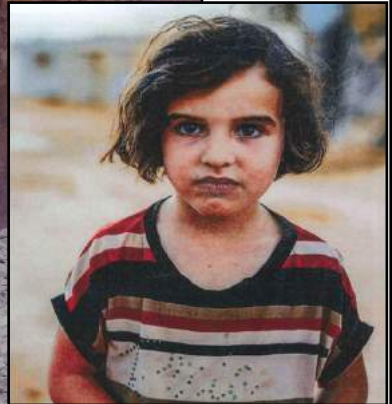




English Faculty
Soroptimist International
Short Story Writing
Competition July 2016

The Winning Stories



Forgotten Dreams



Afghanistan photograph 3

The sky was falling down. That was all I knew. Smoke clouded my vision as I crawled onto the cracked tiles with grey rubble beneath me, the sharp stones scraping my skin. It burned my scorched legs. The fire was approaching and getting stronger with delight. Its threat was palpable. Another life to take. It seemed that however much I pushed my body to bring me forward I was getting nowhere but 10 feet closer to a fiery death. Drowsiness took hold of my mind and willed my body to fall onto the hospital floor. I could feel, with a sense of detachment, my eyes rolling back into my infested head. I was ready to give up. That much was evident. I'd been in the intensive care unit for four weeks when it was bombed. I'd come close to death before, I walk these streets starving while guns are brandished and held to my head. And a bomb is what defeats me. Still, I couldn't bring myself back up as blackness shrouded my vision and smoke surrounded me like an embrace.

My eyes peeled open to see my auntie holding my hand tightly like an anchor. The shock of surviving jolted through me like a bucket of cold water. I moved my mouth to smile but found that it hurt my muscles and all I was capable of was a taught grimace. Auntie Basira was sobbing, using her hands as shields while salty tears collected into her pink scarf. Roya, she kept crying out. My name was a prayer. After losing my parents in a gun raid when I was 6 my aunt was all I had. I couldn't imagine me and my brother, Mullah surviving without her fierce discipline and incessant love. I peered at my surroundings, spying other families enclosing their loved ones in circles of love. I envied their crowded families and missed my mother and father. If I close my eyes I can still hear my mother's sweet

lullabies that would always get me and my baby brother to sleep and my father's scoldings when we fought over the last Noni. I kept these memories close to my chest and replayed them like a film in my mind, ignoring Aunties desperate attempts to get me to look at her warm brown eyes and assure her that Roya was still the giggling girl she left behind in the Kunduz trauma centre weeks ago. I wasn't. At 11, I had to grow up fast, skipping school to help provide for my family with Basira's job at the clothing stall generating next to nothing. I was a weaver, my quick and nimble fingers making me an asset to the manager, earning me double my aunts Afghanis. My thoughts then quickly flew to my injuries. Would I be able to work again? What happened to me in the fire? Through my aunts bawling I could make out that I had not got out of the air strike easy. Basira wouldn't reply when I pulled at her arm, wouldn't look at me in the eye when I asked her how the bomb had ravaged me. I whipped off the rug enwrapped around my body feeling the chill of the makeshift emergency room and looked down at the brown of my skin in rags. Nothing looked different to my untrained eyes. Everything was as it should be save for the burns marking their way down my body. Immediately I knew my eyes were tricking me. My injuries weren't visible to anyone, they were internal yet larger than anything that could have occurred inside of me. The realization of how my life would be turned upside down dawned on my mind, slowly then all at once. Numerous ideas of things I would never do, never see, never *feel* poured into me like blood seeping out of an open wound. I would've dropped onto my knees. If I was able to. Desperately trying to will my legs to move I was shown proof of the exact thing I was terrified of. Paralysis. I could feel nothing from the waist down. I would never use my legs again. Crushing sobs burst through me and I mirrored Auntie with my shaking, convulsing body, twisting hands manoeuvring around my face like a cage.

Assa Kanoute
Year 9

Syria



Today, the hills are abandoned as usual. The sparse, dead trees must be very lonely by now. The sky above me is a roaring canvas full of reds and oranges and swirling yellows, projecting a dull orange glow onto everything below. The grass beneath my bare feet is as scratchy as gravel, the colour of sand. If it weren't for me, I'd think this was a photograph; there is no movement for miles and miles around me. The horizon is frozen and the heavy air feels like it's hanging lazily from the sky.

