

Everyone doesn't belong to a place

By **Astrid Zapart**, Norwegian student, Writing Champion 2024

- Sali's Diary, page 67

There's been talk of something happening. Something which will either save us all or doom us. Ali had said as much. My brother keeps secrets, even from me, but today, he told me that the man of a family living across the village had planned it, had created it, that we must stay loyal to him, and that if anything ever happened to them, the Americans would blow us all to shreds. After he claimed we were in danger of being squatted like flies, I left, not wanting to hear any more. Little did I know those were my last moments with him, the last time he would speak to me. The Americans shot him yesterday, after he left for Pakistan to take care of some business. He would have been home hours ago.

- Sali's Diary, page 146

I've always wondered what made this small village so gloomy. Maybe it was the everlasting sand, forming dunes far off in the horizon, or sand pits where the other children could play, well, if they weren't scorched to death first. This heat is agonizing. There is no escape from it. I've tried everything. The only way to get remotely cool is to hide in the shades and pray for wind, some cool delicious wind that could caress my face. Nowadays that wind, that calling of calm, seems to be the only thing I can call company. The other children are always playing in the sun, the heat of the game more important, more fun, than the heat on their face. I wish I could once feel that way, feel so happy and not having a worry in the world. I am never invited

to play, never allowed to join the other children playing four-square even if I ask. Maybe it's because I am an orphan, or maybe it's because my brother had taught me things the others can't do before he got killed by those men in uniform. He taught me to read and write. Skills that are highly valued. So, I pray, pray to God, that somehow, one day, I can impress the others, make my brother proud. If I could just show them that I am just as much part of this village as they are, that I love it too and that I will do anything to protect it, my life would be complete. It amazes me, that this heat, the heat that suffocates me, is the same heat the joyful children playing in the sand are absorbing. One day, I hope I learn how to absorb the sun and not hide from it.

- Pakistan -

The propellers of the helicopter were slowing as they got closer and closer to land. The sand was blowing in every direction as they lowered and lowered, finally landing on a patch of bright yellow sand. "Find the family and meet back here at 0600 hours," Sarge said. It was bright here, so bright compared to the slums of Brooklyn. "Yes, sir!" Jake and his fellow marines replied, the words so common, so often said some would think they were in a choir. They grabbed their guns and their backpacks and started heading off into the endless abyss of sand dunes towards the village right over the border in Afghanistan.

- Sali's Diary, page 151

Today was a day like all the others. I've done and tried doing everything that is helpful. I've washed clothes, hung clothes on the wires stretching just about everywhere in the village, from house to house, from tree to tree. One string was even connected to an old truck that no longer seemed to be used. I've helped clean dishes, make food, wash the floor, but still, there was nothing in return, not even the smallest amount of recognition. The ladies whom I had helped had simply handed me the dishes, clothes and cleaning supplies and left when I had asked them if there was anything more for me to help with. Maybe I should just run away? Find someplace to live my own life and make my own standards.



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- Afghanistan -

It was no easy hike. They walked up and down about 11 dunes now, and just about all the marines were pissy. There were only about 5 more dunes to climb according to Jake's calculations, and then they were over the border, in Afghanistan, ready to retrieve a family. The family was to be taken alive, to be interrogated, Sarge said. They had gotten orders two days ago, that they were to go to Afghanistan to infiltrate the village closest to the boarder, and capture a family: a mother, a daughter, and a father. Apparently, the father is involved in a larger organization, which is working on creating a biochemical weapon which stands as a threat not just for America, but

for all of humanity. It never did sit well with Jake, the idea of interrogating a family, a mother, or children. It seemed despicable. But they all knew something. And the marines need to know what.

Their feet ached and their toes weren't the only thing sweating as they finally got to the top of the last dune, finally standing in front of that village. It took them about 20 minutes to get down from the last dune and to the village, 5 minutes to infiltrate it, and 10 minutes to break into the family's home and find them. It wasn't hard getting all three of them in cuffs. The hard part of the operation was walking away with them. There was no

use trying to be as stealthy as they were when they came in. The family made too much noise, attracted too much attention. They had been stupid. There was no way to make it to the extraction point so far away. Jake picked up his radio and called it in: they needed a new extraction point, right outside the village, ASAP. When they got the confirmation that the rescue point had been changed, they went out of the house, using the front door.

- Sali's diary entry page 160

Today I decided to try something different, I gathered what food I could get from the kitchens without being caught and gave it to the children who were playing football. I thought that maybe if I gave them food, they would give me a chance to play. But I expected too much, like I always do. I have always thought that I belong here in this village, but I don't belong anywhere, to any place, I belong in only one way, with my brother. Wait, why are people screaming? They're taking him! Taking them! The family my brother told me about.

- Afghanistan -

Walking in broad daylight, the mother of the family in front of him, Jake knew they had eyes on them. Everyone heard the cries of the family, and the entire village had stepped outside to look. It wasn't until he beheld the little boy behind him, that Jake realized how filthy the village was, how filthy the little boy was. He had dark brown shorts, with cuts and scrapes through the fabric, as well as a shirt

which looked like it had once been white beneath all the snot, dirt, and sand. "Take me with you," he said, "I'm an orphan. Nobody accepts me. I don't belong here,"

Jake looked at the boy, "I can't take you," Jake replied. Before he allowed himself to change his mind, he walked off, leaving the child further behind with every step that he took.

Reaching the extraction point, Jake thought that they had lied, that they weren't coming, and that they were stranded. That was until he heard the propellers, felt the wind circulation change and saw the helicopter about to land only a few feet in front of them. Before pushing the mother onto the soft cushioned seat in the helicopter, Jake looked back to that little boy who had followed them and had asked for somewhere to belong, and Jake waved his hand, telling the boy to come. So, he did.

Sali ran as fast as he could, scared that if he slowed down the helicopter would leave. He knew he would never get another chance like this. The soldier now stood on the platform. His right hand out, waiting for the boy to grab it and jump on. So as Sali neared the helicopter, he did just that. He grabbed the soldier's hand with his right, his left hand still in his short's left pocket, holding

on to something he couldn't afford to let go of now. Sali's breath was heavy when he finally jumped and set foot in the helicopter. *Safe* he thought. *I'm safe. Now I can be with my brother, where I belong.*

So, as he pulled his left hand out of his pocket, his fingers clenching the lever, ready to let go and let the grenade explode them all, he smiled. For his brother, and only for his brother would he do it. He realized as he saw the soldiers trotting though his home village, that this was the only way he could ever honor his brother and belong. When the family dies, there is no threat to the village, the village Ali had loved so dearly. Even though Sali would never be asked to play four-square or be thanked for his help in the kitchen, he would now always belong. So, he let go of the lever. And Sali embraced and absorbed the warmth from the explosion.



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