WENDY RILEY

Laila's Story

The day I met Amatullah, the world was singing its usual songs. A drone strike hit the valley. Ten new bodies were hung in the square. And my father was in agonies over whether his life-long friend, Mushtaq, was turning into a Taliban man.

Amatullah changed everything. She threw the ragged pieces of my life into the air like confetti in a hurricane.

"She's just a falcon," my mother said.

"She's just a killing machine," my father said.

"She's just a slave," my sister said.

But I knew better. Amatullah had an angel face and a warrior heart. She hooked me in a heartbeat—soaring up and over the high walls of Green Square before dipping in the downdraft beyond. I lost sight of her for moments as the angry wind lost its temper, buffeting my head this way and that. But there she was again, the ghost in the Taliban machine. Lifting on the vertical like a tiny helicopter, she hovered with drumbeat wings before swooping back to the hand which fed her.

What a hand it was, smeared with the blood of so many corpses. Yet no one could challenge the leader of our valley. Forced to gather each week for the public floggings and executions, we looked without seeing. To see was to die, that's what everyone thought. Everyone except my sister Zainab, who insisted on seeing everything and telling its truth. To see is to *live*—that was her belief. Otherwise you just inhabit your life as a captive animal inhabits its cage.

Amatullah was the most mysterious of birds. To me, she was everything at once. Cruel and kind. Angel and devil. Heat and ice. Her pure white feathers were streaked with black, like a moon shining on midnight snow.

"She's just an object," Zainab said.

True enough, Amatullah did as she was told.

But was she a bird of war or a song of peace? Amatullah was more than the squads, better than hate. Her wild beauty lifted her from the terrible deeds of men. Yet she played the Commander's war games whenever she was asked. When the killing was done, The Big C—that's what Laila called him—slipped a helmet on her head. It gave her a comical look. I thought how frightening it would be in that angry dark until my father said the helmet helped her, calmed her down.

"So she won't be frightened?" I asked my father.

"Falcons are never frightened," he replied. "It is only us who are frightened, waiting to know our fate."

My parents had been frightened for a long time. That's how it was in the Swat Valley with its stand-overs and Shariah. Mother talked of the old days with cracks in her voice, rage and sorrow all shaken up together.

"Everyone used to come in my mother's time," she told me once, as she bashed the daylights out of the shabby rug hanging on our washing line. "Everyone. To admire the valley's beauty. The Switzerland of the East, they used to call it, when the hippies came to Mingora and told the world how special we are."

Clouds of dust erupted over our fence as Mother went for broke.

"And look at us now! Slaughtering our own, destroying our womanhood. And my own daughter hell-bent on putting it right herself. I tell you, Laila, peace has abandoned us! The darkness has chased it away."

Then she collapsed in a heap on the dirt floor of our garden, sobbing with the hopeless fervour of a four-year-old.

My own four-year-old fervour had yet to find a voice. It could hardly come soon enough for me. Already fed up with the madness of the human world, I looked to animals for solace and sense. Mother

said I ran on batteries. I could chatter on for hours about being kind to starving dogs, sick cats and broken-down donkeys.

Not that anyone seemed to care. Most people were too bothered about wandering drones and attacks in the night to mind if an animal died screaming.

"In Mingora, it is the people who die screaming," my mother said. That was hard for me to see. I was not my sister, after all, intent on seeing everything. I was a child struggling to make things right, when wrong was the new normal.

My mother, Madeeha, used to answer telephones in the local health centre. That was before men with beards cut the phone lines and installed their own kind to dispense misery with their medicine. Father was a banker of great standing, yet he never quite fitted the new regime. His beard was patchy. His passion was lacking. His loyalty was suspect. Then he lost his position to a man with more of all three. Now my parents scraped a living however they could and the good things of life were gone. Zainab and I could put up with that. It was the slow decline of our parents, our friends and our neighbourhood which was far more terrifying. Schools were burned. Women were insulted and beaten. Books, paintings and clothes were trashed. And people didn't resist, which made us crazy.

