

3 Stories

Not Just a Game

Badi watch from the sidelines as his classmates frantically kicked the ball across the dry and dusty pitch that had not seen rain for some time. He had come to hate the game that symbolised so much trauma in his young life. It filled him with guilt. Every kick stabbed his conscience. Every goal reminded him of how he was responsible for the death of his younger brother. His mind raced back to that fateful soccer game played in the dirt and debris beside his home in the war-torn country of Afghanistan.

His fellow schoolmates and teachers pleaded with him to join in, but there was always the same reply, a stern "NO". He vowed that he would never ever step foot on a pitch again. That was the punishment that he dished out to himself. He had been a spectacular player and was known throughout the village as the rising star of the land. He could pierce the net at any angle, and be guaranteed of a goal. Nobody could defend him; he was invincible, until that day.

On a windy June morning of 2000, Badi's parents announced that it was necessary for them to travel to the major city of Kabul as his mother had to attend an urgent medical appointment and there was no doctor in their village who could assist with her case. Although steeped in risk from the Taliban, they had no choice but to leave Badi in charge of his younger brother while they joined a convoy of others in the perilous journey. He remembered his father's final words to him, "My son, you must promise me to look over your brother and keep him from harm. It may be many hours until our return. We trust you."

Badi watched as the huddled figures of his parents were swept in to an old jeep that headed off along the main road in the direction of Kabul. At first, he bathed in the glory of his responsibility; he felt so proud that his parents entrusted his 3 year old brother "Jamal" in to his care, and he was only 8. No other 8 year old boy in the village had ever been given this kind of job before. But as the morning unfolded, and he heard the excited screams of his friends playing soccer on the nearby pitch, his frustration grew and he made the decision to take Jamal out with him.

At first Jamal sat in the shade of a gnarly olive tree that cast a sliver of shade; he played with a plastic spoon, shovelling the hot sand into the remnants of a bicycle tyre. In and out he poured and poured. Every time Badi looked over at his brother, Jamal was happy and engaged so Badi returned to the game he loved so much.

The explosion was deafening; rocks and dust filled the sky. The rocket had been launched from the top of a nearby hill. The house that Badi once lived in was now rubble, razed to the ground. He stood in the middle of the pitch. It was unbelievable. Then he turned to reassure Jamal that everything would be okay, but his brother was no longer under the olive tree. The elderly neighbour came lumbering towards him screaming, "Jamal went to your house....he is in there!"

It seemed that Jamal had tired of the hot sand and the repetitive play and the sliver of shade. He had taken it upon himself to go back to the house, but instead of being a place to find relief, it had become his tomb.

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Badi hated school. Every day was a reminder of the friendship and brotherly love he missed out on. Badi constantly felt guilty and ashamed for his actions that day. He brought shame and despair to his family. Everyone blamed him for the death. His mother and father, his friends and family. Everyone. Filled with horror and misery Badi's parents sent him away to Australia. Badi felt like he wanted to die, but knew that it wasn't an option. He was constantly tortured by the memories. Badi went over that day so many times in his head. Questioning his decisions. "Did I make the right choice?", "Could I have prevented it from happening?". But then again, who could blame an 8 year old. He was so small and innocent. He should never have been given the job of looking after his younger brothers. But that couldn't change the past. Badi's parents had to flee the house to get medical help for his brother. Badi could still hear the harsh words from his parents like it was yesterday "Do not leave your brother, protect him". These words echoed throughout Badi's mind.

The day of the inter school soccer grand final finally arrived. Badi woke up early. For the first time in many months he felt a tingle of excitement and joy. Badi has a sense that things were going to be different. Badi walked through the gates of his school. He was confronted with members of his school soccer team frantically running around. Suddenly Badi felt a tug on his shirt. Quickly he turned, it was the coach. He seemed distraught. The best player was sick and they needed someone to fill in otherwise they would be disqualified. Badi begrudgingly agreed.

Run, dribble, pass, tackle, dribble, shoot, score. Images of Badi's brothers face kept emerging. Pass, shoot, score. The crowd went wild. They won the game. Everyone was celebrating. This was a small victory for Badi. It put him on the path to a better life but nobody knew how deep and vast the pain he was carrying. It was only a game, but not for him.

