

A Mother's Mirage

A story inspired by 'Ma Ka Khwab' by Allama Iqbal

Mein Soji Jo Ek Shab To Dekha Ye Khawab.

(As I slept one night I saw this dream)

The day my baby daughter got stabbed in our home is forever carved in my mind. I can still see it. We ran inside, hearts pounding, guided by her piercing cries, a sound that echoed in my mind like a siren. When I saw her, her yellow kurta painted with blood, I rushed to cradle her in my arms. "Ya Allah, please protect my child," I whispered, my voice trembling with desperation. Her blood was everywhere—on her, on me, pooling in the folds of the blanket, dripping onto the floor. The metallic scent hung in the air, thick and suffocating, mingling with the spices from the kitchen where I had prepared lunch just moments before. My husband rushed towards me with white bandages from my student nursing kit and we wrapped her. One bandage after another. With each, the flow of blood slowed, but my dream of nursing slipped further away. At that moment, I knew we had to escape to a safe place for my baby.

I could have never imagined that our neighbours, once our dearest friends would ever break into our house and hurt my daughter. My husband and I had gone to the street shop to grab locks and torches to keep us protected and safer during these partition times while she was asleep. Within those few minutes, our neighbours broke in. The smashed windows and ripped curtains framed the house. *The bandages.* If I ever needed cardamom for my chai, I knew I could knock on their door and when their lights went out, they would come to us, knowing we'd have candles to spare. We used to joke that, despite the unreliable electricity, our friendship never dimmed. A part of me wanted to believe that the bond we once shared was not entirely gone. How could it be, when the scent of cardamom still lingers in my kitchen? I wonder, will there ever come a day when they would need a candle again? Can we ever return to those comforting moments, or have they become ghosts of a unity that will never exist again?

The British Raj implemented their divide-and-conquer regime so well. A country that lived in peace for centuries, was now torn apart with hatred seeping from within. For generations, we were welcomed into the houses of people of different faiths and ate among them, yet the hatred fueled by the British divided us away from each other. We wore the same clothes, enjoyed the same poetry and ate the same food. Religion never divided us before, but now separate water taps were installed for Muslims and Hindus to use.

Ye Dekha Ke Mein Ja Rahi Hun Kahin Andhera Hai Aur Rah Milti Nahin.

(I dreamt I was going somewhere on the way

Dark it was and impossible to find the way)

We left in the quiet of the night, with only the clothes on my back and a simple gold chain on my neck, hidden under my scarf, hoping it would help start our future. With a small bag of rations, I closed my home's door for the last time. I looked at my husband, those eyes of his which used to shine bright with life every day when he came home from work, were no longer there, instead replaced with emptiness and sorrow. My sole hope was that we could build a life for my baby girl, and give her a life where she completes her dreams. *The*

bandages. My daughter was my strength, my hope to cross the border. Stories of those who crossed the border burned into me, the murders, rapes and robberies filled me with worry. Safety was neither at home nor crossing the border. But I had hope. Trains were too dangerous and an easy target for bandits. Almost a guaranteed death wish. Blood would seep out of train carriages as buckets would overflow with water in the rain. The only other way we could think of was to pass through the rice fields, to avoid being seen.

Larazta Tha Der Se Mera Baal Baal Qadam Ka Tha Dehshat Se Uthna Mahal.

(Trembling all over with fear I was

Difficult to take even a step with fear was)

We hid in the cold and wet rice fields, holding each other close. With each rustle of the water, my heart raced. The cold, unmistakable touch of a snake slid against me. Our stomachs ached with hunger, relying solely on the dry bread and roasted chickpeas we rushedly packed. The rice fields hid us in their long leaves as we prayed no one would come and find us. I held my daughter tightly to my chest, making sure she didn't get too cold and let out a cry.

Jo Kuch Hosla Pa Ke Aagay Berhi, To Dekha Qitar Aik Larkon Ki Thi.

(With some courage as I forward moved

I saw some boys as lined in a nice array)

As we deepened in the field, I felt my husband's grip tighten around my wrist as we ran into another family, and in their hands lay the lifeless body of a newborn. "We can't stop moving, we have to bury him now." The hushed voice of a man holding a baby sent shivers down my spine, as he was unable to have a proper burial for his child. No matter which side people fled to, the inhumanity remained the same. Before I could do anything my husband pulled me further into the fields, away from the others. It had been a week now and my heart raced each night, the uncertainty of the future kept me awake. As we passed the rice fields, we stumbled further into a farm, where even if we got hungry and snapped the fruit off of a tree branch, it would taste the blood that ran deep through the soil. This showed we were at the border. A border marked by the blood of millions.

Khuda Jane Jana Tha Un Ko Kahan.

(No one knew where they were to go)

We managed to cross the border, going from farm to farm. We stayed on the first farm across the border in Pakistan and did some fieldwork. My husband, once a high-earning and respectable police officer, became a farmer. The sun rose up, signalling for the first work day. I stretched over to my daughter, who lay on the same bed.

"I can't find her," I yelled, frantically searching the room, my eyes darted everywhere. The room was dark except for the slight dappled sunlight coming through the cracked curtain. "Who?" My husband awoke and rubbed his eyes. Confusion etched deep lines across his face. I sprang from the bed and started searching the room. *Maybe she crawled under the bed, maybe she's hiding under the curtain, maybe she's gone out onto the field.* I pulled off the covers of the bed and pulled back each curtain, but there was no playful giggle, no bright smile waiting to greet me.

