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Article

The Dying Child



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THE DYING CHILD

A STORY OF A BUS GROUP TRAVELING IN ASIA, MEETING TWO AFGHAN MEN WITH A CHILD AT A DESERTED ROADSIDE CARRYING THE LOAD OF A VERY SICK CHILD – A DESPERATE MEETING POSING THE QUESTION WHY CHILDREN DIE FROM HUNGER IN THE LAST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

"Henning, shouldn't we take him along?"

"Yes, let's do it. He is standing quite alone. Usually ten others will turn up when you stop."

The desert and the unbelievable heat probably did much for the fact that we could not drive past the Kuchi, who beckoned us in a way that sort of urged us to stop. From where did he come? In a place where we could see nothing else but the totally flat, shimmering sand – and the stony desert?

The bus stopped with the usual jerk a little past the man – his white turban glided past the windows to finally disappear. Eddy leaned forward through the door and shouted, "Dilaram?" At the name of the next city, the man shook his head and said without any facial expression but with great seriousness: "Girisk".

We nodded and with a gesture asked him to come in. We would have those 128 km behind us before long. However, he had returned to the ditch behind the bus. Nobody could see him, but a moment later we heard Eddy say, "He is bringing another person – and a child! The other one has a child in his arms. It looks ill." We were a little annoyed. Every time one person asked for a lift, more turned up. But this time it might be different. The thing about the child that looked so ill made it different. Was it going to the doctor – maybe he was far away – what was wrong with the child?

The two men came to the bus door and nodded meaningfully towards the child as if to communicate that it was all about it. Again, we nodded very approvingly and suggested with gestures that they had better come inside – it looked very urgent. While they looked at each other in order to decide, we put a comforter on a seat. The man who was carrying the child forced his way past the other one and cautiously placed his burden on the comforter. The sun fell directly on the child's head. We wanted to move the child into the shadow and it was actually the first time we had a closer look at it. Until then, we thought it was a sick child that was going to the doctor. Now we saw that it was a dying child. Not because something special had happened that day. It was a day just like all other days – without food, without sufficient hygiene, without any possibilities of change.

Its whole body was filled with big wounds with a reddish scab, especially around the buttocks and on the scalp. The limbs were quite thin and did not seem to be capable of doing anything.

From time to time, it tried to lift its hand to the mouth – as if to stop the tiny stream of blood that during the day had colored red the whole mouth of its far too old face. At the same time, a small groaning was heard – more resigned than pained. The eyes were closed, but all over there was infection and wounds.

We looked at the two men – and saw that they were looking at us. They stared at the child and then at us.

"It is dying," somebody said in Danish.

Then we stared again. Something had to be done, and we were not the ones to decide about it. Wouldn't they go to the doctor?

Again we said: "Girisk, Girisk" – let us go to the doctor at once.

The big one – he who had carried the child and appeared to be its father – quite understood our intention. He left hesitantly, went back twenty meters behind the bus where he dived under an underpass, made for absorbing the water from a sudden rainfall. Here he had hidden the child before in the shadow.

He turned up with a tube, a cloth and a small bowl with water and a couple of pieces of sheep's stomach. After he entered, we made a move to start. It was urgent.

"Girisk," we said – just in order to get the last confirmation that they wanted to go.

They did not. A conversation had developed between them – in Pushtu, but it was clear that it was about these topics: The child. Us. Themselves.

They resigned more and more as if they had expected that we could do something on the spot. A miracle. And now they saw that we could not. We were not magicians. We could just sit and listen with close attention to the fact that these two men in their incomprehensible language would reach the understandable solution that there was nothing else to do but to get out of this foreign bus with their child.

Suddenly we also recognized that it was the only solution. How could we reach the doctor before death occurred? Why should the child die in the hands of foreigners, bumping along towards a remote city, with a doctor you could not even pay?

The father bent down and carefully lifted his child out of the comforter, out of the bus. He placed it just outside the door, took off his vest, rolled it together and placed it under the child's head, dipped a piece of sheep's stomach in the water in the small bowl and dripped some drops in the mouth of the child. The small lips trembled, while the water was running over the clotted blood on its teeth.

The faces of the two men had closed. They were staring at the child, sensing nothing else.

We, who one moment ago had been let into their world and their problem, did not exist any more. Now there were only them, the child and death.

It was too much for us. One ran for a textbook of Persian. Feverishly looking for the word "doctor", "Tabib" - there it was. Tabib. We said it loud, touched for the first time the father and said, "Tabib. We have to get the child to a tabib." He looked up and said, "Tabib", as if he would have said, "Didn't you realize until now? Do look at the child!"

And we looked at the child who was dying.

And we looked at the father who knew it.

Then, we just stood there.

Until the silence was broken by the father, who with a strong gesture ordered us to disappear. We were of no use, why would we be standing there staring at his tragedy? Again this gesture. We remained standing for one more moment without being able to do what we had to do. Then we got into the bus one after another.

Later that day someone was crying.

We have not yet talked about why children die from hunger in the last half of the twentieth century.

But shouldn't we do it soon?"