

*Like unto the Wind*

- Mahi Taban

*“Like unto the wind, every moment, life passeth away!*

*Let then every man have the remembrance of death ever before him!”*

- Khushal Khan Khattak

Last night, like every night before, Baba took his evening cup of chai, piping hot with three heaping spoonsful of sugar and watched an hour of news in Pashto on the sitting room television before getting ready for bed.

This morning, unlike every morning before, he did not wake up to put the hot water on and change into his work clothes.

This morning Farah turned around, found him still and pale, smaller than he had ever been. His broad chest still, without the breath to make it rise and fall, his pale lips parted, with no air to pass through.

Eighteen years of marriage. Eighteen years of constant worry. Of recurring, nightly visions, visiting her in the late hours of the night and early hours of the morning, playing and replaying in her head.

Scenes, at first, of his remains being found, blown apart in a bomb explosion, chunks of ripped flesh laying discarded on the streets. Then, of waking to police lights and a knock on the door, waking to news of his body being found in the gas station, broken, bloody, and riddled with bullets.

But that was not how it happened. There were no deadly weapons, no crowds, no one to blame. He passed, two inches from Farah, without her even knowing.

His heart, after half a century of accepting and pumping, pumping and accepting a body's worth of blood to flow through his veins, had simply given up, overworked, exhausted.

A quiet death for a man who had lived his life louder than most dared.

Minutes ticked by, Farah's sweaty palms itched from the red crescent imprints left by the pressure of her nails into tender flesh. Farah gathered Baba's still head into her arms, her fingers swiping across his cheeks, brushing through his curly hair. She ran her hands across her throbbing temple, "Nazo" she called, softly at first, then louder, wailing into the open room, small and dimly lit by the beginnings of the morning sunshine.

There were only a handful of times Nazo had seen her mother cry. Each and every one of them had been at Baba's expense.

Farah's father, a prominent civil lawyer in the small community she had grown up in, had raised her to be a strong, stoic woman. She was the first woman in her family to go to college and the oldest to get married.

She married Baba when she was 23 and he was 32.

After that Farah's life was one of accommodation.

Baba, from the very beginning, had been someone whose presence consumed those around him, a large man, in stature and nature, his loud, booming laugh and grand gestures dominated phone calls, arguments, living room conversations, and Farah, more and more throughout the years, had drew in to herself, making herself smaller for a man who refused to accommodate.

The thought of never again seeing Baba walking through the front door, or sitting at the dinner table, was unusual, surreal, unimaginable. Nazo, at every moment, half-expected to walk into the living room to see him watching the news, or praying *jummah*, the only time he managed to make time for it.

After Baba was gone, the house suddenly seemed a lot bigger than it once had. The empty space was suffocating. So much empty space and nothing to fill it with.

Suddenly she had realized just how big Baba had been, how much it had taken just to keep up with him, and how much it had taken out of everyone else.

That is how Nazo's summer started and that is how it ended as well, silent but for the weeping spells, triggered by remembrance of memories and discoveries of Baba's mug in the kitchen cabinet, his reading glasses forgotten on the bathroom sink, his shoes tucked away in the corner closet.

Sometimes, when people leave, it is easier to pretend like they had never really existed in the first place.

It is easier to pack away their belongings, to shut away memories of their existence.

To forget a time when they once breathed the same air, ate the same food, walked the same paths as you.

With Baba, it was hard to do that. Even in his death Baba hung over the house, heavy like velvet drapery. A presence which refused to be ignored.

Throughout the years Nazo had hated Baba for a lot of things, for always being there, his suffocating existence, how quick-witted, silver-tongued Farah, sharp as a fox, became docile like a baby lamb in his presence.

Now, Nazo hated him for leaving, for being so careless, so generous, as to go without leaving them anything. Leaving them helpless in his wake.