Really, I just wanted to save unwanted animals. For Zainab, it was all about women. She had strength beyond my own. At the age of 13, she was already blogging about the prisoners of Swat, about the Taliban being so scared of their own women they had to make them slaves. Zainab had fire in her eyes and fury in her belly, and my father said she would be the death of him well before the Taliban got their hooks in.

In the early days, my father Abbas used to tell us: "Stand tall, my daughters, and stamp your ground!"

Now he tended to say: "Just go with the flow, dear girls, upset no one and stay safe."

Zainab scolded him at every turn.

"Go with the flow, father, and you will be washed so far out to sea that no one will ever find you again," she said.

And maybe that is what our father really wanted. He was, by now, a conflicted man. Abbas, the furious lion, had forgotten how to roar.

I often asked my sister why so many people accepted their fate without fighting back.

"Oh Laila!" she might say. "It would take three lifetimes to explain to you why people don't fight. Or can't fight. Or won't fight. Or don't know how to fight. Or think they will fight later on, when they feel stronger."

I'd ask her: "But Zainab, why do so many women choose to stay slaves when they could run, or scream, or break their chains to be free?"

"Oh Laila, Laila!" she would reply. "Women have to protect their children, and survive themselves, and live in bodies that are not as strong as males. And if they have missed their education, they won't have learned all the things they might do to win their freedom."

I would sigh then, as the answers seemed to involve so much that needed to be done and so little hope. Everyone knew, after all, that women could no longer have an education.

"But that is where I come in," Zainab would add with a wink. "I am the thorn in the Taliban rump. Sit on me and you get more than you bargain for. One day I will be a politician, and you will see, Laila, what happens when your crazy sister demands to be heard."

So when I first saw Amatullah, I could only wonder at her slavery. There she was, perched so meekly on a bad man's sleeve. My father told me she was a female Saker falcon, that females are bigger and more ferocious than the males, and highly prized by falconers.

"In the wild, they have no natural enemies except man," my father said, as we watched the falcon's flight cycles. "We are the worst, as always. Thousands of falcons are captured and sold on the black market every year; soon there will be none left in the wild to breed."

"But her name, father, her name?"

I had heard the Commander call out a word, blurred in the flurry of the biting winds.

"Her name is Amatullah, my little one."

"*A female servant of Allah*," Zainab added, with a shrug of her

shoulders. "Didn't the man choose well? She is as much a prisoner as the women of Mingora. The Commander is proud of his story and wants us all to know it. She was captured as a young bird and trained to hunt. And here she is, living out her life. A beautiful and ferocious slave, Laila, who cannot or will not break her chains."

I was angry at Zainab for making fun of Amatullah. But I did wonder why this exotic creature didn't just lift and fly hard for home. We watched as the lure rose and spun around the square, enticing Amatullah to chase, feed and follow. She sank low behind the heads of the hanging corpses, reappearing only to swoop back to her controller. No matter how long she disappeared from view, every time she chose to come back. How could this be? My wilderness bird sighted freedom over and over again. Yet every time she refused it.

I couldn't understand it then. Only now, I realise we loop back to the sites of original sin with the hapless, hopeless notion of putting it right.

Mother was hugely proud of Zainab. Yet she feared for her safety. Father scrunched his face when he found Zainab handing out flyers in the street. They urged the women and girls of Swat to speak their mind and take control of their own lives. Last time, men in turbans tore the papers from her hand and burned them in flaming piles up and down the street. The loudspeakers boomed a message through the alleyways: *"Allah will not tolerate female insurrection; his wrath will be terrifying!"*

I don't think it was Allah's wrath we had to worry about. It was the common or garden anger of men affronted—mortal men whose power was being dismantled before their eyes. Zainab's strength lay in her simplicity. She called out the ridiculous. So Mingora's regime was shocking in its cruelty. But the Taliban way was also breathtakingly foolish—weird and wobbly truths lined up in a row, just begging to be pushed.

I couldn't believe that a powerful man would skulk in doorways, waiting for a little girl to walk past on her way to school. Then he would pounce, denuding the girl of her books and pens, holding them high like sacred swords snatched from an enemy in the field. In Zainab's eyes, the pens were swords; the books, magical texts able

to unlock the secrets of the universe. The powerful men might be too stupid to understand them yet they understood their danger in the hands of others—most especially in the hands of the young women the books were designed to liberate. I wondered how it would be when I went to school whether I would escape the Taliban radars and take flight. I longed to taste that freedom; I jumped up and down outside the school bus which carried my sister to school, pleading to come too.

