

## *Just a Drop of Water* by Kerry O'Malley Cerra

### Author's Note

In September of 2001, I, along with the rest of the world, watched in horror as the attacks on New York City, The Pentagon, and in the sky over a tiny Pennsylvania town unfolded; yet as heart-wrenching as it was to watch on TV—I was glued to my TV for days—I was also swept up with the sense of patriotism that swelled deep for months after. Everywhere I turned, red, white, and blue saluted people across town from t-shirts, to pins on our lapels, to flags boasting in the sky. Neighbors—who usually came home, pulled into their garages, and closed their doors—suddenly stopped in front yards to talk. People came together in ways I'd never experienced before.

Within a day or so of the attacks, my alternating moods of anger, sadness, and pride suddenly had a new emotion to deal with. Fear. It was discovered that Mohammad Atta, the hijacker of American Airlines flight 11, lived just around the corner in my smallish town of Coral Springs, Florida—over 1,000 miles away from the closest attack. What if I'd seen him around? What if my family and I had eaten next to him at a restaurant? It stunned me to the core.

It didn't take long for more of the details involving that day to emerge. It seemed Atta and several of the other hijackers had unassumingly made their way around South Florida for months. But when it leaked that these men had taken flight lessons in Venice, Florida, and it was believed they'd had help from fellow Muslims living there, hundreds of "what ifs" began to haunt me. Every single one of them boiled down to the final, *What if my friend's parents had helped these men?*

My friend was someone I'd met in college. He had come to the U.S. to study and get away from the strict Islamic rules of his upbringing, if only for a while. We grew close, and eventually my sister, my boyfriend, and I went to visit his devout Islamic family abroad, where his parents welcomed us into their home and treated us like old friends. A few years later, wanting to be closer to both of their boys who were then living in Florida, the parents decided to move to the states—Venice, Florida to be exact.

Flash forward to the days following September 11, I found myself doubting my friend's family when I'd heard they were questioned in connection to the attacks. Had they helped these terrorists somewhere along the way? I'd love to say I believed they were innocent, but I'd be lying. It took me a day or two to really know in my heart that they weren't involved. Not these loving, welcoming people. I hated myself for having wavered in my thoughts of them to begin with, but the emotion of that tragedy ran deep. The emotion and fear of those days controlled me.

Not long after, I talked to my friend and asked how he and his family were doing. He told me that the FBI had cleared his parents, but life had become difficult for all of them. I listened to him talk, and though I didn't admit it to him then that I had doubted them myself, he knows now. So do his parents, and I cannot thank his father enough for reading several drafts of this book and helping me get it right.

The feeling of regret stuck with me for a long time. Being a teacher, I looked at kids around me who rarely saw racial lines, and I wondered if this boy—my college friend—and I had been younger when September 11 happened, would I have ever doubted his family? Would I have had the prejudice that seemed to come with age? I began asking questions to anyone who wanted to discuss the subject. Soon I was taking notes, scouring the Internet, and reading books. I was amazed to learn that many non-practicing Muslim kids in the United States actually turned to mosques for answers following 9/11. The basis for my story developed in my head before I even realized I was writing it.

As a former history teacher, this was a story I knew needed to be told. It's the type of novel I myself would have used in a classroom to supplement the textbook and to show kids, who didn't experience that day firsthand, the enormity of the event that happened on our own soil and took thousands of lives—six of them from my own small town, a thousand miles away. I want children to know that sentiments changed from minute to minute, teetering between patriotism, alarm, grief, and so much more. One of my favorite scenes in the book is the one where Jake and his dad attend a memorial service three days after 9/11. That event is real. It moved me the same way it moved Jake. I hope it moves you, too.

I'd like to note that the timing of the events in my book are real: the times of the planes hitting, the days and times of the President's speeches, and Tropical Storm Gabrielle that blew through Florida in the days following 9/11. Even the NFL canceling games that following weekend is true. However, the final mosque scene is entirely fictional. Though there were mosque attacks around the country, there were no mosque attacks in Coral Springs, nor is there a mosque in town. I took some creative licensing with that, in order to tell a story about where the road of prejudice can lead. The story of the mother is fictional, and yet her back story is based on a real American hostage incident that occurred in Sudan in 1973 and involved an Arab PLO terrorist group called Black September. The depth that the mother was able to add to this story because of her past is one I hope kids in classrooms all around the country will learn from. We cannot let fear control us.

#### **Reference Books:**

*Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America After 9/11* by Geneive Abdo

*The 9/11 Report A Graphic Adaptation* by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón

*Islam for Dummies* by Malcom Clark

*Muslims in America After The Catastrophic Tragedy of 9/11* by Edwin Ali

*The American Muslim Teenager's Handbook* by Dilara Hafiz, Yasmine Hafiz, and Imran Hafiz

*With Their Eyes first-hand accounts of the 9/11 tragedy from students at Stuyvesant High School.*

*Edited by Annie Thoms*

*Growing Up Muslim* by Sumbul Ali-Karamali

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