

The Day Death Fell from the Sky

Paul giggled as his Dad winked at him and ruffled his hair. No eight-year-old wanted his Dad kissing him in front of his schoolmates, but secretly Paul missed the warm manly smell, the comfortable safe feel of the hug and kiss they had agreed to abandon when he started school.

“See you later alligator!” they both called in unison as each raced off in different directions. Paul’s heart sang as he ran into the noise and colour of his classroom. He loved Tuesdays because it was their night to cook. He and his Dad would make pizza, Paul’s favourite meal, while his Mom sat at the kitchen table and enjoyed her night off. There was always much laughter and chat while his Dad sang Italian songs (very badly) and they talked about their day. This they called their midweek celebration, because once you got to Wednesday, the week was nearly over.

Mohamed Aqa Abdul had been up for hours as he walked a few paces behind his father in the early morning sunrise. The tall thin man in front of him moved with grace and bearing. Aqa, the middle name by which his family called him, tried to emulate his father’s walk. It was his way of showing him how much he loved and respected this hard, silent man. For he knew that behind the dark brooding eyes, this was a man who would give his life for his God and his eight-year-old son.

The sun beat down on the hard dry, dusty earth as they moved along the hostile terrain. He knew it would not be long before they reached their place of work. They were the lucky ones, carrying bundles on their backs like pack mules, enabling them to earn money to buy flour to make bread. Hunger was an unspoken word, everyone had it in varying degrees, but to have a regular income to provide one basic meal a day made them very rich indeed. Aqa let his mind drift to the meal his mother would take most of the day to prepare, in the clay earth oven that was their only cooking facility.

Lindy hummed to herself in the car as her cell phone rang. “Hello” she spoke into the mouthpiece of the hands free device.

“Lindy! Lindy!” Dave’s voice choked out her name and then an awful silence.

“Dave?” “Dave?” she called back as she frantically looked for a place to park the car.

“Lindy there’s been a huge explosion below our floor. The tower’s on fire. I’m trapped on the stair well and don’t know what’s going to happen. The smoke is bad! Lindy get Paul — please take care of Paul...” His voice was anguished and controlled as he spoke. “Darling you are both everything to me. But I think this is bad. If anything happens Richards will know what to do.”

“Dave” she screamed into the phone. “Don’t talk like this I’m coming there now.”

“No Lindy” he screamed back. “Oh my God!Lindy! I don’t believe it. I’ve just seen a plane crash into the other tower!”

The phone went dead and Lindy felt a coldness invade her body. She started the car and turned it around and headed back towards Lower Manhattan and Paul’s school, which was just a few blocks away from the towers where Dave worked.

Paul jerked his head up to search for what had made the muffled booming sound. He turned to the window and saw a huge ball of black smoke balloon out of the tower where his dad worked a few blocks away.

“Oh! My goodness!” his teacher’s voice sobbed out a sound that reached down deep into Paul and planted the first icy cold sliver of fear that he had ever experienced. She grabbed his shoulders and pulled him to her. “Children line up at the door and keep as calm and quiet as you can.”

Aqa leaned forward as his father lifted the smaller of the two loads and placed it on his back. He could feel by the weight that he would be carrying the heaviest one yet and that the walk up the mountain to the Taliban training camp would be a little harder than normal.

“Aqa you are a man.” His father spoke softly with so much pride and love that the warmth of the

tone lifted his spirit. "The Taliban will reward us well and we will celebrate with a little extra bread this week. Your mother will also find us a little honey maybe to sweeten our meal."

His father smiled and Aqa felt his heart leap with joy. He could already taste the sweetness in his mouth.

Everything happened in slow motion. Paul held onto Farieb, his little Muslim friend's belt, as they were led out into the playground and told to sit down in neat orderly rows. Sirens wailed in the strange silence that invaded the orderly controlled movement of teachers and children as they moved to evacuate the building. Suddenly, a second massive explosion, less muted this time, made them all jump as the second tower exploded into smoke and flames.

"Miss! Miss! ... my Dad works there." Paul pointed towards the distant black cloud that was rising from the towers that were visible from their position on the playground. "I want to go and find my Dad please Miss." Paul's eyes were wide and imploring as he held onto the strange cold emotion that was growing inside him.