There is no breeze. There hasn't been for the past three weeks. Maybe there was before, but I can't remember. I might be imagining it, but after what happened it feels like everything is dead. I think of my family as dead from inside – that's the only way I can put their hollow looks and reluctant attempts at talking.

To reach my usual spot, I have to climb over bricks and debris, but I've become a master at it now. I squeeze through the thickets of brambles like a squirrel running for cover. I walk through a dry ditch where there once was a running stream, avoiding the sharp bricks scattered on the bottom.

A deafening crash that shook the windows until they cracked. Shouts and screams of desperate mothers holding their children close and praying for mercy. A dozen siren calls and my father's face, streaked with fears and filled with a twisted expression that looks like he knows what's coming next.

By the time I've scurried across the coarse land the heat has decreased, and here's even the faintest outline of a shadow thrown by a dilapidated pile of bricks and rocks and rubbish that nobody will ever again give a second glance at. It's still unbearable hot, and I can only walk slowly up my hill to get to the top. I try and place myself in the centre of the shadow, and sit cross legged, taking deep

A second terrifying bang that sends me into floods of tears and a powerful crash which I'll never forget. The rest is a blur. My eyes sting painfully with the smoke which comes billowing into our room, tumbling and spiralling in thick and fast. The floor shakes heavily and I feel a loud rumble beneath us. The smell of burning and rotting meat and outside the loud, unmistakable crackle of fire. The heat creeps towards us like a snake, intense and smelling strongly of hatred.

Down below where I'm sitting, the chinks of sunlight escape the shadows like a plane coming out of a cloud. One by one, slivers of glowing light reveal the old cobbled ruins. Every brick, every stone is illuminated with a garnet glimmer.

I come to this point in the hills every day to escape the sullen mood back in the village. It's very infectious, spreads like an illness, almost as deadly as one. So I become a whole other person when I'm here. The floor here is sandy and soft, and if I can break a stick off a tree, then I draw. I draw my life. I need to do something, to explain myself in some way, otherwise I feel I will go mad, like the rest of them.

The thick stick makes a deep print in the ground, and I begin to direct the stick, dancing it along the ground. I stand up, move around, creating patterns. The sand falls softly to the side as the stick glides through it. I walk in circles, swirling the stick with me. I walk up and down, trailing the stick by my side, careful not to step on my previous lines. I walk around the pile of debris, copying into the ground the jagged edges of the bricks and various objects.

That's when I see, lying on top of a brick, a slender metal fountain pen. There are swirls on it that start on the nib and go all the way down to the bottom. Immediately I drop the stick. It drops to the ground with a dull *poof*.

The pen feels smooth in my hand. It's been lying in the sun for a long time, by the feel of it. The metal is hot. The kind of hot which burns the tips of your fingers, but I clutch it even tighter. Looking through the pile wistfully I strike lucky again and find exactly what I'm looking for. Putting the pen down, I find my hands wet, coated in black ink. I reach my arm into a crack in the rocks. My skin grazes yet for once, I couldn't care less. Soon my fingers brush again the smooth feel of paper and I grab, and pull. Soon I'm holding a perfect notebook. My eyes widen as I flick through. There must be about thirty plain pages! I feel the pages each with my fingers in awe. The book is grubby, and a few pages are ripped, but I can't contain my excitement. For the first time in forever, an actual cool breeze rushes through my hair, and another first, I have a smile on my face.

Every day after that I return to the mountains, finding my notebook and pen underneath the bushes. I wouldn't trust anybody with it at home, and it's safe here. When I draw, the pen ink sinks into the soft pages like a weight sinks into water. The pen flows smoothly across the pages, making beautiful long lines and swirls. Anything I feel like drawing goes in the book, and I vow to myself always to keep it. Pretty soon it becomes the only happiness in my life. After another attack, I've lost my brother. It gets even quieter. The smell of fear intensifies.

But I go back to the book every day, and it keeps me going. Just. Even though I'm living in a ghost town, and I'm the only one alive.

