

**Greensheet 29th September 2016
Extra**

**Soroptimist International
Short Story Writing
Competition**



The Winning Stories

Forgotten Dreams



Afghanistan photograph 3

The sky was falling down. That was all I knew. Smoke clouded my vision as I crawled onto the cracked tiles with grey rubble beneath me, the sharp stones scraping my skin. It burned my scorched legs. The fire was approaching and getting stronger with delight. Its threat was palpable. Another life to take. It seemed that however much I pushed my body to bring me forward I was getting nowhere but 10 feet closer to a fiery death. Drowsiness took hold of my mind and willed my body to fall onto the hospital floor. I could feel, with a sense of detachment, my eyes rolling back into my infested head. I was ready to give up. That much was evident. I'd been in the intensive care unit for four weeks when it was bombed. I'd come close to death before, I walk these streets starving while guns are brandished and held to my head. And a bomb is what defeats me. Still, I couldn't bring myself back up as blackness shrouded my vision and smoke surrounded me like an embrace.

My eyes peeled open to see my auntie holding my hand tightly like an anchor. The shock of surviving jolted through me like a bucket of cold water. I moved my mouth to smile but found that it hurt my muscles and all I was capable of was a taught grimace. Auntie Basira was sobbing, using her hands as shields while salty tears collected into her pink scarf. Roya, she kept crying out. My name was a prayer. After losing my parents in a gun raid when I was 6 my aunt was all I had. I couldn't imagine me and my brother, Mullah surviving without her fierce discipline and incessant love. I peered at my surroundings, spying other families enclosing their loved ones in circles of love. I envied their crowded families and missed my mother and father. If I close my eyes I can still hear my mother's sweet

lullabies that would always get me and my baby brother to sleep and my father's scoldings when we fought over the last Noni. I kept these memories close to my chest and replayed them like a film in my mind, ignoring Aunties desperate attempts to get me to look at her warm brown eyes and assure her that Roya was still the giggling girl she left behind in the Kunduz trauma centre weeks ago. I wasn't. At 11, I had to grow up fast, skipping school to help provide for my family with Basira's job at the clothing stall generating next to nothing. I was a weaver, my quick and nimble fingers making me an asset to the manager, earning me double my aunts Afghanis. My thoughts then quickly flew to my injuries. Would I be able to work again? What happened to me in the fire? Through my aunts bawling I could make out that I had not got out of the air strike easy. Basira wouldn't reply when I pulled at her arm, wouldn't look at me in the eye when I asked her how the bomb had ravaged me. I whipped off the rug enwrapped around my body feeling the chill of the makeshift emergency room and looked down at the brown of my skin in rags. Nothing looked different to my untrained eyes. Everything was as it should be save for the burns marking their way down my body. Immediately I knew my eyes were tricking me. My injuries weren't visible to anyone, they were internal yet larger than anything that could have occurred inside of me. The realization of how my life would be turned upside down dawned on my mind, slowly then all at once. Numerous ideas of things I would never do, never see, never *feel* poured into me like blood seeping out of an open wound. I would've dropped onto my knees. If I was able to. Desperately trying to will my legs to move I was shown proof of the exact thing I was terrified of. Paralysis. I could feel nothing from the waist down. I would never use my legs again. Crushing sobs burst through me and I mirrored Auntie with my shaking, convulsing body, twisting hands manoeuvring around my face like a cage.

Assa Kanoute
Year 9
July 2016

Syria



Syria (2)

Today, the hills are abandoned as usual. The sparse, dead trees must be very lonely by now. The sky above me is a roaring canvas full of reds and oranges and swirling yellows, projecting a dull orange glow onto everything below. The grass beneath my bare feet is as scratchy as gravel, the colour of sand. If it weren't for me, I'd think this was a photograph; there is no movement for miles and miles around me. The horizon is frozen and the heavy air feels like it's hanging lazily from the sky.

There is no breeze. There hasn't been for the past three weeks. Maybe there was before, but I can't remember. I might be imagining it, but after what happened it feels like everything is dead. I think of my family as dead from inside – that's the only way I can put their hollow looks and reluctant attempts at talking.

To reach my usual spot, I have to climb over bricks and debris, but I've become a master at it now. I squeeze through the thickets of brambles like a squirrel running for cover. I walk through a dry ditch where there once was a running stream, avoiding the sharp bricks scattered on the bottom.

A deafening crash that shook the windows until they cracked. Shouts and screams of desperate mothers holding their children close and praying for mercy. A dozen siren calls and my father's face, streaked with fears and filled with a twisted expression that looks like he knows what's coming next.

By the time I've scurried across the coarse land the heat has decreased, and here's even the faintest outline of a shadow thrown by a dilapidated pile of bricks and rocks and rubbish that nobody will ever again give a second glance at. It's still unbearable hot, and I can only walk slowly up *my* hill to get to the top. I try and place myself in the centre of the shadow, and sit cross legged, taking deep

A second terrifying bang that sends me into floods of tears and a powerful crash which I'll never forget. The rest is a blur. My eyes sting painfully with the smoke which comes billowing into our room, tumbling and spiralling in thick and fast. The floor shakes heavily and I feel a loud rumble beneath us. The smell of burning and rotting meat and outside the loud, unmistakable crackle of fire. The heat creeps towards us like a snake, intense and smelling strongly of hatred.

Down below where I'm sitting, the chinks of sunlight escape the shadows like a plane coming out of a cloud. One by one, slivers of glowing light reveal the old cobbled ruins. Every brick, every stone is illuminated with a garnet glimmer.

