

Barates and My Father

by

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It was the brooch, in the shape of a horse and rider, that first drew him to that part of the museum. – Emir thought it was funny and beautiful at the same time. A little man with an overlarge head and tiny feet astride his steed. Emir hadn't intended to go to 'Arbeia', but he'd missed his bus and had time to kill. His sister had told him about the Roman fort and Museum she'd visited with her Year 3 class, so he'd walked the fifteen minutes there from the Bus Station. His friend, Addie, had also visited and Emir was curious.

The brooch brought sad memories. His mother, Amira, now dead, had once owned a few, treasured pieces of jewellery, in what she had called 'the blessed times' in Syria. Emir could vaguely recall a silver brooch of a prancing horse and two beaten silver rings, inter-twined and bound together in the shape of a vine, lying in a basket in his mother's bedroom. That, of course, was before the civil war, before all the bombs and sniper bullets and incendiaries had rained down on his home. Before death danced to its own beat on the streets. Now lost. All lost.

At fifteen, Emir, tall for his age and on the brink of manhood, would've expected to have been taken into his father's business. Fahad had been a respected baker in a small town, two miles north of Homs. 'Had been' being very much the key words. The long, drawn-out civil war, beginning with pro-democracy demonstrations in Deraa in 2011, was a conflict that had surrounded Emir and his sister, Khadijar, aged eight, most of their lives, for the whole of hers. It had changed everything. Future dreams had exploded in the hell that was his home country, a peaceful, seemingly, tameable uprising turned into a raging beast of a vicious, multi-sided, civil war.

Now, his father was dead, killed by a sniper's bullet, six months before Emir and his sister came to the U.K. under the 'Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme' (SVPRS). Fahad and Khadijar had been out fetching water from the only remaining source in their rubble-strewn neighbourhood. Only Khadijar returned. Emir could remember his father with his arm around him, sitting in the remains of their home two days before his death, urging his son:

'Be a 'leader' with integrity, Emir. Your name means just that, so don't always be a follower. Look after your mother when I'm not there.' 'When', not 'if'. He seemed to know.

Prophetic words.

Emir bent down slowly, better to see the little man on the horse in the museum display. Standing up and stretching his shoulders, he ran long, fine-boned fingers through the black tangle of curly hair, trying to push back defiant tendrils from a high, olive-skinned forehead. His was not yet a handsome face, in the conventional sense of the word, but it was an interesting face – expressive, even in his teens – dark eyes, long lashes, the fuzz of a beard, a straight nose and wide mouth.

When he rode on public transport, Emir did his best to avoid eye contact, preferring to look straight ahead, feigning indifference about any stares, those from girls especially. Being a refugee meant there was always the need to blend in. He'd already suffered a few taunts of 'terrorist' at school when teachers weren't around to hear.

In these last two years, he'd tried so hard to fit in, particularly on arrival, when he didn't feel he belonged to any place, when fear had sat on his shoulder for so long. He wanted to shout aloud about losing everything – Though most were supportive and thoughtful, some people in Tarrant Bay, South Shields, tended to act as if, for the Syrian refugees accepted in the town and its neighbourhood, 'one size fitted all'. They meant well. They couldn't know about the flashbacks he still suffered, or his waking many nights to hear Khadijar crying softly in the bedroom she shared with Steph. When her father had died, she was so badly shocked that she spoke little for some time afterwards. On arrival in the UK, if anyone asked her questions about Syria, she would fall silent and tears filled her eyes.

Emir and his sister lived with Mr and Mrs Graham, foster carers, and Steph, their 'surprise', last-born, aged seven. A 'canny bairn' her Mum called her. Older, working brother, Sam, lived in a flat above a corner chippie on the seafront. 'Convenient', the neighbours commented, and they were right.

