

August 2nd by Ayesha Sharafi

Indeed, it is We who bring the dead to life and record what they have put forth and what they left behind, and all things We have enumerated in a clear register.

—The Holy Quran (36:12)

I woke up to the calming voice of Al-Sudais reciting Surat Yasin. There was the smell of burnt oud in the air. Everything felt familiar. I grabbed my mobile to check the date, and there it was; August 2nd, 2010. It has been twenty years since the Gulf War. My father, Saad bin Nasser, was a soldier in the Kuwaiti army. We were in Cairo for the summer holidays, and a couple of days before the war started, my father told my eldest brother, Nasser, to take us to Dubai. Nasser was seventeen years old at that time, and my twin brother, Aziz, and I were eleven. My father had to leave to Kuwait, assuring us that Dubai would be safe for us to stay in. He said that things were getting serious. He said that we were young and we had to continue our education till things get settled. He said that he would be away from home for weeks and it would be dangerous for us to stay alone at home. I remember my mother's strong objection. She did not want to stay away from Kuwait, especially in such critical times. But she was pregnant. I remember my father telling her that the air in Kuwait would soon be polluted, and that it was better for her and for the baby to stay away from a toxic environment. I remember the cries. I remember my mother packing. I remember the goodbyes. I remember hearing my father whisper to her that soon it would all be fine. So my father left Cairo to Kuwait, and we left Cairo to Dubai.

When we reached the Emirates, there was Sultan bin Mubarak, or Bu Noora (the father of Noora) as I refer to him, at the airport to greet us. Bu Noora is a good friend of my father. He's Emirati, and my father met him in Mekka as they were performing their Hajj pilgrimage. They became good friends ever since. Bu Noora and his family had visited us in Kuwait once before, during the Eid holiday. Bu Noora

has only two sons, Fahad and Saeed. His wife, Aunt Mariam, would laugh and tell us that her husband always wanted to have a daughter named Noora, and even though he doesn't have his Noora yet, he wants everyone to call him Bu Noora, the father of Noora.

We stayed the first couple of days at Bu Noora's place, but then Nasser found us an apartment to stay in. The war started shortly after our arrival to the Emirates. The news came to us like a bomb. My mom would stay in her room often, praying and asking God to protect my father and my country. Bu Noora and Aunt Mariam would check on us often, making sure that we weren't in need of anything.

Dubai started getting packed with Kuwaitis. The school year had to start again, and I was enrolled in one of Dubai's public schools. I was in seventh grade, and there were several Kuwaitis in my class. The atmosphere felt somehow familiar. During the morning assemblies, the Emirati national anthem would play, followed by the Kuwaiti national anthem. *Kuwait, my beloved homeland; May you be safe for glory, may you always enjoy good fortune...* I would stand there singing the lyrics thinking of my father, my home, my friends...my country. Sometimes I would breakdown and cry, and sometimes I convinced myself that I had to be strong, and that crying and weeping would do no good.

Days passed with no news of my father. He called two weeks after the war, but we heard nothing about him after that. It's been two months since the war had started now. My mother's belly is getting bigger, and she's getting tired more often. The TV at home is usually tuned to the news channels, and Bu Noora had visited us some days ago bringing with him loads of flour, rice, and sugar. He said that word was spreading about the war extending to other areas of the region, and that we had to

be prepared. Nasser is now working with Bu Noora. He sounded excited with his new job, which made my mother happy. He would tell her that when the war is over, and when we'd go back to Kuwait, he'd graduate from school and enroll in university. He said that now that he works with Bu Noora, he knows that he should major in business administration. Nasser would make my mother smile with his ambitions, and my mother would nod to him with a pale smile and utter "inshAllah." Aziz spent most of his time at Bu Noora's place. He would sometimes sleep over there too. He went to Fahad's school and was with him in class, which made them bond and become good friends. My mother would usually call Aunt Mariam to check on him, but Aunt Mariam would usually say, "Don't worry, your son is in good hands."

