

THE COLOURS OF LIFE

In memory of the victims of July 1 Holey Artisan attack

MARIO PALMA

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, attack on Twin Towers in New York. We all remember the paralysing aesthetic of the live image of the attack on the second tower that the global news channels continued for days to air. It was clear to everyone, first of all to the perpetrators themselves, that in the future, another heinous "performance" of that dimension would have been unimaginable. But it was equally clear to Al-Qaeda ideologists and propagandists first, and, thirteen years later, to the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS)'s, that they would count on a fatal weapon to expand its influence and ability to attract new adherents. This would be the multiplier effect that image iteration — also related to "smaller" sheddings of blood — would have had on the global audience of the new media.

Once the propaganda apparatus of the IS had the terrorist act transferred on to the web, the measure of its success shifted from the spectacular to the terrifying brutality of live feeds of slitting throats and to its ability to stir their supporters into action at the sight of blood, making them the leading roles of new "performances", individual or collective, to be transferred from the web to physical scenarios. That this strategy of terror was able to find local support, as early as the beginning of 2015, even in

Bangladesh, is an established fact. The phenomenon of radicalised web chats for the purpose of proselytising and the clear-headed action plan focused on "Bengal" made public through the issue No. 12 of *Dabiq*, the IS magazine, do not seem to have been given adequate importance. Hence the total unpreparedness of local police forces and the shock experienced by the people when, on the evening of July 1, 2016, the terror "performance" suddenly materialised in Dhaka's diplomatic quarter.

I was having an aperitif with some guests in the lounge dominated by a huge acrylic on canvas — a hymn to life and to its colours by the late friend and master Giancarlo Vitturini — when the news reached my residence of an attack at Gulshan's Holey Artisan Bakery, a restaurant mostly frequented by expats, quite popular with local customers and a favourite hangout for a group of Italian business people. I left the residence and got to the Embassy in a flash, turned my office into a situation room in a few minutes, and had the scattered staff gather into a "Crisis Unit" in order to monitor the development of what turned out to be a terrorist act planned in the smallest details and then claimed by the IS.

As time went by, on the white wall on the opposite side of my desk — normally home to a drawing by the Italian artist Mimmo Paladino show-



A painting by Giancarlo that reminds the writer of the colours of life, and the infinite nuances of human relations and expressions.

ing Rabindranath Tagore "looking at a coloured poetry" — my mind's eyes began to see blurred images of death. I sensed that the killing of Italian and

Japanese hostages could already have taken place. This was soon to be corroborated by the flux of the images of bodies torn in blood pud-

dles, uploaded and distributed by the webmasters of terror. It was only the beginning of an unending, tragic night in which five young "actors" drugged and bound to die, directed from outside or perhaps supervised on the spot by other militants, would go for another grim "performance", where they would play the role of self-appointed inquisitors and executioner vis-à-vis young local hostages.

The black colour in which the Caliphate's Bangladeshi recruits were dressed up — associated with the black flag brandished by IS and now as symbol of the alleged rebirth of the caliphate at Raqqa — is now more commonly and universally perceived as a sign of the most regressive orthodoxy, as a plain denial of beauty, art, music, shortly a denial of life. An alien ideology, incompatible with the cultural syncretism of a country, Bangladesh, where people love to dress up in the colours of the rainbow. I knew, to some extent, only some of the Italian victims, namely Claudia D'Antona, Nadia Benedetti and Adele Puglisi. They and their Italian colleagues were unanimously viewed by their Bangladeshi business associates and friends as being much in love with this country and its people. I also knew Ishrat Akhond and her love for art and cinema and I had met once also the young Abinta Kabir, grand-daughter of a wonderful couple of art lovers and patrons. I had not the chance to meet Faraaz Hossain, the young

man who heroically refused to abandon his two friends when the terrorists decided to release the other Muslim hostages. In his memory a tree has been planted on July 15, 2016 in the "Garden of the Righteous" located within the premises of the Italian Embassy in Tunis. Deep is the void that all the victims have left in our hearts, but their attachment to life and the joy of living will be forever with us.

One year after the tragic event, one night in the silence of my residence, I stood for a while to look carefully at the large acrylic painting by my friend Giancarlo. The vision evokes a big tree of life: the trunk vigorously emerging from the ground and stretching out to the sky with its branches to capture the light and cosmic energies. Its trunk, branches and leaves stand out against the sky showing all the six pure colours that form the three pairs of opposite colours: black and white, green and red, yellow and blue. As every artist knows, they can, by mixing, get all the other colours in endless combinations. Infinite, as the nuances of human relations, beliefs and cultural expressions. They represent the colours of life, as Bengal Foundation's founder Abul Khair — Litu to his friends — puts it. The colours of the beautiful life we have to lead the way Nadia, Claudia, Adele, Ishrat, Abinta, Faraaz and all the others who are no more, had taught us to do.

The writer is Ambassador of Italy to Bangladesh.

Amidst the fear of terrorism, a reassurance

SARAH ANJUM BARI

THIS time last year, we were in a collective state of shock. Pain and mourning would soon follow, but the later hours of July 1, 2016 initially held the millions of this country in a grip of dread and utter disbelief. For many of us, however, the bigger shock came the next day — this date on the calendar last year — as details of the incident started to become clear. Stories of what had transpired inside the Holey Artisan Bakery poured out; and faces of the terrorists plastered themselves on our social media, as did those of the hostages who had died. Faces that were all familiar.

Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain's story strikes a particularly strong chord within us. Faraaz, who was a young Bangladeshi Muslim brought up in a privileged, educated background, just like some of the attackers. Faraaz, who refused to leave the premises even when he could, and sacrificed his life in the name of friendship, unlike the attackers. The incident threw a harsh light on the no-longer-dormant presence of terrorism in our midst in Bangladesh, something that we had been blissfully unaware of until that point. But the most jarring revelation was that the people executing the attack had shared mostly the same age, education and socio-economic background as some of the hostages present at the restaurant. Now that

The truth is that we'll never know what it was like to have been a part of something like that, or gauge how we would have acted. To pretend otherwise is to belittle what the hostages at Holey Artisan faced that night.



From left – Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain, Abinta Kabir and Tarishi Jain, three of the victims of the Holey Artisan Bakery attack on July 1, 2016.

we look back with a clearer but no less mournful perspective, we can appreciate the strong marks that Faraaz and his friends carved in the story of that night. Wielding kindness and their love for one another as unashamedly as the attackers had used their weapons, Faraaz, Tarishi and Abinta struck a stark contrast to the forces that lay siege on the Holey Artisan Bakery on July 1 last year. They proved that while some of the country's youth may be straying towards the path of destruction, there are others who will quite literally do anything for those that they love. This isn't to say that their loss was somehow more significant than the others present at the restaurant — the seven Japanese, nine Italians, two other Bangladeshis and one Indian who fell victim to the atrocities. If

anything, it forces us to keep in mind what Faraaz had remembered even in such terrifying circumstances — that all human lives, and not just one's own, are precious.

The youth as a collective faction received much heat and scrutiny in the aftermath of the attack on Holey Artisan Bakery. English-medium students were blamed, more strongly than ever, of lacking sound religious awareness or emotional maturity. Students of specific private universities were permanently branded with the stigma of having potential ties with militant forces. Every social gathering entailed probing questions about whether a campus that many of us call home — a space containing some of our happiest memories — is truly a breeding ground for terrorism. And the prejudice surrounding

students of madrasa and higher-level religious studies became more pronounced, more unabashed than ever before. Even as we reeled from the pain of the incident, we started worrying about other practical concerns — whether our background as a Bangladeshi Muslim youth from a certain educational institution would mar our chances of securing a job, an admission into a programme, or a visa to a foreign country.

This baggage will be an inescapable part of our reality for the years to come. But the memory of Faraaz's actions lightens the load. It helps to remember that our background isn't one that harboured murderers, but one that instilled a very young man like Faraaz with so much strength, maturity and love for humanity.

A brilliant student, an ace athlete, his act of bravery has been recognised worldwide. On July 15, 2016, a tree was dedicated to Faraaz at the Garden of Righteous Worldwide (GARIWO) at the Italian embassy in Tunisia. The Harmony Foundation in Mumbai honoured him posthumously with the 2016 Mother Teresa Memorial International Award for Social Justice in November 2016. And March 2017 saw the inauguration of the Hossain-Kabir room at the Oxford College of Emory University, where Faraaz and Abinta were students. While Muslims continue to face persecution on the international stage, Faraaz's legacy as a young man who stood up to terrorists and put friendship above everything, provides us with a beacon of hope. It makes us proud to represent a country and a faith that produced such a person; such a friendship.

Unlike the many people who have written heartfelt tributes for Faraaz, Tarishi and Abinta over the past one year, I wasn't acquainted with any of them. I am not haunted by memories with these three people who seemed to have been remarkable human beings even independent of their actions on the night of July 1. Instead, I am haunted by the uncomfortable truths that their fates pushed us to confront. Couldn't it have been any of us present at that restaurant that night? Would we have had the strength to choose friendship over safety? For all our declarations of love, would we sacrifice our life for a close one?

The truth is that we'll never know what was like to have been a part of something like that, or gauge how we would have acted. To pretend otherwise is to belittle what the hostages at Holey Artisan faced that night. But even as I say this, I get flashes of a few faces that I would possibly have stayed back for in similar circumstances. Amid the constant fear and uncertainty that the events of July 1, 2016 have thrown us into, this reminder of the love we feel for those around us, made historic by the friendship of Faraaz, Abinta and Tarishi and immortalised by Faraaz's sacrifice, is reassuring.

The writer is a member of the Editorial department, *The Daily Star*.

QUOTABLE Quote

INDIRA GANDHI
Former Indian Prime Minister

You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Back teeth
- Bonanza stuff
- Fall behind
- Have a spat
- Forecast word
- Dance unit
- Trite saying
- Jailing
- Before now
- Took the title
- Invited
- Fancy home
- Exemplary
- Hot blood
- Mercury or Mars
- Silt setting
- Exploit
- Full of energy
- Ignored the limit
- Professional witness
- Portent
- Purple swallow
- Give - for one's money
- Royal heir
- Yawn
- Did an usheer's work

DOWN

- Spoil
- 2 Bonanza stuff
- 3 Fall behind
- 4 Have a spat
- 5 Forecast word
- 6 Dance unit
- 7 Trite saying
- 8 Jailing
- 9 Before now
- 10 Took the title
- 16 Invited
- 17 Fancy home
- 18 Exemplary
- 19 Improving
- 21 Lasso loop
- 22 Concluded
- 24 Lama's land
- 25 Is for two
- 30 Tennis star Goolagong
- 33 Turkey Neolabor
- 35 Band booster
- 36 Exceptional
- 37 Decline
- 38 Lyricist Gershwin
- 40 Blasting stuff
- 41 Water cooler
- 42 Composer Rorem

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

V	O	C	A	B	W	A	I	S	T	
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S	T	E	A	D	R	A	I	N	Y	

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT