

Rainbow in the Sky of War

*Ahmad Qais Munhazim**

The rain was pouring from the sky and my eyes could not see the road to home. I was stuck in a water pond. My ripped shoes were filled with rain and I felt cold all over. ‘Wake up, Qais. The school is open today,’ I heard my mom shouting as her hand was moving my shoulder. I jumped in panic and immediately started touching my mattress. It was all dry. My senses weren’t believing it, ‘Did I actually not pee in my bed?’ I was doubting myself. What was all that water and rain about then? But I still hear the rain pouring. I looked out and it was actually raining outside. I felt relieved and very proud for saving myself from the embarrassment despite that watery dream. My aunt, Zia Gul always said if kids dreamed about water and rain, it meant they were peeing their bed that night.

Spring in Kabul comes with lots of rain. The dusty dirt roads turn to sticky mud, and the smoky sky that stands sad and dark like the body of a war widow throughout the year clears up, bright and blue. The rain starts heavy but does not last too long. I loved the heavy and loud spring rain. I couldn’t hear anything but the splashing sound of water streaming down the road. I could not even hear the screeching sound of rockets hitting our neighborhood as the Mujahideen were fighting the communists. Spring was my favorite season because of its loud and heavy rain and the bright colorful *Kaman-e-Rustam*, the rainbow after the rain. In the midst of war, when most of the time my mom was dressed in black because someone in my relatives or neighbors had died, the colorful rainbow replacing the dull and dusty Kabul sky after a heavy rain was the only color scheme my eyes could dance to. It was not just the colorfulness of the rainbow but the mysterious mythology behind it. People said that by passing under *Kaman-e-Rustam*, children changed their sex. When *Kaman-e-Rustam* appeared in the sky, all the kids in my neighborhood would run under it to test the mythology. I would watch it from the window. I was scared I would turn into a girl and then the kids would bully me even more. The one time I dared to join the kids and ran under *Kaman-e-Rustam*, the kids almost took off my pants to see if my sex had actually changed.

‘Put on your shoes Qais, and let’s run. It is the first day of school and we are already late,’ Salma, my youngest sister who was two years older than me yelled at me. ‘My shoes are ripped. They come off when I put them on,’ I yelled back at Salma. Salma ran to the kitchen and fetched two plastic bags. I put on my shoes and then wore the plastic bags on top of them. She tied the handles of the plastic bags around my ankles and we were off to school.

It wasn’t even noon when the emergency bell rang and we all ran to the schoolyard. The school principal, a tall skinny man with a long mustache and bushy eyebrows, announced that the

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school would be closed immediately and we had to go back home and wait until further notice. This had become the usual routine throughout the country as the war was getting more violent and the Mujahideen had started targeting schools. On our way back home, Salma traded her new pencil for a bubble gum with Nazifullah. Nazifullah was Salma's classmate but also our neighbor downstairs. He was two years older than me but he could name all types of tanks, rockets and guns. I pulled out my pencil from my bag to exchange it for another piece of gum he had. He did not take my pencil but gave me the gum anyhow. It was not the gum that had made Nazifullah my favorite neighbor, it was his carefree nature and fighting skills. He was 9 and I was 7 but he would beat all the kids in our neighborhood who would bully me. When Salma could not come out to fly kites with us, she would ask Nazifullah to look out for me. When neither Salma nor Nazifullah were around, everyone at home, school and my neighborhood would bully me as soon as they saw me. Zancha (a little woman), kuni (penetrated), bacha bairesh (boy toy) and izak (neutered) were among many things everyone called me. Sometimes when I was all by myself, I would think about all these words and contemplated which one I hated the least. I couldn't pick any because, I hated them all equally. However, I had developed a religious defense strategy whenever I faced a bully. I would shut my eyes and say Allah's two names; *Al Qahhar, Ala Qawi*; the Subduer, the Strong and begged him to protect me. At times, it would work but at times, I would be half way done and someone would hit me or try to pull down my pants. I don't know if chanting those words in my head saved me or not but they certainly distracted me from the pain.