'You'll soon get used to the way of things round here, pet,' encouraged neighbour, Mrs Foley, as Emir helped her wash some windows at the front of her terraced house, next door but one. 'Them's capable hands. I'm a good judge of hands.' She stepped back, breathing heavily, her face red and sweaty and adjusted the floral apron around her stout figure. 'Them top windows was right clouty. Howay, pet. Time for a brew.'

Emir had to adapt quickly to survive, to fit in. Nevertheless, he strove to show he'd got his own abilities and preferences. In a way, it was like being 'born again'. He'd made one friend early on. Adrian, 'Addie' to his mates at Emir's school, in Year 11. One Saturday, he'd noticed and recognised Emir and his sister watching him from behind the goal. Addie lived on the same terraced street. He, too, being dyslexic and with a startling shock of red hair that made him stand out, hadn't, in his early years, had an easy time fitting in at school.

'Seen you before', said Addie at the match, stuffing an orange piece into his mouth at half-time, 'you was helping Mrs Foley with them windows. I'm 'Addie' – live next door but one, up street from you. Oh, aye, you live with Mr and Mrs Graham and Steph, don't you?'

Khadijar had remained silent, resolutely looking down.

Emir's English was better than his sister's, so he'd been able to cement the friendship. He'd picked up bits and pieces of English from Abbas, father of two in the next-door tent, in the Lebanese refugee camp just over the Syrian border. Abbas had worked in a bank, before it was hit by an incendiary, killing most of the staff.

'Teaching you, Emir, helps me forget the things I've seen – the army tanks, the blood and death everywhere. I feel useful here, not just a number, a nobody – a 'refugee'. Now, come on, tell me how to say in English, 'my name is ...?'

Addie was bold enough to ask Emir the occasional question about Syria, where others, especially adults, were afraid to intrude. Emir coped with that from his school-friend, whereas, with others, he clammed up. The older lad tried not to crowd Emir at school or be too protective, preferring to quietly watch out for him.

Hetty Graham, a buxom, enthusiastic Tyne-sider – no 'wilting violet' – was married to Mick, a jobbing painter and decorator working in Sunderland. Her florid face, framed by greying hair scraped back into a bun at the nape of her neck, reflected her warm nature. Her end of terrace house was an 'open' one – welcoming. Hetty often invited Addie back for casserole meals after school, when his single parent Mum had a shift at the local pub.

Sometimes, the two school mates went down to the local chip-shop to give Hetty a break and dropped in on Sam to talk ‘serious stuff’ - football. But last night, it’d been ‘lamb cobbler’ on the ‘menu’ at home.

‘We’ve known it hard, Emir. Oh, aye, pet.’ She stretched out her hand to Addie across the table in the kitchen. ‘Ee, give us your plate.’ Mrs Graham plonked two large spoons of lamb stew and potato in front of him. ‘My grand-da worked in John Readhead and Sons, shipbuilders, until the gates shut for good in ’84. My Mick was made jobless in ‘93 when colliery closed and our firstborn, Sam, was only a toddler of three years. Oh aye, our family’s known hardship, too, Emir. You don’t get nowt for sittin’ on yer hands We would’na made it through if my Mick hadn’t turned to decoratin’. Sam’s joined him in business. He’s a canny lad and no mistake - got a contract for him and his da’ - local housing estate’s going up. ‘I was owa the moon when they got taken on by Geesons.’ Turning to Emir, ‘More hotpot, pet?’

In the museum, feeling suddenly tired and dispirited after seeing the horseman brooch, Emir wandered over to a chair in the corner of the next room, laid his rucksack on the wood floor and sat down. No-one else seemed to be around. He stared blankly across at some Roman pottery, letting his mind drift. He wasn’t certain if the Grahams really knew what a ‘hard’ life was. How could they know what it was really like to be so close to death for so long?

Naturally, Emir missed his parents; his father he missed greatly. Sometimes it hurt so bad even to think of him - like an animal in his gut, gnawing away. Then, in the Lebanese refugee camp, Emir’s mother, Amira, had died of pneumonia. Winters there were bitter, and they were living in tents. She was already frail, with a chest infection, when they arrived at the camp, before the Aid agencies and doctors got really involved. Once Amira knew her children were safe, it seemed like she gave up. The children nearly gave up too, but Emir remembered his father’s words – ‘be a leader, Emir’. Somehow, they’d got through it and survived.

