

testimony

Zohra Saed

On March 3, 2003, I attended the funeral of my friend Farhad Ahad, who was the Deputy Minister of Mines and Natural Resources in Afghanistan. Farhad had been educated in the U.S. and had found his American dream in Massachusetts. He was an activist, and before the catastrophe of 9/11 had founded an organization called Afghan Solidarity, one of the most politicized Afghan American organizations. In the 1990s, Afghan American youths had created several organizations and print media outlets to express themselves, but they tried to remain neutral on politics because of the history of the Afghan political experience. (Even though they claimed to be nonpolitical, there were politics.) The popular approach was to leech away any politics, emphasize instead cultural pride, and reinvigorate historical facts about Afghanistan. Farhad's group was the opposite, and his strength lay in the overt political letters and protests he staged to bring attention back to Afghanistan. After the push of the Feminist Majority to bring attention to the burqa and the situation of Afghan women, American popular interest in Afghanistan had waned. Afghan Solidarity used its website as a way to connect Afghan Americans, and although it was spiked with nationalist rhetoric and a sharp critique of neighboring country Pakistan, Farhad had created an organization that encouraged Afghan Americans to be involved in petition writing, protests, and outreach to media. He had begun to pry open the insularity with which Afghan Americans comforted themselves; he had created an organizational vehicle that could respond to what happened on 9/11 and articulate the Afghan American perspective. His commitment to Afghanistan and his idealism took him as far as being part of the Afghan government.

Farhad became a good friend during these years. He strongly supported intellectual Afghans and was friend of many. The devastating news of his death, an accident off the coast of Karachi, Pakistan, that the Afghan government did not investigate thoroughly because it was a technically difficult project, set behind important projects to nationalize Afghan natural resources like copper and complete discussions of the oil pipeline that would begin in Turkmenistan, run through Afghanistan, and end in Pakistan. This witnessing of his fatiha, the Islamic burial, was my way of saying good-bye to the idealism that many Afghan Americans had in light of the possibilities of Afghanistan.

Now, ten years later, we hear many stories of the corruption of Afghans and Afghan Americans in Afghan government, but I want to share the story of someone who returned and gave everything to watan (homeland).

March 3, 2003

How can I begin to put yesterday into words? Does language have the ability to encase such emotions that I felt and witnessed? I felt unworthy of being witness to so much heartache. In life, did I care for him as deeply as the people among whom I was sitting? But I know that by being there I did love him enough. Admire him in the way leaders are, in the way innovators are, in the way friends are admired and respected. It began like this, and I will tell every part of it, every angle and every stray hair, or else my heart will burst from being so silent from sadness. I woke up even before the alarm went off at 6:30 a.m. I realized that I had thrown out my only black chadar years ago. So I wore something that meant a great deal to me. I wore my white chadar—it was stitched with a delicate white embroidery, and I wore it to honor my friend's memory. I went out into the bitter cold to take the train. I had planned to hail a cab when I got to Flushing and have it take me to the Abu Bakr Siddiq masjid for the fatiha.

I said to my heart, "If Farhad jan wants me to be at his burial, then I will find a way to be there."

I had no idea how I would get there but to my heart, I said if the paths lead me there, then I would be there for him. Every step I took, I said that if

Farhad jan wants me to do this, then I will find my way there. In this way, I found myself at the masjid in Queens. The minaret and the dome were so welcoming in the midst of so many flat-roofed buildings. I was so cold. There was a young man at the entrance of the masjid. He had a grave expression. He said, “Salaam” and kept his eyes lowered.

I said, “Salaam” and exhaled deeply as I looked at the masjid entrance. It had been so many years since I entered a masjid and I couldn’t believe that I was going to be at my friend’s fatiha—my friend who had seemed invincible. I was motioned to go up to the women’s section. I heard someone crying deeply and saying, “I’m Farhad’s sister!”

