

Buzkashi

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Kabul, Afghanistan.

*“Wolves dripped with danger,
Staking their un-rightful claim.
Fearful souls clawed out.”*

One

The vast fields of Kabul stood wearily under the harsh stare of the setting, war-torn sun. The hills were painted with the blood of locals and the colours of the Soviet Ushankas and Pilotkas flooded the valleys. It was only a matter of time until the over-powered army crashed over the outskirts of the city like a tsunami.

Rafi Abdullah shook his head and looked back to his humble home from his spot on a raised platform. The red brick, oak and cement structure wasn't anything special, but it was home. The place he grew up in, where his only child learned the way of their culture and where his future grandchildren were to be nurtured. He noted that it was only a moment until the sun should take refuge, and the moon would stand guard. With this in mind, he fumbled back inside and took shelter from the core-shaking chill of winter's harsh, frigid breath.

The nervous yet naive chatter of children and soothing voices of the respective mothers filled the living room that Rafi entered. Placing themselves on the carpeted floor, most of his immediate female family was situated on one side of the room. His closest companions, and the rest of the men, had moved one of the large couches to the side, making room for them and the blankets that were being handed out by his sister, Fatimah. Rafi darted towards the men to join the table-less round table.

“Have you heard the news?” His best friend Ahmed prodded round the circle, simultaneously ripping a piece of bread and looking over his shoulder nervously.

Murmurs erupted. Everyone looked to his neighbour, trying to decipher what was happening while the country was in a state of war. Rafi's brow creased. He

stared directly at Ahmed, trying to steal a hint. Only receiving a mischievous glint in return. It was something he hadn't seen since the Soviets had sent in the first of their infantries.

A cough silenced the minute cacophony. Ahmed threw in one last piece of meat and looked over his shoulder for the last time, before he leaned in and started to concisely utter what needed to be.

“A truck heading due east was seen around our town. I investigated and confronted the people aboard,” they were met with a pause. “Human traffickers, they said. Headed towards the harbour that the Soviets had already destroyed. They're on the way to the Malay Islands. Plane flight to a land called Australia.”

There was more to be said by his best friend, something about 'risk' and 'danger', but Rafi did not care. A plan was already formulated in his head. He'd heard of Australia before, once or twice when he went to the bazar. One of his friends, Arif, was a travelling enthusiast, and the bazar was his home when he came back to Kabul. Not once did he ever fail to bring back a story.

According to him, Australia was a place where you could do whatever you wanted. It was also a bonus when Rafi heard that small, but active Muslim communities were scattered around the country. Job opportunities sprouted on every corner, and an education suddenly presented itself to his only child's future.

He looked behind him to see his seven-year-old daughter, Javeed playing with her rag doll. Oblivious in the arms of her Mother, Ayesha, she was smiling and brightening the faces of the people around her. Her laughs were a foreign contrast against the crackling fire and the silent night.

The men continued talking in the asymmetrical circle until the night reached mid-point. And as the fire gradually diminished to embers, women and children started to bid goodnight. However, even after the house was filled with the deathly silence of slumber, Ahmed and Rafi still had much to say.

They both had a sip or two of Rafi's quickly brewed tea before settling on the floor across each other. They cocooned themselves with quilts, before getting down to business.

“I know what you're thinking.” Ahmed started, breaking the quiet of the starry sky.

“No you don't. Only God knows-” Rafi's best friend instantly cut him off.

“It honestly doesn’t take a genius Rafi,” Ahmed said with a shake of his head. “Why would you even consider that? *Bismillah*⁽¹⁾, did you not hear that it was illegal? *Illegal Rafi, illegal.*” Ahmed chastised with a hiss.

Rafi let out a tired sigh. His breath steamed into the cold air like wispy tendrils of tribal markings.

“It’s my only hope, Ahmed, and you know it. Those human traffickers are possibly the only hope I have for a better future.” Rafi was greeted with nothingness for three elongated seconds. The only things racing through his mind were the opportunities to be seen in a foreign country. At that moment, Australia was the light at the end of a never-ending tunnel.

“Well have you thought about who you would hurt? Who you would endanger? Think about your parents, your wife and your friends. For God's sake, think about your *daughter.*” Ahmed was quick to chide Rafi. He thought that his long time friend was out of his mind. Though Rafi was known for being a risk taker, this was bringing him to new heights.

“Do you not see? *This is all for her.* All for my sweet, little, Javeed.” He all but growled.

Rafi found it hard to control his anger. Oh how close he was to bursting the little bubble of tranquillity he had been enclosed in. He couldn’t comprehend why Ahmed didn’t understand. But, he still kept his stirring emotions from spilling out in the form of frustrated words. If he let them loose, he might’ve woken the Soviets while he was at it.