Emir took a packet of chewing-gum from the side pocket of the rucksack that was a present from ‘Mrs G’, as he’d learnt to call her, when he first went off to his secondary school. He popped the packet in his pocket and sat there chewing, remembering the shock of being given gifts at Christmas and Eid - new school textbooks, a football jersey and even a phone.

‘A’way, pet. Ya canna gan t’school with no bag for ya books,’ she’d said, as he opened a huge Christmas-wrapped parcel and looked at the contents.

Mick and Hetty also gave Khadijar a new pair of jeans, a sparkly top and matching hijab.

‘Ee, Khadijar,’ cried Mick, after she’d opened her gift, ‘you’ll look a reet bobby dazzla in that outfit. Won’t she, hinny?’ Mrs G smiled proudly, agreeing.

Emir remembered that in the camp in Lebanon he’d been given teddy bears, when he’d wanted so *much* to have books and another blanket to keep out the cold.

A middle-aged woman clutching several clipboards entered the gallery. She smiled across at Emir and he remembered seeing her at school when she gave a talk to the Year 10’s about ‘The Roman Army and South Shields’. Much to his surprise, she came across to him.

‘I’m sorry, pet. We’re closing in another twenty minutes. George’ll be along with his keys soon.’ She was about to turn away but changed her mind. ‘Haven’t I met you at The Robert McAlister School?’

Emir looked up into a smiling face. Shoulder-length, fair hair, curled inwards on her neck. Pointed chin with a cleft in it. Snub nose and laughter lines at the corners of two ice - blue eyes. A slight, slender figure, reminding him of his Mum.

He took the chewing gum from his mouth and dropped it in a nearby bin.

‘Yes. You came and give history talk.’

‘So, I did, pet. You were the one asked about ‘Hadrian’s Wall’, weren’t you?’

He nodded, pleased she’d remembered.

‘Excuse me for asking, but are you bilingual?’

‘Yes – I’m Syrian. I speak,’ here, he thought for a moment, ‘three languages – four.’

She smiled.

He went on - ‘Arabic; a dialect like Arabic - my mother’s language; English and’, – his turn to smile – ‘and a bit of, how you say - Geordie’.

She laughed at this point, understanding his humour. I came from Birmingham, so I, also, had to learn fast.’

‘I too.’

‘You may not remember my name. I’m Pat Stephenson. I work here.’

Emir introduced himself.

Suddenly, as if making up her mind, she asked, ‘Have you seen this over here?’ She walked to a display nearby. He followed.

The upright stone slab, found at the Roman fort, Arbeia, showed a woman, bracelets on her wrists, seated on a tall-backed chair, opening a treasure-box on her right-hand side, with what looked to Emir to be a basket of wool on the other. There was some writing below. Why was Mrs Stephenson so keen to show it to him?

Pointing at the words cut into the sandstone, she explained:

‘This is a tombstone set up to the memory of a freed, British woman called ‘Regina’, ‘queen’, by her husband – ‘from the ‘Catuvellauni’’ – a tribe living in the south – married to a man from Palmyra called ‘Barates’; ‘thirty years old’ when she died’ -

Emir interrupted her. ‘If she was ‘freedwoman’, does that mean she was – what’s the word – um, a -?’

‘A ‘slave’ - got it, Emir. Most likely, she was originally his household slave. Can you see something under the Roman lettering at the bottom?’

‘Yes, I can. It looks a bit like my language – Arabic.’

‘It’s actually Aramaic, so no wonder you thought it was familiar. Clever of you, Emir. It says, ‘Regina, freedwoman of Barates’. Alas.’

‘What is ‘alas’?’

Mrs Stephenson explained. Emir thought for a moment.

