

The Birds

The orange glow of the setting sun filtered through the wooden window slats. She could see the specks of dust in the air dance around as they caught the last light of the day. This was the time when the birds would sing, happily hidden away amongst the leaves of the almond tree. As soon as he heard them, Baba would run outside in his old leather slippers, waving his arms and shoing them to move on. His efforts, however, were always futile. By the time the singing had started, most of the almonds were already eaten. Full bellied, the birds would fly off over the neighbour's roofs, and into the darkening sky. "At least almonds are cheap to buy" she would say to him jokingly. But she knew it was not about saving money, or even having the almonds. Baba hated losing, especially to the birds. So once again, another season would pass with no almonds from the tree.

Baba was gone now. He was one of the first men called to fight when the invasion began. Although retired, he was once a senior officer in the armed forces. Despite being soft spoken and of short stature, he had a special way of commanding a certain level of respect. He didn't say much, but when he did, the young soldiers listened. Perhaps it was the sincerity in his voice and the wholehearted advice he would share to the men about life and marriage beyond the army. Baba always thought of himself as a father figure to the young troops in his division. Maybe it was because he never had a son of his own. He never said so much and loved his three daughters immensely. But most men in the world want sons. Someone to follow in their footsteps. Someone to pass on their genes. Someone to carry the family legacy.

On the day they came to collect Baba, he didn't want to go. She recognised the sad but helpless look in his face. Baba was happy being at home, looking after his trees and watching the English Premier League on cable TV. It was just the two of them now, her and Baba in the big old family house. Both of her older sisters, Badriya and Tahara were married. Badriya married first and then Tahara, who married her high school sweetheart two years ago. Since then, her and Baba had been each other's only company.

Like many men in this country, Baba had diabetes. And like many men, he tried to ignore it. Who amongst the troops, she wondered, would make sure he took his medicine twice a day? And who would hide the sugar in the flour tin so he wouldn't know where to find it? He always complained about how she would fuss over things like his pills and drinking bitter tea, but she knew that deep down, he secretly liked the attention. Ummi had always fussed over him before she passed away. She knew Baba missed his wife's lectures just as much as he missed her.

Unlike her two older sisters, she didn't want to get married. She wanted to be a journalist. Although she didn't really know what that meant, she knew it would mean travel, fancy clothes and dinners with very important people. She wanted to see the world far beyond the concrete walls of Ar Rutbah. She wanted to explore tall cities, visit shiny shopping malls, feel snow through her fingers and ride majestic elephants. But most of all, she wanted to see the ocean. The closest beach was 600kms away and two country borders. She wanted to dip her toes in the cold ocean water, build a sand castle and taste the saltiness of the air. In her mind, the ocean was a place of eternal peace.

Badriya's husband was the next to join the army. He was a policeman, so it wasn't a surprise when the men came knocking. He was given a week's notice and would be stationed in Baghdad. "He will be back in three months", they said. That was fourteen months ago.

Then they took Afshaq, Tahara's husband. Afshaq's conscription came as a shock as he didn't work for the government. Afshaq was an accountant and hardly the type to take up arms. Skinny and goofy with a keen interest in collecting basketball caps, she couldn't imagine him in camouflage riding in the hull of a tank towards imminent danger. By then though, all the men were being called to fight. The war had proved to be more complicated than expected. Living so far from Baghdad and Mosul, Afshaq managed to avoid the conscription for a bit longer than most others. Tahara was two months pregnant. When he was taken, she just sat and stared lifelessly out the living room window for three days. The stress must have been too much as she lost the baby.

Eventually, Tahara and Badriya moved back into the family house. It was nice, being the three of them again. At first it was exciting, staying up till late and learning all about what married life was like. "When the men come back, you should marry Hameed!" Badriya had said. Hameed was the son of the local carpenter. He was studying to be a pharmacist at King Saud University in Riyadh. Four months ago, he was forced to end his studies and return from Saudi to join the fight. "I don't want to marry Hameed", she insisted. "I want to be a journalist and go to London." But if she was true to herself, the idea of marrying Hameed wouldn't have been so bad. Their fathers were long-time friends and he was a smart man with a promising future. He was also incredibly handsome. He had probably met a fancy Arab woman at university. She would be tall, well-spoken and dressed in the latest fashions thanks to her rich father, she told herself. She hoped not. Maybe he would have been interested in her, a simple girl from his small hometown with not much to offer other than average skills in making bread.