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A Friend for Life

Afghanistan was not a good place to come from; there was no hope, no future, and no control over life. Baddar was fortunate to escape that nightmarish place. His uncle was the one with the idea to come to Australia by boat. But he was here now. The other kids noticed he had scars running up and down his arm. When the teachers asked if he was ok, he would just say, "I'm fine." He didn't participate in class; he would just watch. He had no power.

Most of the other kids teased him about his accent and his name, calling him things like "Badder and Bomber." There was a certain individual called Bruce who was unrelenting in his attacks on Baddar; Bruce didn't just bully him, he would bully everyone, the smart ones and the obese ones, the shy ones, and the different ones. Nobody was safe from Bruce's stronghold. He would destroy people's things and steal them, but it seemed he just targeted Baddar more often than anyone else. Bruce would try to remind him of the horrors of his past. Baddar just accepted the barrage of insults that Bruce pitched at him. Sadly, Baddar would just walk away from Bruce with his head bowed down and tears welling in his eyes.

One day Baddar was standing by the fence at the edge of the school ground minding his own business when Bruce and his gang walked past on their way to smoke cigarettes behind the scoreboard. As soon as Bruce saw Baddar, he began his usual taunting saying "What's up loser?" followed by, "Look, he's wearing a Docker's hat....what a tryhard!" Baddar was given the hat by a neighbor who knew he loved watching AFL football, but this was the first time he had the courage to wear it to school. As Baddar tried to walk past the gang to the safety of the oval, Bruce knocked the hat off his head. Baddar reached to retrieve it, and with one swift punch, Bruce hammered into Baddar's chest, knocking him to the ground. "Fight, fight, fight!" chanted the gang, but as Bruce saw the duty teacher sprinting towards them, he took off into the crowd of students, and left Baddar breathless on the dry grass.

Baddar never really had a meaningful conversation with anyone at school; he would just say "yes" and "no" in his strange accent when asked questions about his past. At lunch, he would always try to retreat to places where nobody would find him. When he was there, he would just glance at people and avoid making eye contact for fear that they would notice him. He was always thinking about his life back in Afghanistan, and this made him reflect on how much he missed his family. He could not purge the tragedy of losing his parents in the bomb that destroyed his life forever and left him without an identity.

Baddar was born into the war. He was forever sick and filthy in Afghanistan. The war was always there; the explosions of bombs from near and far kept him restless at night. He feared whether or not he would wake up the next day.

He remembered that day. The day that it all went wrong. The day the bomb dropped. He didn't want to recall it, but it was something he could not forget; he had no control over his vision of the events. The explosion was like a thunderstorm. His ears rang. Baddar stumbled around what was left of his house. He began to search frantically for his parents and little brother. Nothing was left. He didn't know how to react as tears rolled down his face. He didn't know what to do. He ran.

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In the Winter of that year, rumours spread around the school that Bruce's very sick dad had died. Bruce didn't come to school for a few days, and when he returned, he sat on the bench in the corner of the playground slumped over himself, crying faintly so as to not draw attention. He didn't talk to anyone. He didn't bully anyone that day either. The other kids avoided Bruce; they didn't know what to say to him. What are you meant to say to the school bully when he is crying over his dead father? Nobody was willing to take the risk and approach him.

Without hesitation, Baddar slowly walked up to Bruce and carefully led him away from everybody to make him feel more comfortable. Together, they talked about Bruce's loss for a long time. Baddar shared the story of his own father's death, and they somehow knew that from this moment onwards, they would be friends for life. In the next few days, Bruce came to Baddar many times to discuss the tragedy of his father. They soon began exchanging pictures of their loved ones. They realised that they were very similar in very different ways. Bruce loved to play soccer and so did Baddar. Baddar played rap music in his room and Bruce laughed when he heard this because his father used to protest when he heard Bruce playing rap music too loudly in his bedroom. The more they spoke together, the more they grew to become great friends. Baddar had made a friend, probably the most important friend of his life.