Just months before I started school myself, my mother agreed to let me ride with Zainab on the school bus. I had to stay on the bus no matter what, come straight back with the driver and Mother would be there to greet me.

"A trial run," she said. Her smile was lopsided.

"She's trying not to cry," Zainab whispered in my ear. I realised, then, how horrifying each day must be for my mother, forced to release her daughter into a treacherous Taliban world. When I went too, it would be double trouble—the highest stakes for a woman already crippled by her own anxiety.

But my time had come. In the bus, I pressed my face against the glass to celebrate my freedom. By my side was the strongest, bravest, most generous of women, and I could only bathe in her ambition. Maybe a little would rub off on me. As I peered along the dusty road though, waiting for the bus to fire, nothing seemed quite right. A bearded man reached down to lift the blanket from a battered pram. A woman draped a veil over her head, to cover her eyes. A scrawny, three-legged dog cowered under a mulberry tree, as if sensing an unseen enemy. I saw all these things, but I didn't see the bullet. As it lodged in my brain, bloodied glass showering around me, the dog slunk away on its three legs, relieved that the bullet wasn't for him.

Death rarely goes according to plan. In an ideal world, the last words of a dying Muslim should be: "I bear witness that there is no God but Allah." I think mine came out something like: "But who will love a dog with three legs?" And there was no answer. Partly because the ensuing noise drowned the words. Partly because my sister, the only one who heard it, was stricken. And partly because no one in

Swat gave two tinkers for a skinny dog missing a limb and devoid of love.

I understood, of course, that the bullet was meant for my sister. I was far too unimportant to kill. I also realised, however, that Zainab had been granted a second chance. I was now a restless spirit with the power to save her life and avenge my death in one savage swipe.

They laid me to rest in the crooked cemetery on the hillside above Mingora. The wind currents tugged at mourners' robes on a chilly afternoon in November. The Commander came too, which was only to be expected. Frustrated in his efforts to rid Swat of Zainab, the crusader, he was still eager to claim his kill. He had, after all, inflicted massive damage on a girl who now limped along with a broken heart.

The Commander stood, with Amatullah on his wrist, at the top of the hill as my body was lowered into the grave and the Imam called for silent prayer. I willed her to come. When released, Amatullah flew the length of the cemetery before circling, high in the choppy air, spiralling down so low that her feet hung for seconds over my open grave. I saw the merest hint of recognition, talons tilted towards my head, and then she was gone. The remains of my family—Zainab, Madeeha and Abbas—stood terrified and isolated as they took in the Commander's message that day.

There is no escape. There is no pocket beyond my reach. There is no place so secret that I won't be able to find you. Nowhere that my Amatullah cannot fly. No sanctuary safe from my speeding bullet. I afford you no peace.

At the time my family most needed help, a line was drawn in the dusty sand at the edge of their house. It separated those who chose to see from those who sought the cover of blindness. Yet I could hardly blame our neighbours. Who wanted their children murdered on the way to school?

If Zainab was alone, it was down to me to protect her—rustling my way through the streets and homes of Mingora, drinking in gossip, lingering at Militia meetings, poring over plans and documents which were secret no longer. No doors could bar me

now. My spirit could wisp through a fortress of bolts and barricades. The Commander must be removed, as Amatullah removed vermin with her deadly claws and beak. It was my wish. He was my prey.

All I had to do was find my wings.

Amatullah would help, surely. This was a pre-emptive strike against the man who enslaved her. And now there was no limit to the time I could spend with her, no walls to keep us apart. I breathed the same air that she breathed. I melted in her feathers and bone, the better to feel her timeless flight. I tried to make her understand her own strength, the better to fight her captor. I urged her to rip out the eyes which bored through women and girls, seeing only sorcerers.