Coral Monaghan
Year 9

Angel of the Night



Afghanistan photograph 3

Before everything happened mum and I liked to go and lie with our backs on the grass in our wonderful garden in our countryside house with the red roof and stare at the moon and the stars. I loved watching the bright gleaming lights of hope in the dark blue sky as if everything off this earth was peaceful and silent. My mum, she studied the stars for a job, she was an astronomer before the war. That's why I'm called Leila- in my country it means 'of the night'. My mum will always be my idol and my angel, I loved her so, so, so much- and she respected and believed in me. A 'woman' she called me, even though I was only 12, 'a woman' never, ever a girl. Silence, there's no more of that here anymore. Nights in Herat, in my once beautiful country wouldn't be the same anymore.

It was just before midnight, I was still awake. Fear slithered silently through the streets and the rubble and the houses of the people left in the once bustling city... so quickly, too quickly. Baby's cries, a widows weeping, a motorbike- This city was always awake now.

Suddenly a crash and a scream of terror. Then one more, then five more, then a harrowing disconnected string of screams from everywhere you could hear. Huge explosions and more cries and the pungent smell of fire wafted into my room. Papa rushed in, 'Leila go, run, take your sister' he shouted as he thrust the screeching child into my arms. I did what he told me, Clutching Sana in my arms, I fled down the stairs as I heard the top of the tower block crash above

me I felt as though it was me verses the world. I saw a woman rushing down who I knew from the top floor of our temporary flats- she was holding her eleven year old son. However he wasn't moving- I think he was dead.

We took a while to get to the bottom and outside- it was only then I saw how bad the damage was. Our once great city had once again taken a stab to its heart- but now it was time for another stab to my heart. As a stream of sadness and shock ran down my face, I shivered as the harsh cold bit me with a frosty sensation that ran all through me as I waited for mother and papa. Despite this happening to us all the time, we were always terrified whilst waiting for our parents. Every minute I tried to hold Sana closer to my heart because Sana was my job- I had to make sure she was ok. Usually we wait for a couple of hours for them to find us where we are hiding, but this time felt much longer as though time itself had frozen for all the lives lost- and forgot to start again for all the people who needed to find their loved ones.

I don't know how I knew when papa came running to us that mother had gone. I screamed a long, blood curdling scream that met a higher pitch to everyone else's. Papa ran and gave me a soft hug and whispered...."I couldn't find your mother, I think she was trapped," he paused, "I'm sorry Leila." He wrapped his hand around my face and held Sana in his other hand. "Look at the stars Leila. That's where your mother is. One day you will join her and we will live in our countryside house with the wonderful garden and your big room and flowers and the red roof up, up in the stars with Mother. I promise, Leila, I promise you." He was crying- I had never seen Papa cry before. We sat there for a while crying and thinking of our old life in our big house in the country before we moved.

Then a shout "Leila, I'm here! I'm here!" I gasped. It was my mother. We ran together and embraced in relief on one of our final days before we left Afghanistan for safety. From then on I loved her more than ever, because I knew that dead or alive my mother would always be my angel, my angel of the night.

Alice Evans
Year 9

“Amira,”



“Amira,” her mother croaked through blurred tears. Amira sat crossed legged, cradling the two year old boy in her arms. She wrapped her arms around the small boy tighter for comfort, the boy in response tugged on her shirt looking for the same comfort she needed. Her young brown eyes held more than youth. Maturity, something you wouldn't usually find in nine year olds. But that's how it was when you were brought up in the war, surrounded by bloodshed. Amira's mother lay at the corner of the room with only a thin cotton blanket that didn't really provide much warmth. Well, what was left of the room? Her back pressed against the cold floor, sometimes shifting making the rubble follow her movements.

The woman watched her oldest child and couldn't help but think about what the future could have held for her. For the both of them. She always had high hopes for Amira. She was a smart girl, hard working for her age, maybe too hard working. Amira's mother tried to lift her body up but a fit of painful coughs erupted - forcing her to lay back down.

“I won't be here for long-,” Amira's mother spoke between coughs. Amira knew what was to come. Her eyes cast to the opening at the side of the room. Too painful to watch her mother slip through her fingers so easily. The opening seemed to form an image of a gaping mouth - it's pointed razor teeth taunting her. Abdullah shifted his head to the side, his cheek against Amira's chest. He looked up at her with his round naive eyes.

