

Global short stories competition

Winners November 08

THE BET

Joan Osbaldeston

I was eleven when Dana won the Eurovision song contest. I was rooting for Mary Hopkin because she was English but my mother, being from Derry and my sister Bernie being a creep, were supporting the ninny from The North with the green hairslide and dimples.

We watched all those competitions, Eurovision, Ms World, Opportunity Knocks. It was a serious business in our house, sides were taken. To listen to us you'd think we knew Miss Bolivia personally or had close connections with Cyprus and their satin suited men with big moustaches. My Mum, always supported the land of her birth, my loyalty was to England because the rest of us were English and Bernie usually chose France because St Bernadette was French "But if Dana's from Northern Ireland like you" I said to my mum, doesn't that mean she's English?" Mum gave me a withering look. My father sat on the fence. He was the Switzerland of our house but without the cuckoo clocks.

I had a lot riding on this particular Eurovision. I'd bet my sister Bernie a month's pocket money that Mary Hopkin would win. It was cash in the bank as far as I was concerned because our entries had great form, we'd had Lulu, Cliff Richard and Sandie Shaw. After a whole day of considering, Bernie accepted my bet agreeing to pay me out of her savings account, an account better guarded than a chest of gold doubloons. She never spent anything on herself, preferring to take her pocket money down every Saturday and pay it in, poring over the columns in her book and scribbling numbers in the back, her pencil knocking against her teeth, her eyes up to the ceiling as she worked out some complicated interest calculation. Bernie was saving for her travels. She planned to move to Paris when she was 18, and live near the Eiffel Tower. She tried to make me speak with her in French but I always refused even though I longed to show off what I knew.

When she agreed to the bet I had a moment of uncertainty. If she was prepared to wager a month's pocket money, and not even on the French entry, could she know something that I didn't? Had she read stuff in the paper about Dana's chances or was it simply the idea of taking money off me that motivated her? Merdre! I'd been a fool to take on Banque de Bernadette, but it was too late now, I'd signed the betting slip.

Just to reassure myself I wrote to my cousin Austin to get his view on it. A year older than me he lived in Derry like all the rest of my mother's family and he knew what was what.

Dear Austin,

How's life with you...etc etc. It's the Eurovision next week and I think Mary Hopkin is going to win. Bernie's going for Dana. I've bet her a month's pocket money that England's going to get it. What do you think...?

The rest of the letter was filled with details of my uneventful life, my plans for the holidays and jokes from my joke book.

"Dana's a DIV" was his reassuring reply.

Everyone thinks so, except for the old grannies and her teachers. She went to the posh school and is right up her own backside. Mary's going to win, I promise you."

Thank God for that I thought as I folded up the letter and put it back in the envelope, four weeks

money was my entire savings, if Dana won I was stony broke.

..

I sat eating my tea as the news rumbled on. Belfast lay in smoking ruins and the British army stalked the streets, dodging sticks and stones. I glanced at the screen not really equating that Northern Ireland with the one of Austin, and my aunties and my granddad. Austin and his mates roamed the place quite freely, picking up rubber bullets and bits of broken metal, but apart from that he never mentioned it much in his letters.

He promised to send me a rubber bullet next time he wrote. I imagined it to be small and squidgy a bouncy version of the metal ones. They were probably used like peashooters or tranquilliser darts, making the baddies jump and squeal, giving them red welts on their arms and legs. Maybe I'd make a hole in it and hang it around my neck. I waited eagerly for my next letter.

When Dana won Eurovision 1970, beating Mary Hopkin into second place I was outraged. Bernie jumped about the room, shrieking and clapping, and even though I called her "une baguette stupide" it didn't dampen her glee. Mum was happy too, a triumphant smile stretching across her face. Bernie spent the rest of the evening in furious communion with her savings book, and I avoided her, writing instead the words to Mary Hopkin's great entry, in turquoise ink to post to Austin.

It was a week after the Dana disaster and I was doing my homework when the phone rang. I was pleased to answer it, anything to get out of Bernie's way. She was after me for her winnings.

"Can I speak with yer mammy, its yer auntie Mary here."

Mum came to the phone and closed the hall door. She reappeared five minutes later white-faced.

Dad turned from his paper.

"Y'alright love"

Mum was trembling a little. I felt a knot tightening in my stomach.