Indeed, he was in good hands. It was around midnight when we all woke up to the sound of the phone ringing. I left my room to find Nasser on the phone. From his expressions, I could tell he was speaking to one of my relatives in Kuwait. He was asking lots of questions, "How are you? How's Kuwait? Is everyone fine? Did my father call? What? How did you know? What do you mean?" His expressions were getting grave. He was now rubbing his forehead as he spoke on the phone. He looked tense, and he looked sad. His face was getting redder by the minute. My mother was getting impatient, giving him signs to keep it short and tell her what's going on. Nasser soon hanged up. He looked at my mother, and with a choked up voice and a teary eye he said that it was Uncle Abdalla, my mother's brother, on the phone telling him that my father has been imprisoned by the Iraqi forces.

The next couple of days my mother got even more tired. Aunt Mariam would spend most of her time with us now, telling my mother to rest and not to exhaust herself. Some of the Kuwaiti acquaintances we made in Dubai would visit us often too. The war made us closer, sharing stories and praying together for a free country

and safe loved ones. I particularly liked Um Mishari. She would fill the apartment with hope and positivity as she walked in. She would often look at my mother and ask her “Why are you sad? Because your husband is imprisoned? He’s fighting for his country, woman. Be happy.” She would often remind her that those who fight for their country are heroes, and those who die are martyrs. “Do you know what martyrs get in Islam? They go to paradise directly. I’m jealous, aren’t you?” Her comments would fill us with hope, and her jokes would make us smile. “There is no use of weeping and being sad, you know. The men are at war and they brought us here not to weep, but to be safe and to pray for their safe return.”

The gatherings became a daily routine, and those women became family. We slowly lost connection with our loved ones in Kuwait. There was no electricity there and the phones weren’t always working. Soon, the ground war started in Kuwait and the connection was lost completely. We got the news from the radio and TV stations. The TV would show a black Kuwaiti sky in the morning. My mom would tell me it was the smoke from the burning oil fields. It was scary. The women gatherings were getting griever, and sometimes hopelessness filled the place.

February 26, 1991. I woke up to the sound of *yebab*, an ululation used to express happiness. I left my room to find home filled with women hugging each other, singing, and cheering. “Kuwait is free,” cried my mother. “Kuwait belongs to the Kuwaitis.”

February came to an end, and the war came to an end with no news of my father. Dubai started getting empty of Kuwaitis, but we couldn’t travel back. My mother was in her last month of pregnancy. I returned home from school one day to find home empty. I called Nasser and he told me that he was in the hospital with my

mother, who had to stay there since she was extremely tired. Aunt Mariam was there with him. She told me that she'll send the driver to drop me to their place, so I wouldn't stay alone. I spent that night at Aunt Mariam's place, and Aunt Mariam spent the night with my mom at the hospital. In the morning, I got the news that I now have a new baby brother. I skipped school that day and went to the hospital to stay with my mom. She was asleep when I arrived, and she soon woke up to ask, "Any news about her father?" She told me that he visited her in her dream, congratulating her for their new son. "He told me to name the boy after him, Saad."

We gained one Saad, but we lost another. The news of my father's death came a day after the birth of my little brother. My mother was surprisingly calm receiving the news. She said with tears strolling down her cheeks that when he appeared in her dream, she knew that he was gone. We went back to Kuwait accompanied by Bu Noora and Aunt Mariam. Kuwait was different when we returned, filled with damage. There was relief mixed with grief. There was survival mixed with death. There was hope. Every corner of Kuwait had a Kuwaiti flag. It felt good to be back home. After the burial, our house was open for the ladies *Aza*, where visitors would come to mourn our loss for three days. Being surrounded by family and friends made it easier on us. Little Saad made it easier as well. He demanded a lot of care and attention, making his well being a priority.

After the *Aza*, Bu Noora and Aunt Mariam left back to Dubai. Close family and friends would visit us often. My mother's sister, Aunt Samah, would sleep over sometimes. My mother has two brothers, Uncle Abdalla and Uncle Thamer, and one sister, Aunt Samah. My father, however, was an only child. His father died shortly after his birth, and his mother re-married to an Emirati man leaving him behind. He was raised by his maternal grandfather, and rarely spoke about his mother.

Things slowly started getting back to normal. The street in front of our house was named after my father, *the street of the Martyr Saad bin Nasser*. Sometimes I would miss my father, but my mother would remind me that my father is a martyr, and that he is in a better place now. The war made her a stronger woman.

Four months after the *Aza*, we received a surprise visit from Bu Noora. He looked agitated, which wasn't typical of him. After being silent for a while, Bu Noora started to speak, "When I first met Saad in Mekka, he asked me to help him find his mother. He told me that she lived in the Emirates, and her name was Asma bint Jaber. I tried searching for her, but my attempts failed. Last week I went with my friend to the burial of a man in Abu Dhabi. I was told that the man had no kids, and was married to a Kuwaiti woman. I later found out that the Kuwaiti woman is Saad's mother. I went to visit her. She's ill and bedridden. She has no one, so maybe you should consider visiting her. Saad would've liked it."

Nasser was furious. He told Bu Noora that this woman has nothing to do with us, and that she gave up my father early in his years. My mother, however, was calm. She stood up, looked at Nasser, and told him to get prepared.

We reached her place in Abu Dhabi. The house was quite big for a woman with no children. We rang the bell. A maid greeted us and asked us who we were. My mother told her that we were here to visit Madame Asma. She took us inside and there she was, an old woman sitting on the bed. She was wearing glasses, and had a veil loosely placed on her head. Despite her heavily wrinkled face, she looked a lot like my father. They had the exact same nose, thin and pointed. My mother introduced herself. "I'm the wife of your son Saad," she said. The old woman stared at her blankly, and when my mother told her that my father died in war earlier this year, her

eyes got teary. My mother introduced us to her. “These are your grandchildren,” she said. The old woman was still quiet, staring at us blankly. We sat by her bed. There were lots of machines in her room. There was also a picture of a man hanging on the wall. It must be her husband, I thought. The silence eventually was broken, when she asked, her voice heavy and her breaths short, “Why are you here?”

She had a point. *Why were we here?* I looked at my mother who was now smiling. She took out a box and opened it. It was filled with gold bangles and gold necklaces. My mother then looked at her and said, “These are yours. A woman dropped them at our place. She said that she is your cousin’s daughter, and that you kept the gold with her mother before leaving to the Emirates. She mentioned that you were unsure of your new marriage back then, so you kept the gold in safe hands just incase you returned back to Kuwait. Her mother is sick now, and she wanted to return the gold back.

The silence continued for minutes. The maid, eventually, broke the silence and said that it was time for her medication. My mother stood and said that it was time to leave. The old woman surprisingly ordered my mom to sit and said, “I never wanted to leave Saad behind, but my husband was stern. He didn’t like children. My father once came all the way from Kuwait to bring Saad to me. Saad was coughing a lot. My husband ordered me to keep Saad away from him since the boy was coughing, and he was afraid Saad would spread germs. My father got angry then. He took Saad and left the place. I never heard from them again.” Her voice was getting choked up and her eyes were getting teary again. I couldn’t help but notice the mix of Kuwaiti and Emirati dialects as she spoke. “Visit me, I have no one now after my husband’s death.”

We visited her often. She asked us to stay with her. It was a big house and she felt lonely. “This house was a gift to me by my husband. After I die, it belongs to you. Live in it, don’t sell it.” My mother would smile and say, “After a long life, *khalti*.” My mother would call her *khalti*, my aunt, and when I once called her by *khalti*, she smiled to me and said, “I am not your aunt, my dear. I am your grandmother. Call me *ydaida*.”

Ydaida, it felt weird saying it. I never had a grandmother before, and I never had to utter this word in eleven years. Months passed, and we grew closer to her. She would tell us stories of Kuwait in the past, and she would sing old traditional songs to us. I got used to calling her *ydaida*, and my mother would now call her *yumma*, my mother, instead of *khalti*. Her condition, however, was getting worse. She was out of breath more often, gasping for oxygen. After getting a high fever, she was admitted to the hospital, where she was diagnosed with lung cancer. She would speak less often now, but she would smile every time she saw us. Her face especially lit up every time she saw little Saad. I couldn’t imagine my life without her, and I dreaded the thought of another loss.

But the day had to come. I only had a grandmother for a short period of time.

On August 2nd, 1992, as the second memory of the war came by, she decided to leave this world behind.

It has been twenty years since the Gulf War, and eighteen years since her death. It has also been eighteen years since our permanent stay in Abu Dhabi, just like she wished.

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I put my mobile back on the side table, and went back to sleep; August 2nd
isn't a day I'm excited for.