

once we were
strangers

What Friendship with a Syrian Refugee
Taught Me about Loving My Neighbor

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To everyone far from home

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*No one leaves home
unless home is the mouth of a shark.*

Warsan Shire, "Home"

Part One

The Friend

One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: “Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus replied, “What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?”

The man answered, “‘You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.’ And, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“Right!” Jesus told him. “Do this and you will live!”

The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Luke 10:25–29

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Two Grains of Sand

November 2016

The stories of other people are always hidden from us at first, waiting in the shadows. They are tentative, skittish things, these hidden tales, frightened of what might become of them if they step out into the light. When I first met Mohammad, there were things I never could have guessed about him, things I never could have imagined.

The man rides his motorcycle through the Syrian countryside, his wife and four sons somehow balanced on the bike with him. He has received a tip that his village will soon be bombed. Their combined weight wobbles the motorcycle from side to side, and he shouts at them to hold still, hold still.

The man sits quietly on a friend's porch, drinking very dark coffee, watching bombs rain down on his village miles away. "That was your house," he says, then, ten minutes later, "I think that one hit my house." He takes another sip of coffee. His children play in the yard.

The man walks through the pitch-black Syrian wilderness, his family in a line behind him. He can feel the tension in his wife, the fear in his older boys. Someone ahead shouts, "Get down!" and they all collapse into the dust, holding their breath, trying to keep the baby quiet. There is the taste of dirt. There are rocks digging into his body. There is the sound of his boys, afraid, so far from home.

"Abba," they whimper. "Abba."

There are nearly 6,000 miles between Mohammad's hometown and Lancaster, Pennsylvania. There are dozens of other countries he could have been relocated to. Hundreds of other cities. Yet somehow he came here, less than a mile from my house, to the area where my ancestors have lived for the last 250 years.

Imagine two grains of sand drawing closer together. The waves crash, stirring them up; the current pushes, the undertow pulls. There is the swirl of fish swimming past, shells dragging along the bottom, scraping out trenches. Then, at some particular point in time, these two grains of sand lift, rise toward the light, come into contact.

What are the odds of these crossings?

Where in this world will we find each other?

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Help

November 14, 2016

I park my car along the sidewalk in front of our Lancaster row home, the streetlights glowing yellow, the intersection empty. The crossing signal changes. But no cars drive south through the green light on Prince Street—it's after midnight, and our small city sleeps.

The air is cold outside the car, and I pull my shoulders up and fumble with the keys, trying to unlock the front door and get inside as quickly as possible. I glance to the left and the right before going in, seeing a long row of porches in each direction, vacant and displaying a wide variety of city life. To the left, nice porches with nice furniture and nice rugs laid out under nice iron porch lights. To the right, a foreclosed home with a broken porch swing, and beyond that a row home turned into apartments covered in dust and leaves. A dark alley.

One of the doors opens a few houses down to the right, and a man walks out, shivering. He cups his hands and lights a cigarette, the orange glow pushing against the shadows. He glances over, appearing surprised to see me, and I give him a wave, a nod. He waves back with the hand that holds the cigarette, and it makes an arc of ember through the night. I nod again and smile, push open the door, and go inside.

Walking in, I consider, as I often do late at night, how hard it is to believe there are six children and a wife asleep in this house. The living room is still, a blanket draped over the sofa, pillows on the floor. The hallway is quiet until I walk through it, the hundred-year-old floorboards creaking and moaning under my feet. I briefly consider continuing into the kitchen, but I am so tired; instead, I head straight up the stairs.

I peek into our oldest son's room—his teenage body stretches diagonally across the small bed, his head under the covers. It's cold in that back bedroom with its old windows and the door that leads outside onto the small porch. I walk through the dark and feel the radiators, make sure they're on. Steaming hot to the touch.

The hall light is on and it shines into our bedroom. I undress and pull back the covers and find our second youngest, Leo, curled up in a ball on my side of the bed. Sam, our middle son, is asleep on the floor. Children are everywhere, and I smile. This is a normal night in our house.

I pick up Leo and carry him to his bed in the neighboring room. He is limp the entire time, deep in sleep. Deciding to check on everyone else while I'm awake, I make the rounds, including the third floor, looking in on our daughters. Everyone is asleep.

I, on the other hand, am now wide awake. Hoping that sleep will sneak up on me, I go back to the bedroom, step carefully over Sam, and crawl into bed beside my wife, Maile. I try not to wake her, pulling up the covers in slow motion, holding my breath, trying to move slowly so as not to shake the bed, but she is always aware of my arriving.

“Hey,” she says in a quiet voice without opening her eyes, reaching over to hold my hand. We lie there quietly, the stillness of the house all around us.

“How was your night?” she asks in a weak voice.

“Not bad for a Monday,” I say. “Pretty busy. I guess when it’s this cold, no one wants to walk anywhere.”

“I worry about you,” she says, her eyes now open. “I worry when you’re out driving this late.”

“Don’t worry,” I say, turning toward her, pushing the hair out of her eyes. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

A car goes by outside, the headlights pushing a window-shaped block of light across the wall. Somewhere in the distance, a siren wails. The hospital is only two blocks away. We hear a lot of sirens on that street.

Just when I think Maile has fallen back asleep, her voice eases into the stillness. “Are you still going to Church World Service tomorrow?”

“Yeah, in the afternoon. Does that work okay with your schedule?”

“I think so. Are you still meeting with the Syrian man, the one you might want to write a book with?”

“Yeah. Mohammad.”

“That should be interesting.”

“I hope so,” I say, smiling.

She smiles at me and rolls over, facing away. I turn away too, facing the window. Our backs are against each other. Our cold feet touch.

“It’s important work, you know,” she says, and I can tell by the sound of her voice that sleep is coming for her. It’s just outside the bedroom door, peeking inside. It’s coming across the room, the floorboards creaking.

“I just want to help,” I say. “I don’t know what else to do.”

I just want to help. I think briefly about those words, that sentiment. Would writing a book, would getting this man’s story bound and published and sold, help? How? Who?

“I guess we’ll see,” I say, as if in answer to my own concerns, but Maile does not reply. She’s asleep. I can hear Sam’s heavy breathing coming up to me from the floor beside the bed. Another car drives by, and someone’s car alarm goes off for five or ten seconds, and a cold wind shakes the house.