"Sit down honey." Miss replied, her face barely able to conceal her own terror and shock at what was happening all around her. "We have phoned your Mom and she will be here very soon to take you home."

Aqa listened to the talk as he sat in the background. The adults were very excited as they discussed the events of the last few days. Aqa understood the simple facts about his country's politics, and the relationship of those politics to the religion that controlled his life.

"Aqa, bring the coffee and serve our friends." His father's voice interrupted his thoughts and Aqa jumped up and pulled the big pot off the fire and moved around pouring the thick black liquid into the cups extended out to him. His father looked up at him as he stooped to serve him and Aqa saw the concern etched deeply into those dark brooding eyes, as he continued to speak.

"The patriots await our answer. The Americans will attack and we must decide if we are ready to assist with the downfall of the Taliban." His father's grave tones sent a shiver down his spine.

He had always felt safe with his father, no matter what they faced in the harshness of their lives. They feared and served the Taliban who were both brother and oppressor in the contradictions of their country. His father had told him of the long war with the Soviets, the strange relationship with the infidels whose own beliefs challenged their religious beliefs and way of life. Aqa tried hard to understand all the implications but it was a huge burden on his young shoulders. Only one thing was crystal clear in his life at this time and that was his love for his father, his protector and teacher.

Paul woke up with a start and stared with eyes wide open into the black oppressive night. He tried for a moment to fight off the feeling that he knew would overcome him, no matter how hard he pushed the memory away. But in waves, the unbearable pain invaded his mind and body. He had no concept of grief, no way to understand the emotional and physical emptiness and loss that pressed down on him, with a suffocating weight. A sob, soft and anguished, escaped his lips as a hand reached out and his mother drew him into the warm folds of her body.

"It's OK baby." Her voice brushed against his ear as she started to rock him in her arms. "You see it will be OK."

There were things going around in Paul's mind that he needed to ask that he needed to know. But he was afraid to ask. He had seen the traumatic footage on TV of the plane flying directly into the Tower. He had seen the Tower where his Dad worked, burning and collapsing in a horrific cloud of smoke and dust. He had been near the Towers when all this had happened and experienced the panic and urgency to escape the catastrophic events around him. He could still remember the taste and smell of the dust and smoke that burned into his lungs, still hear the eerie sounds of the sirens and the winds whipped up by the fires, wailing through the streets. But he could not put the two events together, could not bear to think of

his Dad falling in that huge cloud of fire and masonry to his death. So whenever he could, he would sneak off to his dad's cupboard and sit beneath the clothes still hanging there, and breathe in the smell of his father. And for a short time he could cope as he rocked back and forth and sang and talked to his Dad as if he were there.

Aqa ran doubled over with the sack of bread clutched to his body, so that the Taliban snipers would not see him as he delivered provisions to the rebels hiding in the craggy outcrops in the steep slope of the mountains. He was so proud to be a part of the small guerrilla group his father was leading in this section of the offensive against the Taliban regime. They had listened to the Americans' bombing throughout the night. Heard the whistle of the missiles as they flew overhead towards their targets. But now it was quiet as the mid-day sun beat down on them sending out heat shimmers that sometimes played tricks on one's vision, especially when you were very tired from being up most of the night.

"Father I bring you bread," Aqa whispered close to his father's ear as he dropped the sack on the floor and opened it.

"Thank you my little Afghan patriot." His father smiled a rare smile and bowed his head towards his son in a symbolic show of high regard and respect. Aqa felt his heart would burst with pride as he responded with clasped hand and a reciprocal bow.

The exchange between father and son had been a few fleeting seconds but out in the stillness of the terrain, the bobbing of the little boy's head had extended a few centimetres above the rock and disturbed the air. The Taliban sniper saw the flash of movement through half closed eyes and in a dazed state of fatigue reacted by letting off a volley of shots. Suddenly the whole area below erupted in gunfire as the Taliban began their offensive. The patriots, greatly outnumbered, silently melted back into the mountain to send off messages for assistance.