One day, my mom sent me to the next-door neighbor to borrow two eggs as she was making *Piwa-e-Tukhm*, egg soup for us. Three kids in our neighborhood who were slightly older than me cornered me and asked me to pull down my pants and prove that I was not a girl. As I was begging them to let me go, they started chanting 'dukhtarak, zancha, izak,' *little girl, little woman, neutered*. One pushed me to the wall while the other two tried to pull my pants down. I shut my eyes and started saying *Al Qahhar, Ala Qawi*. Before they could manage to pull my pants down, I heard a scream. I opened my eyes and there was one of them on the ground holding his head in his palm. The other two were running away. I saw Nazifullah standing with his kite and spool. He used the kite spool as his weapon whenever someone fought him or bullied me. When Nazifullah was around, I did not chant Allah's names for protection. I put all my trust into him. I would either hide behind him watch the other kids from the corner of his shoulders or he would hold my hand and beat the kids with his free hand. When he would let my hand go free, I wouldn't wash it for days. I didn't want his scent to go off my palm. I did not know if it was his care for me that raced my heart whenever I saw him or his dark green eyes and olive skin that twisted my tongue and I often could not even talk around him. I sometimes envied Salma. When she was not around, Nazifullah would ask me to go home and ask Salma to come out and play with us. I would lie to him that Salma was napping or doing homework. When she was around, Nazifullah would forget I existed. In my world, all that existed was him. I would fall asleep talking about him to Salma. I would wake up and run downstairs to see if he was up.

As the three of us were walking from school towards home, the rain stopped and the sky started clearing up. Nazifullah asked me to run home and fetch him his kite and spool. He always did me favors, the only thing I did on a regular basis for him was to sneak in his house through the window and fetch him his kite and spool without being caught by his mom. As soon as I handed him the kite and the spool he dropped his backpack and ran down the road. I grabbed his backpack and went home with Salma. Salma and I started changing our clothes when the harsh

sound of a rocket took over the room. I felt the floor moving and my ears filled with waves. The dust from our cracked mud walls filled the room. I ran screaming downstairs and onto the street. Kids, men, women, old and young were all running down the road. I followed them to see where the rocket had landed. There was noise. There was crying. There was screeching screams. Two blocks down, and there I was standing on blood, hands, legs, flesh and heads. As my eyes were scanning for familiar body parts, my eyes fell on Nazifullah's mom holding Nazifullah's half body. His eyes shut and face covered with blood and mud. In the early days of the war, when we heard a rocket, we tended to run somewhere in the house and hide. However, as the war became a daily part of our lives, we would run to where the rocket had landed. We came to know there was no way we could hide from rocket. It would find us if it was our time, as the elders used to say: 'waqt e adam k pora shuda basha, agar da zameen bashi ya asmaan, rocket paidait maikuna, meaning, if your time has come, the rocket will find you no matter you hide under the earth or above the sky.

The next day, the rain was pouring just like any other spring morning in Kabul. The neighbors were gathered at the outskirts of Panjsaad Fameeli Mountain, which was only a few minutes walk from our house to bury Nazifullah's body. His family was around his grave to say their last goodbyes. His dad was holding his mom, who looked half dead and was trying to throw herself in his grave. I was standing with the kids from my neighborhood far from the grave watching the burial. An old man from the crowd yelled at us to leave: 'why are you kids here? Go home. Graveyards have ghosts. Go,' the man kept yelling. After a few times of this yelling, we started running towards home. The rain had stopped and the sky was clearing up again. I could see *Kaman-e-Rustam* appearing in the sky. When I got closer to our house, I saw my two older brothers, Masih and Darioush who were a few years older than me standing outside with their friends chatting. Some days, I hated my brothers. Some days, I loved them to death. I can't remember why, but I remember I envied their masculinity. I envied their deep voices. I envied their skills in kite flying. I hated them because, they would yell at me to go home if they saw me outside. When I cried to them to save me from the bullies, they would slap me and tell me to act like a man. Then, there were days they would buy me a slice of cake from their pocket money.

The kids were flying kites. Some were playing with marbles. Some were playing hide and seek. I was hoping to turn invisible and pass through the manly violent crowd. I closed my eyes and started chanting *Al Qahhar, Al Qawi*, in my head as my steps got faster. I heard a kid yelling, 'pass under *Kaman-e-Rustam*, little girl. Look up. It is waiting for you.' The voice got louder and more kids started chanting, 'little girl, little girl.' I started running faster, hoping my brothers couldn't hear the kids calling me a girl. My body slumped against something. I opened my eyes and it was Darioush. He grabbed my arm and shook me: 'I told you act like a man, you *Kuni*, faggot.' My body froze and I tried to cover my face with my hands to block his slaps. The kids gathered around us screaming, 'pass under *Kaman-e-Rustam*, little girl. It will turn you to a real boy.' It got louder and louder. Among the noises, I heard Darioush yelling, 'drop your pants and show them you are a boy.' I started crying, holding my pants up with both hands. 'No. I can't. Please. I won't come out again. Please forgive me,' I started begging him. He slapped me and said, 'drop your pants and save our honor, you little faggot.' My body started trembling. I wanted to disappear. I wished I were hit by yesterday's rocket. I closed my eyes, pulled down my pants and ran under the rainbow.