For weeks, it went on like that, dipping into savings, stretching paychecks paper thin. Soon enough Farah had to take more shifts at the bakery she worked at, Nazo had to spend more time at her summer camp job, and for large parts of the day, Sahar had to get used to being alone.

And as the days went on, so did life.

There are only so many tears one can shed over any one person, and by the time Baba's body would have begun its process of slow decomposition, of returning to the earth from which it arose, Nazo would have shed all of them.

Soon enough the chilly Bay air, remnant of spring, turned hot and muggy. The streets of Oakland swelled with the presence of youth freshly out of school, visibly, agitatedly bored. Neighborhood streets, parks, venues filled with families and children, gleeful for a respite from the monotony of the school year.

On the third week of July, their forty first day without Baba, Farah, standing by the stove, cut up half of a red onion and let it simmer in a mixture of hot oil, turmeric paste, and garlic on the stove. The paste smoked up, filling the kitchen with promises of nourishment.

"Nazo" she murmured, tying up her black curls into a knot at the nape of her neck, "Your Bibi might be visiting us later this month"

Nazo had not seen Bibi, Baba's mother, since she was but a few months old, save for a few phone calls once or twice a year.

All she knew about the woman was that which Baba had passed down to her through his stories. Stories of Baba's childhood, his family's village, countless cousins and relatives Nazo had only ever heard of. These stories were special, recounted rarely, but always so carefully, tales which to Baba were memories of a time and place long passed, and to Nazo, a time and place which she had never been part of.

More and more after Baba had gone, Nazo found herself coming back to these stories, found herself craving to hear Baba, once again, recounting his memories to Nazo and Sahar, bringing to life people and places unknown.

"With you and Sahar going back to school I think it will be better to have someone around the house" Farah continued, absentmindedly stirring the browned onions,

"And Bibi's arthritis has been acting up, so it would be better for her to see some doctor's here"

Farah turned to where Nazo was sitting, with her schoolwork spread out on the dining room table, Sahar coloring on half a piece of notebook paper next to her.

"When is she coming?"

"Your uncle bought her ticket, she'll be here next week" Farah turned from the steaming stove, moving to crack open the small kitchen window, fogged up with the heat of the simmering paste.

Nazo could picture Bibi, picture Uncle Raza in the grainy old photographs collected in the old cookie tin. In one particular picture, which Nazo had started to keep in the pocket of

her journal, Bibi, young, tall, and smiling slightly stood with Baba and Uncle Raza, boyish and shy, in their early years.

Something about that photograph stood out to Nazo, the lightness of the scene, the dulled colors, old-fashioned clothing, all captured by lens, one moment in time, preserved for eternity. One million stories contained in a single frame.

“I know I don’t have to tell you Nazo, but you know things are a lot different here” Farah sighed, “Bibi is from a different time, please, take care of her”

In the week leading up to Bibi’s arrival, every inch of the old wooden floorboards of the house was washed, every nook and crevice of second-hand furniture dusted.

Pictures of Baba tucked quietly tucked away, as to not irritate slowly healing wounds. The small black and white portrait of him migrating from the bookcase to the bedside drawer, the frame of him and Farah smiling in front of the Golden Gate Bridge disappearing from its place on the living room wall.

Bibi arrived on a Thursday night. Farah drove to the airport to pick her up. She looked as if not a day had passed on her pointed face. Her large brown eyes, her strong chin, her low cheekbones were Baba’s, but they were also Nazo’s, they were also Sahar’s. Mirror images of a man who no longer existed.

Wrapped up in thick heavy shawl, Bibi had always been a tall woman, but old age had stooped her down ever so slightly, the only clear indication that any days had passed since they had last seen one another.

Even so, Bibi towered over Farah's small frame, her straight, light hair braided down, contrasting Farah's unruly black curls, pulled back into a low ponytail at the nape of her neck.

Upon meeting Farah at the busy terminal Bibi's thin lips pressed together, kissing both sides of Farah's face, her bony arms wrapping around the younger woman's narrow shoulders.