Relief came during the night when American planes came in waves and bombed known locations of the Taliban hiding in the mountains. Aqa lay in a cave with other young boys, guarding the supplies as their fathers and brothers watched from vantage points. The ground shuddered beneath him as an explosion ripped through an area close to where they were. Aqa worried a little as he knew the danger the men outside were in. After what seemed like a long time the bombing stopped and the silence became deafening. His ears hurt from the noise and the smell of dust and smoke invaded the dark cave, as he waited for his father to return.

The movement as the men shuffled into the cave carrying the bundle told Aqa something was not right. His eyes squinted against the torchlight as they laid their burden gently down on the floor of the cave. Aqa saw the serene face of his father, his eyes closed as if in sleep. The cloak wrapped around his body was black with the congealed blood that had flowed from his wounds.

His father had died from an American bomb, meant for the Taliban. All the harshness of his life, the toil, the teachings, the suffering he had endured, had not prepared him for this moment. He reached out and touched the face growing cool beneath his hand, and clutched at his own heart as it froze into a pain so intense that he thought he might not be able to breathe, as a sound that he did not recognise, escaped his lips.

Paul held the warm squiggling animal close to his face and breathed in the puppy smell. "I think I will call him Rover, Mom." He smiled for the first time in three weeks as he looked at her.

"Would you like to take Rover over to Farieb and show him your new puppy?"

Paul's face clouded over and he looked away. Farieb was Muslim and the Muslims had killed his Dad. He felt the anger bubble up inside him as he battled to understand what had happened. "No!" he shouted and ran outside with the puppy clutched to his chest.

The sadness invaded him again as he played with the puppy and he turned away as his mother sat down beside him.

“Paul we have to talk, honey.” She brushed her hand through his hair. “What happened will always be a sadness inside us and we will always miss Daddy. But Farieb did not do this awful thing. His religion did not do it. Bad people that share his religion did these terrible things.”

He sat and stroked the puppy as he tried to put together all the things that had changed his life forever. War on TV was not like this. Soldiers in uniforms with guns and jeeps fought other soldiers in different uniforms and the good soldiers always won. How did his best friend suddenly become his enemy? He did not understand any of it except he knew that the Muslims had killed his Dad and Farieb was a Muslim.

“Mom will the sore in here,” Paul placed his hand over his heart, “go away?”

“Yes honey, the sore will go away and you will understand better one day what happened but until then, you have to trust me and go to Farieb and share your happiness at having a new puppy with him.”

Aqa moved out of the tent where his mother lay rolled up in her black burka, the long garment all Afghan women are forced to wear, as she softly rocked and moaned in her grief. He looked up at the sky as British and American planes flew over, releasing a rain of parachutes that floated down to earth with parcels attached. He understood his duty, knew that as the eldest son, he would assume the role of head of the home. The shared burden of helping his father work would now fall fully on his shoulders. It was as if his thin, strong straight back had been specially built to carry a heavier load. His agony and grief became the rod of strength that he needed to survive, to carry on. His icon, his focus, his mentor, his warmth was no more. There were no more steps to emulate and follow, only an awful emptiness and loss that cast a grey shadow over all his thoughts and feelings.

His hollow empty eyes followed the men and children, as they ran towards the first of the parcels as they crashed to the ground. Aqa knew in his heart that he should do the same, so that he and his family would get their share of the gifts sent by the very people who had killed his father. But he remained rooted to the spot as the white-hot anger surged through his body as he started to purge his internalised pain. For the first time, since the anguished cry had left his body when they had brought in his dead father and laid him before him, Aqa started to scream. “Kill the Americans, kill the Americans!” Tears streamed down his face as he ran forward brandishing the gun that was now his, the only legacy left to him by his father.

Two of the men from his father’s command caught him in mid-stride and carried him off screaming. They took him beyond the camp and set him down and waited for him to stop sobbing.

“Aqa — you are the son of a brave fighter. Your father was killed by the Americans in error. The Americans are not our enemy today. Today it is the Taliban who keep us as prisoners in our own country. They make rules that lead us back into the dark ages. Your father would want you to take the gifts they send. But we must go now before the Taliban come, as they will, and take all the food and medicine and keep it for themselves. They will shoot us if they see us take it. So we must hurry. Trust us Aqa, you are an Afghan patriot, you are one of us and from us you will learn the strange ways of this world and about war and how it is fought. Come, brave young man, you have a family to feed.”