"It's my daddy, he's been hurt." there was a catch in her voice. I held my breath.

My father stood up, the paper slithering to the floor. Something had happened to granddad. Dad put his arm around my mother a gesture that was so unfamiliar it made me feel uneasy. He sat her down, and she slumped on the settee.

"He was caught in crossfire, the army and some kids."

"Jesus Christ" my father breathed.

I waited for her to tell him off, but for once she ignored his misuse of the Lord's name.

She pulled at her cheek with her thin white hands.

"They got him in the face with a rubber bullet"

I breathed a sigh of relief. That was alright then, it wasn't a real one. He'd be shocked for a bit, and would drop in to see the doctor for a check up but then he'd be over to see us as he'd planned, with boxes of Lindt chocolate bunnies from his sweet shop and maybe some Milk Tray chocolates, the kind that came in a bar, with all the chocolate joining them together. I scampered up to my room, hoping that the drama would distract Bernie, but she followed me up, and stood at my open door.

"So that's £2.00 you still owe me", she said.

"Honestly Bernie", I said, "how can you talk about money at a time like this?"

She dropped her head and poked at a hole in the woodwork with her finger.

"But you still owe it to me" she said and slipped off into her own room.

I lay on my bed and thought about granddad. I'd spoken to him on the phone last Sunday. He'd told me he was coming over for a wee holiday. I thought of him outside his shop, suddenly slapping his hand to his cheek, darting around to see what yobbo had fired the thing at him, poor gramps. He'd want to wait a week or so now while the red marks went down but at least that meant I didn't have to give up my room straightaway to his aftershave and starched collars and funny man smell. I turned on my side and switched on the radio. It was Dana so I turned it off again.

The next day my parcel arrived from Austin.

"It's from Ireland" the postman said rattling it, "I hope there's not a bomb in it."

I stared at him, then closed the door without saying thank you. Up in my room I undid the packaging. It was heavy and I guessed Austin had sent me something else too. I tore off the paper and unfolded the tissue. There was a big black solid object inside, almost as big as a toilet roll tube with a pointed end like a missile. I poked it. It was hard like a car tyre. This must be some other bit of hardware he'd found. I rummaged through the paper for my little bullet but there was nothing else there. I opened the note.

"Thanks for the song lyrics. She really should have won. Here's a rubber bullet like I promised, shame about Dana, and your bet. Hope you didn't lose too much.
Austin"

I dropped the bullet on the bed, afraid to touch it. I wanted to be sick. My granddad had been hit in the face with one of these? I stared at it for a minute then picked it up again gingerly with a bit of tissue, and dropped it in the bottom of my drawer under my jumpers. I went into the bathroom locked the door and filled the bath. I sank into its burning depths until my skin turned pink and even my head was covered. I stayed there until the water went cold and my fingers were as wrinkly as granddad's.

I went to school the next day but I didn't tell anyone what had happened. I thought about the bullet in the drawer, and wondered what I should do with it.

When I got home it was my father who let me in. I stared at him and he looked away. I hesitated for a moment, afraid to let go of the doorjamb. Bernie was already there sitting on the sofa, still in her blazer. I went upstairs to my room and took off my coat. I tried not to look over at my chest of drawers, but I couldn't help it. I had the feeling that if I opened it, the thing would burst out huge and dark like a Zeppelin, swallowing up the room and suffocating me. I took £2.00 out of my money box and hurried downstairs.

"Will you sit down please Claire", my dad said in a strangled voice "I have some very sad news for you"

I dropped onto the settee, and held Bernie's hand pressing the money into it at the same time.

"Its OK", she whispered, her voice shaky, "you keep it. Mary should have won."

My eyes welled up and the tears began to roll down my face. I squeezed the dry notes and her damp fingers, and she squeezed mine back.

"Merci" I said, "Merci beaucoup."

Highly commended Eat, Mister Jan Miklaszewicz

On the day of my grandmother's funeral, I stopped eating. To begin with, there was no conscious effort to starve myself. I didn't have a grand scheme, I just wasn't hungry, and I couldn't face food. I couldn't even face the thought of food. Like my insides had been scooped out and replaced with sawdust.

The service was sombre, as they are, and the wake was held in the bungalow of an aunt, who I had never liked. Her main concern seemed to be whether or not people were enjoying the spread she had put out. There were vol-au-vents, and sausage rolls, and chicken drumsticks. She was extremely proud of her Coronation Chicken. Of course, it was very likely that she was just hiding her pain, but at the time I couldn't find the energy to see it that way.