“I'm hungry. It hurts,” he lay his small hand on his stomach to show what he meant. Amira shifted her gaze to the small boy, too small for his age, then to her mother who looked at the edge of falling sleep. She searched her mother's face for help or some type of guidance but she seemed somewhere else, deep in thought. You could see the tension on her forehead, in long lines, eyebrows furrowed. Amira watched her mother take in struggled breaths, breaths that were shorter than usual. It looked so painful, like she was breathing fire. Her hands gripped tighter on the piece of cloth that was turning into a dark dirty colour matching her skin that use to be a brighter, cleaner shade.

"I know, I am too," she leaned forward stroking her mother's forehead – pushing her brown mud caked fringe out of the way - hoping that could relieve her of her struggle - make things easier for her for once. Amira's heartbeat sped up when she realised how dangerously hot her mother's temperature was. She wished for it to end quickly. She couldn't end up having to watch both her parents die in slow pain. Her father died stuck in mountains of debris, crushing his limbs into unnatural angles.

Shouts outside resonated through the room making Amira jerk back. She twisted her body to the direction of the ruckus. Abdullah hid his head in the crook of Amira's neck shielding himself. He knew the danger just like Amira did whereas her mother didn't seem to notice. She lay like a log, the only movement visible from her was small intakes of breath.

"Mummy," Amira's voice cracked. She started to feel the panic rising but did her best to look brave. Her lip quivered but she bit down on it trying to keep her expression stone. The shouts grew louder as she sat silently watching her mother. She watched her mother absent mindly stare across the room as colour from her face drained making her look paler than usual. The firing of gunshots covered the screams and cries of those innocent.

Amira leaned over again to her mother but this time shook her by the shoulder trying to wake her up from her deep slumber. No response. Amira wasn't that young to not understand what was going on. She felt numb, that connection between mother and daughter faded. Abdullah must have felt it as well because he started to cry out, his voice like a siren. Amira rocked the small boy dying down his wailing. She didn't want to attract any attention. With shaking fingers she gently pulled off the cloth of her mother's dead body. She wrapped it around their two living bodies and moved to sit in the corner where her mother lay. Her body curled in a circle around her younger brother. They were both so small hiding behind their mother, away from the outside. Away from the war.

Umaymah Khan 9W
Year 9

Wondering



She was frightened and distraught. The rubble under her sore feet crumbled away with every struggled step. She imagined that the ground was a bridge, and sooner or later it would open up and drag her down. Like it did with her parents. It was all a blur. One minute her family were gathered around a table, her mother, father and brother. The next, loud noises and screams filled her small ears. The perfect, laminate flooring had parted, creating a sinkhole of death to its victims. Her brother had managed to move out of the way and picked her up; and without hesitating, had sprinted out of their collapsing home. She was

screaming and shouting for her mother, but she never came. Neither did her father. Shya tried to scramble away from her brother's strong grip, but she was completely powerless. She wished to hear that bedtime story, to feel that night-night kiss; to smell her purple, lavender scented candle that filled the warm night time air around her.

Shya's brother had tried to cover her eyes as he ran, and she didn't want to look, but she could not peel her eyes away from the horror that unfolded before her. It was as if she was the character in a tragic book. Her story had been read so many times and she knew the outcome, but she could not prevent the pages from turning. All she could do, was carry on.

Her brother had been telling her something, but, lost in her thoughts, she had hardly heard a word. She had only just noticed that he was no longer running and was about to flip her over his shoulder and back onto solid ground. Except it wasn't solid. There were bodies and loose stones everywhere, making walking extremely difficult. She was exasperated. Her feet were beginning to swell up and her brother was practically dragging her as they lumbered on and on. His hand had begun to slip from hers and he picked up the pace, but there no way she going to let go of him. Not now, not ever. As she focused back into reality, she saw the mess that was Aleppo, her city! Everywhere seemed exactly the same. Blood, screaming, tears and broken houses as well as broken hearts.

He had been telling her how their parents had gone on a little trip, and would return in a few years. Shya knew he was lying. She knew what had happened. She knew there was no way her parents had survived the quake. She also realised her life was falling apart. Bit by bit; like she was a cliff. She could stay strong for a long as she liked, but something will always make her lose it and break apart. Being with her brother helped her to manage her humanity and carry on going. Despite the fact that she had no idea where they were going. Lost.

He was lost and she knew it. She slumped to the ground, careful to mind the sharp rocks. Her sweaty back was leaned up against a cold, metal wall, and it felt wonderful. She was so tired, her heavy eyes closed and she fell into a deep, nightmarish sleep.

