a classic chicken curry dish with rice, which he liked very much.

While we were having dinner, I was thinking about some interesting things that Aamir had illustrated to me and I wanted to share them with my father.

“You know, dad, Aamir told me a lot of interesting things about this country.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, for example did you know that in Pakistan some English sports, such as cricket, are very popular?”

“Well, considering Pakistan was part of India and India was an English colony, it makes sense...” he answered.

“And did you know that there are many different religions, not only the Muslim one, which is the main, I know, but not the only one. There are Hindu and Buddhist communities and even a substantial Christian community. They love wine, in fact an important holiday they celebrate is the one after the harvest or the one after Ramadan. The national dish is fried rice with mutton and spices, we ate it today at the restaurant. One thing that made me mad was the fact that he told me that girls usually marry between the age of 10 and 14, and boys usually between the age of 16 and 24. I did not expect such things to happen in modern society.”

“Modern, not so much.”

My father mumbled and then straightened and continued to talk:

“Wow, he told you a lot of things. He’s really talking to you more than before, isn’t he? He just needed time.”

“You were right, dad” I admitted.

“I’m exhausted and tomorrow we will have a long day of work. Time to go to bed... Good night, Isa.”

“Night, dad.”

The next day I had to go to the camp. I greeted my father, who had different shift, as he was the main doctor, and left the house, as usual, late and with shortness of breath and unkempt

hair because of the time. I went down and took the car, opened the gate and went out. I had already learned the road from my house to the camp. Actually, I was learning pretty well how to drive in the crazy traffic of the city. As soon as I left the gate, I stopped: I had forgotten it was market day and the streets were full of stalls and people. Undoubtedly, I could not use the car and had to walk to reach the meeting point where the local bus took volunteers from "*Medici senza frontiere*" to the military camp just outside the city. I got out stressed and started running. I walked through the stall of nuts, rugs and even the pot stand, dodging people and apologizing for dropping some bags or fruit. At one point I heard my name. I sneaked to a stop and turned around. It was Aamir:

"Hey Isa where are you running so fast?"

"Sorry Aamir I can't talk, I'm in a hurry."

"I see this, but where are you going?"

"I'm late for work."

"Can I come with you?"

"What?"

"Can I come? Please? I just want to watch and learn."

I stopped for a second and I thought: after all nothing bad would happen if he came, also because he was 15 years old, he knew how to behave.

"Okay, but now run."

We missed the first bus and had to call and wait for another one to come and pick us up. We arrived at the camp almost 2 hours late. My father, who had already arrived by that time, welcomed us.

"Isa but where were you? I was afraid something had happened to you!"

"I'm sorry dad, you're right." I answered apologetically

"I see we have guests."

"Yes. Dad, this is Aamir, you remember him?"

"Hi Aamir! I am Leonardo, Isabella's father. I'd appreciate if you helped here, we're laden down today, we have a lot of work to do! If you want to be useful."

"Yes sure, just tell me what to do" he said right away.

"You can fill in these forms where you will mark all the patients we have already done, in order to proceed more neatly with the visits."

He didn't answer. I saw him embarrassed and I understood why: Aamir had never attended an English school and therefore he could not write or read in English. My father immediately understood the situation:

"I got it. Okay then give a hand to Isa, who will surely need it. I'll see you around, then!"

After the cleansing and disinfecting and after having worn a clean uniform, he flanked me and we immediately visited the first patient: a soldier had a sharp wound in his right arm. I opened my briefcase and began to treat him. Aamir sat next to me:

"What are you doing now?"

"I'm disinfecting his wound and removing the pieces of grass and the scraps on it."

"Oh... don't open bleeding wounds upset up?"

"A bit. But see, if you want to help someone you have to put up with your ills a little."

Then he turned to the soldier and asked him something in Urdu. I curiously asked Aamir what he'd just said and he replied:

"I asked him if he hurts and how he got hurt. He told me he fell down while he was running and was hit by pieces of a grenade."

Immediately I had an idea! Aamir could be useful as a means of communication. Each time I had to communicate with patients I had to call a translator, who wasn't always available, or use gestures or come out with the strangest ideas: thanks to him everything would be easier.

At the end of the day we were exhausted. On our way to his house we were talking about the day.

“You know Isa, I’ve learned so many things... you know, when I grow up maybe I want to be a doctor. I understood what it means to truly help others and how it feels. Thanks for letting me be part of this.”

He turned and walked into his hut. I took a deep breath and smiled. I closed my eyes, and slowly began to go home. He was right: we are made to give ourselves to others.

Hours became days, and days became weeks, and my friendship with Aamir became stronger and stronger. Now, we meet every Tuesday and most weekends. We became friends, best friends, maybe. One day, we went on a picnic in the ‘Bagh e Jinnah’ park in the centre of the city.

“Isa, sorry.” He suddenly said.