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The Irresistible Peach

Badi followed his Uncle Shameer as they pushed their way through the crowded Melbourne markets. Ever since the two fled Afghanistan some months earlier leaving the rest of their family behind, they had been inseparable. But today Uncle was cold and tired. Today Uncle was grumpy and out of money. Today the youngster felt that he was a nuisance to his Uncle. He felt like he was a ball and chain shackled to his Uncle's ankle.

The stench of decaying fish and old piles of rotting fruit was putrid. Badi could hear the conversations of customers as they tried to get a bargain for their fruit. The vendors' voices rang out as they tried to persuade people to buy their plump rich mangoes. "Two mangoes for \$5". The air had a freezing chill on it. The rain thumped down onto the old rusty roof. The wind howled through gaps in the walls making little tornadoes that sent chills down his spine. There were puddles everywhere from the holes in the rusted tin sheeting. The unavoidable puddles were too tempting to dodge. Badi delighted in splashing in the water. Without warning Uncle Shameer shot around and scowled at Badi, disapproving and annoyed. No words were needed.

Badi felt out of place. Everyone had coats and long warm trousers while he was dressed in old, tattered clothes that his Uncle Shameer had given him. There was no colour amongst the chaos. Everything was dark, damp and dreary. Except for one stall. The vibrant colours of the fruit drew Badi towards the stall, like a bee to honey. As he got closer, he could smell the sweet fragrant aroma of the delicious fruit. There were towers of shiny red apples, stacks of perfect fresh strawberries and mountains of golden ripe mangoes.

In the midst of a wintery day, a ray of sunshine broke through the gloomy marketplace. The sunshine settled upon a luscious rosy peach. Just like the ones on his grandmother's tree back home. As if it was a gift from heaven. Badi dreamt of biting into the irresistible peach, and for a few seconds, he was lost in his imagination. He felt his pockets for some coins to buy the prize peach, but of course there were none. Badi secretly looked around and noticed everyone was busy buying, selling and chatting. The idea of stealing just one single peach filled his mind. Would Uncle be mad at me? Would Uncle understand? It is worth the risk? The temptation was too much. Swiftly and carefully he swept the precious peach away and slipped it under his scruffy shirt. There was an immense surge of joy throughout Badi's body.

The young boy rubbed his fingers along the outline of the plump peach. The texture was furry and soft and reminded him of the old peach tree in his grandmother's backyard back home in Afghanistan. Badi suddenly felt sad and a longing for his family. He quickly caught up to his Uncle who was buying the 'black sheep' of the food. The seconds were always discounted - bruised, small hard fruit with bits missing. He could feel the urge to take a nibble of the gorgeous peach but had to use all of his will power to resist the temptation.

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The wait for the tram to take the young boy and his Uncle home to Ringwood seemed to take forever even though it was only a few minutes. Once on the crowded tram, people were pushing and shoving for a seat. The noisy school kids dominated the back of the tram. Badi stood shyly, wondering when he would be able to taste the precious peach that he was holding gently under his shirt. When the school kids got off, Uncle found a seat at the back of the tram and Badi stealthily slid in next to him.

Badi took the peach out from its hiding spot, just staring at its beauty in awe. Bravely, he offered it to his Uncle Shameer for the first tasting. At first Uncle looked thunderously at him. With pleading eyes and holding the peach in front of them both, Badi whispered "in honour of Grandmother". A smile broke out across Uncle's face and he kindly replied, "you first". As Badi bit into the succulent peach, memories of his childhood flooded back. Images of Badi and his siblings climbing his grandmother's old peach tree overwhelmed him. He could almost feel himself stretching as he reached for the glorious peaches that hung there on the highest branches. The sweet smell, the intense taste and the soft texture of the peach reminded him of the happiest time of his life. And the most precious memory of all was of his grandmother, sitting under the shade of the peach tree humming their favourite songs. With sticky fingers, the young boy shared the remaining peach with his treasured Uncle. Juice flowed. Eyes closed. Tears welled up. As Uncle wiped the juice from his chin his other arm settled on Badi's shoulders. The family of two sat in comfortable silence, savouring their happy memories.