

Title (up to 20 words) - Amal

Copy (between 900 and 1000 words) -

“Not the red ones. He hated the colour red,” Mum ordered from her wheelchair.

Amir and I lay the red chrysanthemums on Dad’s grave, an image of him coming to the forefront of my mind in those last seconds, his eyes accepting his fate. He handed me the oars that day, and urged me to row with a look.

I don’t think I ever will understand that look.

Amir linked his arm through mine. “Where did you go just then?”

“Nowhere.”

“You sure? It seemed like you -”

“I said *nowhere*,” silencing him with one of my glares.

18th March 1947

The first time my mother looked upon wasn’t with two shining orbs brimming with love, but with fear-stricken azure eyes instead Born in France- occupied Algiers, Algeria. At 4 kilograms, a head full of black hair, and deep, brown eyes, I really was my father’s daughter, and soon, I would share his head-strong ways.

To my parents I represented a melancholy acceptance of the occupation, but also, a *hope* for the new world, hence my name - Amal.

Nine years was enough to dispel any sibling rivalry, but it also allowed me to become accustomed to being an only child. My spot as the favourite and only child was stolen from me by Amir, my little brother. By the time he was born in 1956, the fight against France was well under way, but my father’s eyes were too tired from Monsieur Arsenault’s tyrannous rule to see my brother as anything other than another mouth to feed.

Arsenault owned the farms that made him rich off the Algerians' sweat. Because of him, Dad would always come home and lie down on his mattress, expelling the pain of the day. Because of Arsenault, Dad's fingers were stained from the mud in the farms, his skin darkened from the sun, his back was beginning to adopt a permanent curve from constantly bending over and tending to the crops.

I can't completely hate Arsenault though. If it weren't for him, we wouldn't have had access to the sheep and the pick-up truck.

Amir might have just been a child, but at fifteen, I knew more than I let on – the walls have ears, though admittedly, I think it was the fact that Mum and Dad's room had no door.

After weeks of catching whispers and murmurs in the dead of night, I finally knew the plan: we would be stowaways in the back of the sheep truck, Dad would drive us down to the beach where we would find a boat, and sail away to a place called Casablanca.

Stuffed into the back of the van, the fetid smell mixed with the heat threatened to knock us out, but, true to my name, I smiled every time Amir complained. We were separate from the flock with wooden planks to protect us from being trampled by the sheep and covered with a black cloth to remove the chance that someone could see us.

We set off.

Amir, only child at that point found it hard to sit still, but after sing all the nursery rhymes he knew, he was fast asleep.

I felt every hole and every speed bump in my heart, thinking that the cloth had come undone, that someone would see us, that we were as good as dead. It was at these points that I was no longer a stoic teenager, but a scared child in adult clothing. But perhaps the second we were strangers in our own country, we already were dead. It's a human instinct, I suppose - the need for survival. People have betrayed their own people, or even hidden in a sheep truck merely to survive.

A welcome break from the sheep odour, the salt wafted in the air and woke me from my philosophical reverie. We were at the shore.

Now I must say that coincidence is a wonderful thing at times, but at other times, I think coincidence is the name we assigned to the universe dealing us bad cards.

As Dad got out, the truck momentarily leaned to the side. His descent was marked by 4 clear words:

"Qu'est-ce que tu fais?"

Mum's grip tightened on Amir and I. We could see the face belonging to that voice. Eyebrows raised mockery. My father can't speak French, none of us could. They didn't even teach us how to hold a pen.

"Bonjour, Monsieur Arsenault." My father had used up the three French words he knew, and I saw him; the deep furrow between his brows when he thought too hard; the smile painted on his face by fear, exposing his three missing teeth; his arms tainted with bruises, cuts, scratches, scars. I knew Monsieur Arsenault wouldn't buy it.

The sand gave way to Arsenault's combat boots that were getting louder, unhindered by my father's ardent pleas or by the acrid smell of sheep. Arsenault's hand tugged on the black cloth, and lifted it up.

Our eyes locked - hunter and prey.

Mother started praying.

Amir hid his face in mother's chest.

And what did I do? I kept eye contact long enough to see the entire gamut of emotion brush against Arsenault's face: shock, confusion, realisation, anger, contempt.

"ARSENAULT!" Dad's stentorian voice cracked through the air.

In his final breaths, my father picked up his shepherd's cane, and brought it down on his head, leaving Arsenault in a sanguine pool, helped us out of the pick-up truck, dragged us towards the little dinghy boat waiting on the shore, placed the oars in my hand and pushed us away.

To this day, I still don't entirely understand what happened in his last moments. Amir was crying and screaming at the top of his lungs, mother trying to comfort him, whilst all I did was row, my eyes still linked to his as he waved us goodbye.

None of us realised until too late that Arsenault's body had moved, or that his bullet had lodged its way into father's heart.