I couldn’t believe it. I wanted to cry or run away for not being worthy of witnessing such deep sorrow. I wasn’t sure how I felt. I was too busy trying to pull myself together, so I could be presentable at prayer and hear sections of the Holy Quran being read. I followed his sisters down—this is where I realized that Nilufar jan was there and her elder sisters were walking her down. She was unsteady. I had no shoes on. I had left them upstairs and then followed everyone downstairs. I went down and an older lady with hennaed hair and a lavender chadar said in a motherly tone, “This is where we are. Go upstairs and get your shoes and coat.” I went up and did as I was told.

Downstairs, I saw his sister, whom I later learned was Nilufar jan, crying again. This time she was surrounded by other women, perhaps white women because they were all blonde, who were crying as well. I snuck past them and went downstairs; I had no idea what to do and I wished I had some etiquette training in mourning. When I went down again, the older lady, who introduced herself as his aunt, I believe, asked if I had seen Farhad jan’s janaaza. I shook my head no. I didn’t quite understand what janaaza meant because I had never been to a funeral before. She called over another lady, with a white chadar and strong bone structure, which gave her a handsome face, and told her to take me, Farhad’s colleague, upstairs so I could see the janaaza. I was so scared. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to see him.

“Dear friend,” I thought several times that day, “is this how I was meant to see you back in New York?” She took me upstairs to where everyone had surrounded Nilufar jan. By the doorway, he was in a coffin. The lady asked

the man in a colorful pakol to show me his face. I think people were supposed to step down, but my legs weren't moving. I was too afraid that my knees were weak and I'd fall. But I wanted to see his face one last time. She must have motioned for the man to show me Farhad jan's face from where I was standing over him far away. His eyes were shut and he looked tremendously pale. But I could see his bold eyebrows, his strong jaw line, and he looked handsome (there was gauze that ran a neat line from under his chin to the top of his head). He just looked like he was asleep with a bad toothache. I cried dry sobs into the lady's shoulder. I couldn't believe it. I was so stunned that tears wouldn't come down my face. She walked me downstairs and showed me a seat. She was very comforting. I sat there while the women next to me were talking about what probably happened in Afghanistan. I didn't want to communicate with anyone. How could I even be articulate after seeing him? I could hear some things that his friends from business school were saying. I realized that these were the friends he was talking about when he sent me the pictures of all of them at their gatherings in the Bahamas. He had welcomed me into so many little corners of his life. I was a little spider, investigating the corners and then retreating into my own little humble home. Time had moved so quickly that I had never had time to know him. But I value what I did learn about him. Knowing him was like a big jigsaw puzzle and only upon his death was I able to put all of the fine pieces together. I had interviewed him a few times for a project on Afghan American activists. I never recorded these sessions, thinking he would visit Manhattan and I'd record him then. Once he had driven with his father all the way to the Upper East Side from North Carolina to attend an Afghan American Film & Video Festival I had put together in 2002. He had said, "Zohra jan, I hope one day you can write my family's story!" Now, these conversations came back to me. I felt his presence there and it was as light and buoyant as he was in life. His face had a glow. I cried slowly and to myself.

I saw his fiancée's suffering face from across the room. What deep sadness. (I had seen that kind of sadness before in the eyes of Vida, Baktash, Khaled, and Jawed Wassel's mom when we spoke of Jawed. He was another casualty in this post-9/11 world; the murderer used patriotism to lessen his

sentence.) It was so raw, her pain. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her pale face was gaunt, and her hair kept away from her face. A veil was over her head until she banged her head against the wall and it slipped down to her neck.

They read some thoughts about Farhad jan over the microphone. In the women's section, we could hear but couldn't see anything. It was little drafty downstairs—the mosque was still being constructed—so I kept my coat on. They said beautiful things about him. I cried thinking of each word. From the faces in the room, you could see who was close and who was distant from him. There weren't many women in the room. Then they called for the prayers and I went to do my ablutions in preparation for my prayers. Again it was difficult because the lights didn't work, and there was no soap, no towels, and no paper towels—at least I couldn't find them. A short woman with reddish tints in her hair wearing something floral—was it her chadar? I can't remember—came over to me and said, “Musulman asteen, oh bubakhsheen.” She apologized for thinking that I wasn't Muslim and that I was American.