Did Amatullah want to break her chains? I don't think so. She knew when I was there, I'm convinced of that. Her head cocked towards the breath of my spirit; her eyes shone more brightly when I stroked the smooth streaks of her chest and belly. Yet still she played her master's war games. When prisoners were tied to their posts in Green Square, a militia man would swing the lure behind someone's shoulders, or balance a dead pigeon on their head. The last thing victims saw was the white dagger of Amatullah swooping towards them, talons outstretched—the angel of death.

Was she a bad bird? Surely she was just following orders.

Isn't that what they all say? Amatullah was never a winner. Out in the wilds, her Saker population was crashing, with thousands of her family traded illegally on the black market. Perhaps she felt this insidious decline; like the Commander's victims, she played a losing hand. I longed to stretch out a living arm and take the weight of her chilly feet. If we could truly see each other just for a moment, couldn't we break the chains of repetition and find our way home?

I knew, though. It was never going to be easy for either of us. In the end, Amatullah was both—the bird of war *and* the song of peace. She was born to tear flesh. She was trained to dance on death. Yet she longed always for the pure, sweet freedom of flight through clear air. Leaving humans to our horror show.

It was finally down to me. I watched the Commander at work, listened to his conversations, monitored his phone calls. He wasn't going to rest until Zainab was gone. He talked to his generals of gun

sights, knife blades and suicide bombs. What, after all, is the best way to kill a 13-year-old girl? I heard cold words. They laughed when the cruelty amused them. Sometimes they barked in excitement or rage. Their hearts went on beating in their chests even when frozen with spite. It was a killing freeze. I don't understand how their blood stayed warm enough to keep them alive.

I knew every inch of the Commander's compound by now. It was crammed with trophies and conceits. Servants, Saluki dogs and Arab stallions; dancing girls and pleasure boys; bejewelled women and muscular birds of prey. Shiny pistols and jewel-encrusted daggers were stowed away in polished cases he thought nobody else could open.

And me, what did I have left to give? What in Allah's name could I hope to achieve before sliding away? You will see.

I had chosen my place—the deep lake beside the Commander's compound. It was where we used to picnic in summer, before the darkness came. I stole petals from the hot houses where the Commander grew tropical flowers in winter. More a wedding than a funeral, I laid a pastel trail from his courtyard to the water's edge. It was a splendid morning. The grass was silver with ice. I watched his breath pluming on the air as he found the trail of yellow and pink, then followed it. I'm sure he thought a sultry maiden was waiting at the end of it, complete with her bountiful gifts. More a wedding than a funeral, indeed. I had discovered that the Commander could not swim. At the water's deepest point, where the ground fell steeply away to black, I would gather every last shred of energy and throw him in. That was the plan. I would watch as he surged up for his last gasp. I would laugh as he slowly drowned in a perfect marriage of icy water and frozen heart.

That is how it should have been. As he approached, I launched myself at him. He walked right through me and out the other side, a petty God once again disposing of an infidel. This was despair. I felt the sheer helplessness of my plight.

Yet life still had one ace up its sleeve for Laila's ghost.

Three steps beyond, the Commander stepped on an IED and blew himself into an unknown number of pieces. My sister heard the explosion, as she waited to board the school bus. My parents

heard it too, as they cleared away breakfast. Amatullah heard it as she preened her morning feathers. She pointed her beak towards the bang, just for a moment, before finishing her ablutions.

And so it was done. I prayed that Amatullah might come to me now that her master was dead. I yearned for the wildness suppressed beneath her chiselled wings. I imagined her free, calling *Ki-yee!* to the winds which roared over the mountain range. The cry would be thrown like a spear through the middle of the valley. I dreamed of catching the sound as it ricocheted around the slopes, slicing through snow. Then I might swallow it or melt it inside me or simply hold it in my tattered hands for as long as I could before it dissolved, sliding slowly back to the crystalline peaks as whispers and breath. I longed for the falcon to return. Before it was too late.

I think she knew. At the very end, she found me. I saw her speckled body emerge through the snow which had started to fall thickly and silently from a slate-grey sky. Gathering speed, she sighted me, settling in to the one task which remained. So Amatullah came, straight as an arrow, spearing through my soul like a blade through flesh. The human war was over. And we were one.