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Healing Words

It was 11am when Fadela called Dr. Miller. She was very anxious and worried about her son Salim. He was everything to her. Salim, her only child, was nine years old when he first felt the strange symptoms of his mysterious illness. He screamed, pressing his head with both hands and tearing his hair. It was a terrible scene for Fadela who sunk into despair.

Although in his sixties, Dr. Miller appeared younger, especially during emergencies. Quickly, he packed all his tools in his black bag. He included a stethoscope, a thermometer, blood pressure gauge, cotton balls and alcohol. He was a tall man with blue eyes and grey hair. He left his house and followed the little boy with torn pants. Fadela's place was nearby and this was his third visit to her. He didn't know what to do for Salim. Twice Dr. Miller checked his medical encyclopedia where he found nothing to help him identify this child's mysterious ailment. The route to Fadela's house was strewn with Eucalyptus trees which, lined on both sides, formed a dark tunnel as if leading to the heart of darkness. Milo started barking and Dr Miller stood still, cautiously looking at the dog. "Happy to see you again, Doctor. Salim needs your help," Fadela said in a desperate voice.

"It's fever again," said Dr Miller who, putting down his thermometer, concluded that Salim's illness was worsening. The boy's temperature was over 45. The red veins in Salim's eyes were full of blood. Dr. Miller asked Fadela to bring a wet towel and put it on Salim's forehead. Working in this remote village, Dr Miller often found he didn't have enough medication. He had to order drugs by phone and the order could take up to a fortnight to arrive.

The UN had sent Dr. Miller to ensure the health and well-being of the villagers. He liked voluntary work. It was the essence of his life.

"All people agree that money is important, but I believe that saving the life of a villager is more precious than gold." This was one of the stock sayings he regularly wheeled out before the press. The villagers had great affection for him and they used to clean his house and prepare fruits for him before his return. When his little jet landed, children used to run fast to the plane, hold his luggage and dance around him. Salim was one of the receiving children. It was only after his last trip, when he went out with his father to hunt, that Salim fell ill and stayed home.

"Oh! I lost my husband Karim and now I fear I'm going to lose my beloved son," Fadela sighed desperately. "They were like friends. Karim loved Salim dearly and saw in him the man of the future. For his father, Salim was the center of his life. I can't forget the first day when Salim

started school with Sheikh Ibrahim. His father was so happy that he asked me to sew a special white uniform for him. He bought him a small white hat and a leather bag from the city. They were really expensive, but Salim deserved them, as Karim used to say.”

“Can you tell me what happened exactly?” Dr. Miller inquired.

“I’m not really aware of the whole story. What I have understood from my husband’s account is that he found Salim in a cave. He heard Salim’s scream when he was having a nap. They had been out together. It was a terrible scream that made him jump like a fool and run to the cave. Three minutes later he found Salim. He said the look in the boy’s eyes wounded him.”

“Were there any snakes or scorpions around Salim? You know the area is full of such poisonous creatures.”

“No. The cave was not dangerous. All the villagers knew it was an old cave. They used to visit from time to time in the summer months. They say it’s really cool inside. Yet, Karim told me that he heard some whispers and a kind of breathing. He didn’t know what it was, but he felt there was another presence with him. He told me that Salim was trembling and sweating when he found him.”

Fadela laid her head down and began to cry; she could not continue with the story. Dr. Miller felt helpless and told her to never stop cooling Salim’s fever with the cold wet towel. It was 4 pm by the time Dr Miller left the house. Walking slowly, he went back home to find a cure for the little boy.

“I must do something to help him. This is a serious illness and I’m sure that for every disease there is a cure.” For the first time, Dr Miller couldn’t be of any help to the villagers. He was so fond of the youngster, that, if anything were to happen to him, Dr Miller would be a broken man. On his way back home, he met Sheikh Ibrahim returning from a pilgrimage.

“Welcome back Ibrahim. How was your trip?”

“It was very tiring, but wonderful.”

“Have you heard about little Salim? He’s been ill for more than a month now.”

“Oh no! Poor Salim.” Sheikh Ibrahim had known Salim since his first day of life. The villagers celebrated Salim’s birth in their own way. They brought two fat sheep and slaughtered them for a celebratory feast for everyone in the village. Every single step of the way was full of fun and happiness for them. They considered such celebrations as necessary rituals for their spiritual life. They said that a newly born female baby should have only one sheep slaughtered, whereas a male baby must have two. Sheikh was the man who gave the birthday speech. He spoke about the importance of having children and their rights. He spoke about the responsibility of parents to feed and educate their children. He prayed for Salim to grow up to be a successful man in his life. He was praying and all the villagers were saying “Amin.”

Dr Miller and the Sheikh were both well respected by the villagers.

Sheikh Ibrahim was the wise man of the village although he was only in his forties. He was of medium height and had black hair and eyes. He had a sharp look and a smile that never left his face. He went to his house where he put his luggage and prepared his bed. It was 9pm. It was a quiet night except for the whisper of the cold night breeze.

All of a sudden, the silence of the dark night was broken by a terrible scream. The villagers heard the scream and candles were lit from one house to another. Women looked out from their windows and the men went out to check the area around them.

Dr. Miller woke up and quickly made his way to Fadela's house where he found Sheikh Ibrahim. Fadela was glad to see Ibrahim there. They said that he could heal people with his words, but Dr Miller never believed in such stories. Dr Miller was a man of science. He and the Sheikh had many disputes on this issue. "I can't believe that you can heal people with your murmurs. I'm sorry Sheikh, but what shall we do with all these inventions? Scientists have sacrificed their lives to save humanity. They are bearers of light and hope. Don't you agree?"