Of course, her nightmare had to be about the events of the day. Screaming, noises and death. Death? Witnessing death now was surely not possible? Her father had always explained to her that dreams sometimes recapped on past events. Shya definitely did not see anyone dying.

Someone was calling her name from the distance. Without warning, she felt a strong hand grasping her shoulder, shaking her.

It was her brother. He had been calling her name and shaking her. Feeling refreshed, she stood. It took her a moment to process her surroundings. She was no longer leaning against a cold wall. She was on grass. Bewildered, she staggered after her brother, bombarding him with questions. He knelt down in front of her and pointed to a large hill that covered the sun as it continued its descent to make room for the silvery moon. Her shoulders dropped. Shya dropped to the soft, fresh grass and stayed there, staring at him. Kicking off her shoes, she lurched back up again and strolled forward; her feet carried her faster and faster as they climbed up the surprisingly steep hill.

The strain was definitely worth it. Once they reached the top of the hill, they were greeted by a small community of people. Laughing and being all cheerful. Shya questioned why they were there. Apparently her brother was looking for someone. Desperately. She was contemplating who it could be. The only family she had known to be in the area had been their parents and... well. Maybe it was a friend? She honestly didn't. He was flying through the narrow streets with Shya perched on his shoulders, gawking at all the different foods. She then realised how hungry she was.

Unanticipated, he came to an abrupt halt. They had stopped in a clearing behind what looked like a blacksmith or something. Her brother let her down to the ground again.

There was a woman standing nonchalantly a few metres in front of them. She was beautiful with a few bruises and cuts up her bare arms and legs. However, the dress made up for it. Her hair was swept back and was as black as night. The woman noticed them and a smile broke through her flawless face, so wide, so warm. She dropped to her knees with her arms wide open, and tears started to fall from her perfect sea green eyes. Shya's brother ran forward, releasing the clasp on their hands. He fell into her arms, laughing. When they unattached themselves, from their heartfelt hug, Shya. Looked at the woman with longing in her eyes, as she finally realised who the woman was. She didn't move, it was as if her legs had been plastered to the ground. Shya whispered: "Mama"

Rachel Avery
Year 9

Medina's Story



Hair ruffled and stained with the ashes of her mother. Plump face painted with splashes of dry tears. Fear beating her heart immensely against her chest as it clings to the loving warmth of her grandfather. A 9 year old girl whose childhood went corrupt with a bang of an explosion. Barely standing on crumbling dust with her grandfather, she thinks of how he used to feed her hope with the happy go lucky stories of his childhood. She thinks of the image of a little boy skipping across the shops and splashing in the pond but these false memories are weak. These images of joy cannot quench her thirst for hope and these memories are beaten to myths. The only thing holding her together is the sturdy hands of her grandfather clasped around Medina and her baby brother Babur, but even his bleeding hands are shaking...

Ironic – Babur meaning joy and yet he entered a world of pain, and loss. He wouldn't even have known how to walk yet; most babies have their first steps on the soft stable floor of their home or on ripe grass in a field. Babur would have to learn to walk over dead bodies and rough scrap of forgotten homes. Even now the irony remains heavy in the smoked filled air as his cries echo across the minefield. These people are the remains of the destruction that tore apart Medina's home.

It started with a bang not as heavy as the recent one- a slam against a table. Her father Arman. A wail of worry is let out by her mother Aina, followed by an argument breaking out between husband and wife as words of war and huge debts are thrown about in their small box of a living room. It was decorated with the passionate colours of their forgotten culture and the flags of her soon to be forgotten country. Words that Medina never knew existed as she stands at the corner of the door perplexed. Her eye following a fresh tear that trickles down from her mother's to touch her hands that agitate with worry and swell with muscles hard from the daily labour she undergoes.

'Ama?' says Medina with a melodic tone. Aina rushes her hand at the speed of light to her face and dries the tears away ever so quickly, it had become a skill obtained from the many moments she spent being caught crying in the living room.

'Go to sleep Medina,' her father commanded 'it's late'
'Calm yourself Arman!' Aina objects

Aina stood up and rescued her daughter away from the stressful aura that was strong in the living room. As Medina floated away in her mother's arms to the bedroom she witnessed her father sink low in his chair. The light so dim in that room seemed to focus on his slumped back. The family was held on to that back, all their problems but that night it seemed limp enough to crash down, as he gazed down at the weapon of cold

steel floating in a pool of salt in his hand. For that dim second it was the first time she'd seen her father cry.

