

And Then Everything Changed

Canadian Landmine Foundation

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### Scene One

RETH: My friends call me Reth. Some people call me a 'landmine victim'.

But I am not a victim, I am a survivor. I carry in my body the injury caused by landmines.

I often say Cambodia is a handicapped country, a country where good land is planted with mines instead of rice, where women collect wood in fear, where children are afraid to run and play freely in the fields, where families are displaced from their homes.

I was 22. I was a resistance fighter. We were near the Thai-Cambodia border. The mine blast shattered both my legs. And at that moment everything changed.

I wanted to shoot myself rather than live as half a man. My friend told me I needed to live – my wife was with child – our first. He carried me 30 kilometres to get help.

### Scene Two

PRAKASH: I was planning to become a police inspector near my home on the border between India and Pakistan. I was engaged to be married. When I stepped on a landmine everything changed.

My name is Prakask and I live in India near the border. When things became tense between my country and Pakistan, soldiers came to work. They were laying mines to protect us, but they hadn't carefully marked the mined areas. I stepped on one of these mines one kilometer from my house. My right foot was blasted off. The experience was extremely painful, and the nearest hospital was 22 kilometers away.

My parents are farmers and don't make much money, but they have had to pay thousands of dollars for my medical costs.

My dreams were shattered. I had to give up my goal of being a police inspector. My fiancée's parents called off our marriage.

### Scene Three

FAHRIJA: I am Fahrija.

MIRSADA: I am her sister Mirsada.

FAHRIJA: Every day we walk together across a field to work at the shoe factory.

MIRSADA: The factory is near our home in Korica Han, in Bosnia.

FAHRIJA : On August 20, 1992, we were walking to work as always. There was nothing special about the day.

MIRSADA: We were not late or early. The weather was not warm or cold.

FAHRIJA: Is it not strange that such an unremarkable day should burn such a hole in our memories.

MIRSADA: At that moment we were not talking – each lost in our own thoughts.

FAHRIJA: And then everything changed.

MIRSADA: The noise, the light, the smoke, the pain all happened at the same instant. It is hard to know when one began or ended. There was no beginning; there was no end.

FAHRIJA: I was thrown aside and fell to the ground. There was a cloud of white smoke. I was sore but not injured. I jumped to my feet and ran to me sister. I reached out to her.

MARSADA: I reached out to her. My sister.

FAHRIJA: my heel must have touched it. I was thrown forward, a burning up my legs and back. My sister broke my fall.

MARSADA: My sister blocked the second blast. Together we crawled to get help.

FAHRIJA: We still walk together to work at the shoe factory.

MIRSADA: But now we do not walk as quickly.

#### Scene Four

MARGARET: My name is Margaret. In 1998 I was traveling by bus to Kampala in northern Uganda to spend Christmas with my family. There were twenty-three of us on the bus.

Suddenly I heard a “bang!”. The bus stopped. Everyone ran from the bus. I tried to run but couldn’t. The “bang” had severed off my right foot. The bus had hit a landmine in the road. The blast had come right through the floor of the bus.

The rebels were coming. I managed to lower myself by the roadside and drag myself further into the tall grass where I remained still lying face down. One of them tried to take my trousers off. I pretended to be dead. He hit my injured leg with his gun to see if I was pretending. I did not react. He gave up and went away.

The army arrived at the scene and I crawled back to the main road. They drove us to a nearby health unit where the remaining bits of my leg were cut off without any anesthesia. The next day, I woke up in the intensive care unit and it was then I realized for the rest of my life I would be disabled.

At first I wanted to be able to do everything and not depend on anyone. I came to know that it is not possible. The landmine took that possibility away from me.

#### Scene Five

RADWAN: My name is Radwan. I am 45 years old and work as a builder in my country, Jordan. I have four sons and a daughter.

One day we decided to have a picnic and we prepared a basket of food to take with us. We traveled to the Jordan River valley and found a spot that was pleasant. My family was still in the truck when I found the spot. I was clearing stones to lay down the blanket when everything changed.

The explosion damaged both of my arms and they had to be removed. What good is a builder without arms.

