

The Mustafa boys

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You don't really think of electricity as a sound needing to be heard. You wouldn't think of it as bringing to life a static orchestra with one instrument at a time to echo throughout a home. Every four hours we welcomed the hum that would wake the fridge from hibernation and rescue the produce from summer temperatures. Our eyes were relieved as yellow pools that hugged the walls replaced white lights. Showers could be planned as the water heater groaned and angry molecules kicked the inside of the metal body with impressive thuds. Our phones would go from being in our hands to being plugged into walls via adapters that accommodated to two parallel punctures. This would be our second home together since our wedding less than a month ago. The pattern of electricity was not only a shared aspect of the two homes, but a constant variable across all the homes within the village. Two hours of electricity and four hours of feeling deprived.

'Wajde.'

In the mornings his name was a soft whisper and vowels were stretched out in tunes. A groan escaped his parting lips as I continued to tap his nose.

'Good morning Manooos.'

I caught his smile before the sheets covered his humility. Our relationship had been developing over two years. For most of the two years, we relied on static phone lines that required

dialling country and area codes. They also required patience through lack of electricity or lack of reliable reception. For some of the two years, the privilege of owning an Australian passport had me visiting Wajde in Syria. My last visit turned into a wedding, then into a shared life together. But this wouldn't end my travelling between Syria and Australia.

'Up, up.' I now patted the blanket where I assumed his head was. A muffled, 'Yallah.'

'I'm going to get the mattee ready, yallah follow me.'

Our current home was my family's home in Orman. My family had travelled back to Australia after the wedding and we moved into their home. We were living in an apartment that felt like living within strips of an undeveloped film. It was noon by the time we were sitting cross-legged on the Persian carpet in the living room. Sunlight poured out of the windows metres above us. Wajde liked his mattee sweet, so sweet that I had to bury the green beneath white crystals. The house was silent, as it had been all night so it was a relief when the orchestra re-joined us as Wajde raised the bambeeja to his lips. The filtering straw slipped out of his mouth and, in hurried movements, Wajde claimed the good phone charger.

Looking up from my phone, I saw the dark depths beneath Wajde's eyes and a complexion that resembled leftover turmeric yoghurt. I knew he had also discovered what suddenly stained my home screen. Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp conversations from family members, all bled of a massacre that occurred within two villages, only an hour away from Orman. Our fingers worked our screens profusely to try to make sense of what happened, and yet our minds failed to latch onto any

sense. It was 5 am on a Monday when ISIS invaded the villages of Shbiki and Rami.

Men, women and children were not spared gruesome deaths. Rapidly, this news spread across the villages, across the country and escaped the borders of Syria.

The Mustafa Brothers, they stand there at a makeshift checkpoint at the beginning of the village. There, being right in front of my family's home. A total of twenty-five gunshots have echoed across an eerily quiet night and trembled through villagers' nerves. On the first occasion my heart slightly stammered but I continued to make dinner. I trapped the steam of the complete ingredients when my phone began to vibrate against the kitchen bench. My mother in-law called to ask about her son's whereabouts. Her voice was riddled with worry. Her son, my husband, was not home. I assured her it was nothing and that it was probably alcohol-fuelled bullets to the sky. Probably. I said a hurried goodbye and called Wajde.

Since the events of Shbiki and Rami, a wave of fear and inherited bravery had swept across the city of Swaida and all of its corresponding villages. Many young and untrained men spilled into the two villages soon after the ISIS attacks. Some were met with their last pulse of courage and others walked away as living heroes. Many ISIS members had been defeated and others escaped into rugged land. In the weeks following the tragedy, Orman fell into a state of apprehension. Weapons invaded most homes and villagers mentally prepared themselves for defence against ISIS. Various armed groups across Swaida did the same. Yet, Syria was a war-torn country with no laws to protect the oppressed and no laws to prevent the oppressors. Now, weapons were in the hands of both.

My heart dropped when I heard Wajde's voice, a detached sentence of breaths and whispered words.

'Bye, bye,' he hurried.

I was midsentence and desperate to latch onto meaning. The phone line had just died when Wajde walked through the door. I called his mother to tell her he was home and safe. Again, gunshots sounded followed by voices. Raised voices. Low-pitched growling with high-pitched releases. One voice, two voices. They became clearer and more daring. The west end of the village rose and neared their ears to the nearest windows and doors.

