

## A Proud Father

### A short story by James H Longmore

It is hard to think of those extraordinary times as anything else but inherently ordinary. It was all we knew then; the fear, the overbearing feeling of hopelessness that a war harbors, the sickening omnipresence of destruction and death that pressed down on our town like some malevolent cancer.

And I remember *her*, she was just eleven years old the last time I saw her; a rare and welcome spark of effervescent life amidst the grim desolation that cast a dull, gray shadow over everything I held dear and all that should have made me feel safe within my childhood.

As I sit here now in the sunshine, sipping on scalding, tasteless coffee and listening to my adulthood friends as they share mundane snippets of their life, I can't help but feel a weird kind of detachment. Sure, I join in with their well-worn jokes, smile at the trials and tribulations of their everyday lives – even chip in when expected with cutesy tales of my own beautiful wife and three precious children – but I feel as if I am never really *here*. There will always be that part of me that is adhered to those formative years, as a prisoner is chained to the walls of his dungeon.

Her name was Angelia and she was quite the prettiest and most perfect girl I'd ever known, would *ever* know. Angelia was little more than a year older than I but with a malnourished frame that made her appear far younger. She had the longest, blackest hair I had ever seen – a perfect complement to her dark olive skin – it shone with an unearthly iridescence and in the scarce sunlight miniature rainbows danced within its sheen. Angelia had beautiful, deep brown eyes that in the right kind of light seemed to be almost black and I often imagined that they could gaze deep in to the depths of my soul.

We'd been friends since before the war. We used to ride to school on the same bus and our apartments sat opposite each other in our block, separated by the gray concrete hallway that was the alligator-infested creek and river of molten lava of our games.

When the war began they had closed our school because the hospital had been bombed out of existence and they needed somewhere to keep the corpses that were beginning to pile up out on the streets. Then one clear and starless night the school itself had been shelled, reduced in a fiery instant to smouldering timbers that poked up into the smoky sky like charred, accusing fingers. After that, they just had to leave the dead folk to rot where they fell.

It was around that time when most of the tenants moved out of our apartment block in panicked droves, taking our playmates with them, desperate to flee the ever-encroaching shells and staccato rattle of automatic gun fire and Angelia and I had been left with only each other to play with.

Luckily, Angelia's father didn't seem to mind too much that his little girl was spending so much time playing with a boy; to me he always seemed to be too wrapped up with his own life to be bothered with such trivialities. Having said that, I did occasionally get the impression from him that had we been a few years older, his attitude would have been a heck of a lot different.

Angelia's father was a tall, handsome man whose face was permanently etched with creases and worry lines, his salt and pepper hair always trimmed neat and tidy. He was a proud man who would dress in his business suit and tie every weekday morning as if ready to face yet another day at the office; the office where he used to work had been little more than a scorched crater in the center of town since the war had broken out five years previous, but nonetheless Angelia's father would be at the breakfast table bright and early, clean shaven and in his best work attire. Such was the man's stern and icy demeanor that even my mother called him Mr. Rouzan, even though she did know his first name; somehow, she'd say, it just seemed more appropriate that way.

Mr. Rouzan and Angelia lived alone. They had done so ever since Mrs. Rouzan had gone out shopping for groceries early one morning in the earliest days of the war and had never returned. One heard such terrible stories of the heinous things that befell people at the hands of the enemy back in those vicious, lawless days; although the tortures meted out by one's imagination in the darkest dead of night were far, far worse than actually *knowing* what fate had greeted a loved one.

Angelia told me that often she would be forced awake by her father's screaming of his beloved wife's name into the night, and by the incessant, heart-breaking sobs that would invariably follow. And then the gnawing hunger in her belly would keep Angelia company until the morning cast its cold, desolate light once more over our devastated town.

Our apartment block was a remarkably unremarkable building. It was all gray, utilitarian concrete and windows bedecked with thick iron bars – which we would often muse were to keep we poor inhabitants in rather than would-be intruders out. Boasting five floors of uniform two-bed apartments, our block stood shoulder to shoulder with two others that looked exactly like it; each of the trio of buildings indiscernible other than for the fat, black numbers stencilled over their entryways.

The huddled group of apartment blocks had become an unfortunate victim of location once the conflict had escalated into full-blown war, pretty much wrong place, wrong time. All too quickly, we had become trapped between each of the warring factions and relegated to a forgotten corner of the war zone.