While others filled their faces, I sat on a bench overlooking the vegetable patch in the back garden, where I smoked myself stupid and rejected a dozen offers of alcohol. The sky was heavy with cloud, and I could feel the weight of it pushing me down into the ground. Numerous relatives took turns to sit beside me and reminisce, but as the day drew on their drunkenness peeved me and I excused myself and went back to my flat.

There, I continued to smoke, until my chest became tight and I felt truly nauseous. As evening drew in, I didn't turn any of the lights on, and sat in gloom, then darkness, until eventually I fell asleep in the armchair. I woke several times, but felt no inclination to undress and take myself to bed. When morning came, the sick grey city dawn came creeping through the window, and finally I stood and sloped to the bathroom.

A morning routine, in normal life, commenced with phase one. A five-minute shower, during which time I would brush my teeth and spit catarrh into the plughole, rinsing my mouth in the steamy hot water from the showerhead. Phase two was a case of dry and shave, followed by the deodorant and dress duties prescribed in phase three. It was at phase four that I encountered difficulties.

Phase four was a trip to the local internet café. A phase designed to prevent the need for grocery shopping. The last time I had milk or bread in the flat was when my mother brought some round the day I moved in. That was approximately four years ago. An internet café is good, because it provides all the conveniences of a morning at home without any of the inconveniences. And by inconveniences, I mean, in my case, the washing up of dirty dishes, and the thunderous feet of the very fertile unemployed family which lives in the flat above me.

I reached the café without incident, and approached the curved glass counter with the expensive sandwiches and the meagre portions of selected cakes. So far so good. The autopilot was functioning as it should have been. But at this point, the black box [they're actually orange, you know] began to record a deviation. The Polish girl with the too-large breasts and the slight hair-lip asked me what I wanted. And I just stood there dumbstruck. Like a child at the nativity who's forgotten his lines. I didn't actually want anything.

Of course, I had to buy something, or I couldn't make use of their Wi-Fi. So I stammered, sucked my teeth, and came away with a bottle of mineral water. I took a seat by the window, went online, and checked my emails. Three kind offers to expand the size of my penis [how do they know?], a bargain rate on airport parking, some prick from South Africa who wanted my bank account details, and, judging by the title, a letter of condolence.

Knowing pretty much what it would say, I immediately deleted it. It would say something along the lines of: I know how much she meant to you... Well, what's the point in telling me what I already know? And anyway, you don't know, you can't know, I'm only just finding out for myself. I felt justified in what I had done, because my grandmother would have done the exactly same thing. We both considered sentiment a private affair, and felt that wallowing in public was as big an offense as going down the high street naked. This was my loss, and mine alone.

It started drizzling as I left, and trudging home the air was filled with that smell rain brings to a dirty city. Dust and oil, and the scent of damp earth from the nearby allotments. As the drizzle turned to something harder, I watched people hurrying past me on the slickened pavement. We all

run, I thought, and we still get wet. Despite all our efforts and all our cares, we can't do a thing to stop the rain. And I didn't run. I didn't even quicken my pace. By the time I got home, I was drenched to the bone, and I stared through the TV screen until way past midnight.

The days that followed adopted a similar pattern. I had three weeks of leave, and did very little with it. Mornings consisted of the same four phases, and in the afternoons I would sit in the armchair, filling the room with cirrus clouds of cigarette smoke. Daytime TV passed in a montage of fatuous bargain hunts, property programs, and cooking competitions. By the time the evening came, I had drunk my eyes senseless on cathode rays. What I watched after six, I couldn't begin to tell you.

I became fascinated with the way my body behaved sans nouriture. After a day or so, I stopped passing solids, instead expelling gushes of orange water, containing what looked for all the world like shreds of tobacco. It occurred to me that what I was doing might actually be beneficial. A detoxification of sorts. So I tripled my water intake in the hope of attaining a clear stool.

And what of the hunger? Well, hunger is an abstract noun for starters. Just like Communism. What you experience are its effects. My stomach churned in peristalsis, like a set of teeth gnashing away at thin air. My sense of smell went through the roof. And, aside from the occasional bout of giddiness, I felt remarkably alert. I guess I began to enjoy the experience. Abstinence gave me a sense of achievement, as did looking at my body in the bedroom mirror.