After his haste outburst, a companionable silence fell over them. While they contemplated and shivered into the early daybreak, it was always lingering, intervening when the thoughts of the two men weren’t loud enough to fill the empty space.

Two

Javeed roused from her sleep to the sound of pots and gravelly voices clanging against the walls in disharmony. Curious, she sat up, rubbed her eyes with her clammy hands and grabbed hold of her ragdoll. She slowly pushed away her thick quilt and tiptoed around her aunt and grandmother, whom she was sharing a room with. She thought that maybe letting them sleep would... erase the lines that were permanently etched with fear and unease onto their beautiful features.

The doorway was adorned with sheer, grey-scale drapery, which allowed people to see the shadows in the hallway and adjacent kitchen. Javeed looked back to make sure that her aunt and grandmother was still asleep, then turned to the drapes.

She could see two figures through the curtains, they moved in a stiff manner like a shadow puppet would. Her mother owned a considerable amount of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* books and every now and then, Javeed would learn about the many cultures of the world. Ayesha was only missing letters S-X, but always worried that Javeed hadn't learned enough to have an open mind about the world. (Though none of it was animated,) Javeed could imagine the grace of the Chinese dancers as they moved, her mother narrating it from the first few pages of article C. The detail and finesse of Javanese shadow puppets as they interacted behind the cloth stage when Ayesha described the acts and stories associated with them.

As she stood behind the curtain not knowing what to do, the voices that woke her slowly ascended in volume and ferocity. Javeed was stunned. The voices were distinctly male and female, almost like her parents. But, no, it couldn't be. Her parents never fought. And with the way the man and woman in the kitchen disputed like two Roman gladiators releasing their battle cries, she wondered why no one had woken up. Or why no one else was sobbing like she was.

Maybe it was just in her juvenile mind.

Javeed finally scavenged through her heart to find the secret treasure trove of golden courage. She moved aside the curtain and walked warily towards the kitchen. She was precise with her footsteps, determined to avoid that one creaky floorboard, albeit the kitchen is only two meters away from her.

When she was only mere centimetres away from the verbal brawl in the kitchen, the voices became more distinct. Her eyes widened, on their own accord, in fright. Her mother's voice rang clear, slicing through the air like a malignant blade. Javeed quivered in fear. Her kind mother had transformed into a ferocious beast and she could hear her father trying to tame her with reason.

"How could you be so selfish?" Ayesha growled, another crash of a plate accompanying her.

"It was for a better future. By the time this God forsaken war ends, it'll be years until we can recover and move on!" Her father's deep baritone was deathly calm, almost emotionless.

"If we leave, it will leave less people to help rebuild the village! More than half of our village population consists of the elders!" Rafi paced and clenched his jaw. His wife's pupils were dilated and set ablaze. She was stubborn and opinionated, a personality that can often tip the scales.

Javeed slouched against the hallway walls. She kept an open ear on the conversation. Her curiosity was peaking and she was praying that no one else would wake up.

Rafi sat down at the dining table and bent his head down onto his folded arms. Ayesha sat down opposite him, rigid and stiff as a board. Rafi had mumbled something unintelligible and Javeed's mother raised an accusing brow.

"I don't want to go either dear, but Javeed has the best chance for a future in Australia. She's supposed to start school this year. At the rate the war is going, she won't even be starting until she's at least twelve." Rafi's voice was shaking, breaking. He was unbearably exhausted from the weight on his shoulders. Ayesha could barely hear him but his words still translated.

Ayesha scrunched her nose up in thought. She'd planned to list out all her worries and doubts until her husband lifted a palm.

"Do not worry. I know you can speak fluent English, and there are Muslims where they plan to take us." Rafi said, defeated. If that didn't sway her, he didn't know what would.

Javeed was utterly confused. Where would they be going? Why did they have to go? She knew about the bad men in the funny hats, but they've never done anything to her family.

Suddenly, wooden chairs scraping against the cool, ceramic tiles sharpened her senses. She stood up and tried to sprint as quietly as she could back to her designated bed, keeping an open ear towards the kitchen. She slipped into the bed, evened her breathing, pulled the covers over her and squeezed her eyes shut. Never ending streams of questions ran through her mind.

Three

Rafi and Ayesha had finally come to an agreement. Oblivious to their daughter's knowledge of the situation, the couple conjured up a plan to leave thirteen days after the early morning conversation. Rafi had also backed up his argument to immigrate with one little fact: that the bunker was a tad claustrophobic. Ayesha had squirmed when she heard that; small spaces made her feel scrutinised, insignificant and like all the attention was on her.

When duo broke the news to their family and friends that same night, the response was almost synonymous. Save for the crippled elders, these Afghans were too proud, too scared and too reluctant to leave the country they so adored.