'Ama don't cry' she sung ignorant of the truth that laid behind her mother's tears. Her reminder was silenced by Aina's desperate lullaby. Medina always remembered the gleam in her mother's eye whenever she performed the hymn of joy and love with a broken voice. She sang all the air out of her lungs as if she was trying to animate the joy in these lyrics that rocked Medina to sleep.

Hot morning. However not the beaming summertime beach hot. No. this was unnatural heat. It oozed out a metallic scent into the house. BANG! Medina shot up from her slumber. She sat erect on her bed to see her grandfather barge into her bedroom with blood dripping from his veins to his fingertips and Babur sitting on his arm with only a diaper wrapped around his bum cheeks. The baby was still shaking the sleep off himself. Then an orchestra of gunshots sounded from outside the house leading to a deafening alarm of explosions. It seemed impossible to leave. They ran through the cracks of concrete and out of the pile of the bricks that used hold their home together. They finally arrived outside to black clouds of smoke, red hills of bodies and ugly metallic birds packed with missiles. Her toes feeling the dirt form the ground absorbing the blood and dirt from the destruction

'WATCH OUT!!' her grandfather screeches before he pushed her away from a trigger bomb burrowed under the ground.

They never stopped running until Medina tripped over a figure.

'Come on Medina!!' her grandfather pleaded as he tried to tug her away from her grip on the figure. The face was too bashed in by the falling buildings to see but Medina recognised the significant tears that were smothered onto those hands. Behind the disguise of dust Medina could feel the swollen muscles under those loving hands... That was the moment she understood the meaning of loss.

Her grandfather finally succeeded to drag her up but with Babur wailing on his arm; it was a fight to pick up the screeching 9 year old girl whose sorrow was being lashed out into waterfalls.

But where would they run. They weren't going to be able to go on forever. Here lies the three remainders of the huge bang that took place at their home. The baby whose name had lost all meaning, the old man whose child memories faded into the dust and the girl whose hope ran dry and learnt of the words of loss and war. The shimmering gleam once in her eyes was lost in the screams of her fear- they're shouting 'help us!'

Sergina Sergio
Year 9

Story in the city of Homs



Its midday and the sun struggles to beam light for the two kids to survive on. Tulari stumbles onto the rubble remembering her dreadful past as she looks at the house that was destroyed in front of her eyes as a baby. Her older brother, Shardre, cuddles her from behind and softly strokes her hair while whispering that it's going to be alright. She turns around to slowly embrace him in a heart-warming hug as that's all she has left in her family.

Clambering along the dusty pathway, the day begins to drag on as their only hope starts to fade away into the darkness of the night. Shardre and Tulari are on the search for dinner as it will be their last meal before they have to move away from their wreck of a home. Shardre gently takes Tulari's hand as they walk into an abandoned shop keeping together so that she doesn't get lost through the gritty congregated isles. He picks up the necessities of food and drinks and exhaustedly carries them back to the base, while on the other hand Tulari stands in her place admiring a blanket she spotted amongst a rack.

"Do we have to go?" she muttered airily towards her brother. He turned to look into her heart broken eyes, "Yes Tulari we have to..." he said calmly. "There's no point in staying here in this dump; the terrorists are out to eradicate us! There's no chance of survival here!" he said, beginning to raise his voice with a hint of sadness and anger. Tulari didn't say a word in response, dropped her head in despair and grabbed the blanket- following her brother like a lost puppy on the way back to the base.

Darkness drew upon the sky as the two settled down for their last meal of the day. Smoke drifted into air filled with the aroma of sweet coconut rice and grilled chicken. Shardre served the food to his sister first, before serving himself as if she was his own child. The tummies were soon filled with satisfaction as the two began to fall into a deep sleep wrapped up in the blanket together to keep warm.

Shuffling and quiet voices were heard close by as strangers came upon them. They weren't just any strangers... they were a part of the Taliban terrorist group. One of them grabbed Tulari with such force and woke up screaming for her life alerting Shardre who was next to her. Shardre rose from his spot thrashing about trying to throw a punch at the Taliban who's attacking his baby sister.