“For what?” I replied puzzled.

“Sorry if I have doubted about you. Sorry if I thought you were incapable as a woman. Sorry if I treated you badly and sorry if I didn’t understand you. Sorry if I am unable to accept the fact that you are incredibly intelligent and different from others.”

“I’m confused, I think I don’t understand.”

“The truth is that since the first day I saw you I understood you were different, and is for this reason that maybe I decided to treat you badly: I couldn’t accept that you, a woman, were more intelligent than me. I mean, women here are naiver, or better, they are underestimated to the point they become sure about the fact that they really are. You aren’t like this. You are able to make your own decisions and be autonomous. For this reason, I want to apologize, as I wasn’t able to recognize your value from the very beginning. You’re much better than me.”

“No Aamir, here no one is dominant over no one. We are all equal: me and you are the same, with the same rights, maybe we’ve got different personalities, a different temper but we have the same value.”

“You are right. Thanks for making me open my eyes.”

I didn’t know what to answer. I hugged him. Thinking about it, he also taught me something, but I was actually ashamed to express my emotions. He taught me how to see the life with simplicity and to appreciate what we have; to see the positive side everything and to live every instant of the life as if it were the last.

He allowed me to grow up, to be more open. He had allowed me to feel emotions and affections that I had never felt before, and that I could never imagine to feel. Even today it is difficult for me to describe this kind of affection, but somehow, I felt responsible for the future of Aamir. “*You become responsible of what you have tamed*”: I remember having read these words in an incredible book some time ago... The Little Prince, one of my favourites.

If something happened to him, I would never forgive myself for that. I felt like the burden was on my shoulders, but at the same time I knew very well that Aamir’s life was wild and uncertain. It had been living this way for three years, and he got used to it. But if I could help him, I would do anything to make him happy. In addition to this, Aamir taught me to appreciate his world and his culture to which he seemed very bonded. I was very skeptical at first, but I found that, despite some ideas I could never support, Pakistani culture was very fascinating: religion, mystery, colours, scent, food, spices, carpets... I never thought I’d be able to fall in love with another culture, and that also made me realize how mentally closed I was.

Was about to tell him some news about my close departure, but before I could open my mouth, he continued:

“The first time that we met, you asked me if I was lonely and I answered “yes”, and it’s true, I had to learn to manage on my own. But it hasn’t always been like that. I lived with my parents and I had a quiet life, we weren’t very rich but money has never been a problem, we always loved each other, we were very close. We often traveled together, we visited a lot of cities and my favorite was Islamabad: for this reason, I know Pakistani culture very well, because I know Pakistan very well. On a bad day, three years ago, me, my dad and my mom were travelling by

car, when suddenly a van cut our road and we got off the road. In that terrible crash my parents died, and I was survived. These events made the person I am now. Without my parents I was lonely, I had nobody, the street became my house. I met some guys who used to steal in the bazaars and I joined them, I knew I was wrong but I didn't have other options. The only point of reference were my parents and, in particular, my grandfather and his stories and life lessons. I loved being with him when I was a child. I remember him well and I was very fond of him, he always told me the adventures of his father, and sometimes I dreamed of being him. Even now I think and admire him."

"I imagined that you had a bad story behind but I didn't think it was so dramatic. Sorry for the intrusion but I've been thinking about it for a long time and now I'd like to ask something: I understand that you are very attached to the medallion around your neck, did your grandfather give it to you?"

"I'm happy for your question Isa, it actually belongs to my great grandfather, that he gave to his son and he gave it to me. It's something that makes me feel connected to my family."

"It's really nice what you just told me. I know that it isn't the best moment for the news I have to give you but I cannot postpone any longer. As you know, I came here as a volunteer for a short period and I can't stay here anymore. I have to come back to Italy to end the residency. I'm living tomorrow."

He was visibly shocked and he replied:

"Are you kidding me? I don't understand, why can't you stay here?"

"I have to go back Italy to become a doctor."

"I can't believe that you are going to leave me."

"I am not leaving you, I am just going away for some times but I promised you that I will come back."

He nodded weakly and we said goodbye with a hug.

The next day, my father and I packed our bags to go back to Italy. I knew in my heart that I would miss Pakistan and my work there, but I would miss Aamir more than anything. The day before I gave him a Nokia with my number already among the contacts.

Once back in Rome I felt disoriented but at the same time happy to be at home. I had a week off, then I was back to my ordinary life, with the long shifts in the hospital ward. My last year and a half of specialization ended and I decided it was time to go back to Pakistan, not necessarily to settle down but because, in the end, I had grown fond of that land, that was no longer hostile to me as it was at the beginning. And then I had promised my friend I'd come back and see him.

While I was thinking about this, I got a message on my phone: Aamir was telling me that was in the army now, following his great-grandfather's steps. It was a dream he had always had. That notice shocked me deeply. After the experience at the military camp, I was really worried for him.

