

## **Stroke my hair for the last time**

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It was 11 at night and just after hearing a bedtime story about the afterlife from Maa I asked her, "Shall I go to the heaven or hell?"

"Shut up! You are too young to worry about all this." she widened her eyes as if I said something diabolical.

The next morning, I woke up with gasps as I heard shrieks of people concurrent to loud gunshots; I heard something which does not suit the beauty of our valley - Jannat as people call it.

I got off the bed and continued walking out of the room apprehensively with my mind filled up with negative vibes and unassertive thoughts. There was utter silence in the courtyard, even a heartthrob could be heard. It dawned on me that something is terribly wrong there. I ran out of our house in fear and as I put my left foot out of the main door I saw my foot got soaked with blood. The floor was blood-bathed and that blood was dripping out of my Maa's wounded body which was barely three meters away from me. White snow was falling directly on her skin which curbed the blood flow to some extent.

I was stunned with my legs trembling. My body slightly bent over reluctantly, for my shaking legs couldn't hold my weight. I was about to fall on my knees right there, it was then when she looked up at me unconsciously and unhinged. She was crying, her tears dripping down her cheeks. Her eyes looked more painful than her wounded body. I buried my face in my hands to let my face get wet in tears.

"My dear son, listen to me carefully," she cried, "They will be back in minutes and they will kill you. Run away from here, Right now! My days are over now."

I held her hands in mine as she struggled to breath.

"Don't worry about me. My faith in God won't be wrong; he'll save you; he'll have to save you!" she lamented.

Tears were falling down and she was thumping her trembling red hands on the floor. She was dying with a belief that God shall save me. I fell on my knees beside her. I slid her head into my lap holding it by my both hands. Despite heavy snowfall, her face was warm and wet because of tears and sweat.

‘Don’t cry Maa, don’t cry.’ I said, "Who did this and why are you asking me to run away from here? Who are you afraid of? Where is Papa? Where is Grand Maa?"

As I asked, she sobbed more intensely this time and I tried to shake her head but failed to do so. I warned her that, "I won't go from here if you don't tell me the truth".

She pointed her trembling hand towards two bodies which were lying just beside the main gate of our house. I stood up and ran towards those bodies. I saw that nature had already muffled them in Qafan in its own way; a layer of white snow was covering both the bodies. I screamed out loudly with my widened eyes, ‘Grandma speak to me, listen to me, papa.’ But no! In such a heavy snowfall, perhaps, their senses were not being able to hear me.

I looked back towards my mom. No! She was not looking at me. I rushed back towards her. It was just a lifeless body now. A few moments ago she was my mother. By her straightened hand towards me, I made out that she wanted to tell me something before she took her last breath. But what? What she wanted to tell me before I became an orphan? Maybe she just wanted to stroke my hair for the last time or give me a kiss on my cheek as she used to every day before I go to school. I still don't know!

I felt a complete silence as if even my heart stopped beating for a while. My mouth was open and tears flowed out of my eyes.

"Mum....mummm.....maa", that's all I managed to say. And cried! Just cried. She didn't reply. Her face looked calm now. She went into the eternal tranquility. I cried inevitably looking up towards the sky holding her head in my lap. I bent over to hug her as I did not have ample strength to bring her close to my chest. She wasn't warm as usual. It was like a cold flesh. She didn't utter even a word to assuage me. Sobs echoed the area for a while, but the voice, if I could hear in reply, was of my echo and that of snowfall on withered leaves of the trees which were standing silently there, as if they were trying to cover their eyes with snow in order to not witness what's happening there. I felt as if they were ashamed of being trees and having nothing in their ability to help me.

‘The culprit is god’ that’s all I was feeling. But at the same time, I was praying to the same God, "Please, send my mother to the heaven." Ironically, the same heaven she was talking about nine hours ago.

"Goodbye," I said to my guardians and started running as I saw a group of people with their faces covered by scarfs and a gun in their hands coming towards me. I'd not have even tried to run away from there but the last commandment of my mother was to be obeyed.

I stood up and sprinted towards their opposite side. After darting through congested streets of the valley for almost 5-6 kilometers, I reached the other end of the valley and then my legs answered me. I ran my eyes all around. Oh, Miracle! A ray of hope rose inside me as I saw one of my school friends' father there. I went to him and requested to take me inside their home to save me from those terrorists. He refused, saying "Sorry, who are you? I don't know you."

I was stunned hearing his answer. Though his wistful eyes were talking about the reason why he was saying this all, perhaps, he was afraid of those people. He wanted to help me. But he knew that I'm a Hindu and saving a Hindu will put himself in peril.

I was tired now and my face withered. I fell down there almost unconsciously on the road that a car came and took me inside. Later, it dawned on me that it was another family whose house was burnt to ashes and they too were forced to leave the valley. As the car was going through streets, I saw many houses were burnt to ashes, many dead bodies were scattered over the roadside. I saw a house's soul burning in the flames. Some people were standing nude in front of those monsters who were carrying guns in their hands; the reason was to know the religion they belong to.

The new year and January which brings chilled winter mornings is approaching us. This month, January, conjure up the January of 1990. I don't even come of my room on 1st January. I find myself somewhere back to those days when you people do enjoy the New Year.

A fear pertaining to this month is stuck inside my heart, and as it approaches me... my body starts quivering and some questions arise in my mind which are always unanswered, and perhaps, will remain unanswered till I inhale my last breath.

Why did this happen to us Kashmiri pundits? Was the fault ours or our religion's? Why have you people forgotten us? I often see you, media, politicians talking about many other riots and massacres and you should in fact, but why are we side-lined? Aren't we humans? Oh, I see! We are no vote bank. History won't forget you. We had to leave our land and we lost our beloved

ones because some filthy minds wanted to spread their religion. Where are your human right organizations? I see - they're liberal. They won't speak on this. It's hard to be liberal when you see your dying mother asking you to leave her immediately, and the same way it's easy to be liberal running your fingers on keyboard buttons and periodically grabbing the coffee cup to take a sip while looking out of your window towards chirruping birds sitting on a coconut tree.

That winter! It was so cold

So cold that they left our houses on fire

That they warmed themselves on our pyre,

That it froze people's emotions

Snowfall seized humanity relations

So cold that it froze someone's mother

That snow enveloped screams of slaughter

That winter! It was so cold,

So cold that even today we're waiting for a season – anew

That our screams are still finding a place in the snow to go through That winter! It was so cold

Smell the wind, hear the silence

Souls are still wandering in search of justice

That winter.....!

Why don't they understand that when the first ray of the sun comes from heaven crossing the sky touching cliffs, removing the fog and meets another heaven on our earth - when it falls on the bluish water of Jhelum river walking amidst the valley - It wants to see love, peace, enjoy spree and listen to some beautiful songs, not your bullet fires and screams of innocent people?