## Scene Six

MOHAMMAD: My name is Mohammad. I was working in the bazaar in Herat, Afghanistan when I received an urgent message that my brother had stepped on a landmine. I told my employer that I must go and he agreed. When I arrived I a group of people standing and watching. I pushed through them and saw my brother about 20 feet away, lying on his side. Near him was a small boy, also lying on his side.

“What happened”, I asked a man. “The boy went into the field and was injured”, he said. “The man went in to help him. He must have stepped on a mine. We saw the blast”.

“Iskander”, I called out. “Can you hear me?”

He called back, “Mohammad, is that you?” “Help me Mohammad”, he said. “Help me!”

“We must help him” I said to the men. They looked away, they avoided my eyes. I grabbed one of them by the shoulder. He would not look at me. An old man looked at me. His eyes burned into me. “We are not cowards”, he said. “But to go out there is madness.”

I pushed him aside and went to my brother. I reached him safely. He thanked me for coming to him. The little boy was crying. His leg had been hurt and his face also.

I turned to the men and said, “It’s alright. Come and help me.” And then everything changed. As I turned there was a blast and a flash, I’m not sure which came first.

I was told later that some of the men went to a nearby army post and brought back a long sheet of steel. They laid the sheet down and when it did not set off any mines, they walked out to rescue us.

I lost a leg, my brother lost both legs, the boy lost one leg and the use of one eye. At least we are alive.

### Scene Seven

AIMABLE: I am Aimable. I am 18 years old and am a student in Rwanda. I was on my way to school when everything changed.

My dearest wish was to be a good student. I worked very hard at my studies. But after the accident I spent so much time in the hospital. And afterwards I needed to learn to walk with a crutch. I was told that they could give me an artificial leg but there were never enough to go around. There was not one for me.

When a prosthetic finally came for me I was able to finish high school. Now I am in university and studying business. With my education I hope to be able to help to rebuild my country.

### Scene Eight

MOTHER: We knew that the area was dangerous. Everyone knew. Signs were posted. No ropes were put up because there was not enough money. But everyone knew.

FATHER: You can't tell children. Here in Bosnia landmines are part of their lives. It 's like telling someone when we were young, before the war, not to cross the roads in Sarajevo. Telling them it's dangerous. That it could hurt them. They don't care.

MOTHER: Ema didn't care about landmines. She was 11. She cared about her friends, Goran and Haris, and she cared about playing. She was playing with her friends when she met the landmine.

FATHER: It was a Monday. April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2000. I heard the explosion.

MOTHER: Right away my throat grew tight – all of my insides – grew tight. I called to my husband and we ran outside.

FATHER: Our neighbour Nenad, who witnessed the explosion, said the force of the blast sent the body of one child through the air. I heard a crying voice. I had heard that sweet voice so many times.

MOTHER: She was calling to me. I wanted to go to her. Many people held me back. They said it was sure death. Who wants to live when they have listened to their little girl frightened, in pain, and they can not

go to her. I called to her. I told her that I loved her. I told her help was on the way.

FATHER: The police came and the deminers came and started to clear the landmines in a path. It took more than two hours. By then Ema had gone quiet. Her body and the bodies of the other two children were carried out of the minefield.

MOTHER: They said the war ended in 1995 when Ema was six.

FATHER: She was 11 when the landmine from the war took her life.

MOTHER: The question I keep asking myself is when did the war end?

FATHER: When did the war end?

### Scene Nine

NAHN: My name is Nahn and I am 13 years old. I remember little about the war. People still talk about it, about the anger and hatred. Much bitterness remains.

When the fighting got close to us my family fled to the south and we stayed with my uncle until the fighting stopped. It was two years before we were able to return to our homes.

When we got back to our village many of the buildings were destroyed or damaged. The fields were torn up. It was as if the land itself was damaged.

The next period was very hard. We were to rebuild our community but there was no money. The farmers could not cultivate the fields because they were filled with landmines. If we can not farm we can not eat. We grew hungry.

The village elders asked the government to come to our village and remove the mines. They were told that we were on the list but so were many others.

The men of the village decided to clear the mines themselves. Each day they went out with their garden hoes.

One day my father did not come home. And then, for our family, everything changed.