When Thursday came, the night I usually went to my grandmother for dinner, I stayed at home and feasted on my empty stomach. The TV flickered before my eyes as usual, and I smoked and took sips of hot water from a Cadbury's mug. Considering the armchair bad for my posture, I had taken to sleeping in my bed again. After all, what kind of wreck would fall asleep in front of the TV every night? And my sleep was becoming very sound, another symptom of the fast, I presumed.

I began to meet my grandmother in my dreams, and we'd talk long and hard, as we used to across the dinner table. Those dreams were incredibly vivid, to the point I felt I could actually reach out and touch her. She was beginning to get upset with me for not eating.

I don't know what you're hoping to achieve with this nonsense.

Well, I suppose I'm trying to flush myself out. You always told me I drank too much. That I ate too much rubbish.

That's as may be, mister, but I didn't invite you to starve yourself. What's your mother got to say about it?

I've not seen much of her. You know what she's like.

It's that bloke of hers is the problem. Don't want her to have a bloody minute to herself. She's always been the same. Spreads herself thin for every bugger, and got no time for her family.

I don't know, Grandma. Maybe she's trying to keep busy because she misses you.

Well, what's the bloody point in that? No good ever came from harking back on things. Anyway, you're letting me get off the point. Get something inside you before you waste away.

Looking back, I guess I was afraid that the dreams would stop if I began to eat. That if I did as she said, she would consider her job complete, and she could leave me in peace. Or maybe the dreams were a biological result of fasting. Either way, I wasn't going to start again, despite her annoyance. Having her angry was better than not having her full stop.

By the middle of the second week, I had dropped a jeans size. Shirts that were once quite tight across my shoulders now had room to spare. I avoided family wherever possible, and had already turned down two offers of dinner from my mother. It wasn't that I desperately didn't want to see anybody. I just didn't desperately want to see anybody. It was vague old feeling, and hard to express, but I guess you could call it indifference. Besides, I would only get the lecture about not eating, and there was plenty of that when I was in dreamland.

On the Friday, there was a problem with the network at the café, and I couldn't get online. They told me it would be sorted out by the lunchtime. The morning was bleak, and I had little inclination to go into town, so I headed home, stopping off to buy some cigarettes on the way. It must have been just before ten when I got in, and thankfully upstairs were out on the morning nursery run. I poured a mug of water from the kettle, and settled down in front of the TV.

Same old morning bullshit, with a pair of grinning robots presenting the usual list of nonsense. Celebrity guest chef, latest debut novelist, something on making fat legs appear slimmer. There was also a feature on women who'd recovered from mastectomies. An Irish woman in her

early forties was explaining how for years she was ashamed of the scarring. They showed some quite unnecessary photos of her post-op, and I had to agree it was a pretty awful sight. Then something more recent, where the scar had become a translucent purple silver. The male presenter asked her if she missed the breast, which I thought was a truly thoughtless question.

For a long time I did, she said. But what right did I have to feel hard done by? Thousands of folks die every year. At least I got to carry on.

That afternoon, when the rain had eased, I went back to the internet café. When she saw me enter, the Polish girl with the too-large breasts and the slight hair-lip reached down into the fridge behind her. Without a word, she placed two bottles of water on the counter and held her hand out for the money.

'Do you have anything other than carrot cake?' I asked her.

Commended
A Breath of Fresh Air
Mary Jean Chan

Karima ran across the flower-dotted fields with the wind streaming in her face. The air mingled with the scent of earth and grass, and her heart rejoiced in the freedom she possessed. Breathless, she slowed down to a walk and lay down on the grass.

A dazzling expanse of blue met her eyes as she stared up into the sky. The sun beamed down upon her, holding the world in its embrace. It was a truly glorious day. Time passed, and she was on the verge of sleep when a shadow fell across her face. Karima's eyes snapped open in shock. She saw that a large, grey cloud had completely blocked out the golden rays. The world had dimmed in an instant, and to her utmost horror, the dimness was turning into blackness...