"You take your hands off her right now!!! Before I kill you myself!" he scowled, blaring with fire and rage.

Tears streamed down Tulari's face as she has no chance of defending herself as she is too small and weak. The Taliban chuckled menacingly to himself and the rest of his group.

"You? Kill me? Ha, I'd like to see you try! You don't stand a chance against me and my crew." He said arrogantly, as he held his hands tighter around Tulari with a knife dangerously close to her throat.

Shardre cowered down beneath the man only to hear the blast of a gunshot close by...

Esther Amosu
Year 9

Afsana



Afsana didn't know her last name, or her eye colour, or favourite food. Was it really important?

These are the kind of things these couples in rich countries hate themselves for not knowing about the other lover but, what if you don't know it yourself?

8 years old, thirsty and forgotten what hunger feels like, sitting on an empty Water Aid parcel. Nobody in her family got to the water in time but at least she has a seat and doesn't have to sit on the rubble and ash like she had to yesterday. Maybe not yesterday. Well it was before the last time she fell asleep.

Afsana heard a piercing semi-deafening gunshot. Any normal child might flinch and cry or run to her mother but this girl was completely at home with the gunshots and screams of pain and terror that she just stood up and talked to herself, out loud, with confidence. "That man with a gun just shot something or someone," she mumbled, cautiously pacing over grey bumpy land, cruising over bodies beneath her which she did not want to know about, heading towards the shop her dad was supposed to be in. "but it did not kill me, I will walk." The childish emotions had all be forgotten; or released when she was just a baby.

Afsana did not know why she was one of a few children left in her camps unit 6. Once you saw her, you could tell. How do you tell a child with no sense of self, let alone self-love, that she has not been murdered because she is a beautiful pale mix race Muslim? How can you even begin to explain that she is under threat because of that too? Her father was a soldier giving donated supplies to her Refugee unit nearly 9 years ago, when he fell in love with Yazmin, Afsana's mother. Yazmin was only 16 when she had Afsana, and it wasn't even unusual. But when a pale baby popped out on the rubble, it had the whole community gossiping about who the dad was, assuming it was rape by a lonely soldier. What good Muslim girl at 16 has a baby with a white man willingly, without marriage? None. She was disowned by her family, forcing her to move out of her safe family patch and find some other unit to live in with a baby and a white father at just 16.

Yazmin was burnt with acid three years after her birth of her first child. A woman like her with no self-modesty must not be worth anything but her reproductive system. She now covers her entire face, apart from tiny slits for her eyes. Her life was falling apart at 19, and it never was together. Pregnant again, she is forced to take some leave off her quietly spoke of job "entertaining" some soldiers without dignity or wives. Yazmin does what she can to just bring a few Syrian Pounds home each week. Just an orange carton for Afsana. Her little Afsana might have to start coming work with her when the new baby is born.

Afsana waited outside the shop for her father but after hours of counting the same bit of broken wall she decided to head home, flip-flops broken and dirty thumb in mouth and index finger rubbing her cute button nose that all the men seem to give her a lot of attention for.

“You. Out here. Hurry!” she recognised that voice from a mile away, probably because you could hear it a mile away.

“It’s Lukas, right?”

“Yes sir,” that was the moment she knew her dad’s name and what it meant. She turned around to see an image painting or dreams could only ever come up with. Her strong father was pinned on the ground, palms and knees nailed into scrap metal and bones, digging into his hands as easily as it is to push a needle through cotton. The gun was slowly tickling his spine and shoulder blades until finally settling adjacent to his first vertebrae in his back.

He turned his neck up just enough to see Afsana up ahead, standing silent and emotionless at Luka held at certain gunpoint. She had no reason to run up to her daddy apart from if she wanted to get killed herself.

“Hey!” the Head hit Luka in the face with the fully loaded silver shining gun “-you know that girl? Huh? Is she your little rape consequence?”

“no”

“No? Well that’s good isn’t it. Nobody got any sadness for when you get...”he leaned into Luka’s ear, whispering “killed.”

What he said didn’t make sense but it might not be advised to retort back to him.

“MOVE IT!”

Afsana crept back to a shelter beside of her and sat down, covered by a plastic sheet. She could not hear anything they were saying anymore but her language wasn’t that good anyway. All she can talk about in English and Arabic is war.

