

Locked Doors

By Misbah Ahmad

“No one should die near Eid days,” I climbed up on the charpoy to sit near her while taking the bowl of hot halwa out of my mother’s hands, who, with her stare, told me that I had, yet again, uttered words that I should not have. But ignoring that long and discontented stare, I continued to deliver my thoughts on the funeral announcement just made through the mosque loudspeaker. “It ruins Eid for their loved ones forever. Every year twice, near Eid, their happiness would be overshadowed by the loss.”

My mother sighed once again thinking about what went wrong at her end that she could not teach her daughter to stop saying the first thing that came to her mind. I thought it was a very astute observation. And that’s how it was around Khala; one could get away by saying anything. The comment got buried in the compliments of the sweetest and most delicious pumpkin halwa prepared by her. But who knew, years later it would come back to me as a strange déjà vu.



It has been an hour since I received the call. But the voice of my sister keeps lurking in my ears. “Khala died this morning; one moment she was taking out her Eid clothes, and the next she was gone.” I could not hear anything after that. I could not comprehend anything beyond that.

I was just with her yesterday when we both went to visit my sister to celebrate Chand Raat, the night before Eid, and Khala insisted on staying with her. I agreed because she seemed like herself after ages, playing with the kids, helping them with their bangles, and applying henna on their tiny hands. She had a glimmer in her eyes that was lost years ago.

Khala was not just a person, she was a place that became a home for so many. She was a woman of few words, yet she was a story that needed to be told. She had the sweetest soft voice and yet was a voice that demanded to be heard. She was the epitome of Wonder Woman.

For me, she was a safe place. I felt the warmth of her arms the night I first saw hate up close. Before that, it was just a word, a feeling I was taught to avoid. But that night it was a person with a brightly burning torch. That night it was a voice, a scream, a shrieking sound that pierced one’s heart. I could not understand what was happening around me as it happened too fast. I was dreaming of yet another garden laden with grape vines and mango trees when I felt the sharp shoulders of my father under my head replacing the soft pillow. I opened my heavy eyes and saw my mother handing the locks to my father while balancing my sister on her shoulders. I blinked, turned around, and saw my father placing the locks on the door that were never opened again. I heard voices, I saw the flames, I felt the heat, and I went back to dreaming of the gardens.

When I woke up, I saw more yellow hues following the pick-up we were in with a few other familiar faces, only this time it was the yellow of the dawn. My father gave me a glass of water and told me, with a hesitant nod, that everything will be alright.

After a few more hours of traveling in silence, we reached a place that became our home for the next few years. Khala was the first person to approach the pick-up. She took me into her arms and complimented my mother for the “fashion choice” she had made by putting two different shoes on my

feet. The laughter that followed was the first thing I heard since the voice of hate.

No one ever really talked about that night again. I once asked my father about it and all he said was it was not a place for us to make a home. I never understood what he meant. We already had a home there. We were not any different from them. We spoke the same language, we looked the same, we saw the same moon every night, and we woke up to a familiar sun every morning. Then, how were we any different from the people who were ready to burn us alive? No one ever answered that. I don't think anyone ever had any answer for that.

Khala was everyone's Khala. It wasn't until after years of knowing her that I got to know her real name. Before that, she was just Khala – one's maternal aunt. And it suited her well. She had no kids or siblings of her own, but the house where she lived with her husband was always full of people.

It would start early in the morning. Just as she would be folding her prayer mat after the morning prayer, the first knock would come. It would either be Sakeena or her sister Tehmeena with an empty pail. Khala would ask them to sit and wait while her husband would milk the cows. Both sisters were fans of "how, when, where, who and what" talks. Only Khala's husband bringing in the milk pot could stop them.

After that, kids from around the neighborhood would start running up to her door for their daily Quran lessons. They would all line up around the big charpoy facing the lawn. They told Khala they liked to sit there because it could accommodate them all, but Khala knew well that it is the only place from where they could see her dog sitting under the big pipal tree on the lawn. They enjoyed teasing him.

Breakfast at Khala's always tasted different. Just like her, her parathas were distinct. They weren't round – rather they were, unconventionally, square. I had so many parathas at her place, but I still could not figure out how she made them so soft on the



inside and crispy on the outside. I had run, many a morning, from her home to mine with greasy fingers to get ready for school, where I could not wait for those long classes to be over so that I could finally go to her house to play on the long swing in her lawn. It was where I would share with her all my thoughts and observations of the day. We called it the chai talk. She drank her chai and I talked.

That chai was also something out of this world. She took her time to cook it. Putting every ingredient in with great care. Chai leaves, sugar, cardamom, cloves, and a stick of cinnamon boiled in water until it turned black with shades of red, and then she would gradually add the milk turning it to the prettiest shade of brown. She took her time with everything and everyone almost as if she were praying. Evenings in her house were for all sorts of social gatherings. There were days when people brought in their radios to listen together to their favorite verses from Faiz and Ghalib. Some brought in their favorite book to share stories. There were nights when



people gathered to watch dramas in black and white on her small television that a neighbor had brought from Iran.