‘Barates, he loved his wife, ‘Regina’, much to put such things, and – he pointed to the stone - make this for her.’

‘I’m sure he did. He was far from home, but he clearly loved his ‘queen’ - his wife.’

Suddenly, he felt swamped in a tide of sadness, ‘empathy’ his English teacher would’ve called it, if Emir had understood the English. Why did he feel sad looking at this old tombstone? He was thinking about his parents. Emir didn’t want Mrs Stephenson to see his reaction, so he quickly asked another question.

‘Was ‘Barates’ Roman soldier at the fort?’

‘We don’t think so; soldiers weren’t allowed to have wives and there’s no mention after his name of an army unit. See here.’ She pointed to the lettering. ‘He might have been a trader to the fort, selling goods to the Military.’

‘Where’s Palmyra?’ Is it in Italy?’

‘Oh my, no. It’s in Syria! It was an ancient city in the present region of Homs; part of what was once a huge empire stretching over several countries, including Syria.’

Emir looked down at the floor, suddenly quiet.

‘Have I said something upsetting, Emir?’ she asked, full of concern.

He turned back to the tombstone. More silent seconds, then - ‘we lived in village near Homs. It’s gone now.’ His voice wavered. ‘It’s all gone.’ Now he was blinking back tears.

‘Oh, Emir, you must think me *so* insensitive. I remember now – I remember the ‘Shields Comet’, a few years back, coming out with an article on the Syrian refugee resettlement scheme, the ‘SVPRS’ I think it’s shortened to. Were you part of that?’

He still didn’t turn round to her, but kept his eyes fixed resolutely on the tombstone. A few more seconds passed. ‘My father died in village,’ he spoke, falteringly, ‘my mother later in Lebanon. She died in camp.’ Now he turned back to her. ‘Yes – I’m part of that thing you said. I’m Syrian, but I don’t want to be called ‘refugee’ anymore.’

‘No, of course not.’ There was mutual silence for a while. Emir crossed the room to retrieve his rucksack, but he didn’t walk away out to the Entrance. He went back to Regina’s tombstone.

Pat was still by the display, looking at Barates and his ‘Queen’, seated, in homely fashion, on her wicker chair, looking out at them across the centuries. This time, Emir smiled. He, also, stared again at the long dead wife of the Syrian and spoke, without looking at Mrs Stephenson next to him:

‘That ‘Barates’, he was good man to do that for his wife, wasn’t he, Mrs Stephenson?’

‘Yes, Emir. He was.’

‘He made it, made the journey *here*, like my sister and me. All the way from Homs to the UK.’

‘Yes. All the way to Roman-ruled ‘Britannia’, to this fortress of Arbeia.’

Emir shouldered his rucksack. 'My father – his name's 'Fahad' – he'd like to see this. Make him feel good. You understand?

Mrs Stephenson nodded. 'I do indeed.' She smiled again - such a warm smile. 'I must go now and check the other gallery.'

When she'd gone, Emir took one last look. Somehow, he was sure Barates would've understood how he felt – this UK, it was his home now, yet he wasn't completely one with this new country. Maybe soon it would be different. Until then, he had Barates and 'Regina' as 'friends' he could visit.

He imagined Barates and Regina would've had children. He imagined Barates bustling about in this fort of Arbeia, watching over his cartloads of cloth and other goods. He saw him bargaining with the officers for a good price, just like his mother had in the market in Homs, before the war dropped terror into the streets and villages everywhere. He imagined Barates and Regina hugging each other in the evening. Barates would have got on well with his father, 'Barates and Fahad'. It sounded good. 'Barates and my father', he murmured to himself. He was sure he and Khadijah would settle well in South Shields. But they'd not forget their home country and would pray for peace there.

'Yes, Barates - friend,' he said quietly to the empty room. Taking one last look at the merchant's regal wife on her chair, he popped another piece of chewing gum in his mouth, turned on his heel and left the gallery.