“Budding Tulips” by Gabriella Ross
1st Place, Short Story 10-12
“The wound is the place where the Light enters you.”

— Rumi

It was on January 24, 2012. Lalzari, my best friend, and I were exiting the girl’s school. I clutched my poems and stories to my chest to prevent the wind from whisking them away from the daily mini sandstorm. We stood outside the school and talked about school when I noticed a crumpled afghan fall from a passing man’s pocket and hit the ground. I squeezed past the pedestrians walking in opposite directions and retrieved it. This is the moment that I would rue forever. The day a generous deed would ruin me: my self-consciousness, my pride, and my strength. Why did I take this adverse step?

“Excuse me, sir is this yours?”

Click.

The ground sank. Seconds later, a thunderous rumbling shook my legs. My blood froze, fear seized my body. I looked down at my feet, the last time I would ever see my lower two appendages. Before I could even blink, a formidable, white light flashed before my eyes, tossing me into the air and throwing prostrate to the hard ground. The forbidding light faded away and revealed blooming red roses. The roses melted into the acidic taste of blood that dribbled into my mouth. Screams echoed through my brain, bouncing off the sides of my head ringing endlessly. I attempted to push myself back up on my wobbly arms. My vision swam for what seemed like ages until it finally focused on the chunks of flesh scattered all around me. A gory bone was
protruding out of my calf. I was so stunned, I couldn’t even scream. Lalzari came running
towards me, her face covered in tears and my blood.

“You’re gonna be okay,” she cried in a trembling voice, “Allah will protect you.”

“Will I die?”

“No, you’re not. You’re a strong girl with a brave soul and you will make it.”

Red and blue lights danced upon the ground. I still couldn’t get my eyes off the bone sticking out
of me. Once the paramedics touched me, I passed out.

All I hear is the constant beeping and crying in the pitch black darkness. My thighs feel sore and
cumbersome. I wake up, and my family is crowded around my bed in the bustling hospital of
moaning patients and pacing nurses. Baba and Bahrawar hugged me, their hot tears warmed my
skin. Zaalan faced away from me, quietly sobbing in his hands. What was wrong?

"Baba, it's okay. Everything is gonna be alright."

"If Allah wills, Hala," he held my hand. I knew something was wrong, but I couldn't fully
grasp my issue. More tears streamed from his eyes, "You stepped on a landmine, and your legs
were blown off."

He held me in his arms again, my thoughts raced through my head. I looked down at the heavily
bandaged stubs I would live with forever. How could it happen so fast? I can't make sense of
anything that just happened a few seconds ago. Or was it a few seconds ago?

"How long have I been here?"

"About six days."
Tears trickled down my cheeks. Is this my life now? Am I worthless now? My brain kept conjuring questions I couldn't answer. My legs were gone, I was gone. I ignored everything I heard around me and just sat there, staring at the plain ceiling. I sank into a silent, inescapable pit of despair.

For the next two months in the hospital, every day was a grueling hardship. Life without legs was impossible. My stubs were sore all the time. Sometimes, I would lean over to scratch my missing extremities when they weren't there. I would spend my time out of therapy staring at the phantom body parts, reflecting on what I should've done to prevent this.

What if I hadn't been generous? What if I had just waited for Baba? I'd cut myself with needles each time I thought about the past, for the pain of lacerations always replaced the aching void inside of me temporarily. But something was still missing, cuts nor floral gifts could help me. I was lost in an infinite desert where the wind whispered death songs in my ear. I aimlessly wandered, until someone found me again.

The nurse peeked her head through the door. "You have a guest Mermon Hala."

I hid under my white blanket, part of me wanted to stay in solitude, like the Hindu Kush Mountains in winter. The other part was curiosity, a desire I yearned for. I turned my head slightly towards the door, and there stood Lalzari. She held her hands over her mouth, her eyes widened. She was frozen, then her face was full of joy to see me. Lalzari ran up to hug me in an embrace, but I refused to reciprocate.

"Allah has willed!"

"I guess," I mumbled reluctantly. I partially agreed, my body was alive, but my mind was dead.
"Everyone at school misses you so much," she said, fishing out something that made a crunching sound. "They sent you all of these gifts." She carefully placed them on my nightstand.

I let my aching extremities hang from the bed, I buried my head in pillows.

"Hala, are you okay? You're not being yourself."

"I'm fine." I grumbled.

"Tell me the truth. I'm here for you."

I took a deep breath. I trusted Lalzari more than I did a therapist, she was my only hope.

"You know, I've been thinking lately about ending this mess. I don't think there's a stop to this madness. Every day is another burden to carry on my shoulders. Only my demise will be my escape hatch out of my new world."

She looked up at me with her sparkly, blue eyes, "The world needs more girls like you who are smart, beautiful, funny, and loving. We all go through obstacles in life, it's what makes us stronger. You may be physically different, but you are still the same Hala."

"No, I'm not."

"Amputation is not a setback, it's an opportunity for you to heal from your scars. Humans make mistakes. Some are irreversible, but we keep pushing forward and look to the future."

"But-"

The door creaked open, the nurse appeared. "Visiting time is over." she called. She motioned for her to leave, but Lalzari stayed and rummaged through her bag. She pulled out a pencil and blank sheets of paper and handed it to me. "Many writers express their feelings through the art of literature. I know you love to write poems." I accepted her offerings, and she was escorted out.
I thought about what Lalzari told me after she left. Keep pushing forward and look to the future.

What future do I have? There is no future for a legless Afghan girl. I would be a widow beggar on the Kabul streets. I can't work, stand, marry, or do anything now. My head turned towards the papers and the pencil tiredly.

For some reason, they called my name and tempted me. My fingers inched forward to grab them. The feeling felt so pleasant in my hands, I started to write stories of heroines, monsters, war, and distant lands that evolved into poems that touched the hearts of the nurses and therapists. The world was not an eternal trial anymore, it was a beauty worth living. I had hope I would live a fulfilling life of laughter, sadness, and friendship.

Writing saved me.

One month later, I was discharged from the hospital. It was great to be in Kabul again, to smell the fresh cardamom and taste the crispiness of gosh-e-fil. I came back appreciative of what I have and doing what Lalzari said, looking towards the future. The desert I was trapped had turned into a valley of blooming tulips. Each budding flower is a story waiting to be told.

Pashto Glossary

Afghani- the official currency of Afghanistan.
Baba- father.
Gosh-e-fil- a flat donut in the shape of an elephant’s ear.
Mermon- Ms.