"You must be tired, how was your flight?"

"Very long, I lost my way in the airport a few times, but by God's will, I am here now. Where are the girls?"

"In bed, Bibi, Nazo has her work with the children early in the morning"

Nazo was in bed when she heard Farah's beaten up Hyundai pull up in the parking space outside the house. She heard the sound of Bibi's luggage being pulled to the front door, Farah's key twisting in the lock, the two women coming inside the house. Farah warming up rice pilaf, spring rolls, chai. The water running in the washroom as Bibi prepared for bed. Farah leaving her room, in which Bibi would now be staying, creeping onto the air-mattress laid at the foot of the bed shared by Nazo and Farah.

Nazo imagined what Bibi could be thinking right now. Halfway across the world, with her dead son's family, family which she had no connection to, but that of blood.

Sahar's left foot had found its way out of the knitted blanket. Nazo turned to cover it, wrapping her arms around the small girl, now softly snoring.

The old wooden clock on the bedside table ticked on, Farah's breaths grew deeper and deeper, lulling Nazo to sleep.

By the time Farah awoke, early to prepare breakfast before her shift, Bibi had showered and prayed and was sitting in Baba's chair in the living room, reading from her small Quran.

Bibi paused, looking up from the book on her lap, "Praying five times a day is not a choice, dear, it's our responsibility, I wouldn't want our girls to have the wrong impression" she stated, before continuing her soft recitations.

Farah had forgotten many things about her mother-in-law in the long years she had not seen her. Absence tends to make one forget the difficulties, the wrongdoings, the negativities of others.

One thing Farah had not forgotten, however, was Bibi's way of making a person feel like the smallest, most insignificant creature on earth.

By the time Nazo had woken up, Bibi was sat at the dining room table, picking at pieces of paratha and vegetable omelet.

"*Salam*" Bibi looked to Sahar, examining her leggings, t-shirt, messy hair.

"Come, here, girl, let me look at you. Look how you've grown, you look just like your father, don't you?" Bibi put her wrinkled hands on Nazo's cheeks, kissing her forehead, "just like your grandma"

Bibi wasn't wrong. Nazo very much saw Baba in herself, but she also saw Farah. Farah's small frame, her love for books, her artistic talent.

When Nazo had been very young, Baba had been something of an idol to her, unbreakable, untouchable. He had been the one who shielded her from Farah's irritation, the sharp sting of her hand across Nazo's cheek.

Baba would be the one to sneak Sahar and her chocolates, pick them up early from school to take them to the zoo, let them stay up to watch cartoons on school nights.

But as Nazo grew older she realized it took a lot more to do the job Farah did, to put in the long nights, hard work, to do the cooking and cleaning, to sacrifice and to be there constantly for two growing humans who never did, never could, appreciate any of it.

“Where’s your sister?” Bibi asked, “Look at the time now, it’s almost 7 in the morning, when I was your age I would have prayed, cleaned, and made breakfast for my family by this time”

“Nazo works all day, Bibi” Farah said, rolling out another stack of parathas on the counter, “She’s still young, no need for her to work so hard while she’s still in her father’s house”

Bibi clicked her tongue, “Her father’s not here anymore, best she gets used to doing some hard work around here, clearly you can’t do it all on your own”

Late that night Bibi had unpacked the small bag she had lugged halfway across the world with her. Pulled out boxes of nuts and dried fruit, jaggery, henna cones and bangles, shawls, and Farah’s gold bangles, her wedding present she had left behind when coming to Oakland.

“I thought you would like these here with you” Bibi said, sliding them onto Farah’s pale wrists, “It’s not like they’re being put to use at home, and I don’t think you or the girls will be coming to see us anytime soon”

Nazo wondered what it was like for Farah, the few years she lived with Baba in his family home. How it must have felt to be stuck between Baba and Bibi, two unyielding forces, to be young, newly married, far from home, to live with so many people but feel so alone.