For many, many years after that, nothing came in to our immediate area and nothing – and nobody – went out.

Angelia and I would spend our days playing together in the stark labyrinth of dim hallways and had made the myriad abandoned apartments our playground. The long, straight walkways became our racetracks, the stairwells our magical towers, the inky, clinging shadows the fortresses of our imagination. We'd play hide-and-go-seek for hours on end and were forced to make up our own rules in order to ensure that the seeking part was in some way practical in such a vast building; the *no hiding in odd numbered apartments* declaration became particularly popular.

Occasionally, stray shells would hit the building late at night and we would be awoken by the feel of our walls wobbling and a deep, grumbling sound that resonated through the floor like some lonely giant's voice.

With only candles to light our way in the pitch dark, my mother and I would struggle from our beds and hide under the kitchen table and hope against hope that we would be lucky and the shells would simply pass us by; it seems quaint to think now about just how much confidence we placed in that kitchen table back then. Sure, it was

built of solid oak but precisely how it could possibly have protected us from a direct hit, or if the building had fallen down about our ears had never seemed to have occurred to us. There were nights where my mother and I would fall asleep beneath the protective canopy of the table, her arms wrapped tight around me, my head pressed tight against her chest to seek out the reassuring thrum of her heartbeat. Around us, our home would shake and clatter and puff out a fine, powdery dust from the ceiling, and its foundations would creak and groan like a weary geriatric.

The morning following a night's shelling was always one of excitement for Angelia and me. The landscape that was our domain would always look and smell different from the day before and it was easy for us to imagine that we had been magically transported to some new, fantastical world. Together, we'd eagerly explore the freshly bombed apartments that had previously been locked and out of bounds to us. Those apartments that had succumbed to the night's deadly rain of explosives were often torn completely apart and made ugly, gaping wounds on the front of our building that would bleed their long-gone inhabitant's personal possessions out into the streets below for the looters to pick over.

We saw a dead body once – well half of one, it was the top half so I guess it still counted – as not every apartment had been abandoned. Sure, we had seen plenty of corpses on the streets before, but never one this close up and so *raw* – glassy eyes fixed and staring, torso soaked with black, congealing blood and innards spilling out like bloodied ribbons across the scorched carpet. And because we knew her, it had seemed all the more personal.

Some residents stayed as we had, for the simple reason of having no place else to go. The half-body was the elderly woman we'd known as Mrs. Wachowski, who had on more than one occasion popped her white-haired head around her door to chastise Angelia and I for making too much noise as we raced up and down the hallway. She'd also bring us fresh water and tinned fruit that always tasted extra special and she would regale us with her marvellous and fantastical tales about what things were like when she was our age, a long, long time before the war.

With heavy hearts we stole what was left of Mrs. Wachowski's food. Angelia had assuaged my guilt by telling me that it was an okay thing to do as it wasn't technically *stealing* – it was not as if the old woman needed food anymore. Found food had become increasingly sparse as the war dragged on; looters had ransacked most of the abandoned apartments and anything remotely fresh had rotted away years ago. Even some of the canned goods my father had had the foresight to hoard upon the inevitable approach of war were beginning to taste funky.

Angelia would always eat her share of any food we happened upon straight away, never once did she take it back to her own apartment. She'd explained to me that this was because it would wound her father's pride for her to be the one bringing home the food rather than him. That, and there was also a good chance that he would beat her for stealing, albeit from a dead person. I never once questioned Angelia's reasoning, nor thought of her actions as strange.

As our time ground on in those dusty, smoke-filled days, there came a time when Angelia would tire too quickly for any games that required our running around the dank, draughty hallways. Her painfully thin legs would wobble and shake and her breath would gasp and labor in her gaunt chest. We adapted to this – kids seem to have the ability to

adapt to most things – and entertained ourselves with more sedate pastimes such as Legos, dolls and the unending pile of board games Angelia seemed to possess. I remember all too well that Angelia was particularly ruthless when it came to the Monopoly board!

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On the very last day I saw Angelia, she had paid a rare visit to our apartment to have dinner with us. Her father was out on one of his excursions and had left her with nothing to eat. Angelia would often tell me of the days on end when she and her father would have nothing at all to eat – for them, having *nothing in the pantry* was literal, not an overused euphemism for having little to take one's fancy. When I dared, I would smuggle her a slice or two of Mother's special bread for her to eat as we played, under the pretence of having it for myself.

