



POETRY

Their Songs

RONNY NOOR

*Shake, oh grave;
my wailing voice
is the autumn wind.*
— Basho

I know a craven Mir Jafar
when I see one, pleading
with me softly, sweetly,
like a dear friend
to shake off the past
as if I were a newborn.

But I am who I am for that
eerie night in March
when homes collapsed
and the heavens cried
in the manic tank fires
of Yahya's henchmen,
who wished to paint our land
red with Bengali blood.

Buried lives tell no tales;
but I know the ones who died –
fathers and mothers,
brothers and sisters –
for no fault of their own
but for seeking a better life.

Those gunshots amidst screams
haunted me for nine months:
endless nights of horrid dreams
seared deep in my heart.

They live in my songs
to sing of that March night –
we must live in freedom
to honor the fallen lives.

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FICTION

KHEYA'S WAR

FAYEZA HASANAT

The ant mound was intact until Kheya stepped on it. Pappu was trying to pick some ripe oranges from the big orange tree by the gate. While running toward him, Kheya stepped right on the mound and got attacked by a platoon of red ants. "Stupid ants!" Kheya started jumping and shaking her legs.

"I'm going to teach them a lesson, wait!" Pappu brought the watering hose from the yard and started sprinkling over the ant mound. "Don't kill them!" Kheya wanted to snatch the hose from Pappu, but ran to the house instead, covering her ears firmly with her two little hands. She could not stand these air raid sirens. Meanwhile, as the siren reached its shrilling peak, Pappu dropped the water hose and followed Kheya. He lived a few blocks away and there was no time for him to run back home.

Kheya's mother Nazma got furious to see Pappu at her house.

"I don't know if these kids will ever understand the danger they're in," she complained to her husband. "They think this siren is just a drill! And this boy—why doesn't he listen to his parents?"

"Don't scold him now," Faruq said. He then asked all the kids to run with him to take shelter in the trench.

The trench was originally a pit oven built for them by Wahid—their next-door neighbor and Faruq's colleague. Four years ago, when Faruq was transferred to Islamabad from Dhaka, Wahid picked them up from the airport and brought them to this house that was rented under Faruq's name. Wahid's wife Bushra, the generous Pathan woman accepted Nazma as a younger sister, while his daughter Shehnaz claimed Kheya as her best friend—her *seheli*. From day one, the two girls clung together as if they were Siamese twins.

Every week, the two families gathered at Wahid's house to cook and share their dinner together. Nazma prepared her signature dish—a beef and *methi saag* curry—and helped Bushra bake the tandoori naans. The children sat around

The two of them worked all afternoon to dig a two feet wide and three feet deep hole in the ground. They smoothed its walls with mud-paste and bordered it with bricks.

"I hope you'll stop by with Bushra one day, to taste our home-baked tandoori naan." Nazma wanted to sound happy.

"I hope so too," said Wahid. "But we'll definitely resume our old routine once everything turns back to normal."

"Yeah, we'll see what happens after the war," Faruq said, as he shook Wahid's hand.

The war continued for months and the two families hardly met after that day. Nazma's pit oven stayed unused because the war had eaten up their appetite. Every night, Kheya went to bed hoping to wake up to a normal morning—with a mother going hysterical preparing breakfast for them, and a father carpooling with uncle Wahid to work. She missed the morning commotion that all the kids of the neighborhood created while waiting for the school bus under the *sukh chain* tree right across from their house. Waiting for the bus with her friends under that big old tree was what Kheya considered the best start of a normal day—a day she now hardly remembered.

In December, when the air raid began, Wahid showed up again with another proposition:

"Bombs have hit Rawal Pindi, Chak Lala, Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad too. I've built a trench in my backyard, and so did almost everyone else who did not flee the town. I suggest you do the same."

Faruq dug a deep tunnel inside the unused pit oven and turned it into a narrow trench, big enough to protect his family during an air raid.

That day, when Pappu took shelter in the pit-oven tunnel with them, Nazma exploded in anger at Faruq. "Why didn't you build a bigger trench? If this air raid lasts all night, then all these kids will suffocate to death!" She then scolded Pappu for being an unruly boy. Pappu started crying. "I just came to tell Kheya that we'll be leaving the town any day now."

Kheya did not want to hear anything. She pressed her ears firmly with her two tiny index fingers, in an effort to stop all sounds from entering her head—the sounds of war and the sounds of an impending loss of a friend.

II
It was not the word 'war' that baffled Kheya; it was the lack of life in people that rattled her the most. She did not know why Shehnaz stopped playing with her. She did not understand why Nazreen's mother shoved her out of their house the other day. "Go home, dear. Nazreen won't play with an enemy girl," she said, as she closed the door on Kheya's face. Perplexed, Kheya then ran to Pappu's house and saw uncle Jalil — Pappu's father—wiping off some words from their door with two unsteady hands. Pappu's older brothers were also busy washing off charcoal marks from the windows and the boundary walls of their house. Some of the words were already erased and some of them were smudged and in the process of disappearance. Written in Urdu, the words stood like alert soldiers, waiting to attack the enemy eyes. Holding her Dolly to her chest, Kheya stood on their driveway, trying to comprehend the true



meanings of the words—the smudged ones and the half-wiped ones and the ones that were still intact:

"...chli...abu...babu...machli babu...bangalee babu machli babu...bhaag ja...apna ghar...machli khana to idhar na rehna...bangalee saaley...bancho..."