"Of course I do. But science isn't everything and truth is not only what we see and touch."

Dr. Miller recalled this discussion when he saw Sheikh Ibrahim in Karim's house. Am I going to attend one of his healing sessions? What shall people say about my job? . . . It was very annoying for Dr Miller to attend Sheikh's healing session, yet the scene of little Salim trembling and sweating made him stay and watch the proceedings. Fadela and the Sheikh were surrounding Salim. There were only two candles to light up the house.

"Do you have water?" Ibrahim asked. Fadela had some beside her. Dr Miller knew from an old villager that before Sheikh started his healing sessions, he performed his ablutions. They said it regenerated him. When Sheikh opened the door, the candle lights were moving right and left, up and down. The shadows in the house were performing a dance of sorrow and hope.

"Oh no! Is he coming?"

Salim's eyes were suddenly and widely opened when the Sheikh approached him. He stopped trembling and the red veins in his eyes became darker. Sheikh Ibrahim sat by Salim's right side and put his hand on his forehead. Salim groaned and moved his head back.

"الرجيم الشيطان من بالله أعوذ"

"A-oudhou Billahi mina eshaytani errajim"

"Oh! It hurts. Leave me!"

"الرحيم الرحمان الله بسم"

"Bismillahi errahmani errahim."

The more words Sheikh said, the more Salim trembled. After ten minutes of chanting, as Dr Miller liked to call it, Salim groaned again and the terrible scream was heard once more. They all looked around them. No one was there. Shiekh knew that the voice came out of Salim.

"Who are you?" Sheikh asked.

There was no answer. Dr Miller tried to spot Salim's face from behind. He believed that these hallucinations were the outcomes of a hot fever. He approached Sheikh and sat down next to Salim. Now the three of them were surrounding the poor boy. Their bodies' shadows were dancing behind the candle lights and Salim's became so still that it looked like a mummy. Sheikh kept muttering under his breath.

It was clear that Sheikh's words had had a great effect on Salim. Yet, the little boy was about to die. His mother squeezed his hand. He stopped breathing. He started trembling again.

All of a sudden, the house started to move as if hit by an earthquake. Dr. Miller tried to escape, yet a strong wind closed the door and locked it. He didn't know what to do. He hid his head under his arms. The house was shaking as Sheikh kept reciting. Dishes, cups and furniture fell down from the shelves. Dr. Miller felt an apparition flying around. It was moving to and fro, breaking all that came in its way. Dr Miller lifted his head from the floor where he seemed to see a light. He kept moving his head and following the light, right and left, up and down. The gust of the wind headed towards him. He opened his arms in a position of a hug and opened his mouth widely.

"It's coming." He repeated his words, "The light is coming..."

"Yes, I'm coming. Embrace me!"

Then there was a dead silence.

Salim looked at his mother and said "Mama." He flew into the arms of his mother who couldn't believe her eyes. She was a strong woman and knew that Sheikh would cure her son. She thanked Sheikh and Dr Miller for their help. Sheikh tried to arrange the house and clean the broken items from the ground. It was 2 am when Sheikh and Dr Miller left the house.

When they got out of the house, Dr Miller and Sheikh were both silent. Neither spoke to the other. It was a difficult time for both of them.

Salim turned back to life again. He was so happy to recover his energy after four weeks of severe illness. He was playing with his friends in the little playground which his father had made. It was a small area with small wooden bars to jump over. There was a seesaw, two swings and a small football field.

The village children were all happy to see Salim playing with them again. Running after the ball, one of the children spotted a police car.

"Look there. The police are coming . . . Let's have a look . . . wee wow wee wow wee wow"

Two police cars stopped at the entrance of the village. Dr Miller received the police officer and took him into his house. After half an hour they got out and went straight to Sheikh Ibrahim who was in his house trying to have a nap.

"Yes, we're really sorry about him. I do respect this man, yet when I discovered that he was a pedophile, I was really shocked. Children used to go to his house to study and learn, yet some students' parents accused Sheikh of strange behaviour towards their sons . . ."

Sheikh Ibrahim left his house with his two hands chained together

behind him. While passing closely by Dr. Miller, Sheikh smiled. He could see the red veins of Dr Miller's eyes. Dr Miller pretended not to see him. He turned to talk with two famous elders who came as witnesses against Sheikh's affair.

Sitting around a small tea table, two men with white beards were observing the scene. They were discussing Sheikh's arrest.

"I can't believe what Dr Miller is saying. If we entrusted our bodily health to Dr Miller, we trusted Sheikh Ibrahim with our minds and our children's future"

Tea was part and parcel of the villagers' life. They drank it every day, before and after every meal.

"Yes, my friend. Sheikh is a respectful and faithful man. I will never believe these accusations against Sheikh. He can't be a pedophile! That's unbelievable! We know him very well. The parents in this village are not so stupid as to send their sons to a psychologically imbalanced teacher. I can see the effect of his education on my two sons. This is a condemnation of the whole village!"

The police cars left the village and people wondered about the real reason why Dr Miller called the police. The eldest man in the village was sad. The villagers respected him and used to ask his advice about such affairs. He sat in his wooden chair and started gazing at Dr Miller.

At sunset, Fadela called Salim from the kitchen's window. She was looking at the red sky and waiting for the day to wear its dark mantle. Night had fallen and the children were not allowed to play about in the dark. Salim came in and called for water to wash his hands. "Time for dinner, Salim." They sat together around a small wooden table. Whenever she sat with Salim for dinner or lunch, she remembered her husband. Life is hard for Fadela without her husband. She hid her grief from Salim behind a false smile.

"Mama, will my father and Sheikh ever come back?"

"I don't know my son. Maybe they'll come soon."