Angelia told me of the – increasingly infrequent – times that her father would go out and return with a little food. It would mostly be canned stuff – beans and tinned vegetables in the main – and she would notice that one of his gold teeth was missing. That, or one of the valuable things of her mother's that her father held so dear was no longer on the dresser where he'd faithfully kept it since her departure.

I guess that Mother and I were immensely lucky in that we had provisions aplenty. My father had seen the war looming for a long time on the political horizon and had made sure that we were more than prepared. Of course, that had been before he was killed in a random shelling the day before my sixth birthday.

He used to work at the gas station down town that was hit by a stray bomb; I remember clearly how the place lit up the night sky like some macabre *aurora borealis*. I saw and heard – and *felt* – the explosion all the way from across town and I knew in an instant that Daddy wouldn't be coming home any more. At the time I'd comforted myself that the yellow flames and cacophonous noise had been my father ascending to heaven or someplace similar that was a far better place than – *this*.

It was of no consolation that my father had been one of the first civilian casualties of a war that no one had neither asked for nor understood.

"Ask your friend if she's hungry, Gustavo." Mother had an odd habit of never addressing Angelia directly; it was almost as if she were afraid of the frail little girl. It was strange for me to think of my mother like that; this was the woman who once beat two women almost to death who tried to steal her meagre purchase of flour and canned goods after she'd stood in line all day to get them.

I asked.

"I am, Mrs. Salazar." Angelia smiled at my mother. "Thank you."

"I thought she would be," my mother addressed me. "It's just the usual, I'm afraid."

She dished out the rations which must have seemed like a lavish banquet to my friend. Mother had somehow managed to procure a handful of small, anemic-looking potatoes and a slice of meat that looked nothing like anything I'd ever seen in a butcher's shop in the times before the war. She had opened a tin of cut spaghetti in sauce – the kind with meatballs in it *because we had a guest* – and there were, of course heaps of her home-made bread. Mother's bread was a tough, yeastless concoction that was basically just flour and water; she would bake huge batches of it on the sporadic occasions that the

apartment's power would come on and she'd store it alongside the mountains of canned food that were secreted beneath our beds. At the time I always thought it strange how her bread never seemed to grow stale or mold – I thought perhaps that was because even fungus hated the bread's dry, gritty taste and jaw-aching, chewy texture.

Angelia and I tucked into our dinner as if it were the first meal we'd seen in ages. Quite possibly in Angelia's case that was actually not too far from the truth, but I didn't like to ask. Instead, we talked about the TV we missed watching, the friends (and enemies) we'd once known and even the school that we didn't know we'd miss until it was bombed into oblivion. My mother sat at the table with us and nibbled on a crust of bread which she dipped in salt to kill its inherent flavor. She listened with a polite countenance to our childish chatter and laughed along at our silly jokes, all the while reminding us to please eat with our mouths closed.

There came a knock on the door.

I saw my mother visibly jump in her skin for the first time in ever. She stood up slowly from the table and made her way over to the door.

"Just a minute!" she called out and shot me a stern look that told me to stay quiet. We very rarely had visitors anymore and looters were a constant possibility.

I saw my mother squint through the peephole on our door. "Ah, it's you, Mr. Rouzan," the relief in her voice was palpable. "Do come in, we were just –"

Angelia's father burst in to our apartment the second my mother unlocked the door. "What the hell is going on here?!" he bellowed at his daughter. "Do I not provide sufficiently for you?"

I saw Angelia cringe beneath the weight of her father's harsh words – a second first for me that day – and she lay her fork gently by the side of her plate.

"It was time for Gustavo's dinner and I could hardly leave Angelia out whilst he ate," my mother explained as Mr. Rouzan stormed across our apartment to bear down on his daughter.

"Well, we don't need your damned charity, Mrs. Salazar, *thank you very much*," he spat.

"It wasn't charity at all," my mother defended. "It's just two children having dinner together."

"Come along, Angelia," Mr. Rouzan barked. "You're coming home with me."

"But Papa!" Angelia protested.

"At least let the girl finish her meal," my mother implored. "You could join us, if you like."

