

Red

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THAT'S ALL I saw, that's all I dream: the colour red.

It was a cold night. To me, every night felt cold, even in the summer. I tried to fall asleep but all I could think of was the seeping red. It wasn't the red I used to know, the one that I used to associate with love. It was the red that I witnessed through innocent eyes, the red that dripped through the people I love.

Sometimes I want to be dead, maybe then I'll feel warm. I forget how it felt to sleep with the comfort of my mother's arms wrapped around me. I sometimes forget what it felt like waking up to my eldest brother's voice and my dad's farm tools making noise when he was out working in the fields.

I am alone. I am cold. My house isn't a home and I don't feel very safe here but I have no other choice so I accept my fate. I sometimes think how bad my situation is and feel sorry for myself, but then I feel ashamed because when I look around, I find lots of other children with no parents. They play happily, I guess they are too young to understand. The only happiness I feel is when I see the children smiling especially the smile by Nadir, my little baby brother.

I used to think that children had no cares or worries in the world, that the only hard decisions they made involved choosing which candy they wanted to buy or which colour they wanted to paint with. If that was me when I was younger, I would have chosen red. Not anymore, red is now the colour of death. I can never get the image of my mother out of my head.

Before she died she laid her hands on my eldest brother's head as she

tried to protect him, even though she was also in need of protection. I know I need to be strong but how strong can a young child like me be? I already have to look after my two-year-old brother; he was left behind by my red-covered mother. I still feel cold, but I manage to close my eyes even though the explosions and gun shots wake me up from outside every now and then.

The next day came and I woke up to the screech of my brother's voice. He always wakes up early. I grabbed the only pot I had and warmed some milk. We didn't have much left but it was enough to fill us both. He drank the milk and gave me a smile. He always makes me happy. I love the way he chuckles and runs around without a care in the world. I guess he is a true child, not like me. I'm too old to be as happy as he is and I know too much.

After we ate, we went outside. It wasn't always safe to do so, but things have died down and I see people on the streets now. We need milk and some food so I need to work today. I wrap my brother in a sling and carry him on my back and head towards my neighbour's farm to help with the crops. I work till evening and she pays me with bread and milk and if I am lucky; she gives me a small bag of rice too. I hope she does today. Nadir is usually a good boy and he plays with my hair or sits next to me as I work.

'Hello Farah, you're nice and early today.'

'I am bored at home and . . . and we need umm . . . '

'Don't worry; I will give you some food my dear, we have some rice today, I will give you a bag,' she said with a smile.

I tried to hold in my excitement, so I just smiled back. She knew I loved rice. I worked extra hard that day because Mrs. Alisar was extra nice to me. She is a nice lady, and I loved going over to her house because she was my mother's best friend. When she smiled I imagined my mother smiling.

I'm going to start living with her soon and she's promised I can eat whatever I wanted. She doesn't have much but it is enough. She can't take me in now because she already has a lot of children. When her eldest son gets married in two days, I can move in. I can't wait. When I do move in, I hope that things will start to become better. Maybe I can go back to school and will start sleeping well. I don't like where I live now, the stains on the floor remind me too much of my pain, of my family's pain.

I finished work and Mrs. Alisar gave me my wages in food. That was a good day. Nadir and I made our way back home, always looking on the

ground in case we stepped on one of those things that explode.

Just three days ago one of the orphans stepped on one and died. I hate it when those men in green plant them around. They killed my family in broad daylight you know, and I can never forget how one of them smiled while doing so. My father hid me and Nadir in the underground wooden trapdoor where we kept our food, but I saw everything through the termite weathered cracks. He only had enough time to hide us both and I sometimes wish I was the one dead and they alive.

Nadir was getting hungry and so was I. I lit the stove and cooked the rice with some salt. It was one of the best meals I'd had in a long while. We felt very full. I made him some warm milk and he drifted off to sleep in my arms while I sung his favourite lullaby. It's great when he sleeps in my arms because I love looking at his innocent, angelic face. He is what keeps me going; he is my life.

Nadir woke me up this morning pulling my hair. He loves it and I think it reminds him of our mother's. I got up quickly to play with him because I love when he's in this mood.

'Come here, give me a kiss.'

'Gab me a kif,' he said trying to imitate my words. I burst out laughing and gave him a cuddle.

'Come on silly, I have to work today, lets go baby, get into your sling.'

He ran around and it was impossible to catch him. He always does that when he doesn't want to be carried by me. So I just left him. I always keep him close though. He's a good child, but like every child, he loves to explore.

'Go ahead Nadir, but don't get too far,' I said with a smile. His chuckles make me so happy. I let him run in front of me so I can keep an eye on him. The dirt path was safe, I used it everyday.

'You're running too fast, slow down!'

Just as I started running to catch him, he jumped off the path and into the long grassy field.

'NADIR, WAIT. Come back it's not safe there!'

I heard a loud explosion. The noise pierced the air and I was knocked off my feet. Nadir! I got up as fast as I could; the only thought running through my mind was him in danger.

'WHERE ARE YOU?'

I ran further as tears welled. I began crying uncontrollably.

‘NADIR,’ I yelled, my voice broke through the crying.

He wasn’t in sight. The grass was too high for me to find him but I searched and did not stop until I saw it. There it was. That hideous colour that painted the green grass. My heart sank and I thought of the worst. I walked further with the only remaining spark of energy I had, and my shaky legs brought me to my worst nightmare. Covered in red, was my baby brother. I sat down next to him and took him in my arms.

‘Wake up, wake up please,’ I sobbed, shaking his lifeless body.

No answer.

‘Nadir please wake up, I know you’re alive, please Nadir wake up,’ I said, as tears rolled down my cheeks and trickled onto his little lips.

I knew he was dead because I saw the colour red. I yelled and placed my forehead on top of his.

‘Please, please don’t die, I love you too much, everything is going to be OK,’ I said as my voice softened and became a hoarse whisper, ‘Please don’t die.’

I knew deep down he had passed but I didn’t want to believe it. I grabbed his little hand and caressed it, kissed all the places that looked sore. Maybe he will feel better, I thought, but he didn’t wake up. I didn’t know what else to do, so I sung his favourite lullaby and placed my head near his; hoping, praying he would show some sign of life.

Nothing, not a breath, not a movement, not a twitch. My baby brother was gone. The only worldly thing that kept me going was now on my lap, lifeless. I lifted my head and from afar I saw Mrs. Alisar rushing towards us yelling. She approached us with tears in her eyes.

‘Farah, what happened, did Nadir step on a landmine? Is he alive?’ she said in a crying voice.

I didn’t reply but she knew it was over. She grabbed him off me and I let out a yell.

‘GIVE HIM BACK TO ME. Give him back,’ I sobbed uncontrollably.

‘Farah, we need to bury him my dear, he is dead, and he is in a better place, with your parents.’

‘I want to go too,’ I said in a soft whisper. ‘I DON’T WANT TO BE HERE ANYMORE.’

I am alone. I feel cold. I still see red.