She stayed by my side and ran to help me find a prayer rug and a longer chadar. Then she said that women didn't pray for the dead like the men, so we didn't have to pray. Everyone began getting ready to go to the funeral. She asked me if I was going to the burial, and I said that I didn't have a car. If someone could drive me, I would go, but I didn't know whom to ask. She went to Fatima jan and asked her to take me. Fatima jan motioned to show me who Maria jan, his fiancée, was, and I went over to her as well. I felt so wounded for this woman. She was beautiful with a porcelain face and tall with long beautiful hair. She was so brave, and when I cried, she said, “Farhad would have wanted us to be strong.” She said it so resolutely that I cried even more for her strength. Her voice was unearthly from suffering.

I came back and talked to Nilufar jan; I told her my dream and Fatima listened. She was the only one who looked like the pain was going to break all of her bones. In the car with Fatima jan and her family, I was holding onto Fatima jan's hand, especially after Fauzia, the cousin who introduced me to her, left and said, “Take care of Fatima jan, she is the most delicate.” It hurt my heart to hear. She was so frail and her hands were delicate. I realized they were Farhad's hands, and in the car I looked at her face and there was his shy

expression. She carried him within her. Then she told me that they were 11 months apart—she was his elder but they were in the same grade together. She was his almost-twin. We followed Farhad jan’s janaaza in a red van driven by her husband.

So Fatima jan tried to get to know me, and we talked, but I can’t remember what we said until we hit the highway. It hit me then what an honor it was that I should be following his janaaza and have the opportunity to pray for him all the way to the burial site. We were silent. Elyas jan was listening to the Quran on his walkman. Fatima jan said a few things—stray thoughts about her brother. She had a faraway look and told me, or told herself, some of the things he had said—like how the coldness of this place had made him tired. With that same faraway look, she told me how handsome he had looked when he returned from Afghanistan in a suit and tie. She asked where he got his coat, and he said that he had his own tailor make it in Kabul. (Piles of suits are at the tailor’s still waiting for his arrival.) She said that nazar shud—no one burned espad (incense) for him in Kabul, nazar shud, and that’s why he died. It was a moment of glass in which language falls powerless in our mouths and in our thoughts. She went on and on in this way, sharing things about her brother. The ride was long and I kept saying prayers during the silences. I could see Farhad jan’s expression, his smile on her face. At some point in the ride, she said with a shy smile, “I have gotten used to you.” I was so touched by this comment. I was holding her hand the whole ride. We finally got to the burial site and there were no headstones. So I asked her why, and she said, “Yes, this was a Muslim burial ground as well as a burial ground for veterans from the Vietnam War.” Afghanistan, Vietnam—how close those places seem in this place.

Funerals in movies seemed more picturesque. In real life the funeral was fraught with errors and clumsy things like a tractor. My entire body was sobbing. I remembered that the body knows that people are crying over it and will see the people there. I did my best to be a loyal friend by being at his burial. I called him friend when he was a superstar, and I still called him friend on the day he was buried with so much rock and red earth thrown over his coffin. It hurts my chest to remember such sorrow.

The imam had a neat beard, a pakol, and an Afghan outfit. He was cold and said few words. Farhad jan's uncle said a few words, and it was over. We put flowers on his grave. I felt like we could have said more, but the imam said it was too cold and that it would be best if we spoke at the parlor reserved for the after gathering. I wanted to stay longer and hear more about him. I didn't feel the cold at all. I don't think anyone felt it. Fatima jan asked for her book of prayers, and I asked her to read it out loud so I could read it with her. We read together and went back to the car.

Farhad, who had piles of suits waiting for him Kabul, was buried in New York.