"How *dare* you!" Mr. Rouzan exploded. "You insult my daughter with your pity, and then you insult *me* and my abilities as her provider!" He grabbed Angelia by the arm and dragged her from the wooden chair which clattered noisily to the floor. He pulled my best friend in the world towards our door, her skinny legs scrabbling to support her; how I wished then that I'd had it within me to help her.

"Mr. Rouzan –" My mother stepped in the man's way.

"My daughter is no longer welcome here!" Mr. Rouzan yelled in my Mother's face and raised his arm as if to strike her down.

The breath caught in my throat and I froze. As used as I had become to the anonymous violence that went on around me every day, seeing it so up close and first hand was truly horrifying.

Thankfully Mr. Rouzan checked himself – perhaps he'd seen the murderous rage in my mother's eyes – and lowered his hand with a muttered half-apology. He yanked on Angelia's arm so hard that I heard her shoulder joint pop right from where I was sitting. It made me grit my teeth and wince and I'd swear that I actually *felt* my friend's pain.

And with that, both Mr. Rouzan and Angelia were gone from our home with a vicious slam of the door that shot spider web cracks through the desiccated plaster around its frame.

My mother held me tight that night as if she was afraid to ever let me go. A little later, whilst she tidied away our dinner things, my mother allowed me to shirk my regular evening chores and go out into what was left of the evening's murky light to play awhile.

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The door to Angelia's apartment was open and the yellow, flickering light of cheap, sputtering candles danced from within. I stepped inside, unsure as to whether or not I should call out her name.

I espied a fleeting movement from her father's bedroom. The door stood half open and I could see that the glorious antique dresser that took up most of one wall was empty – everything of monetary and sentimental value was gone – its thick drawers had been pulled out and their silky contents strewn across the room. I dared myself to peer a little further in to the bedroom and what met my inquisitive gaze froze the blood in my veins.

More than anything in the world I wanted to cry out, to call *stop* to what I was bearing witness to. But as hard as I tried, my voice and my frightened body simply refused to comply.

So I watched helplessly as Mr. Rouzan held the pillow over Angelia's face and how her painfully thin legs kicked and danced atop the dusty counterpane until she lay so very still.

I remember clearly that Angelia was in her very best pale pink dress – the one she always wore on a Sunday even though she hadn't been to church since the war began – and the pink shoes that she said made her feel like a beautiful princess; they were made of pink satin and tied across her dainty feet with big, fat ribbons.

Mr. Rouzan must have heard the strangled cry that finally struggled from my throat because he turned his head with a slow deliberation and looked directly into my eyes, and I saw that his were cold and empty.

Breathless, I ran through Mr. Rouzan's apartment, back towards the gaping door and the sanctuary of the blackest shadows that skulked in the hallway beyond. I skirted around the threadbare velour couch upon which Angelia and I had spent so many happy times playing and laughing, past the polished mahogany dining table upon which lay the paltry remains of Mr. Rouzan and Angelia's final meal together, and out into the welcoming chill of the hallway.

I ran for my life that evening, for fear of Angelia's fate befalling me; that Mr. Rouzan had become completely deranged and was about to embark on a murderous spree amongst those of us unlucky enough to have remained in the building. I raced into my apartment and slammed the door shut behind me and only then would I allow the tears to burst from my eyes in a flood of immeasurable pain and heartache.

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Mr. Rouzan didn't follow me, nor did he murder me - or anyone else in our bleak apartment block - as I slept. Nor did he kill himself, as my mother suggested he might. I don't think that the man was too cowardly to do so; from what little I knew of him, I thought it more likely that he believed he'd sent his beloved daughter up to heaven and that if he committed suicide he would be unable to join her.

My mother said remarkably little about what happened that evening, only that Mr. Rouzan was a proud man and he'd probably done what he thought was for the best under the austere circumstances and that one day when I had children of my own, I'd understand.

I never even found out what Mr. Rouzan had done with my friend's frail, limp body after he'd suffocated the fragile life from it.

In the days, months, *years* that followed I'd occasionally happen upon Angelia's father as he wandered aimlessly around our shattered, crumbling apartment block. He'd be wearing his best work suit, his graying hair would be neatly trimmed just so and I could see that his soul was dead and moldering behind his eyes.

As for me, I still played along those desolate hallways and in amongst the decaying apartments and I'd imagine that Angelia was by my side just as she had been in her all too short life. And whenever I saw her proud father, I would avoid his haunted stare and scamper away into the shadows.