

Kabul

My first memory of Baba was him cradling me in his arms, whilst I stared at the beautiful orange glow of sunset in Kabul, on our balcony. The purple sunbirds chirped melodiously, their ivory green and violet feathers gleaming whilst a comforting breeze ruffled their chests. Back then, there was no darkness. Everywhere I turned, there was a rush of colour and joy, my nose was always treated with exotic fragrances and spices from Mama's cooking. Even at midnight, the moon shone in all its brilliance and the stars twinkled like doors to heaven. We lived in luxury, a modern apartment - or as Baba used to call it "Our little nest".

However, as I wrap my arms around little Aki, I try to shade her from the wind that wails just like the cripple in the camp next to us, crippled from a bomb in Syria, from conflict. In Turkey, we are exposed to the elements. I am seated on the sandy, bare earth that sometimes stings my eyes and causes them to water. I blink quickly and look away from Aki so that she does not think that I am crying. Everywhere I turn, I see more crowded refugee camps with more huddles of malnourished children, clinging to each other for dear life.

Now Aki is finally asleep, I zip the plain white strips of cloth that encompass our tent together. I feel like I am zipping me and Aki into a little bubble of privacy amongst thousands of similar dwellings. Our new humble abode is a makeshift home, at least that's what I keep telling Aki. This tent engages us amongst thousands of others, it makes us "refugees".

Kabul was the most comforting and secure place in the world, or so I thought naively for eleven glorious and carefree years. One dreamlike April, Baba returned home staggering, with a weary look in his eyes and whispered something to my mother. She embraced him tenderly and gently shut the door, so that I could no longer see them. I crouched down like a kitten and put my head against the wall. I could hear shaking sobs and the rummaging around of papers and files. Then there was the ring of a telephone and Baba speaking in a nervous, hushed tone. What seemed like the lifetime of a Neti (several thousand years) later, Mama took hold of my hand - whilst holding a small suitcase in the other - and ran. I looked back at Baba, unexpected tears blotching my princess make-up. He whispered "Everything has its beauty, but not everyone sees it." I nodded like a big girl - as though I understood.

Now, I feel that it is my duty to protect Aki, like a tigress - for her sake and for her dead father's sake. Aki's father died in the refugee camps after a blustery December. It was partially due to his medical conditions, but I will always blame the lack of medical professionals and resources. The only beauty in this refugee camp is Aki. Her almond brown eyes are a source of hope for me, like a well in a drought. I have been told that an extremist group - the Taliban - have seized Kabul, and Baba. The people that said this, said it plainly, as though they were used to imparting such news. I wish for the umpteenth time that we can go back to Kabul, to a safe Kabul.

Aki is about to turn two and is already crawling about. I worry for her safety and whether, if she crawls too quickly and too far, I will be able to find her amongst these thousands of identical tents. One early morning recently, I could not bear it any longer and wrapped my only shawl around her so that she was securely on my back. I crept stealthily round the different shelters, vivid memories searing my mind. When I finally reached the well-concealed side entrance, I could picture the first time I came here. I was a young teenager back then, having travelled from camp to camp. Despite having lost touch with Mama, I had great friends from Kabul who came with me. We were an enthusiastic group of "explorers", homesickness had not affected us permanently - yet. "3, 2, 1...Run!" I left the way I entered. I made short, sharp drives through the nearby forest, careful to make sure that Aki was still resting comfortably on my back.

Firstly, we stay at a nearby bed and breakfast. I use up the majority of the money that I had kept from years ago to get Aki settled and well fed. After that we are on the go again, slowly progressing through Syria and Iran. We are looked after by hospitable Samaritans and charitable couples. We are always cautious, however. I cannot lose Aki. This is when I realise humankind's internal beauty, despite the danger that we bring upon ourselves. When we reach the Iranian-Afghan border, I feel utterly exhausted.

News has spread that the Taliban no longer have control of Kabul and have been forced to release prisoners, including Baba, and that he wants to meet me in Kabul before sunrise. When I finally reach the site of our old house, I catch a glimpse of Baba. We rejoice as though we have achieved salvation: Baba and Aki are my heaven. Now that we are reunited, I introduce Baba to Aki. He strokes her silky tufts of remnant baby hair lovingly, just like he used to caress me when I was younger. I ask about Mama and he shakes his head reluctantly. Now, he asks me whether I understand his saying from seven years ago and I nod. Tears splash onto my cheeks; a form of relief. The most important thing, I have learned, is to understand and appreciate one another while still together. Anyone can bounce back from any situation, as long as they have the determination. Aki is mine.

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