I was sitting with my parents for our usual dinner together and I seized the opportunity to talk about my decision to go back to Lahore. It seemed to me to come back to my birthday 2 years before.

"Mum, dad, it's been almost two years since my experience in Pakistan. I finished my residency and now I'd like to return to find Aamir, to see how is he going."

"If that is what you want, - said my father - I will not stop you. You have learnt how to behave in most dangerous situations in that place. You have grown wiser."

His answer struck me greatly, I didn't understand why he was so permissive now. My mother, for once, broke her barrier and with a sweeter smile than usual, said to me:

"Go Isa, if you really want it."

Less than a month later I was one more time in Lahore, happier than ever, and I noticed something different. There was an atmosphere of serenity, but of a sad calm at the same time.

"Why is there such an atmosphere around here?" I asked to a passer-by

“Where do you live? The war is over! And we have been defeated by India!”

With that beautiful and at the same time sad news in my heart I started looking for my friend who I had missed so much.

I thought I could find him at his house and there he was, carrying some shopping bags of an aged woman who was walking next to him. When I saw him, my heart started beating again, I didn't have an idea if he had survived or not, but only seeing him made me feel better. When he saw me his face shone, a big smile came and he ran toward me, placing the old lady's bags first. He spread his arms and wrapped me in an immense hug, which I hoped would never end.

Then we started talking about this and that, and he told me about the terrible adventures he had been through. He told me about the first time he had to kill a man and how much this memory still traumatizes him now.

“Isa, all I have left now is hope, only hope ...”

“Hope for what?”

“The only hope that someone was next to me.”

“Who are you referring to?”

“I refer to my great grandfather. His name was Kimball O'Hara, but everyone called him Kim. He was born in India, his mother was Indian and his father Anglo-Saxon, and thanks to this English trace I can speak this language. Over time he had become a spy for the government.”

“What a fascinating story!”

“I've always seen it as a point of reference, and to be honest, the only reason I was excited to enlist was because I wanted to follow his example, of a brave and heroic man, who will never be afraid of anything. But now that I've lived this experience, I don't believe it anymore. I think I'll never forget the military life; it will mark me forever. But I don't belong there. Now that it's all over I have nothing left.” His gaze became now more earnest and pensive. “I ask myself: *Who am I? Who do I belong to? Do I really have a purpose, in the end?*”. Although I have always loved my land, I no longer have anything that holds me back. My family is gone.”

This question struck me a lot: I had never wondered who *I* belonged to.

“Aamir, you are a 17-year-old boy, and that you have your whole life ahead of you. You taught me to appreciate what I could never have imagined. And remember also that I will always be with you, no matter what.”

“Yeah, but now you're going to leave again.”

This sentence left me puzzled for a moment, and there was a silence, a silence that seemed to me to be endless. Then we said goodbye, but we parted in an almost sad way.

He suddenly turned his back on me and embraced me, with a tender hug, and I heard him sobbing. I understood that at that moment he had put aside his pride and that he really cared for this bond we had. He said:

“I don't want you to go. When you leave, I'll find another place to live, but the only place where I'll ever feel at home is with you.”

These words moved me. I looked at him in his eyes:

“You know I love you, and this is forever. Now, why don't you think about we can do together tomorrow?”

He smiled wiping his tears: “Sure, we'll have a nice ride like on the old days.”

I headed to the hotel where I was staying, but I couldn't stop thinking about those words from him: “Who am I? To whom or to what do I belong?”

These questions provoked me deeply. I asked myself: who do *I* belong? I immediately realised that true belonging is an affective bond. I thought of my father, my friends and Aamir.

I spent a tormented night; those questions were spinning in my head undeterred. I decided to sleep on it and think about it the next morning.

When I woke up, I had no more doubts, so I went to Aamir, with whom I had arranged a meeting in front of the Lahore Museum, and I said:

“Aamir, I've been thinking a lot about what you told me yesterday, and I can't deny that those words struck me. However, this morning I called my father suggesting that you come to live with us in Italy, and I do not deny that I've discussed with my parents, but eventually we both understood that it's feasible: above all that is the right thing to do. What do you say?”

“Well... I must confess you caught me a little off guard but, as I told you yesterday you are the most important thing now, so I would do anything to be with you. On the other side, my roots are here, this has always been my home after all. It will not be easy to leave this place, but I you are my family now. What I am is also what I was and what I have received from my father and my family. But I can see a new bond that makes me be myself. I'll go with you.”

I was happy, and my parents too, to welcome Aamir in our family.

Aamir walked into my life with a strong and yet delicate touch. What is identity? “My identity is the link with my land” is what he told me on that day “but I don't long for anything else than be part of you and your family.”

Maybe what we are is what we love and the affection that owns our lives. I felt grateful.

Aamir was ready to start a new life and I was willing to discover what else his presence would bring into mine.