The more she read, the more she got confused. "So, Dolly, eating fish is a bad thing then?" Kheya asked her doll. "I'm a bad person because I eat fish? Is that what Nazreen's mother meant when she called mean enemy girl?"

The doll did not answer.

Pappu was in the backyard, talking to Bula *apa*—his older sister. Kheya considered Bula *apa* the prettiest woman in the whole world. She was a college girl with long dark hair and a mouthful of pearl-white teeth and a pair of dark eyes that always smiled. But Bula *apa*'s eyes were not smiling that day. Someone tried to break into their house last night and filled all the walls with words of hate. They were the only Bengali family living

in that block that had not fled yet, so it was only logical that they would be the targets, she said.

"Where did they all go?" Kheya wanted to know.

"They paid some people to help them cross the border, to reach either India or Afghanistan, from where they'd go to Bangladesh," Bula *apa* said. "Who will I play with when Pappu is gone? Nazreen's mom thinks I'm an enemy girl, you know?"

"She is silly. But tell me this, little monkey: do your parents know you're here?"

"Nope; they were taking a nap. My Dolly got bored sitting home all day and she wanted me to come out to play."

"Tell your Dolly that she shouldn't have done that. Islamabad isn't safe for any of us anymore," Bula *apa*'s voice cracked.

"Everyone acts strange during a war. I don't like it at all," Kheya nodded her head in frustration. "Everyone keeps talking about a war, but where is it taking place?"

Bula *apa* gave Kheya a strong hug and asked her to behave like a good girl and stay inside the house until the war ended.

III
Pappu's family left the town that night. In the morning, some hooligans looted and vandalized that house and put their furniture on fire. "There's no remorse, no pity left in these people anymore. I think we should leave soon." Kheya's father said. But Nazma was hesitant to take such a risk with her three little daughters. "Our neighbors aren't that bad. Wahid bhai is here, and I..." Nazma's optimistic words sounded so hollow that she felt no urge to complete her sentence. They had no neighbors—at least not the ones they could see. Most of the Bengali families were gone and the Pakistani neighbors had stopped acknowledging their presence. Kheya's family lived an invisible life, as if they were ghosts—stuck in a bottle and stranded in the middle of a silent ocean—waiting for a rustle of life—no matter how insignificant that rustle might be.

The silence was broken one night, by a vigorous knock at the front door.

"Faruq, let me in! It's important! Please open the door!" A familiar voice kept pleading and banging.

"Don't! Please don't open it!" Nazma whispered.

"It's Wahid—Shehnaz's father. I don't think he means any harm," Faruq said.

"No, no, please don't open it; I don't trust anyone these days!" Nazma frantically said.

"Open the door before it's too late!" Wahid pleaded earnestly.

As Faruq unbolted the door, Wahid rushed in and picked up Kheya and asked the rest of the family to follow him.

"Where are you taking my daughter? Kheya's dad! Stop that man! He is taking away my daughter!"

Hearing her scream, Wahid came back and spoke softly. "Sister Nazma, please trust me. Kheya is like a daughter to me, and I won't let anything happen to her." There was something in his voice that calmed Nazma down.

"Are you sure they're coming tonight, Wahid?" Faruq asked. "We've already made our plans to flee in the morning, with a group of Bengali families... through the Peshwar border..."

"What! Didn't you hear what they did to Jalil's older daughter? Some thugs assaulted Bula and another girl and then kept them as their ransom, do you know? And you're planning to put some crooks like those in charge of your family's safety?"

Faruq did not argue anymore. He could hear a growing uproar somewhere in the neighborhood. Faruq and Nazma quickly picked up their two younger daughters and followed Wahid.

From Wahid's house, they could hear the crowd getting louder. Men—young and old—were talking and jeering and cheering and laughing and cracking jokes and the windows of their house in the same breath.

"Baba, baba, when will the war end?" Kheya asked.

"Shhhh, my darling, stay quiet." Faruq held her close.

"But baba, I forgot to bring my Dolly! I left her in my room. Will they kill her? Kheya started sobbing.

Faruq did not know how to tell his little girl that everyone turns into puppets during a war, and the strings of humanity get tangled and weltered at the ruthless hands of fate.

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the pit oven and watched their mothers who stayed busy flattening the dough on their palms and then fluffing and stretching and then pressing each naan on the hot surface of the oven. The seven children—including the two dolls that Shehnaz and Kheya carried with them—sat under the starlit sky, waiting for the soft and warm tandoori bread to blanket their cold hands. The dolls also had to have their share, which was later consumed by their owners. The two eight-year-old girls treated their dolls as living beings, because they were talking dolls. But the dolls did not talk much; they only said "Hello, I'm Dolly," and then giggled like a happy toddler. The keys that were hidden in their back had to be wound fully before they could deliver that sentence once. But that did not stop the two girls from making the dolls talk and giggle all day long. Life for these children was nothing but a fire of joy that glowed its warmth, like a friendly tandoori oven that lay flat in the earth and shone like a circular sun.

Their joy ended abruptly one morning when Wahid showed up at Faruq's door, carrying a pair of shovels.

"Some neighbors are calling me a traitor for being friends with a Bengali family," Wahid reported. "Let's postpone our weekly dinner until the war ends. In the meantime, let's build a pit oven for sister Nazma in your backyard."

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