And so, as they do, the household came to a compromise. They were sent to a bunker that was stocked with food, water, a working radio and most living essentials. With so much on the line, Rafi could only pray that his friend, Umar, would keep his promise to protect his family. Umar was an experience hunter and former soldier; his skills were honed to sense danger and hear the most silent of footsteps.

When it was Ahmed's turn to pack up and head towards the bunker, he gave Rafi one last firm and affectionate hug.

“Good luck. May Allah be with you. I'm going to miss you brother.”

Those exact words were the last thing Rafi heard from Ahmed before he left.

Javeed was surprised to see her mother set her great collection of Encyclopedias into a dusty box, hiding them under a row of floorboards, which had a hidden storage compartment. She wondered what else her parents had hidden from her. A sibling? Perhaps her name wasn't Javeed Rafi Abdullah at all.

But there was no time to ponder on it, her mother had already beckoned Javeed to help her put away some clothes into a trash bag.

It was exactly one week since the Relatives of the family of three retreated to the bunker, two since the exchange in the kitchen. The morning of the designated day they were to set to leave, the seemingly empty house bursts with nervous excitement.

The house had been stripped of any personal belongings they might have. It was either sent off to the bunker, packed into the one ratty old bag each family member held or sold for extra funds that her mother kept under her many layers of clothes.

Javeed, the poor girl, had caught on somewhat to what was happening. She acknowledged the fact that they were most likely emigrating to another country, but where to and why, she was still kept in the dark.

Her mother had told her to only hold on to what she kept close to her heart. The worn, cotton bag enclosed her rag doll, food for the journey, a set or two of clothes and a book of classic faery tales. The book had been her mother's. Ayesha received it as a gift from her late mother, and translated it into the Pashto language underneath the English script.

She took one last tour of the house. For her age, she was as mature as they get. Compared to the rest, she was more aware of her surroundings and understood certain things that others didn't.

As her pattering footsteps echoed along the halls, she grazed her hand against the faded wallpaper. She tried to paint a picture of each and every room she visited. From the little cracks in the floorboards of the study, to the distinct scent of the family room, she recorded every nook, the invisible crannies.

Her gut told her she wouldn't be here for a while.

As she neared her parents' room, she heard the squeak of sliding glass. She peeked inside only to see her father contently admiring the awards in the trophy case.

Rafi fiddled with the fine sashes and turbans that he had won. After his daughter and wife, the prizes for the countless Buzkashi matches were his pride and joy. He was one of the youngest individuals to become a chapandaz, or master at the art of dragging a goat carcass into the scoring area, at only thirty-five.

He gazed towards the other half to see many of his wife's distinctions. English and the arts seemed to be a main contestant amongst the certificates and trophies. Rafi shook his head, reminiscing only makes things harder. He hastily produced a folder from his satchel and placed only Ayesha's most important qualifications, he thought that it would help them when first starting out in the foreign country.

He closed the case. Just before he stepped foot out the door, he turned back and grabbed a royal blue sash, the first he had ever won, and tied it around his waist under the thick clothes.

Javeed suddenly heard her father's constant and heavy footsteps. Not wanting him to know that she had just invaded a private moment, she ran to the door and turned to wave at the barren corridor. She wistfully smiled as she exited and closed the door behind her, meeting her mother in the dusty courtyard. Together, they stared, acknowledging the fact that this home that held memories that could never be replaced.

Four

The family of three jolted with every pothole, bump and abrupt stop the truck made. The man, Ali, that was meant to take them to the harbour was gruff and sported a noticeable potbelly. He muttered everything and grunted every minute or two as well.

Rafi shifted uncomfortably right beside Ali, and couldn't fathom how his wife and daughter were doing. Ayesha and Javeed were carefully placed in between various closets to conceal them, the smell musty and like decay. Only adding to the discomfort, they had to curl up as tight as they could to fit and not bump their heads against a cupboard.

"In the back, you two," Ali had instructed with a grunt. "I will knock three times on the panel you two lay against if we approach any military personnel, twice once we are all clear. Be quiet and cover yourselves with this black cloth when I knock."

Rafi wanted to protest as the cloth was being handed to a shaking Javeed, but kept his mouth shut. The burly man who was meant to help them petrified her. Ali had noticed Rafi's reluctance to let them sit at the back amongst all the carpentry.

"If I could, no one would be sitting back there." Ali tried his best to grumble as nicely as he could, an attempt at reassuring the man.

Which brought the mother-daughter duo to their current situation. Ayesha's heart ached knowing what they had thrown themselves into. But they had to pick up the pieces, of what's left of the war and do with that.

Turning around, leaving it all behind. It's harder than it may seem.