It was later in the year when the foreigners came. At first it was just a few. They would guard outside the government offices, changing shifts twice a day. Over the next few weeks, as the nights got colder, more and more of the foreign soldiers came. Soon they were a common sight along the narrow streets and shop fronts. They set up checkpoints throughout the town and there were stories that some had conducted violent raids on businesses. She didn't know why there were this many soldiers here, so far away from the major cities where the actual fighting was. Ar Rutbah had nothing but old buildings, a few mosques and an old oil pipeline decommissioned more than 50 years ago. It was a small run-down town on the outskirts of the country near the border of Syria, known for its farming thanks to the high rainfall. Now it was just a small run-down town full of lonely women, children and elderly.

Within a few months of the men leaving, food supplies began to run low. Farmers, truck drivers and shop keepers were all called to the war front. Although many women also worked the land and took up jobs in transporting food, they could not keep up with the growing demand. Feeding the army was the nation's first priority.

The foreigners brought food to town every second Tuesday. The trucks would stop at different checkpoints to unload the brown packs. She would go with her sisters in the early

afternoon on those Tuesdays. It was dangerous now in Ar Rutbah. Nobody walked alone. Nearby towns had been hit twice with airstrikes in the last week. Dust filled the air and the once clear blue sky now grey.

It was always crowded at the checkpoints. Hordes of women fighting for rations of flour, rice and bottled water. Neighbours turned against each other like hungry rats fighting over leftover food scraps. How quickly life had changed in this sleepy old place, she thought to herself. How much longer, a question no one knew the answer to.

If she was a journalist, she thought, these were the stories she would share to the world. Stories of her sister's miscarriage brought on by an immense sadness. Stories of a budding pharmacist sacrificing his dream of saving lives only to be forced to take them instead. Stories of neighbouring friends who once shared gossip over biscuits and coffee nothing more than an enemy threat to their ration allowance.

If she were a journalist, she would share the story of Baba's almond tree. For the first time it was full of almonds. Hundreds of them growing in little clusters across the branches, ready to be picked and roasted. The birds don't come here anymore. The air is too dirty and the guns are too loud. Baba finally won.

Oh Baba! How she missed him! She imagined his face. His kind smile. His overgrown moustache. His dark brown eyes. Familiar eyes that were filled with endless love and warmth. Eyes that had witnessed her birth and her very first step. Eyes that had showed disappointment at the 5 year old when she stole sweets from Uncle Jabir's shop. Eyes that carried a deep sadness in the doctor's office when Umami was first diagnosed with breast cancer. Eyes that filled with tears of pride when she finally graduated from school. Baba's beautiful eyes.

But these eyes that dominated above her were blue. These eyes were a stranger. There was no love, no warmth. These eyes shared no stories. These eyes did not know her history, her ambitions or how she liked her eggs cooked. Fried and a little bit runny. These eyes didn't care about stealing from shops. They did not care for what they were stealing from her right now. If eyes were the windows to the soul, then there was no soul beyond these that she could find.

Outside, the sun was beginning to set. The orange glow of the last light filtered through the open wooden window slats. Swarms of hungry mosquitos began to make their way through the opening looking for their next meal. She didn't feel them bite all over her arms, thighs and stomach. She felt nothing. She did not even feel the loose piece of kitchen tile underneath her break off digging deeper into her lower back every time he thrust. She closed her eyes. The ocean.

How quickly life had changed in this sleepy old place. The orange glow of the setting sun once signalled the Adhan to be called from the mosque towers, summoning people to join in prayer. But just like the birds, God does not come here anymore.