



Things we LOST to the fire

Hiraeth

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PHOTO: IMRUL ISLAM

The distance from Lexington to Astoria is six miles; 1.5 hours by foot. On that crisp fall morning, it took twice that. Some streets were crowded, others were closed. Across Queensboro Bridge, a steady stream of office-goers walked home in single file while behind them, the smoke rose in an unending plume.

The news set the tone early on. Hundreds were missing, hundreds were feared dead. Over and over again, on loop, planes crashed into the towers and made America gasp in unison. Deep into the night in Dhaka, airwaves brought fear home.

Over the next few weeks, I learnt of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. I heard stories of men who had read the Quran and somehow found in it all that I had not. And I learnt about the FBI, the CIA, the Army; about an impending war in a part of the world that had reduced two towers to rubble.

In New York, my cousins were also learning new things. They were not to appear 'too Muslim', or frequent the halal aisle at the grocery store. Going to the mosque was out of the question. Across the city, Muslim establishments were being vandalised, hijabs were being torn from the bodies of women, the NYPD was ramping up surveillance.

Overnight, Muslim had become a bad thing to be. Every night, I fell asleep to Ammu conversing with Khala in hushed tones. Something was going to happen. Something Bad.

And then, it happened. The Something

Bad. On October 7, President Bush came on TV with an announcement of war: "We defend not only our precious freedoms, but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear." The operation, named "Enduring Freedom," was to save Afghanistan from itself. It was to show the world, once and for all, that violence was not the answer. That evening, American planes blanket bombed Kabul.

Over the next few months, the world changed, and the evening news became a nauseating rerun of a bad war movie. In between dinner and homework, I learned the names of new cities: Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar. From the comfort of my couch, I watched them burn.

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When the towers came down, the smoke lingered for a week, blocking out all light. In that dusty, murky darkness, fear uncoiled serpentine. As the city teetered, it crept out from rubble, crawled into coffee shops and whispered absolution into eager ears. Some shook their heads in disbelief, others looked up and listened.

When the leaves turned, Fear swam through the Hudson and landed in Queens, then Brooklyn, Bronx, Staten Island. It swept across state lines and invited itself into homes in forgotten neighbourhoods, giving those who had nothing something to fight for. Even as the dead were being buried, Gods were thrust into war.

Fear turned faith into license for murder. The attacks started. Others noticed. Where most saw rage, a few saw opportunity. This

was their chance to forge an America that looked different, talked different, prayed different. Organisations poured in money and created factories that manufactured more Fear. Their product took to the airwaves, dressed up pretty in stars and stripes, and each night for a hundred nights, it spoke of a world drowning in darkness. No one remembered Mohamad Hamdani, who had raced into the burning World Trade Centre to help. Rarely were the 31 Muslims who had worked in the towers mentioned. All anyone could talk about was invasion and collective responsibility.

One night, long after the television had been switched off, men fell asleep dreaming of war. In their dreams, as cities suffocated in smoke a hundred towers crumbled, and children died frothing at the mouth.

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When the towers came down, time became mobius. The past rushed forward to embrace the present, a century of Fear morphed into rage. A civilisation built on the backs of people looked at a people with disgust, men who had cut up the world wondered how best to curb the spillage. In the marbled halls of power, a strategy took shape: the ills of a few would inform the fate of the many.

The bombs rained down. Tanks slithered up valleys and into towns, leveling the most wonderful landscapes the world had ever seen. Museums were ransacked, artwork stolen, schools perforated with bullets. Hospitals ran out of supplies, the streets overflowed with the injured. In cities where America was little more than a country on a map, America reduced civilisation to dust.

Then war came home. In late 2001, in 2002, and in the years and months after, Muslims in America became prisoners in their own country. There were things that could not be talked about, and people one could no longer trust. A line had been drawn in the sand and no one knew where it was. Imams stood at the heads of congregations and stuttered, politicians spewed lies no one countered. Mosques were retrofitted with CCTVs, informers were sent into houses of worship to listen in on conversations. At airports, the TSA printed out posters of burning towers graced with the words "Never Forget." The searches began.

Fear hardened, multiplying and mutilating into a thousand different forms in a hundred different locations. It found itself in Iraq, in Syria, in Yemen, each time leaving behind a trail of mangled bodies.

It crept into Washington DC, into Presidential proclamations and judicial chambers; into every vote and every election. Muslims who had lived all their lives in America woke up to chants of "the Muslims are coming."

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