

Bay Leaves and Bombs

Samar bent over the sunflower-yellow laminate counter, inhaling the smell of raw chicken. The scent of the dead creature made her feel never more alive. She picked it up, carried it to the stove, dropped it into the boiling water. The height was too great, creating a saucepan tsunami that broke over her wrist. She ran to the sink, allowed the cool running water to soothe the embryonic burn.

“Tarrook, who was at the door?” she called.

“Nobody, imma.”

Samar grabbed a towel, dabbed her wrist dry. She found Tariq squatting in the hallway, red and green Christmas paper strewn across the floor.

“I thought you said nobody was there?”

“Only this, imma. Do you think Baba Noël was able to find us this year?”

Her heart broke, so much hope tinged with despair on her young son’s face. Their last Christmas was notable for car bombs and shrapnel rather than gift giving. A tall Christmas tree had stood defiant on the debris of what had been a café, decorated in red ribbons and photos of the dead.

“Maybe.”

“But why did he give us a rock?”

Samar joined Tariq on the floor, picked up what was indeed a large, smooth rock. There were markings in black texta, and she focussed hard to read the scraggly English characters.

Go. Home. Muslim. Terrorist.

The rock slipped from her hands, the sound of its collision with the tiled floor reverberating through the empty hall.

“This is just someone’s little joke.” She attempted a smile.

Tariq tilted his head in expectation of more information. “Do you think it was that red-headed boy across the road?”

It was Samar’s turn to look quizzical. “Why do you say that, Tarrook?”

“Because he’s always mean to me. The other day he called me a dirty Muslim. But we’re not Muslims, are we imma?”

“No, though many of our friends were. If anyone teases you, just remember to be proud that Yeshuuſ did not speak English, but Aramaic. You tell them your people can still speak the language of Jesus himself. Now, I must finish the dinner, so please clean up this mess.”

Samar returned to the kitchen, gazing distractedly at the array of items on the counter-top. Bay leaves and cinnamon sticks. Minced beef and freekeh. Onions and pine-nuts. Baklava and a partially completed spinach and feta fatayer. Such a colourful, delicious culinary mess.

She was suddenly transported to a different kind of mess. Their once beautiful home reduced to rubble. The basement in which they had lived, layered in dust born of destruction. The freezing winter air invading at will. Flying shards of glass, deadly as any bullet.

Shaking her head, Samar returned to the task. The chicken was taken out to cool. She tossed onions into the frypan, added beef and freekeh. Next came spices, salt, some stock. She fried pine-nuts and almonds in butter. Tore the chicken flesh into strips.

The clattering at the front window caused Tariq to run into the kitchen, burying his face in Samar's skirt folds.

"Imma, imma, are the bombs back?"

She stroked his hair, glaring at the stained floral curtains that protected the offender. "No Tarrook, it was only stones. Nothing at all."

"Will abba be coming home soon?" he sobbed.

Samar had not seen her husband since they were separated in the camp. She knew not whether he was alive or dead, free or imprisoned.

"He will find us, one day. Now my son, do you remember what we do for New Year?"

"Yes imma. We leave straw and water out for the camel and get presents."

"Do you remember why?"

"It's for the smallest camel carrying the three wise magi. He worked so hard to bring the magi to baby Jesus that he collapsed, so Jesus blessed him so he could live forever."

"Very good, Tarrook. Now you have to be just like that little camel. Be strong and carry your heavy load. And you too will be rewarded."

"Yes, imma." Tariq wiped his eyes with a piece of her skirt.

"Today, though, is Christmas Eve. And what does the youngest child have to do?"

"Read the Nativity story in front of the fire!"

"Well maybe you should go and practice."

"Will we have a bonfire?"

"No, the fireplace will have to do."

"But how will I jump over and make my wish?"

Samar laughed. "You can jump in front of it. I'm sure that will still count." She already knew what he would wish for.

Tariq was not always the youngest. Samar could still see those huge, ebony eyes. Still smell the skin made of sunshine and sadness. Feel the final breath escape her thin body while she lay so still in her arms.

But now there was a meal to finish. The chicken was returned to the stock, brought to boil. Bay leaves were tossed by angry bubbles, like the rickety boats in which they had crossed the choppy sea. One leaf sank into the water.

She could still hear the screams.

Samar assembled the plate. A pile of freekeh. Layers of chicken. A sprinkling of toasted nuts. She breathed in the aroma, igniting pangs of hunger in her stomach. Remembered surviving on herbal teas, giving any scraps of food to the children. Of hunger itself feasting on her insides.

“Come, Tarrook, there’s something we must do first.”

Samar grabbed her son’s coat and hand, dragged him through the front door. Crossed the icy road, took a deep breath. Knocked on the door.

A light switched on, a large man and his shadow appearing in the doorway. A smaller shape crept up behind, his red head peering around edge of his father.

“Edo bri'cho o rish d'shato brich'to! Merry Christmas.” Samar held the warm chicken dish before her, an offering of peace.

The man grunted, slammed the door. Samar stood there, fighting the stinging moisture gathering in her eyes. She looked down at her son.

“Never mind, Tarrook. Let’s try again, next door.”