But the language barrier doesn’t stop you from hearing your fathers’ screams. The girl sad straight faced and hand in her lap she let out a sigh. Even though this is stuff of life altering nightmares Afsana just sat. This 8 year old girl is so emotionally stunted that she hasn’t even had a lesson but she is dealing with depression.

And there it was. The three gunshots that restricted half of her opportunities, again. Afsana stood and walked out to the grey street. She headed to her bed and her mother. For a split second she turned her head back, her beautiful curls bouncing off her cheek. Her father was dead but held upright as if he could get up and walk again, if he wanted. His blue shirt had two bullet holes. One by the heart from the back and the second was straight through his neck, where it was before.

And they just dropped him and left him crumpled on the rubble.

Beth Johnson-Hall
Year 9

Brave



She wasn't supposed to be here, no living thing was. No one deserved this. It wasn't as though there were many still breathing, watching- being tortured by the sight that they were forced to see. It wasn't just out here, within the rubbles dusty clouds from the fallen houses of Homs. It was inside too, where Aya thought she could shield herself from the gunshots in the night.

Aniya wouldn't say a word; she was ashamed of what her daughter would make of her. The name given to her-that meant love- she now brought it shame. All for a few Syrian pounds that would only stretch so far enough to buy her young the dry, imported bread. She would curse when Aya walked into the room, her innocence leading her to protect the bearer of her life, but her small fists only got so far compared to the rage of the lustful men. Always walking away with purple spots here and there, her four and a half years of life had been through more than any privileged could stomach- yet she never once came out crying.

Her mother had no option but to do this, both sides of the family were buried under the debris and her father, oh her father. He was just like the rest of them in her mind. Aya had stopped praying the first time he left, though she was less than a year old- she knew he was never coming back for them. She now laughed humourlessly- Civil War they said. There's nothing civilised about wiping clean an entire city in just under a day.

There were no street lamps when dusk hit, nor were there any restrictions but survivors knew not to come out at night- only Aniya would. When Aya fell asleep she would tuck the thin and worn covers up to the crease in her neck, wish her a good night's sleep through the explosion. Aniya would trail her finger down Aya's temple, tuck a lock of her shortened, coal coloured hair and press her chapped lips to her daughter's rough skinned cheek for what could be the final time.

When the bowed door was finally shut, Aya would open her eyes again. They would dilate and watch the half fallen wall on the opposing side of what was once a road. The flames from down the street would glower, spreading wisps of warm colours across the grey concrete. The night's air was thick and heavy; dust from the hourly spree would linger above and be inhaled by the people trying to forget the life they were put in.

Aya didn't know what fun was. She didn't have a childhood you see. What would you say to a child that weaves between decaying shot down fighters from the night before, just to run back into her mother's arms after seeing her bloodied and wondering if she would weave by her next time?

Once, after two years of already being in the hell ridden town, she walked into the main room with the navy sandals that were falling from her dirty feet. Her mother, bent over on the only chair they had, elbows on her knees and head in her hands- her skeletal fingers wrapped around her thinning hair. Aniya's tears fell onto the carpet, dampening the fibres as Aya reached her hand out- palm upwards. She caught one. The tear cleaned the dirt from her skin as Aniya pulled back and sat up slowly. She wiped away the water from her face, ringing a sniffle through the desolate building as she opened her arms for her kin.

"It's just mummy and Aya now." Her voice wavered, barely above a whisper as Aniya's fingers ran through Aya's hair.

They only had each other for support now, the other half of Aya's existence had been confirmed as lost. There would be no burial- with what money? With the scarce amount Aniya was making, barely being enough to feed her own blood and flesh? Think again. They would have no option but to leave him how the previous family members were left-

Forgotten beneath the rubble.

Aya had no option but to go to her mother, it's not as though they were any colder than the air outside, if there was any sort of climate change then they knew they would have no hope- not that they did anymore. They were still here because they were brave, they had no trust for anyone nor did they particularly trust each other. How can it get to a point to where a mother doesn't even trust her own daughter, and vice versa?

Aya knew, no one would care for her cries. They were useless against the whole country that droned with the sounds of ruthless bloodshed. The eyes of the men that were armed, their suits unable to be ridden of the blood that stained their uniforms and mind. This was her life now. They were all dressed the same- each one of them trained to kill and would do so when given the order by someone who was just another human being.

It was too late for humanity to go back now.

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Year 9



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