

Toy Bombs

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For the past two-months, rival forces had been pounding each other amid residential areas in Kabul. The bullets hissed over our house and the rockets rained like hailstones. Any minute a missile could fall on our heads, so no one dared to step outside. Several rounds of mortars fell in the next-door house, shaking the earth, bursting the doors open, smashing the glasses and pelting dust and debris into our courtyard. With every explosion, we screamed and covered our ears with hands.

Then came a short ceasefire that provided a chance for escape. Hastily, we stuffed anything, we could grab into sacks. At that time, I was eleven, and it was a scorching summer's day. On the way out, I saw crowds of people fleeing. Some people carried wounded children in wheelbarrows, and others carried their household essentials, mattresses, rags, cooking pots on their back and shoulders. Children were wailing while the elderly were reciting verses from the Quran. I closed my eyes when I walked past three dead guerrillas swollen and smelling like millions rotting rats. The gushed blood from their wounds had reddened the graveled sidewalk.

Finally, we exited the dusty alleys of our neighborhood and entered Kote-Sangi Chowk, a roundabout. The smoke and gun-powder smells still hung in the air. The entire blocks of shops and buildings were turned into piles of brick and stones. The city cinema was charred and riddled with bullets, standing like a scarecrow. Roadsides were littered with blocks from the pulverized buildings, shards of glasses, burnt out cars, and collapsed electricity poles.

After we walked past the Kote-Sangi roundabout and arrived in no-man's land, a rocket roared in the air and slammed near the sandbagged trenches. Then gunfire ripped through the crowd, creating a stampede, men and women rushing across the road bumping into each other and falling in the street. In the fleeting glance, I saw a man dropping his disabled grandmother from his back.

Everyone was racing ahead to get shelter behind the shipping containers that stood ahead. It was only behind those containers that I joined the rest of the family. After about an hour further walk, we, the lucky ones, made it alive to Company area. There, we paid a bearded, turbaned and dust-covered lorry driver to get us to uncle Kamal's house in a village in the Maidan-Shar Valley.

We climbed into the wooden back of his hand painted lorry that was already laden with goats. When the lorry's tires sang on the cobblestones, the goats made a sound like a human cry. The white road ahead simmered in the heat, and the car before us waved behind a big cloud of dust. The faster the car travelled the more dust and jolt we received. Along the road, I saw scraggy landscapes with sunbaked bushes, bombed out derelict villages, and the brown peaks of the Hindu Kush mountains shimmering in the blazing afternoon sun.

Scorched with the sun and choked with dust, after five hours, we arrived in the Kharote village, Maidan-Shar. The mud village clung to the mountain's skirt, overlooking burnt orchards, fields and a river meandering at the bottom of the valley. Maidan-Shar, like every other district in the Afghan countryside, had been a warzone for the past ten years since the Russians' invasion. The scars and wounds from the anti-Soviet war still lingered everywhere: bombed-out mud houses, rusty corpses of the Russian tanks, walking trails littered with shrapnel and trees lining the riverbank burnt into ashes.

Now that the war had left rural areas and moved to Kabul, life was flourishing again in the village. People were re-building their mud-houses, repairing their irrigation canals, and tending to their plots of land for agriculture. Uncle Kamal's family, like millions of Afghans living in the countryside, had fled anti-Soviet war to Pakistan, returning to the village only last month. Their mud-walled house was half-destroyed. Of all the room that stood around a rectangular courtyard, only three timbered roofs were still habitable. So, we slept nine to a single room like rows of sardine stuffed inside a can. But thanks to the warm summer weather, most men could sleep on the rooftop at night.

Like everyone else in the village, uncle Kamal's family lived in dire poverty. They used lanterns for light and cooked meals on pit fire. Household ladies woke early in the morning, swept the courtyard, sprinkled the floor to keep the dust down, kneaded the dough, set fire in the tandoor, baked bread, milked the cows, fed the animals, brought water from the stream in earthenware pots on their head and prepared breakfast for men before they left for manual labour.

Adjacent to the village, there stood a cemetery that contained the remains of the *Shohadaa* (martyrs), people who had been killed during the anti-Soviet war. To mark their martyrdom, the villagers had planted green flags atop each domed shaped grave of soil. Now and again, when villagers walked past that cemetery, they knocked on gravestones, a blue flat rock, shouting, "Congratulation! We defeated the Russian. Islam is victorious."