Ayesha had sat in silence for around three hours now, and Javeed was growing restless and fidgety, not knowing what to say. The mother in question had too much on her mind, only remembering her daughter at the end of her train of thought. To help Javeed with her restlessness, a story came to mind and she let the words replace the uncharted future.

"One fateful day, twins were born. They were named Selene and Sam," Ayesha started with sigh, caressing her daughter's hair. "But they were special. They could see into the future. Selene would see it happen, Sam would receive the small details. People from all over the world wanted the twins' power, even to go as far as-

Ayesha was silenced by a series of discreet, but audible knocks. She placed a finger on her lips, her eyes wide and staring at her daughter. Javeed took the initiative to slip the black cloth over them, cloaking them from sight.

Rafi had frozen in his seat as a human silhouette could be seen in the distance. He nimbly knocked on the panel between the driver and passenger seat, placed near the joystick. As they finally neared the man at what seemed to be a checkpoint, Rafi quieted down. Not like he was any louder before that.

Ali slowed down to meet the man. He was also apparently bilingual, for he and the man spoke in a completely different tongue. As more words were exchanged, the man cocked his head to the side trying to get a better view of Rafi. Once he did, he nodded in something similar to approval and gestured towards the road ahead.

Breaths of relief were sounded in chorus.

So they continued on, with the motor of the truck always humming along. It was only after they left did Rafi notice that the unknown man held a gun. As well as the Pilotka that stood proudly on his head, the red star shining brightly in the afternoon sun.

And so this continued on through the sandy gravelled roads of desolate Kabul. The knocking had become ritual and stories were constantly shared, only cut short when three firm knocks were heard. The travellers only stopped for the necessary supplies and rest. It was a rough three days before the strong, salty tang of the sea invaded the interior of the truck.

They finally parked behind a large, rusting and abandoned shipping container. Rafi slipped out of the truck and hauled open the heavy doors of the vehicle. With the help of Ali, he moved aside the carpentry and helps his wife and daughter out from their hiding place. Ayesha and Javeed both rubbed their eyes, after spending the past few days in almost absolute darkness.

Ali grunted and beckoned them with a hand to follow him. The family of three kept up with Ali's long strides, despite the gravel and sand in their way. The sky was still a frozen grey, pasty and a normal characteristic for the end of the winter season.

They approached the pier with caution. There was nothing but two boats, which had already been filled to the brim with passengers. The boat that Ali had led them to was rickety, the mint green paint was chipping and it seemed to be teetering to one side. A man at the bow of the boat spotted Ali and hopped onto the wooden pier.

He walked towards the travellers, fiddling with his lip and chewing on a toothpick. Once he reached them, he wiped his grimy hands on his dusty pants and shook the men's hands. He grabbed hold of Ali and Rafi's shoulders as if they were best friends and moved them away.

A quick, muttered deal was made. Rafi handed the man his family's passports and Ali the money. The unnamed man gave Ali a final shake of the hand and

pat on the back, before turning to Rafi and leading him back to Javeed and Ayesha.

The man motioned towards the boat. The family immediately scurried over and made their way towards the rickety sea craft. Climbing on, they lurched forward as they tried to keep their balance. Rafi was first to slip into the masses of bodies and limbs. He then carried on Javeed and then helped his wife on board.

Another man dressed identically to the one on the bow of the ship approached the family. He checked their bags for any birth certificates or items of interest then let them go. Nobody noticed how Ayesha had wrapped her arms around her waist, trying to conceal what little she had of her legal identity.

Rafi had a hand on his wife's back as he led them towards another friendly looking family.

“Salaam, my name is Rafi. This is my daughter Javeed and wife Ayesha,” Rafi immediately introduced, hoping to find a friend.

“Wa'alikum salaam. I am Adam, here is my wife, Noor and son, Yusoff,” Adam replied, as merrily as he could. He patted the spot in front of him, making the Rafi and his family sit down in between all the other passengers on the boat.

The two families hit it off. The children played pretend, play fighting as if they were Russians and Pashtuns at war, while the parents discussed past experiences. Suddenly, a horn blared and they were off. Yusoff, now best friends with Javeed, followed whatever she did and held tightly onto his mother, the sea currents usheringssss them towards the place to start again.

An hour into the journey, he looked back at Kabul's shoreline and suddenly, Rafi came to an epiphany. He shouldn't waste anymore time wishing that war could just fade away. It is what it is. He was running away, and he didn't want to look back. There would always be a never-ending replay of his memories both good and bad, which was for sure. But in the future, he could only see the best of times in front of him. It was too late to second-guess his decisions.

He felt free. He felt a sense of relief. And he felt like he was flying away, like a bird from its cage, escaping the horrors it experienced by its captors.

His held on to this feeling, and kept that beside him and his family, as the boat ventured, finally, towards the light at the end of the never-ending tunnel.

THE END