“Who?” He asked again and shook me gently, grounding me as if to pull me back from the edge of my spiralling thoughts. My eyes were fixed on the empty spot beside me, the place where she would always be, nestled in the comfort of our bed. *The bandages.*

“She was right next to me!” My hands trembled as I thought of where she may have gone.

“I know...” His concerned expression softened, his furrowed eyebrows relaxed and his gaze stopped at my eyes. As though he was searching for our girl in my eyes.

I froze, turning to him, “You know?” I sat on my bed gathering my breath. His words brought a wave of relief that washed over me, cooling my panic. *Of course, she must be nearby—maybe outside, maybe just playing in the next room.* That comforting thought wrapped around me, leaving me feeling a little embarrassed for having such worries when I had fought so hard to keep her safe. A soft smile curled onto my lips as I sank back onto the bed, the tension in my body slowly releasing.

My husband seemed lost in a whirlwind of thoughts, so palpable that I could almost hear them. “So where is she?” I asked while reaching out to his hands, trying to draw him back. “Well, do you hear her cries?” He asked, his gaze not leaving my eyes, his hands not leaving mine. I did hear cries. I heard the cries of the crops in the searing wind, the rustling of leaves pleading for rain and the distant wail of despair carried on the air. But I didn't hear the cries of my baby girl. With the same smile on my face, a puzzled expression creased my forehead. But when I looked at him, he mirrored my expression.

“No, I don't.” With that, my husband turned away from me and started putting on his chappals. As he did, I noticed the cuts on his feet, raw and tender from the frayed straps that had long since lost their comfort. Those same feet used to wear polished dress shoes each day as he headed out to the station to work. “So where is she?” I asked again, unable to understand why he was unable to give me a straight answer.

“I'll bring her home with me after work,” he said before stepping out, closing the door behind him as he headed to the fields. Hours passed by as I did small crop work around the house. Sweat dripped down my back in the scorching heat, with the slight breeze swaying among the distant trees.

Mujhe Uss Jamat Mein Aya Nazar. Diya Uss Ke Hathon Mein Jalta Na Tha.
(When in this troupe my son saw I, The lamp he had in his hand was not lighted)

My husband returned from work, sweat crowned on his forehead. “You didn't bring her?” I glanced at his empty hands, my heart sinking.

“Do you remember the day our house got broken into? What happened to our daughter that day, do you remember it?” He asked as he sat on the bed to take off his chappals. *The bandages.* The unsettling memory washed over me, stabbing at my heart. Her blood, her cries, her kurta. Everything flooded my head.

“I know you remember, I can see it in your eyes. Look I've needed to tell you this for a while... She never made it.” A wave of disbelief crashed over me, sending chills down my spine. Sweat started gathering on my forehead, dripping down like the tears that were unable to fall from my eyes. “You fought so hard to save her, but we were left with nothing at home. They shattered your medical kit, leaving us without even a single bandage. In the end, all we had was a white cloth to wrap around her for the burial.” As my husband stepped closer, wrapping his arms around me. My truth, the hope I had held onto for so long, unravelled in an instant. Memories ignited within me, burning with a ferocity I couldn't escape. The moment her lifeless body lay in my arms. At that moment, I felt utterly alone, trapped in a nightmare from which I could not awaken.

"I came here only for her, I thought..." My breath was shaking. He took a deep breath, his gaze steady yet filled with pain. "I couldn't tell you the truth before. If I had, we might never have made it here. Your strength and hope, channelled by the love for our daughter, carried us across that border." Each word was a jagged shard piercing through the fragile shield I had built around myself. Each memory tore into me. The world around me started to spin uncontrollably, each rotation blurring the lines of reality. My vision dimmed, the colours melting into a haze of indistinct shapes.

When I woke up I heard my husband's voice, "It'll be okay, just like it was." He gave me a clay cup full of water. "When she died, I lost all hope in everything. But, when I saw the hope in your eyes when you imagined her in your arms, I let you believe it. Maybe it was wrong, but I needed you to survive. Without that hope you had, we would've both died with our baby girl." He held my hand tighter as tears filled my eyes. Memories kept hitting me like a tsunami, threatening to drown me in grief. Amidst tears, I realised my husband had borne this burden alone, protecting me from a truth too painful to bear.

Months passed, and I was unable to console myself. Each day became a relentless cycle of pain and sorrow, leaving me consumed by grief and tears. Each day I kept losing myself even more, it was as though I was forgetting how to eat how to walk how to live. *The cloth.* One of those nights, as I drifted to sleep, I dreamt of my daughter holding a blown-out candle among kids with bright flames.

*Judai Mein Rehti Hun Main Be-Qarar
Paroti Hun Her Rouz Ashkon Ke Haar
Rulati Hai Tujh Ko Juddai Meri
Nahin Uss Mein Kuch Bhi Bhalai Meri
Diya Phir Dikha Ker Ye Kehne Laga
Tere Aanasuon Ne Bhujaya Issay
(Restless due to separation I am
Weeping every day for ever I am
As the child saw the distress in me
He replied thus, turning around to me
The separation from me makes you cry
Not least little good does this to me"
Showing me the lamp then he started talking
"Your tears have extinguished this"!)*

As awoke from my sleep, a newfound purpose washed over me, transforming the heaviness in my chest into something lighter, almost empowering. I felt as though she was guiding me forward. I knew I had to be strong for her and confront reality. I did not want to extinguish her flame again by crying more. My princess was in a peaceful, better place, distant from this hate and suffering. For the first time since learning of her passing, I rolled out of my bed and started working on the farm.