On the other side of the river, there was another small cemetery that contained eighteen graves. It often intrigued me to see an egg left over one of the smallest graves. Only later, I learnt that all the eighteen people had been killed by a Russian Napalm bomb

that had fallen on a *smacha* (an underground bunker) and when the dead bodies were recovered from beneath the rubbles, one child held a boil egg in his hand. Then, as a mark of respect to the child's memory, his extended family placed an egg on his grave.

Life was so different in the Kharote village compared to Kabul. Kids were also different. Here the kids wandered around bare footed, grazed animals, fetched water from the streams and collected animal dung, swam in the river, defecated in the woods and played marble all day long. They had rough skins, callused hands and feet. Of all the kids, I was drawn to a stocky, pale skinned lad, named Younis. He had almond-shaped nomadic hazel eyes, bushy eyebrows and a wide, flat nose and full head of hair. Younis could have been my age, around eleven, and he often wore a hand-embroidered red Afghan hat.

Younis had seen more war than any child his age could have seen anywhere else on this planet. His father used to be a *Mujahid*, whom the Russians had killed at the onset of anti-Soviet war. His mother was deaf from artillery rounds because she had never migrated from the village to seek refuge from shelling in the other villages behind the mountains. How Younis and his mother had survived all those years of bombing in Kharote was akin to a miracle.

I often envied Younis' bravery and skills. He could climb to the crowns of the tallest trees to steal magpies' babies. He could fire pebbles the farthest with his slingshot. I heard he was once seen throwing pebbles at the swollen corpses of the Russian soldiers and saying, "Even stones hate the infidels," because the pebbles were bouncing back.

Around that time, 1992, Pakistani merchants came to the village to buy shrapnel, shell cases, and fragments of destroyed tanks. They paid five thousand Afghani (about 25 cents) for one kilogram of shrapnel. The merchants would haul the shrapnel to Pakistan to be

melted and then cast into new iron. Most villagers made money from collecting and selling shrapnel and war metals.

One sunny morning, Younis and I headed out to collect shrapnel to make some money. Having spent his entire life in the village, Younis knew the mountainous terrains where the Mujahideen and pro-communist soldiers had planted land mines to kill each other. Those un-defused land mines still posed a danger, but there was more shrapnel littered near the places where the *Mujahideen* had dug their trenches.

That day, we scaled the tallest peak of the Kharote mountains. By lunch time, we gathered enough shrapnel to fill two rubber buckets. Then, I came upon two large missiles debris half sunk into the ground.

"Look here!" I said. "Two big ones!"

"Too heavy," Younis said. Then, after a moment of reflection, he nodded. "Let's cut some bushes to camouflage these."

"But why?"

"If people see these, they'll bring shovels and dig them out."

"But they're too heavy to take down to the village."

"They can be rolled down from the mountain, you softy Kabuli."

Tired of a long walk, we paused for a rest under the shadow of a huge rock, sitting on our butts and stretching our legs out. Sweat trickled down my face. I enjoyed the summer breeze but felt famished. Younis pulled out round bread from the side pocket of his Kamiz, halved it, and gave me a piece.

From the mountaintop, I looked down toward the valley and saw green and brown fields and donkeys and cows grazing along the riverbank. And then my gaze fell on the martyrs' cemetery with green flags fluttering over the *shohadaa's* graves.

I pointed toward the cemetery. "There's your father's grave, Younis."

Younis frowned but said nothing.

"Did you see your father's dead body?"

Younis squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. "My father is not dead. He lives with angels in heaven. My father is a *Shaheed*. He gave his life in the name of *Allah* and Islam at war with the Russians."

"But every day when we walk past the cemetery, you pick up a stone, knock on your father's gravestone, and say '*Baba*, congratulations, Islam became victorious. We have defeated the Russian.'"

"You are stupid." Younis' voice rose. "The real life is in the spirit, not in the body. Every time you see a wandering star in the sky, it is a *Shaheed's* spirit soaring up to heaven to meet Allah."

On our way down from the mountain, I stumbled upon a green-coloured toy shaped like a butterfly with uneven wings. I went to pick it up.

"No!" Younis roared. "Don't touch that."

"Why?"

"They are toy bombs, dropped by Russians to deceive kids." Younis pointed at the mini bomb. "See, it has two wings, one movable and the other rigid. When you touch the movable wing, it explodes. Also, if you see anything that looks like a pen, radio, or matchbox, don't pick it up."