I sometimes even spent nights at her house. Like her days, her nights were simple too. Charpoys in the corridor with the softest sheets to cover, fireflies flying from the small dark corners of the wooden roof, and her sweet voice humming the lullabies of all the birds going to sleep.

On the days I slept at home, which was just on the other side of her walls, her house was the first place I would run up to after waking up and it became the last place I visited before leaving the country.

Our father had arranged for us all to move to a land far away from the haunting past and a dreaded future. He wanted to make a safe home for his family away from hate. But can you ever really escape hate?

I was there, just a few months before our departure, when they came knocking on her door. I saw her standing in front of them, her usual strong posture, while they inquired about her husband. I heard her telling them that they were mistaken, for he had been home since morning; he could not have possibly done that. But they insisted that it was her husband who had killed or at least plotted to kill the Mullah of the local mosque.

The only evidence presented to her was the argument that had occurred between them a few days ago. Her husband had confronted the Mullah about his speech on the people of a different sect. He argued with him that his comments could ignite hate toward the people who were not much different than him. He warned him about the hate that could engulf all forms of peace. The events that unfolded proved him right.

Khala's husband was eventually arrested and put in jail. People chose sides. Hate made home. The same hate that made us leave our homes was now at Khala's doorstep.

Sakeena and Tehmeena no longer came to her for milk. The hate had declared it haram for them. The same milk they had been drinking for years had now become fuel for the fire of hell. There were not any kids now lining up across the big charpoy to tease her dog. Their parents did not want her to teach them the Quran. The verses of Faiz and Ghalib were replaced by hateful curses and chants that

people screamed in front of her house, daily, almost like a ritual.

As we packed our bags to leave another home and lock a few more doors, she stood with us smiling, hiding her pain. She told us she is strong; she said she can fight the hate. "I have known these people all my life, they are just angry, they do not really hate me," she said to soothe the burns left on her heart by the people, her people.

I could never really comprehend how one could hate someone. You could dislike them for a habit, or you could detest their choice. But to hate someone simply because they believed in something that you do not agree with must require hate to first possess your body and then your soul. Only then can it become so strong in a person that it destroys everything in its way.

For years she stood in its way. She told us over the phone about her weekly meetings with her husband in jail. He was kept in the death cell, kaal kothri, a room with pitch black darkness. They hated him so much that they did not even want him to see a glimmer of light.

Although she tried to cover it with her usual laughter and light-hearted jokes, one could hear in her voice that she was getting tired. Her conversations on the phone got shorter. They became less about seeing Sakeena and Tehmeena passing her by without greeting her and more about her asking us about our lives. "I do not have anything new to tell you. So, you tell me what is new at your side."

It was a Friday. We were not expecting a call from her. That's why when the phone rang, and we saw her number on it we all stared at each other, confused and puzzled. My mother finally answered the call, breathed in a long sigh of relief and tears started flowing from her eyes. The court proved the charges against Khala's husband false. He was finally coming home.

Khala talked to us all for more than an hour, telling us excitedly about her plans of welcoming him. She wanted to make arrangements for more than fifty people. She was certain that others would join too. "I will make pumpkin halwa for everyone. Oh, you all must come soon. You have to come soon." She wanted to make it like "those old days" that now seemed like a dream we all once lived.

But, the hate was too strong for Khala to overcome. The moment her husband stepped into the house, which she had decorated with lights and colorful strips of paper, he was shot in the back. Her husband's smile faded, giving in to sharp pain. A loud chant followed: "We did it, we took our revenge, we sent him to hell!" But wasn't this earth hell for him already? His house was robbed of its peace and happiness. He had to spend years away from his wife who had now gotten old. He had to agree to sell his cows and to part from his dog because it was becoming too much for his wife to take care of. And what was left of everything that he loved or lived for was taken away from him with that one bullet that pierced his body. What else was left in hell for him to feel? He had already lived the hate.

Khala wanted it to be a happy reunion, but we only managed to reach in time to hold her while she let go of her husband's body, one last time. There was not much left for Khala after that. There was not much left of Khala after that. She had to abandon the house, which was a refuge for many unhomed people.

We arranged for her to come live with us in Germany. While her plane flew across the sky in the yellow dusk, almost like an illusion of nostalgia, it was I standing with my arms open for her at the airport, trying to make her laugh at her strange "fashion choice" of pairing bright green socks with her sandals. But this time no one laughed. This time, her body and soul were in separate places.

I was holding her hand, but she was still, in her thoughts, holding onto the locks of the doors that were never opened again. Although her mouth learned to create language, and her brain became acquainted with the change of scenery around her, she still lived in the memories of the courtyard. She could not go back to where she made pumpkin halwa for everyone.

Just a few days before Eid, I asked her what she would like for her Eidi – an Eid present. Instantly, almost with longing, she said, "home."

Death, like a genie, granted her wish.

As I saw people lining up for her funeral after the Eid prayer, I smiled, remembering her reply to my words from all those years ago: "What if that is the only way for them to live."