Karima sat up in bed. Dazed, she looked around and saw the four grey cement walls that were by now etched deeply in her mind. No sunlight streamed in through the tiny window, for it had long been painted black. As she turned to get up, her hands brushed the piece of clothing that constantly lay beside her bed. It was her burqa. Karima glared at it with loathing, and suddenly, she was reminded of her dream. It had been so vivid and wonderful at first... but she knew then that the brightness had simply been a memory, while only the darkness was real.

The sound of Fatana's lung-racking coughs woke Karima from her reverie. She hurried over to her mother's bedside and gently massaged her chest. After a while, the deep frown on her mother's forehead softened, but the coughing continued. Just then, a pair of strong arms embraced Karima, and she stared into the eyes of her older brother Nadeem. She saw in them the same pain that she herself felt so acutely and immediately looked away. They both knew that their mother was dying. The grief and helplessness they felt was further intensified by the fact that she was not dying of some incurable disease, but from pneumonia that could be cured – if only she were allowed to see a doctor.

As Karima gazed at the frail and sickly face of her mother, she was suddenly gripped by a wild urge to act. She returned to her bedside, grabbed her burqa, and put it on. Nadeem immediately stood up and gripped his sister's arm. "Where are you going?" he asked anxiously. "To find Samsor." Nadeem's mouth widened in protest, but seeing the determined look on Karima's face, he bit his lip, and the worried frown on his forehead deepened. Karima tugged her hand free and turned to go. "Wait!" She turned and saw tears glistening in her brother's eyes. "I'll go with you," he whispered. Karima gave her brother's hand a grateful squeeze, and the two of them left together.

As they walked along the dusty road, Karima was once again reminded of her fury towards the Taliban. The burqa she was forced to wear on the rare occasions she ventured outdoors covered her from head to toe, stifling her in the intense summer heat. As the heavy gauze patch across her eyes made it almost impossible for her to see, she had to lean on Nadeem for support while she took small, careful steps for fear of tripping. On one occasion, she had seen an old woman trip onto the ground, only to be grabbed by a Taliban and beaten mercilessly because her ankle had been showing from underneath her burqa.

They had arrived. Karima and Nadeem stood outside Samsor's home, waiting impatiently for an answer to their repeated knocks. Samsor was a well-known physician in the city of Kabul, and he was famous for curing even the most complicated diseases. Minutes passed, and still no answer came. Nadeem was just about to knock again when the door creaked open slightly. A thick pair of glasses peered out at them. "What do you want?" Samsor whispered nervously. Karima spoke. "We

want you to visit our mother. She has pneumonia.”

Upon hearing this, Samsor exclaimed in a loud undertone, “Are you out of your mind? Surely you know what will befall your mother and I if I do as you ask me to! The Taliban are not people you can disobey!” He moved to shut the door, but Nadeem heaved against it, and Karima cried out in a pleading voice, “Samsor, in the name of Allah, help us! Our mother is dying, and you know that pneumonia is curable! All she needs is proper treatment, and you can give it to her!” From the narrow opening, Karima saw Samsor’s eyes soften with sympathy, but almost immediately, he replied in a desperate tone, “I’m terribly sorry, but I cannot offer you help. I...I have my wife and children to think of...I really cannot put them in such grave danger. Forgive me.” With that, Samsor gave a hard shove, and the door banged shut.

Karima hurled herself against the door of the house, crying, “You have to save her! I beg of you! Please!” Nadeem stood by in silence, his knuckles clenched white. After a while, Karima slid to the ground in exhaustion, her eyes wet with tears. Nadeem walked over and gently helped her up. “Let’s go home,” he urged. With a sigh of frustration, he added, “The Taliban are so powerful that they seem to have taken away our sense of humanity, apart from everything else.”

A storm of coughing greeted them as Karima and Nadeem entered the house. She was coughing horribly, and a few drops of blood lay on the floor. Fear closed upon their hearts like an icy fist as they rushed over to their mother. Nadeem gently leaned her against his strong body, while Karima quickly filled a cup of water and carefully raised it to her mother’s lips. Fatana choked and spluttered as she drank. Seeing Fatana’s painful expression, Karima grasped her mother’s hand in hers and squeezed it tightly as the tears that had been straining against the barrier of her mind broke through.

At last, Fatana spoke. “Children,” she uttered weakly. “I know that I don’t have long to live.” She started coughing again, and it was a while before she could continue. “My death is of no significance...but you must defy the Taliban and help the women of Afghanistan. Endure....” Fatana gave a violent shudder, and her whole body went still.

