

Creative Writing: Prose

SECOND PLACE:

White Tulips

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Let's march without the noise of threatening drum. - Shakespeare

It was early in the morning when Aziza and her parents staggered out from the wreckage to gaze upon the street that she used to know so well. During the previous night, an air strike had taken place – certainly the worst, and definitely not the last. It was as if they wanted to obliterate her town, along with all of its inhabitants, completely; as she closed her eyes, she could hear the low whistle of the missiles, and the unmistakable reverberations of buildings as they tumbled to the ground left a distinct ringing in her ears. Aziza's newfound silence imbued this tragic scene with a sense of tranquillity, a profound stillness that only added to the overwhelming feeling of desolation and hopelessness that threatened to engulf her completely.

She gazed at the ruination of the town that she had formerly called her home, remembering a time many lifetimes ago when she would play in these very streets, imagining all of the possibilities that were spread out before her like an immense tapestry. That feeling of endless hope had come crashing down around her, dismantled by the relentless onslaught of bombs and missiles that had ravaged the landscape of her childhood.

In those brief moments of realisation, Aziza had aged beyond her fifteen years. She looked gaunt and haggard - her once youthful face bore a greyish tinge, which only told of her unmitigated sorrow. She contemplated the preternaturally azure sky, which accentuated the intense anguish that seemed to emanate from every person. The tentative sun cast its weak rays over the ruined town, illuminating the devastation that lay beneath it as bodies were uncovered and people began to mourn the dead. She perceived her parents, too, casting around desperately. They were, as individuals and together, completely, infinitely lost, and unable to conceal this fact from each other. The contrast between the beauty of nature and man-made devastation had never been so pronounced, Aziza thought, as she surveyed the azure expanse. On any other day it would have filled her with delight, but today was different. Today felt like the end of the world. The grey rubble seemed to rise up like a monolith, usurping the sky.

Out of the corner of her eye, Aziza noticed a small white object. As she took a closer look, she realised that a tulip had arisen from beneath the rubble. Its small, perfectly round petals seemed to attenuate the destruction that stretched as far as the eye could see. She approached it, wondering how something so delicate could withstand the interminable bombardment that had laid waste to the rest of her town. If something so frangible could endure the full aggression of the state, Aziza thought, then she could too. For a while, she stood there in bewilderment; bombs had torn down innumerable stone edifices, and yet this flower stood unperturbed. Nature, so it appeared, could simply not be contained. The tulip, nestled in amidst the remnants of the town, was an emblem of transgression – of the durability of nature. It instilled in Aziza a sense of defiance – she could no longer merely sit idle and allow countless other towns and villages to be cast into ruination as hers had. She glanced at the worn faces of her parents as they struggled to console those around her, and she felt sure that this was something that she had to do without them. An idea had begun to develop in the back of her mind - an urge to resist, to rise up against the oppressive regime that had subjugated her people for so many years. She took one last look at the flower, and hastened away. When she had assembled her a large group of her friends, she told them what she had seen. As she recounted her discovery she was aware that it must have seemed absurd to invest a mere *flower* with the capacity to engender hope, but she felt that it was nature's way of telling her that the injustices that they had as a community suffered, could not continue any longer. Aaliyah, one of

Aziza's closest friends, was the first to speak. She agreed that this latest affront necessitated action, but what could they do? They couldn't stage an insurrection against the government, nor should they descend to the level of their aggressors by launching similar attacks against the government. Aziza nodded contemplatively, whilst her cousin Habib refuted the implication that revenge was out of the question. This generated much commotion within the group, until Raisa, an unassuming and intelligent girl who used to be in Aziza's class at school, declared that there was indeed something that they could do. Raisa was the cleverest girl Aziza knew, and the two of them shared a love of history. During the Second World War, Raisa averred, a small group of students in Nazi Germany had carried out a campaign of peaceful resistance against the regime; they called themselves the White Rose Group. Distributing pamphlets and posters would be out of the question, she continued, but maybe if they could attract the attention of the outside world, they could try and liberate themselves.

The determination in Raisa's face was reflected in Aziza's, and it was clear to that small assembly of teenagers, who had already christened themselves the White Tulip Group, what they must do.

Three Months Later

In the days and months that followed, Aziza and her friends worked tirelessly in aid of the cause of liberation. That fateful morning had changed them irrevocably; they had adopted a steely-eyed resolve to end the inequities that had resulted in the relentless destruction of their war-torn country. Their lives had become furtive and covert; they met every night in the back of a ruined shop where they had managed to unearth an archaic computer. This computer was their only method of communication with the outside world, and they felt sure that it would become their vehicle of emancipation. They had managed to get into contact with a British ambassador, and through a series of encrypted emails in broken English they relayed the dire situation in their country and the plight of their families, entreating other countries to send some kind of help and relieve them of their suffering, contacting whoever they could, begging and pleading. For the first time in many years, Aziza felt alive to the possibility of a new life unfettered by repression – a change was coming, and they all collectively held their breath in anticipation.

The change came on a windy summer morning. The breeze seemed to carry rumours of an attack by a coalition of other countries united in the face of a common enemy. Sure enough, an immense convoy of tanks rolled into the village square, stationing themselves amidst the wreckage by the white tulip which remained there unabashedly, the emblem of defiance and tenacity. A man with a strange accent disembarked from one of the vehicles and announced the liberation of their town, exhorting them to gather their belongings ready to be relocated.

The White Tulip group stood in astonishment; they, and they alone, had allowed this to happen. This emancipation was the culmination of their toil; Aziza felt as though her heart was about to burst with pride as she embraced her parents fiercely and whispered promises of a new life. She looked back over her shoulder as they hastened back towards the ruin of their home at the small white flower, and wondered how she could ever express gratitude to a tulip.

10 Years Later

Aziza hadn't revisited her town since the revolution – for that was what they called it – that had catalysed the collapse of the regime. She could still close her eyes and recollect the exact colour of the sky and the way the sun's rays illuminated the unblemished petals of the tulip that had stood there in the street, staunch and resolute. Many years had gone by, but the passage of time only emphasised to her that she could never feel the same affinity for any other place in the world. There was only one thing for it; she had to go back. Not permanently, of course, for she had come to love her adopted home in Paris – it was where she and her family had begun to heal, to recover from

their traumatic experiences in the war, but nevertheless, it could never compete with the azure sky of her hometown.

She returned on a spring day and made the mystifying discovery that her town was exactly as she remembered it. She had been transported back to a time ten long years ago, where the cyanic sky resided over a scene of grey devastation. The rubble had been removed, or perhaps it had just disintegrated after years of sun, rain and wind. She traversed those hallowed streets, drinking in the atmosphere and noticing the lingering aura of decay that emanated from every stone, brick and edifice that remained. As she approached the square, she was greeted by a sea of white, a carpet of luminous white flowers swaying gently in the breeze. Immediately, her eyes filled with tears as she bent to pluck one of the radiant blooms. The tulip was unrivalled in its perfection; it seemed to bear some kind of message, invisible to the naked eye, that nature was inextinguishable. Aziza could scarcely contain her elation as she clutched the flower to her chest, smiling to herself.

She did not know what she had expected of her return; perhaps she had hoped that a new town would usurp hers, that new families would walk the streets she used to walk, chattering about anything and everything. Instead, she had been reminded of the irrepressibility of nature, the power of hope and her days in the White Tulip Group. She whispered an almost imperceptible 'thank you', and the breeze swept it away through the sea of tulips.