Insults, red throats, corrupted minds. This wasn't ISIS. This was the group of armed civilians who chose to stay up all night at a checkpoint to guard the village. These were the men to protect and warn us of any threats. They were drunk. Threatening. From what we made of the yelling and the numerous phone calls we received, there was a reason behind the disturbance. These men were previously paid an amount to ensure their services. This questionable payment came from our neighbour with the looming dark fortress for a home. One of these men was attacking our neighbour's front gate. He demanded money and he raged about having to guard the checkpoint alone. The drunken stupor was continuously interrupted by the second voice in a failed attempt to calm him. Waseem and Baseem Mustafa were becoming recurrent names in the village, and tied to their names were rumours of illegal trades, alcoholism, vandalism and a family that was quickly dissociating from them. The Mustafa boys.

The dramatic change in atmosphere within Orman placed strain on my relationship with Wajde. He wanted to purchase a

weapon and I wanted otherwise. My awareness of the outside world and my recent experiences in this one made me more adamant towards my viewpoint. Wajde's response was a variations of, 'What if ISIS break into this house and threaten your life, do you want me to just watch?' In the end he did what everybody else was doing. He joined the men on night errands and my heart was hung from the frame of the door until he returned. When months had passed and ISIS was a dissolved threat, the weapons still remained and threats manifested. Wajde and I shared a third home in Syria in the heart of Swaida city. The pattern of electricity was different there; it was the tune of a single harp. We had found an impenetrable sanctuary within a city of intermittent chaos. This sanctuary was enough for the two of us, but Wajde's family and friends remained in Orman, and he was constantly pulled to it.

Abbas Abou Shaheen. I never saw this man wearing anything but a camouflage uniform. He talked enthusiastically and seemed to be the hero of whatever story he was fabricating. He was related to my grandfather and visited him often. Sometimes he would attend to an electrical issue and other times his lies would cause too much static in the room. Though, it was his sons' names that struck electricity throughout the village.

It was still odd waking up in Wajde's parent's bedroom. It was odd to be sleeping in their home and not our apartment in Swaida. I was okay with it sometimes. I was okay with it this time enough to wake Wajde with soft kisses and a smile. Here, we rarely left the bedroom together, like teenagers in a secret romance, not wanting to be caught in the room of the host at a house party. I walked out of the room and the hum of electricity

was harmonised by my mother-in-law's soft voice. Rarely did something perturb her state of calmness and this was mostly convenient considering the recurrent calamities.

'Did you open Facebook?'

'Why what happened?'

'Okay, it's Baseem Mustafa. He's been killed.' Wajde and his mother fell silent. I stood wide-eyed, afraid to react. 'Waseem is in hospital, he's been shot and doesn't know about Baseem's death.'

Wajde knew them well; well enough to keep his distance from them, yet distances in this village were brief. The Mustafa boys were related to my father-in-law. They were also his neighbours who lived three houses down the road. That was where Wajde's father now was.

'What happened? Who did this? Are you sure this is real?'

Baseem Mustafa was a father of five, raising a disabled eldest son with his young wife. He would travel to the capital to make a living enough to maintain the level of poverty his family was accustomed to. The capital also allowed him to place guilt-free distance between himself and his brother. Baseem put aside his hesitations yesterday and returned to the village with his family. He returned for the last time. He would defy sanity to defend his brother for the last time.

'I have your payment, meet me at my place.'

Waseem didn't hesitate before flinging himself onto his motorbike, there wasn't anything he couldn't do while intoxicated. He headed towards the roundabout in the centre of the village with a renewed sense of recompense.

'Where is it?' Waseem remained standing.

'I have it, but I don't have it with me right now.'

There was a shuffle in the corridor and Waseem glimpsed a shadow before it escaped the light. With a fist full of Ashraf's tee-shirt he threatened, 'I will kill you.'

Waseem rejoined the road that was swept with shameless moonlight, leaving behind the dust of the Sahara desert. In the house the shadow emerged from the corridor as Ashraf's wife. The night shook and she muffled her gasp in her hand. Ashraf stood in front of his home, and as Waseem's body fell to the ground he released the pistol's trigger.

Ashraf and Amer Abou Shaheen stood in a guarded stance at the roundabout. Waseem was rushed to hospital and Baseem rushed to the roundabout where he thought his brother still was. Baseem and his older brother, unarmed, reached the roundabout. They found no Waseem and instead were met with gunshots that bounced off the tar.

Baseem seared in pain and reached for his leg.

His older brother ushered him back into the car.

Baseem approached the car.

Baseem knelt into the car.

He knew his thoughts were his last, yet even they were interrupted as Amer Abou Shaheen leered over Baseem and sent a bullet through them.

The day before Wajde and I were to travel back to Australia, a treaty was being prepared to be signed by the Mustafa and Abou Shaheen family. Waseem was out of hospital and now knew of his brother's murder. He was under scrutiny, expected to avenge his brother's death. The Abou Shaheen boys had fled the country. Wajde and I were leaving Syria, but there were things we couldn't leave behind.