I come to this point in the hills every day to escape the sullen mood back in the village. It's very infectious, spreads like an illness, almost as deadly as one. So I become a whole other person when I'm here. The floor here is sandy and soft, and if I can break a stick off a tree, then I draw. I draw my life. I need to do something, to explain myself in some way, otherwise I feel I will go mad, like the rest of them.

The thick stick makes a deep print in the ground, and I begin to direct the stick, dancing it along the ground. I stand up, move around, creating patterns. The sand falls softly to the side as the stick glides through it. I walk in circles, swirling the stick with me. I walk up and down, trailing the stick by my side, careful not to step on my previous lines. I walk around the pile of debris, copying into the ground the jagged edges of the bricks and various objects.

That's when I see, lying on top of a brick, a slender metal fountain pen. There are swirls on it that start on the nib and go all the way down to the bottom. Immediately I drop the stick. It drops to the ground with a dull *poof*.

The pen feels smooth in my hand. It's been lying in the sun for a long time, by the feel of it. The metal is hot. The kind of hot which burns the tips of your fingers, but I clutch it even tighter. Looking through the pile wistfully I strike lucky again and find exactly what I'm looking for. Putting the pen down, I find my hands wet, coated in black ink. I reach my arm into a crack in the rocks. My skin grazes yet for once, I couldn't care less. Soon my fingers brush again the smooth feel of paper and I grab, and pull.

Soon I'm holding a perfect notebook. My eyes widen as I flick through. There must be about thirty plain pages! I feel the pages each with my fingers in awe. The book is grubby, and a few pages are ripped, but I can't contain my excitement. For the first time in forever, an actual cool breeze rushes through my hair, and another first, I have a smile on my face.

Every day after that I return to the mountains, finding my notebook and pen underneath the bushes. I wouldn't trust anybody with it at home, and it's safe here. When I draw, the pen ink sinks into the soft pages like a weight sinks into water. The pen flows smoothly across the pages, making beautiful long lines and swirls. Anything I feel like drawing goes in the book, and I vow to myself always to keep it. Pretty soon it becomes the only happiness in my life. After another attack, I've lost my brother. It gets even quieter. The smell of fear intensifies.

But I go back to the book every day, and it keeps me going. Just. Even though I'm living in a ghost town, and I'm the only one alive.

Coral Monaghan

Year 9

July 2016

Angel of the Night



Afghanistan photograph 3

Before everything happened mum and I liked to go and lie with our backs on the grass in our wonderful garden in our countryside house with the red roof and stare at the moon and the stars. I loved watching the bright gleaming lights of hope in the dark blue sky as if everything off this earth was peaceful and silent. My mum, she studied the stars for a job, she was an astronomer before the war. That's why I'm called Leila- in my country it means 'of the night'. My mum will always be my idol and my angel, I loved her so, so, so much- and she respected and believed in me. A 'woman' she called me, even though I was only 12, 'a woman' never, ever a girl. Silence, there's no more of that here anymore. Nights in Herat, in my once beautiful country wouldn't be the same anymore.

It was just before midnight, I was still awake. Fear slithered silently through the streets and the rubble and the houses of the people left in the once bustling city... so quickly, too quickly. Baby's cries, a widows weeping, a motorbike- This city was always awake now.

Suddenly a crash and a scream of terror. Then one more, then five more, then a harrowing disconnected string of screams from everywhere you could hear. Huge explosions and more cries and the pungent smell of fire wafted into my room. Papa rushed in, 'Leila go, run, take your sister' he shouted as he thrust the screeching child into my arms. I did what he told me, Clutching Sana in my

arms, I fled down the stairs as I heard the top of the tower block crash above me I felt as though it was me verses the world. I saw a woman rushing down who I knew from the top floor of our temporary flats- she was holding her eleven year old son. However he wasn't moving- I think he was dead.

We took a while to get to the bottom and outside- it was only then I saw how bad the damage was. Our once great city had once again taken a stab to its heart- but now it was time for another stab to my heart. As a stream of sadness and shock ran down my face, I shivered as the harsh cold bit me with a frosty sensation that ran all through me as I waited for mother and papa. Despite this happening to us all the time, we were always terrified whilst waiting for our parents. Every minute I tried to hold Sana closer to my heart because Sana was my job- I had to make sure she was ok. Usually we wait for a couple of hours for them to find us where we are hiding, but this time felt much longer as though time itself had frozen for all the lives lost- and forgot to start again for all the people who needed to find their loved ones.

I don't know how I knew when papa came running to us that mother had gone. I screamed a long, blood curdling scream that met a higher pitch to everyone else's. Papa ran and gave me a soft hug and whispered...."I couldn't find your mother, I think she was trapped," he paused, "I'm sorry Leila." He wrapped his hand around my face and held Sana in his other hand. "Look at the stars Leila. That's where your mother is. One day you will join her and we will live in our countryside house with the wonderful garden and your big room and flowers and the red roof up, up in the stars with Mother. I promise, Leila, I promise you." He was crying- I had never seen Papa cry before. We sat there for a while crying and thinking of our old life in our big house in the country before we moved.

Then a shout "Leila, I'm here! I'm here!" I gasped. It was my mother. We ran together and embraced in relief on one of our final days before we left Afghanistan for safety. From then on I loved her more than ever, because I knew that dead or alive my mother would always be my angel, my angel of the night.

Alice Evans
Year 9
July 2016