"Who told you about them?"

"The Mujahideen. All the Mujahideen know about these things."

Looking back, it makes my stomach cringe. One would often meet children in the countryside with their arms and legs blown away by those mini bombs. The irony is that

those mini bombs were a direct copy of an American device used in the Vietnam War, the BLU-43B. I find this absurd. How could scientists in white coats, enlightened by science and reason, spend time inside a lab to invent a bomb that could deceive and kill a child? When did children become part of their war? I wonder whether man's moral intelligence will ever catch up with his technological intelligence. They spend too much time inventing devices to kill each other and spend so little time on making peace.

But I guess the Cold War was a tit-for-tat affair. No wonder the American president, Jimmy Carter, said in 1982: "We now have the opportunity to give the USSR its own Vietnam war." Here, I am reminded of Dad's words again. "When elephants fight, frogs get trampled." Perhaps Afghan kids were frogs.

That day, the journey down from the mountain was more tiresome than the journey up, due to the weight of buckets filled with shrapnel. We took a second break under the shadow of a mulberry tree at the foot of the mountain. There, Younis fished out a chunk of *gwadaa*, an Afghan sweet made from sugarcane, from his pocket. He first tried to break it into two pieces with his hands but had no success. Then he placed the *gwadaa* on a rock, hammered it with another small rock, and split it into two halves, one piece springing to the ground and the other remaining on the rock. He gave the latter to me but picked up the dusty piece. He cleaned that piece with the hem of his grey shalwar, kissed it and put it in his mouth. It was odd to see Younis kissing the *gwadaa* because Afghans only lift strewn bread from the ground and kiss it.

As we were chewing on the *gwadaa*, I spotted a battery in the distance. "Look, there is another toy bomb."

Younis went near it and picked it up. "No, this isn't a bomb. It is a real battery. The Mujahideen use this in *mokhabera*,"

"*Mokhabera*, what is that?"

"It is something that the Mujahideen use to talk to each other from a distance without seeing each other."

I felt inferior to Younis. To boost my fragile ego, I tried to show off my shrewdness.

"Do you know what electricity is? We had electricity in Kabul."

"I've heard of it, but never seen it."

"You press a button on the wall, and this fills the room with light, which is a lot brighter than the light in the lantern."

Younis grew thoughtful.

I enjoyed impressing him, so I continued. "Have you ever seen a television?"

"No, what is that?"

"It's a box with a mirror in front of it. You can watch people and animals in it. People sing and talk inside a television."

However, Younis could not visualize a television set.

"Who makes all these things?" Younis said.

"Dad says that the British and Americans make television, and the Japanese make cars."

"Infidels make everything. Infidels also make all the weapons." A moment of silence prevailed, and then he blurted, "Who knows more, Allah or infidels?"

I never got to answer that because a whistle blew. We looked behind us and saw a *Koochai* (nomad) herding his flock of sheep toward the tents on the mountain's skirt, just above the village. He was a white bearded, turbaned man with crooked back, holding a stick in his hand. Two white Alabai dogs guarded his herd of sheep. The sheep coasted past us, baaing, their bells jingling.

For as long as I remember, I have always valued other people's opinions more than my own. That night, while sleeping on the rooftop, I reflected on Younis' words about *Shaheed* and gazed at the star-flooded sky, trying to spot a wandering star, thinking how lucky *Shaheeds* were to be dwelling in Allah's company. I lay awake most of that night.

In the morning, I asked Dad, "Do *Shahids* never die and meet Allah in the sky."

Dad's face contorted, "Who has put such a stupid idea in your young head. There is no such thing as *Shahid*. Everyone dies. Mullahs make such stories to turn kids into suicide bombers."

Glossary:

Mujahideen: Holy warrior of Islam.

Shahid: The one who dies defending Islam.

Mukhabera: Military communication device.

Mullah: Islamic cleric

Maiwand Banayee was born in Afghanistan. He came to Ireland in 2004 as a refugee, and learnt English while living in Ireland. After receiving permission to stay in Ireland, he attended IT Carlow, graduating with a degree in Physical Therapy and then a postgraduate degree in Neuromuscular Therapy from the University of Chester, UK. Maiwand speaks four languages, and he writes about war in Afghanistan from his direct experiences, and is currently writing a memoir. His work has been published in *International Art Festival*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Galway Review*, and *MAS/literary Journals*, *Senior Times Magazine* and several anthologies.