“Mother!” Karima gave a loud cry of grief and threw herself into her mother’s arms. Unable to reign in the flow of tears, Nadeem broke down sobbing. At the moment, three Taliban soldiers came bursting into the house. Two of them grabbed Nadeem and started beating him with a large stick. Karima shrieked with anger and fear. “Stop hitting him! He’s done nothing to deserve this!” The soldier grabbed her by the neck and jerked her into a kneeling position. “Why did you go to see Samsor yesterday? You shall pay for defying the laws of the Taliban!” Infuriated, Karima slapped the Taliban hard on the cheek. The soldier grabbed her by the shoulders and flung her against the wooden table near the wall in anger. Karima lay still, paralyzed by the intense pain that surged through her entire body. A loud, animalistic roar echoed in her ears, and she struggled to raise her head just in time to see Nadeem hurl himself against the Taliban. He pinned the Taliban onto the floor, but the other two soldiers immediately pulled him off. Karima watched on helplessly as one of them grabbed a rifle and hit her brother repeatedly on the head, causing him to collapse onto the ground. With that, the Taliban dragged him out into the night.

Karima sat on her bed, gently fingering the shirt Nadeem had been wearing on the day of his arrest. Her heart clenched at the thought of her brother alone and wounded, even possibly...she pushed the thought out of her mind. Though she longed to search for him, she knew that venturing out alone would only lead to a certain death. Her own situation was also beginning to look desperate. Despite the fact that there was barely any food left in the house, she couldn’t risk going outside. There seemed to be no way out of it.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. Karima's heart skipped a beat. Warily, she went over and opened the door slightly. Her mouth dropped open in amazement. It was Samsor.

Karima opened her mouth, but found herself unable to speak. She felt a sudden lump in her throat, and her eyes welled up with tears. Samsor was aghast. "What's the matter? Why are you...?" Even as he spoke these words, his eyes widened in realization, and his face blanched. "No...please... tell me it's not true." Seeing the look on Karima's face, a wave of remorse engulfed him, and he gave a low moan of pain. For a long while neither of them spoke, and the sound of Karima's quiet sobs echoed in the doorway. At last, Samsor whispered in a broken voice, "I...I'm terribly sorry... I'll...I'll go." Just as he was about to leave, he felt a firm grip on his arm.

Astonished, Samsor turned and saw that Karima's eyes now brimmed with a mixture of pain, hope and fierce determination. She looked at him long and hard for a moment, her mind whirling with thoughts. Here was a respectable man who could search for her brother and find a way to help her survive. And perhaps...here was a man who could help her complete her mother's final wish. Karima finally spoke. "I need your help now, more than ever. Please don't leave. My mother would thank you for this."

Speechless, Samsor allowed himself to be ushered into the house. The two of them sat down at the table, and Karima began explaining her situation. Finally, she told Samsor of her plan. She wanted to start an underground school for girls. She had known the moment before her mother's death that she would forever defy the Taliban, even if it cost her her life. Having majored in world history and English literature at university, she could start with these two subjects.

Soon, there was nothing more left unsaid. Samsor gazed at Karima with a mixture of respect, pride and admiration. Karima waited quietly for him to decide, and after what seemed like ages, Samsor replied in a decisive tone, "I will do all that you have asked me to." For the first time in many years, the shadow of a smile spread across Karima's face.

Kabul, Afghanistan
Autumn, 2001

Karima sat up in bed. Instinctively, she reached for the burqa that lay near her...and her fingers stopped in mid-air. With a grin of satisfaction, Karima left the burqa lying there and went outside.

A cool, refreshing breeze greeted her as she stepped over the threshold. She stood there and took in a deep breath of the crisp autumn air. High above her, the sky was a deep, clear shade of blue. Every blade of grass glistened with a radiance of its own under the sun's brilliant rays. A warm hand clasped Karima's shoulder, and she turned to embrace the beloved brother whom she thought she had lost. Nadeem looked out at the sun-coated land before him, and there it was – a smile.

As Karima took in the scene before her, her eyes filled with tears of joy and gratitude. At that moment, she suddenly understood. The loathing she felt towards her burqa was not without reason, for it had deprived her of one of the simplest joys in life – the right to a breath of fresh air. The burqa had suffocated the women of Afghanistan, but now... it could finally be thrown away.