

THE DEATH OF A YOUNG SON

A Young Mother's story of loss and courage By Yasmin Nasser as told to Shyroose Jaffer-Dhalla

"Mummy, York University in Toronto accepted me!!" Areef was beside himself with excitement as he swept me up in his arms. We were both laughing with happiness and joy as we savoured the fruit of months of hard work. Watching him read the many papers in the acceptance package, I smiled at the endearing way he impatiently pushed a wayward hair out of his eyes. How my son had grown up! It seemed like only yesterday that I was watching him take his first steps, eating solid food for the first time, saying "mummy" and putting his first sentence together. Now at 18, he towered over me and his youthful, charming looks took my breath away. His friendly personality drew people to him like a magnet and his sense of humour often had the whole family laughing together.

As he chattered on about campus housing in Toronto, tuition fees and course selections, my thoughts were far, far away. Having him move so far away from home in Dar-es-Salaam would be so difficult. How would I be able to get through a day without his bubbly presence in my life? The past year had been so busy for him and I was already missing our mother and son chats because of his long hours at the library. He had successfully completed the last challenging year of his International Baccalaureate at the International School in Dar-Es-Salaam and I was so looking forward to spending more time with him now that summer was here.

"Mummy thanks for all your support this year," Areef's voice interrupted my thoughts and I looked up to find him standing beside me. His ability to express his affection like this always filled my heart with so much love and gratitude. The past year, although a very busy one for him, had inexplicably brought us even closer together. He freely spoke to me about his dreams, his wishes and his fears and together we would discuss his future aspirations. Areef going away to university was a dream that the whole fam-

ily had shared and I was ready to do my part in making that dream come true. "We have a lot of work to do," I told Areef. "Let's start making the travel arrangements to Canada". He smiled his lovely smile and I knew that someday my son would make me very proud of him.

The next few weeks went by in a whirlwind of events and activities. Areef's many friends regularly dropped by to say goodbye, family members came to visit and we became busy packing for his upcoming trip. Soon, only 2 weeks remained for his departure and there was bittersweet happiness in all our hearts. I could see his that 14 yr old brother, Ali, was having the hardest time. He was extremely fond of his one and only sibling and would miss him the most. Everyone was trying to keep a brave front; at least Areef would visit during school breaks and summer holidays. We would make up for lost times during those vacations, we vowed. It was only a matter of few years and they would go by fast. The plan was that I would be accompanying Areef to Toronto to get him settled so the house was busy with preparations of the impending trip.

When Areef began to complain of nausea and stomach aches, we took it in stride. The doctor confirmed our suspicions: he had malaria. In East Africa, this common, mosquito-borne illness has been experienced by mostly everyone, sometimes even 2 to 3 times a year. We weren't overly alarmed when Areef was admitted to hospital since we knew Malaria can often dehydrate a person and can require close monitoring of the patient. Nevertheless, I was at Areef's side day and night for 3 days.

It was late at night when my brother-in-law offered to stay with Areef so that I could change, shower and get something to eat. I reluctantly left for home and was at home only a few hours when I received a call to come back to the hospital. Again, nothing seemed out of the ordinary in Areef's case to cause us any alarm but when we reached Areef's hospital room we were suddenly met with a

crisis atmosphere. The doctors were working hard to revive him and I was shocked to see that Areef's condition had deteriorated. Within minutes, I was holding my teenage son close to me as his life slowly left him. My husband and I looked at each other in bewilderment and shock, unable to comprehend the words that were being said to us. Our 18 year old, beautiful, vibrant son, had passed away. Our tiny family had been shattered forever.

Grieving for Areef has been the most challenging *intehan* of my life. My grief had no bounds but yet, as a mother, wife, daughter and daughter-in-law, I had to support the grief of everyone around me, as well. It can be difficult to search for the strength to give to others when your own tears and mourning leave you feeling totally spent and empty inside. The process of healing was a long and difficult one with the usual unanswered questions, feelings of immense sorrow and inability to go on with day to day affairs. The support of community, friends, relatives and loved ones was like a constant cushion against the pain that threatened to consume our family, yet, we began to realize that true healing would have to come from within ourselves.

I have learned that the subject of bereavement or death may not be the most comfortable one to talk about, more so for those who have been closely affected by it. In fact, people often shun it and would rather talk about something else, and yet it is a reality of life which presents itself all the time as a constant reminder of our mortality. So when it does come, how do we deal with it? When an elderly or ailing member of a family, say a grandparent, for instance, passes away, there is a good chance that their children and younger members have mentally and emotionally conditioned themselves to this normal progression in life. The parents would have probably talked and explained to the younger ones that there will come a time when they would have to say goodbye to grandma or granddad. It's a kind of preparation for that time when it does come. Of course the sense of loss and pain is still there and nothing can change that. However, the situation is totally different when a young person, a child passes away. The pain manifests itself many times

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over. The family is suddenly caught in this hurricane of deep pain, profound sense of loss and bewilderment that leaves the world around them shattered and changed forever. Things just don't make sense anymore.

