Sharing

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My grandfather devoured a healthy serving of veal at a steakhouse in London a week before he died. He had never particularly enjoyed the meat, or the idea that it had come from an unsuspecting calf bred specifically to fill the dinner plate in front of him, but he knew that his breaths were numbered and that he might not feast on such a delicacy again. He said that he didn’t want the grilled bone marrow that came with my rib eye- that it didn’t appeal to him- but I put it on his salad plate anyway, next to the beets that stained the china with blood. After some feigned discontent, he scarfed it down anyway. It was the fourth day of September in 2013 and he was seventy-six years old. I started my junior year of college two days later, and flew back for his funeral in Pakistan within the week.

I had always adopted an apologetic tone when I talked to my white friends in college; I could never share their grief of 9/11 or even distance myself from it altogether. How could I? I was who I was, my skin and nationality dictated this. I had, by my very existence, been made central to the dialogue that plagued the world. I was an outsider, a sympathizer, a terrorist. For twelve years I had been stopped at international airports for ‘random inspections’ and was ostracized by anyone who wasn’t Pakistani. I once had the pleasure of having a conversation about the uncharacteristically rainy weather in Ohio with an Apple ‘Genius.’ When I told him I was from Pakistan he chuckled and said, “I bet it rains something else there, huh?” I had to smile and laugh it off- pretend that it didn’t bother me that he was referring to the drone and artillery strikes that claim mostly collateral damage along with their desired targets. He was just making pleasant conversation. Yet I could not make pleasant conversation. One wrong word could get me deported. Or worse.

When we brought him to London, we imagined that a few routine checkups for his arthritis and a joyous family vacation would ensue. We were in excellent spirits; my grandmother had always complained that my grandfather liked staying home far too much. ‘His kingdom,’ we called it. “I have no desire to leave, my life is already a vacation,” he’d say, as he sat in the hundred-degree sun on a charpai reading an Urdu newspaper, barely breaking a sweat. Had we known he’d come back as airplane cargo, things would have been much different. He
would have died patiently and willingly. He had not yet reached the age at which he would look back upon his life.

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I remember when I first saw the footage of 9/11 on CNN. I was getting dressed for school. My parents had also recently awoken, and were going through their morning ritual of chai and soaked almonds. Their voices become shrill as they conversed and saw that the news was on. An outrageous amount of smoke escaping a skyscraper set the backdrop as reporters hysterically commentated. I did not know that this was footage from eight hours ago, just that a building was on fire somewhere in New York City. I began to ask a question but was immediately and rather harshly cut off by my father, who was also seeing the life-altering moment for the first time. I knew this because his mouth was open, his eyes alert. I don't remember my mother's expression, just that she shrieked when the second plane hit a few minutes later. I was eight years old and I had no idea what the fuck was going on.

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At the hour that I was supposed to leave for Heathrow airport, my grandfather sat at the head of the dainty dining table of a rented flat and ate lentils, spiced fish and rice in his undershirt and a blue pajama that had long ceased to fit him. His face was an unnatural grey, and a congestion of blood splattered tissues occupied his side-plate. As I leaned in to embrace him on my way out, my father locked eyes with me from across the table. It was a simple, apologetic look, devoid of any real emotion, but I knew what it meant. I already knew before he told me. I would never see him again. His ashen skin smelled of sesame as my nose touched his bare shoulder and a single tear fell parallel to his back. And as I took in my last memory of him, he slipped a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket into mine. "Study well, alright?" I looked around the table and saw that everyone but him was in shambles.

September 11th was a historical day contaminated with incidents of misfortune across time and space. It was the day that the Pentagon was inaugurated in 1941, exactly sixty years before it was hit by American Airlines Flight 77. (Goldberg, 2) It was the day in 1948 that Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, lost his battle to lung cancer, a disease he had kept secret from the entire nation. (Ahmed, 30) It was the day in 1952, when 33 people died in a train wreck, not one hour from Granville, Ohio. (Railway Age, 1) It was the day that two planes hit the Twin Towers at short intervals and devastated the universe. It was the day when I began to keep my head down in fear that someone would mistake me for something or someone I wasn’t and unleash their fury on me. It was the day my best friend and mentor was taken to the morgue so his lifeless body could be embalmed, boxed and sealed for travel.

I remember he died on my uncle's forty-eighth birthday, on life support in the Intensive Care Unit of St. John's Hospital in the City of London as my aunt clung on to his limp hand. On his bedside was a book that he had been reading called "No god but God." My father told me that washing his body a few hours later was the hardest thing he's ever done in his life. He was the new head of the family, and he was not given the opportunity to mourn. It hit him a year later, the fact that his father was gone; that every time he walked into his childhood home he would encounter only his mother, softly rubbing the fabric of static dress shirts with her fingers. She did not know that he had stage-four lung cancer until the end was near, before my world collapsed. Upon his death she fell silent, praying for his forgiveness. Now I'm not a religious man, but my grandfather doesn't need forgiveness. He never did. My grandfather was a modest man.

When Osama bin Laden was killed, I did not rejoice. I had no right. He was killed in Pakistan, and of course it was my fault for not knowing he was seeking refuge in a city six hours away from me. It was my fault that he had given the color of my skin and the region of my origin a reputation. How could I rejoice, knowing that he had changed the way the world perceived me, and in turn the way that I perceived the world? How could I show happiness, when the world expected guilt?

The world mourned with us that September 11th without our permission. I had been denied their grief, but now they shared mine. Perhaps one day I could share theirs too.
Works Cited

