

Remembering
By Fatima Bhutto

A hundred beats

This past Tuesday was my Uncle Shahnawaz's birthday. He would have turned 48. Uncle Shah was only 27 years old when he was killed in the South of France in 1985.

I was very little when we lost Uncle Shah, only three, but I remember him. Sometimes, I have to close my eyes and squeeze them shut, as if to remind myself that there are memories that only my eyes remember in order to trigger flashes of Uncle Shah. Other times, a simple look at a photograph of him will do it.

I remember how he used to put me and his daughter, my cousin, Sassi who was born three months after me, in wicker baskets that he would lift up into the air and twirl around until we screamed for him to stop. I remember how he used to smoke cigars. I remember how loud he used to laugh. I remember how he used to play with Sassi and me whenever we demanded that he must. I remember how after most of these sessions with Uncle Shah I would announce to Sassi that he was my father, not hers. Sassi would cry and cling to her father's leg and I would insist that she release him as he was clearly not her father, but mine. My actual father found these theatrics of mine only slightly amusing. Eventually Sassi would cleverly amble over to my papa and I would have to let go of Uncle Shah to go and protect what was rightfully mine.

As I grew older and further away from the year that we lost Uncle Shah I clung to these memories even harder, reminding myself of them as often as I could bear to, so that we would never forget. So that I could say I knew and remembered Shahnawaz.

The night before Shahnawaz was killed in France in the summer of 1985, our whole family had gathered on the beach for a barbeque. Uncle Shah was working the grill, laughing every time he accidentally squirted lemon juice into his eyes (which was pretty often). He was wearing a beige shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the middle of his forearms. His face glowed in the late July sun and he had a light sunburn spread across his nose and cheeks. Uncle Shah's mood was infectious. He was celebrating a reunion with his mother and with the family he had not seen in months. The wall behind Shah that night, as he roasted and singed the meat on the grill, was covered in graffiti. I can see it when I close my eyes, I can see the letters so clearly, but when I open my eyes to type them they're gone. It's a trace of a memory, only for me. My memory is full of images and snapshots of Shahnawaz that night, but it's my father that I remember most clearly the next morning, when we found Uncle Shah's body.

Shahnawaz's death extinguished the incandescence that filtered through his family at a time when they had little else to be happy about. Papa was distraught. I had never seen him so overwhelmed by sadness before that morning. I remember trying to hold his hand but not being able to hold on long enough because he was in a frantic state of movement, every few minutes my hand would slip out of his as he gestured to someone or rose to get something. It was as if Papa was acting in the hope that he could beat the clock – that he could reverse what had happened to Shah. He was not ready to face the murder of his younger brother. Papa wavered between anger and disbelief that day, and between sadness and fury for many months after. Most of memories of Uncle Shah are inextricably linked to my father. Murtaza and Shahnawaz were closer to each other than to any of their other siblings. Shah possessed a lightness of spirit that came with his age and it seemed as if Murtaza was constantly in awe of his younger

brother's effervescent personality. Shah's joy was contagious. The brothers were direct complements of each other – where Shah was impetuous, Murtaza was patient; when Shah was melancholy, Murtaza was hopeful – they were more than just brothers. They were comrades, companions.

Life in exile was bearable when Murtaza had Shah to commiserate with. His company made the long nights in strange lands pass easily. Together they spoke and thought of home and shared their dream of returning one day, one day...

Without Shah, Murtaza was more alone than ever before. One night in Damascus, several months after Shah's death, I came across my ordinarily jovial and excitable father alone in his office. We used to spend the evenings together, staying up past my bed time, nibbling on nimco sent from home and telling stories and jokes late into the night. But there Papa was in the office that night and I had not been invited in. I was not used to being excluded and even less familiar with the gloom that was written so clearly across Papa's furrowed brows and knotted hands. I tiptoed into the room and put my head up on his lap, looking at him I asked " Papa, what's wrong?" He tried hard to smile at me find a way to begin.

Having grown up as a child born in exile, I was well acquainted with the nostalgia that overtook my father on occasion. There were nights when we watched old Indian films so that he could hear the cadence of his language spoken before him, as if he was part of a conversation in his mother tongue once again. There were days when we drove around old Damascus city and its bazaars listening to Sindhi folk songs like 'Oh Jamalo' on the cassette player and afternoons where we ate my father's special brand of achar gosht (more achar than gosht) with shikarpuri achars on our side plates.

But this evening was different. There was no melancholic music in the background and no fragrant remembrances of a time past were present on his table.

It was Shah that was weighing heavily on his heart.

I brought him some of my toys, so that they would cheer him up. I could not stand seeing my father that way, worse, I could not stand not being able to help in some way. I even brought him my toy computer that sang nursery rhymes when ever the space key was pushed and had holographic fish dancing on its screen.

His smile was maudlin and his eyes were exhausted. He told me he was missing his brother, and tried not to cry in front of his daughter, "Tonight would have been Shah's 28 th birthday..."