

The Shooting by Sally Baker

From his vantage point on the wall by the lift access to the flats on the second floor the boy saw the whole thing. On sunny days, when he was bored, the boy liked to sit and watch the comings and goings in the road in front of the flats. It was a perfect spot. Sheltered from the wind and warmed by the sun, he could hide there for hours without being noticed. A place to escape the everyday tensions in the hostel.

There had been yet another row that morning... he hated being shouted at, especially when he had done nothing wrong. For the umpteenth time, he considered running away but he was frightened of facing the twin challenges of finding somewhere safe to sleep and regular meals to eat. Perhaps when he was older he would have more confidence. So once again he had escaped to his favourite hiding place. He had heard his name being called but had ignored it. Serve them right to be worried for a while! And they only wanted him to clean the house or go begging with the others, or act as a courier with secret packages that he was told to never open.

Suddenly he heard footsteps running through the alleyway by the side of the flats. The boy watched as two young lads ran into the shop on the opposite side of the road, and disappeared into the darkness of the corner store. Each had their heads covered by a hoodie, but the boy had seen them before and knew that they lived on the other side of the estate. He had noticed them on his delivery rounds for his minder. He thought it strange that they had gone into the shop. These boys were territorial and never seemed to stray from their area, certainly he had never seen them near these flats.

In the next instant, he heard a strange sound...two or three dull thuds. Loud but oddly muffled, a sound which he knew, he had heard it many times before, in his old life. Instantly the boy tensed, every fibre of his body electric with fear and anticipation. Immediately the two boys ran out, closely followed by the shop

keeper, who was brandishing what looked like baseball bat. As he watched, transfixed by the events unfolding in front of the boy, one of the young men turned, faced the shopkeeper, raised his arm, and fired point blank at the man's head but seemed to miss. As the sound echoed around the estate the shopkeeper fell on his knees. The young man took a step towards him and fired again and the boy knew that this was the fatal shot as blood poured onto the pavement. The two young men ran off, even faster than they had arrived, darting across the street towards the far end of the estate, seeking the safe haven of their patch.

For several seconds there was silence, but then a wailing filled the air. A howling, so mournful it was unlike anything that a human animal could make. It was eerie and unearthly; it made the hairs on the back of the boy's neck stand out. He had heard that sound many times before. It haunted his nightmares!

He was rooted to the spot as he stared at the lifeless body of the shop keeper, a red stain spreading across the pavement and into the gutter.

The boy was transfixed. What should he do? He had visited the shop himself, many times, and had always been treated with kindness and respect. He liked the old shopkeeper, he couldn't believe what he had just witnessed.

Within minutes the road was filled with flashing lights as a police car and an ambulance arrived. From nowhere, curious onlookers filled the pavement and the boy watched intently as a young policeman began to take down names and addresses from potential witnesses, while his older colleague was inside the shop, presumably trying to find out what had happened. The shop keeper lay motionless on the pavement with paramedics fussing over him, but the boy knew he was beyond the skill of any medic.

'Why doesn't the policeman follow the two boys?' thought the boy. 'If he is quick he could follow their trail and catch them before they could throw away the gun.' But then no-one saw them run off, except me. Had anyone recognised them, did they know where they lived? 'I could track them down for sure', he thought, 'I know which block they were heading for'.

For a moment, the boy thought about jumping down from his hiding place and going to help. But he hesitated, a jumble of fears and concerns battling with his conscience and his upbringing. He knew that his father would want him to go and help. But he was dead. Blown to pieces by a barrel bomb as he worked in his baker's shop.

No, it was not his concern. The shopkeeper was dead, nothing could help him now. Tears flooded down the boy's cheeks as he realised the hopelessness of his situation. What could an illegal refugee do to help in a foreign country?

But as he wept he seemed to hear his father's voice quoting the Quran.

'O you who believe! Fear God and be with those who are true in word and deed.'

Suddenly he knew what he had to do. His minder had come out of the hostel and was shouting at him to come back inside and hide but the boy had made his decision.

Running down the concrete steps of the flats, the boy ran into the street and straight into the arms of a policeman. In his faltering English, he described the boys and pointed out the direction they had gone. Shouted instructions followed and officers ran off towards the thugs' home ground.

At the police station the boy sat in the waiting room, shivering more in fear than with the cold. A woman approached and spoke to him in his own language. She smiled, and for the first time since he had arrived in the back of a lorry, the boy felt a glimmer of hope for the future.