Once, in the later evening, over chai and pistachio cookies, while Nazo and Sahar bickered over one thing or the other Baba, reading the news at the dining room table had mentioned offhandedly, “Don’t fight with your sister Sahar jan, you know you’ll miss her when you both leave us”

He took off his reading glasses, wiping them off with the hem of his shirt, “I remember when I was about your age, I was always fighting with your Uncle Raza. He was younger than me but just as stubborn, if not more so. One day your Bibi told me to go get milk from the store, I remember it was so hot outside, surely over 95 degrees, so I convinced Raza to go, telling him I’d pay him some of my pocket money I’d save up from Eid”

Baba chuckled, “Of course he was so young he lost his way, we couldn’t find him for hours, we ended up finding him late in the evening, he was in a corner store on the outskirts of town, playing with the owner’s young son”

He paused, sipping from his mug. Nazo had made the chai that day, it was over-brewed, the color of it was dark like the skin of a walnut.

“I kept hoping he wouldn’t tell anyone what had happened, little dog told Bibi soon as he came home. I still remember the beating I got that day”

The way Baba told his stories were special, magical. The attention to detail, the preciseness of the recitation, the rise and fall of his voice, his facial expressions and gestures, all made one feel as if they had been there, had experienced it all first hand.

The art of storytelling requires a type of care. A care for recreating the past, for communicating in pure nostalgia. Creating a passageway for the small details which make up the fabric of our lives.

The most precious gift Baba had given Nazo was the gift of memory, countless stories, of love, survival, pain, duty. Human stories, with the power to hurt, and heal, all the same. Nazo could not remember the last time Baba had read a book, he carried within him enough to last a lifetime.

The days stretched to their longest point, till every day seemed immeasurably long, till the hours between sunrise and sunset contained within them a small lifetime.

Bibi's arrival had brought with it a sense of change in the house. The routine they had fallen into after Baba's passing had been disrupted. Farah, who had not prayed in years, found herself taking out the old prayer mat out of the storage closet, found herself reciting the old Arabic words that she thought she had forgotten long ago, standing and kneeling, praying to someone she did not even know could hear her.

Weeks ago, a small niggling doubt had begun to wriggle inside Farah's mind, making its home amongst her thoughts, seeping into a near-constant sense of worry on her chest. After forty-odd years, two children, and a dead husband Farah did not think her body could betray her in this way, did not think she would ever bear again. But recently she was beginning to think otherwise, signs and signals had been given to her, feelings and sensations she had not experienced for years, once again found their way to her.

Before Nazo had been born, one hot, sticky August afternoon, Baba had brought her a pint of the pistachio ice-cream her body had begun to crave. They were sitting on top of the straw bed, on the rooftop terrace, where the tops of the mango trees provided blissful shade, and the breeze hit one just so slightly. Farah's stomach, itchy and protruding, made her narrow frame seem ever smaller. Her swollen ankles ached as she sat, inhaling spoonfuls of the cold cream.

Baba sat next to her, watching, a breath, then, “I hope our son takes after you”

An offering perhaps, some sort of olive branch, but not the kind Farah wanted to hear.

With Nazo, it had been hard to tell, whether the baby would be a boy, or a girl. With Sahar, she knew, deep in her heart. Both times, if Baba had been disappointed, he had not let Farah know, but nevertheless, there was an expectation there which she was very much aware of, and which she had not lived up to.

When Nazo was born Bibi had looked at her, the first grandchild, born to the oldest son, smiled weakly and told Baba to call family members and give them the good news.

When Raza’s son Kamal was born, the first male grandchild, sweets were delivered to every family in the neighborhood, four lambs were bought and sacrificed.

Yet Farah, both times, had been overwhelmingly grateful for the birth of daughters.

Farah knew, if she had borne a son, he would not be hers.

But her daughters, regardless of everything, were always her own.