The family unit can suffer when such a tragedy occurs within it and everyone grieves in their own way. For all us, this was a lesson that made sense very slowly because we were so deep in our own pain that we looked at each other through an almost blurry haze of grief. *The hearts and minds are not able to comprehend, emotions are tossed around in turmoil.* Healing can go through a cycle which spins back and forth instead of like climbing a mountain with an upward trend. Sometimes you can wake up and feel like living again, and, yet, after a few days everything seems futile again. On top of that, you are living with others who are experiencing their own fluctuations and cycles. I have learned that what is required is strong patience and understanding. This is the only way that one of you can wait for the other to catch up to the others on the road of recovery. If the family unit is not strong to begin with, it can be destroyed since everyone perceives the other as being selfish or uncaring of the deceased or personally isolated and unloved.

I feel that there comes a point when the parents face two options: to either give up the world and resign to grief for the rest of their lives, or to go on, but look at life from a changed and totally different perspective and try to gather the strewn pieces of life once again.

Ultimately, I found true healing in the one thing that gave me the solace and answers that I was seeking: the Holy Quran. Deep pondering, analyses and discussions of the Quran gave me the answers to the questions and thoughts that had been plaguing me --and I cannot begin to describe the immense feeling of relief I began experiencing. It was like a big load had been lifted off me. I felt at peace with God, with myself, with what had happened around me. I believe that not only did the meanings of the verses help me, but simple recitation of the Quran, itself, be-

gan to fill me up with a feeling of well-being and love. Together, with groups of friends, I embarked on *tadabbur* group discussions and the Quran offered philosophies on living, death, loss, the after-life. Allah (s.w.t)'s compassion, mercy, and will. I would say, with full conviction, that the Holy Quran truly saved me.

There are ethical and moral aspects that death attaches itself to and a deep understanding of what religion teaches us on the philosophy and purpose of life, death and the hereafter can become instrumental in helping the family to comprehend, reflect and accept. Perhaps most beautiful of all, is that when the mind cannot comprehend due to its limitations, we can find solace and comfort in just submitting to Allah's will, knowing that in His hands there can be nothing but good even if that 'good' appears in a way that is hard to accept.

People often ask me what wisdom I have gained about bringing up children. Would I do anything differently if I had the chance to bring up my child once again? The answer to this is both simple and yet so complicated. *The death of a child will always remain one of the most painful experiences in any person's life for the simple reason that we love and care for our children so much. A mother-child relationship is probably one of the most unconditional kind that there ever will be. A mother's love defies all norms and reasoning. We love our children no matter what and we value them so much that many times we ask ourselves "Am I doing enough for my child?" The truth is you can never do enough. No matter what their age, there is always something to impart. We need to be knowledgeable ourselves and to ensure that they have a good foundation in human relationship. This way we can help to mould them into happy, caring, successful members of the family, community and society at large with a good sense of values, the quality to distinguish between right and wrong and act accordingly. A good education, healthy sports life, love and support at home cannot be over-emphasized. Many times our children face*

their share of growing pains, especially as they approach adolescence. Give them their space. They usually need extra doses of patience, understanding and firm advice at these times. The important thing is to be there for them, whenever they need you. No matter what a rough day they may have had out there, the feeling of knowing that everything will be all right when they come home is what is so important. It is important that we as mothers endeavour to do our best for our children so that when they grow up into the wonderful people we want them to be, we can sit back and enjoy the fruits of our toil and labour. If, for whatever reason, destiny parts them from us, we may at least have the comfort and consolation of having given them the best that we could.

Over the past five years since Areef's death, I have slowly come to terms with the many unfulfilled dreams and expectations that I, like any mother, had built in my heart. This difficult process, which I continue to undergo, has had its own small miracles. As friends and family have come to offer their condolences, they have recounted detailed anecdotes about the different ways that Areef had helped or touched their lives. Some spoke of Areef's acts of kindness, others remembered working alongside him towards some social cause (volunteering at leper colonies) and many described conversations where he had said wise and caring words. Hearing these stories from adults and his own peers has illuminated a wonderful, hidden side of my son's life that I had never known about and the joy this gives me has filled my heart with pride and love. Areef, being the modest person that he was, had not revealed the extent of his affectionate and caring nature to me until after his death. I feel as if Allah (s.w.t) has blessed me with a gift to savour. Even in death, Areef has managed to fulfil the dreams and expectations that every mother has. I knew that someday my son would make me really proud of him.

*Editor's Note:
Please recite a Sura-e-Fateha for
Areef Nasser, and all marhumeen.*