

Three Bullets

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It was dark. I remembered him as soon as I saw his light brown eyes. He played at the corner where the streets met, as we returned from the hut we called school. I was asked to call him Amir Dada, after our fathers shook hands, as though he was my elder brother.

But then, I have forgotten to tell you my name. My name is Zaina Farez, and this is the story of my short life.

They came late at night. I was sleeping in a one room with my family at the time sharing a bed with my sister who slept nearest to the window. They pulled her and a few minutes later I heard a gunshot. I already heard one before this one went through my sister. My parents were missing, but I saw blood splattered everywhere around me. If I didn't act quickly, I would be next but my nine year old brain didn't think like that. He found me sitting inside a gunny bag in the one room now splattered with the blood of those I just a minute ago, called family. He was Amir Dada. I saw him come closer, and even raise his gun, preparing to shoot me point blank, until his boss called out. Three bullets. The one that was not shot made the rest of my life possible.

"This one's got potential" one of the older men said, as Amir chuckled in the strange way boys did in front of grown men. They put my head into a thick brown rucksack that smelt of gunpowder and told me to walk. I didn't see daylight for the next three days. I was so exhausted and hungry, that I could barely even be dragged on my feet, but they didn't care. They gave me half a slice of burned bread which I was fairly used to, so I ate without complaints. We hiked through the deserts until we finally arrived. It was a large hut made of mud and outside it, there was an array of weapons. I did not cry. I was never one to cry.

"Where have you taken me and what do you want with me" I shouted at the nearest man. He responded with "No questions! You are lucky we didn't shoot you". An expression of defiance crossed my face as I walked inside. I was pushed down in front of the trainer. "We have one week, he said" "one week until the war". So many thoughts were racing through my nine year old mind, but one thought stuck with me. "I will get out of this someday".

A week of intense training followed. I marched to the battle front along with over 700 kids like me. That's all we were, kids, but they didn't seem to know this. I fired at random, I did not want to kill anyone. My mother had always told me that violence was never a choice, even in the worst situations. And I wasn't firing at older soldiers, I was firing at a bunch of kids like myself. That was when from out of the blue, a storm struck and caused shock and surprise. A storm in the middle of a desert? How abnormal. "Don't stop fighting" they shouted, but I didn't listen. I told those nearest to me to spread the message to watch for my signal. I dropped my gun into the pocket and screamed RUN!

The kids bolted in 100 different directions. We heard gunfire as I saw the only other friends I had known fall to the ground. Then, I ran. Months, days, it could've even been years that I ran for.

The only thing that kept me going was the guilt. I survived and they didn't. You may look at me and see a 12 year old child - but I have faced hardships you never will. I am not a child.

But today on New Years Eve, peering through the brightly lit windows of Beirut homes seeing tables laden with pita, crunchy falafel, creamy hummus, and endless sweets, I really wanted to be one. Well dressed people were walking past me, and one woman even held her nose, as I dipped my offensive head behind the garbage bin. It was bitterly cold but inside everything seemed warm and beautiful. Suddenly a shot rang out from the room as I watched a well dressed man collapse. I suddenly saw a man jump up next to me, and raise his finger to his lips as he ran fast.

I put my hand in the pocket and felt my only possession - the gun from the rebel army. It had three bullets left. I ran into the dark lane between the two houses and saw the discarded rubbish from everyone's homes. I saw a fierce dog brandishing his teeth. I pulled my gun and shot at a garbage bag next to him until it splattered its disgusting smell everywhere.

"There she is!" screamed a man in police uniform, running between the lanes pointing at me. "The one that shot the Imam!". "I didn't shoot anyone" I shouted, but he seemed not to hear me, his blood red in his eye matching Amir Dada's on the day he found me. I had two bullets left. I shot my second at the wooden bridge above his head. It fell, a huge wooden wall between him as I looked desperately for someplace to run.

"You are a desert rat" I heard a voice behind me shout, cutting off any chance of escape. I saw another policeman, his gun pointing directly at me. "You thought you'd get away with shooting the Imam!". I remembered my sister, her hand tightly clutching mine as she died smiling in her dreams. I turned the third bullet towards my head and pulled the trigger. "Mother" I called "I'm coming", and felt the warm gush of blood turn into brown burnt bread as I felt home again.