Her own to raise, to mold and shape.

And if no one else cared then that was very well, she would just have to care twice as much.

Across the block from the small yellow house rested a small children’s park Bibi had started to frequent on her morning walks.

Early in the mornings, before the sun had found its place high above the clouds, the Oakland air sent chilly ripples across exposed skin, nipping at flushed cheeks, necks, ankles.

Around mid-day, the warmth would seep through, slowly setting into a hazy heat which filled the day, before sunset would once again make way for the cold.

Bibi sat on the bench, watching mothers chase their toddlers across the play structures.

She watched the families with a startling sense of envy, at the ease with which the mothers handled their young, the naturalness of their interactions.

She had given birth to Baba, her oldest, at fifteen, and then three years later to Raza.

There is sense of irony around the circumstances of a child raising a child. Any sense of normalcy is ripped away from you. You don't get to appreciate your children for what they are, what they could be.

You don't just lose your own childhood, you also lose theirs.

When Farah had called her some months back Bibi had known the news could not have been good. While she would talk to her son routinely, save for biannual phone calls during Eid, Farah never spoke to her.

There is an injustice in living to bear witness to the death of a child.

No matter how old the child gets, no matter how few the years between them and you, nothing lessens the pain of a mother in grief.

Bibi stood to make her way back to the house, wincing as the familiar ache in her fingers resumed, a dull throbbing pain, making its way across her hands.

When she had been a small child a street-beggar had come into their house, asking for leftovers. The woman must have been at least eighty, her skin was wrinkled in rolls across her face and neck, layers and layers of wrinkles, creasing across her cheeks and forehead. Her gummy smile revealed only two remaining teeth.

Bibi's mother had given her a bowl of rice and yoghurt to give the woman, who'd looked at her, taken it from her small hands, said "God will give you great gifts one day"

Her gifts had come in the shape of two beautiful, healthy boys.

Only one of whom was still with her.

The other had left her years ago to go very far away and without letting her know, had recently gone even farther.

Before making her way to Oakland, relatives and strangers alike had begged her not to come.

Raza's wife, Hila, had reminded her almost every day;

“Bibi, it's a long journey, at your age it will be too difficult”

“Bibi there is no one there for you, your son is dead, his wife and children are worse than strangers”

But something inside her had implored, compelled her to make her way across the world, to reconnect with her son's family, strangers perhaps, but still, nevertheless, family.

Now, walking through some small, downtrodden neighborhood in East Oakland, she felt distinctly aware of just how far from home she was, how far removed from the village air, the sheep barn and sound of the *azaan* ringing through the open fields.

The grandchildren, who had spent their summer climbing trees and stealing ripened apricots, would all be getting ready to return to the village school.

Bibi thought about each one of them, their round smiling faces.

August had brought with it the beginnings of the end of summer. As Nazo began to think about her future, no small task for someone just beginning to make a path in life, she quickly realized how little certainty existed inside her. How little passion she or will rested inside her, to do any one thing, achieve any one thing.

Nazo felt a keen sense of purposelessness, buried deep inside of her.

When Nazo was born Farah had never expected any type of future for her outside the limits of expectation.

A life in America brought with it a sense of unlimited potential.

At home, daughters left the house with marriage, a simultaneously sad and happy occurrence.

Though a mother's heart could never be content with letting a child go, there was comfort in knowing they would be going to a new family, who would, hopefully, never let them feel a lack of love.

Sons, never faced any of that, never left, never lost one family in pursuit of another.

But in America, sons and daughters alike left the home at the end of schooling, off to the unknown, where they would be free to do as they pleased, no one to watch over them, to protect them from others, from themselves.

To lead them back to the good path when temptations of the heart led them astray.

Baba, one day, while on the phone with Uncle Raza had said, "Raising a daughter in America is the hardest thing for a man to do. The people here don't understand, they've lost their morals, their values, all in the name of civilization"

Baba's face would flush when such topics of conversations would come up, he would sit up, puffing his chest, near shouting, a sort of ardent vigor lighting up within him.

"If that's what they call civilization, then I want no part of it. Young and old filling their bodies with poison, walking around half-naked, *astaghfirullah*, you can't imagine Raza. It's shameful"

School resumed, and the youth of the city returned to their scheduled activities, classes, evening clubs, sports, music programs. The streets of Oakland, for most of the day, became quiet

once again. The worst of the heat subsided, giving way to usual Bay temperatures, light and pleasant.

Nazo, whose summer had been spent in a sort of detached stupor, had begun to feel a sense of stress at the prospect of once again having to care.

Baba's death had put her into a daze. At some point the finality of it had set in and she had begun to imagine herself, her heart, as one big bloody sponge, soaking up life's messy waters, containing them deep within herself.

She had begun to think about the emptiness inside of her, one great empty hole, something gone, leaving behind part of a human being.

The idea of fleeing, going somewhere far away had been lingering on her mind, a prospect which had only recently become feasible.

Sitting on the living room rug, a plush red Persian, Nazo crossed and uncrossed, in black ink which smudged across her fingers and the pages of her notebook, names of universities, near and far.

A hangnail had formed on the index finger of her left hand.

She picked at it, pulling the loose skin away from the meat of her finger.

Near the corner of her nail, peeled skin burned, exposed.

A small piece left behind. She kept picking at it.

The thought of starting anew, of rebirth, weighed on her.

Thoughts of becoming someone else, somewhere else. Filling the void that had begun to grow inside of her. Leaving behind the city which had started closing in on her.

For thirteen minutes Farah allowed herself to sit on the edge of the bathtub, to let each staggering inhalation of air fill her lungs, to slowly breath it out.

To listen to the sound of her heartbeat stuttering in her chest. She did not allow herself to cry, her tears could not help her now.

In 13 minutes, she would have to get up to make breakfast, to clean the kitchen, to drive to work. She would have to pretend like nothing unusual had occurred that morning, like the plastic stick on the bathroom sink did not exist. Like she had never seen the two pink lines on the front of it.

When Farah had been younger, her older cousins had often tried to scare the smaller ones with all manners of ghost stories, tales of black magic, *jinns*, *sheeshaki*. Farah had never thought about it at night, never hid under the cover, or run to her parents' room.

Ghost stories, her father had said, were for children, "Farah jan, as long as the laws of science are true, man should not fear what is unreal"

And so, there were very few things in the world which had ever made Farah the feel deep, unexplainable fear which makes its way to those who allow it to.

The white plastic stick, resting innocently on the edge of the sink, planted deep within her a seed of fear, the roots of which pushed up inside her body, pressing against her lungs, making their way up her throat, twisting around in her belly.

Farah breathed though her body felt deprived of air, she wanted to scream, to release from within what had found home inside her body.

What had before been a mere possibility, the suggestions of a suspicion, had now become real, become tangible.

Baba had gone leaving behind not the ghost of his presence, but a physical manifestation of it, a lifelong reminder.

A permanent legacy.

Thirteen minutes passed.

Farah sat up, ran her hands across her face, reached for the stick, wrapping it in wads of toilet paper, deep inside the waste bin.

More and more after that morning Farah's mind had begun to wander in unwelcome directions. Sitting by herself, late at night, she scrolled through pages and pages of baby clothing, baby furniture, light pastel blues.

Before Nazo had been born, Baba had chosen the name Baryal, meaning brave. When it was a baby girl, not a baby boy, who came into the world, it was left to Farah to name her.

Farah, who always had believed in the power of a name, named her after Nazo Tokhi, seventeenth century Pashtun poet and woman warrior, woman of substance.

Sahar, meaning morning, was a nod to better days, better times to come.

Farah had never thought she would need to name a child again.

She didn't. The decision had already been made.

She had always like Baryal.