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A Letter from Afar

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The stark darkness takes this sparsely populated village, of Gorkha district, in its tight embrace. The swallows and the sparrows twitter in the bamboo bush, perhaps seeking nest to avoid the chill. The villagers have gone abed but Muna, a woman, at her late teens, returns home late with a bundle of grass at her back, throws it in front of the cattle in a shed and enters a thatch roofed mud house to find her daughter asleep. Only at this late hour of the evening, she gets leisure from the inanities of the day to meet her daughter whom she leaves at the mercy of the unknown. Her breasts moisten, seeing the cherubic face of her daughter. The daughter has slept in the rags, spread near the hearth, perhaps getting tired of the long wait for the mother. She is the only creature who understands the mother in the true sense. Poor girl! Sleeps but not complains. Muna sits in a mattress and takes the daughter in her lap as if trying to breastfeed, while at the same time lightening fire in the hearth to cook something for the two of the family. Her joints have sprained with fatigue and she half dozes while making fire. But rest is the unmet stranger of her life. “Rest, god forgot to write for me”-she speaks to herself in a low tone and places the rice pot in the oven. No matter how tired she is, she has to feed two hapless mouths of this home. In the meantime, she hears a footfall at the door and then the repeated calls “Muna, oh Muna. Please come outside.”

Gutted with the fear of unknown, she comes to the door. Her fear lessens as she sees a familiar face of a letter bearer who came to everyone’s home with a letter in the village, excepting her own. With hope, fear and curiosity, she asks, “Dai what brought you here at this time?”

“Muna I have a letter for you.”

“Letter for me!”

Yes, it’s true. So I came at this time.”

Muna, still surprised, queries, “Who sent it to me?”

“Don’t know exactly but it says it’s about your husband.”

She still does not trust her ears and her eyes brim with the tears... perhaps of hope and joy. She knows not when the bearer goes but the phrase ‘your husband’ keeps resonating in her ears. The pace of her heart increases. She doesn’t know how to respond to this time of her life. She looks at the deep blue sky and finds the stars twinkling, as if with joy for her. She goes in; cooks and the mother and daughter eat together. Setting out the fire, she sleeps near the hearth, with her daughter at her tight bosom.

Unlike the previous nights, sleep does not come to her. Her body produces the different rhythm at the prospect of her husband's arrival. The bygone days come to her eyes as if in the screen of television. Her husband's face comes to her memory again and again. She remembers how she, at the age of sixteen, had left her natal family for that man, secretly at midnight. Against the consent of her family, she had chosen her man; stealing herself away from home, beneath the waning moon. She recalls his baritone voice that had made her forget everyone of her life. She recalls those days that the two had spent even without the minor miffs. That man, as she recalls, was always beside her with constant care, love and support and the birth of the daughter had added to the family happiness of the couple. But she feels, the destiny had quite otherwise in its store for her.

The bliss of her life comes to a sudden halt when two people, whom she had never seen before, came to her home at night and called them from outside. As they went out to respond, one of them said to her husband, "Bhai, we have to ask you something in secret, so please walk with us". When her husband demands to know what it was, they threaten to take his life, if not obeyed duly. Muna tries to inquire what it was but her husband beckons her not to speak anything, perhaps sensing a danger of a sort. In his terrified voice, as she remembers, he had said "Muna I will be back soon, don't worry." But that day has never come to her life. Since that day on, she has heard nothing of him. She never knows what, on the earth, her husband had done to be taken in such a way at midnight. She had occasionally heard of 'Maoist cadres' and the 'plain cloth police' but she couldn't know whether the plain cloth or the cadres took her man away from his nest.

After this event, she goes to the local police station seeking the whereabouts of her husband. To her surprise, police respond her very positively and politely. The police in-charge sows the seeds of hope in her heart with the assurance, "don't worry, we will bring your husband back very soon". She at least sees hope in his words. How could this unlettered understand tricks hidden in the sweet words? They don't even register her complaints and send her back with the fake promise. Every time she goes to the police she gets the same fake assurance. Police take no single step to bring her loved one back home. She hardly knows that the police in-charge takes interest in tendering service to the high profiles that visit the locality, cherishing the dream of transfer in the lucrative places. Besides that, he is a fan of young unmarried local bar maidens in the village. He is so close to them and renders them the service of every sort. So his visits to the local bars add to their warmth. He always visits the village, savoring the taste for local chickens. He carefully vets the profiles of the chickens in the locality. Muna, loner turned wife of disappeared member, cannot arouse much interest to him, nor does she have the chickens of his likes. She can even not understand the malice lurking in his heart and frequents her visit to the police station, with the same hope in her heart.

Once in the evening, Muna, as she recalls, was hurrying back to her home and seeing the police in charge in the bar she enters there with the same hope. When she inquires about her husband, he says in a drunken tone, "yes your husband found! Don't you see the husbands around?"

Pointing towards himself with a finger, he adds, “Don’t you see your husband sitting in front of you?” He is the king of the bar, so he need not fear anyone. Sensing the danger of a sort, Muna leaves the place weeping. From that day on, she does not go to police again. Her fruitless search of her beloved man stops then and there forever.

Almost after three years of that fateful night of mid December, she has got something that truly belongs to her husband. So she lays it hidden inside her chest, fearing that it might be dropped or misplaced somewhere, unknown to her knowledge. She plans to get it read, early in the morning from the daughter of village Mukhiya. She keeps tossing over the bed but sleep does not come to her. She goes out and finds that even half of the night has not passed. The stars, her usual clock, in the sky tell her the time. She goes to the bed, again to toss over the whole night.

She remembers the harassments and abuses that she suffers after the disappearance of her husband. She remembers how a few days ago, a local boy, husband’s brother by relation, had tried to harass her in the country well. As if with surprise and sympathy, he says, “Where were you these days, Muna Bhauju? Remember your brother in law too, at least sometimes. You have no love for your Dewar? Who loves us, if not you?” Muna lies agog at the sudden showering of abusive words, from the man who was so intimate with her husband. Her husband comes to her memory and her eyes well with tears. When he sees her squeezing the tears, he says as if in sympathy, “Muna, really sorry for you. Dropping ‘bhauju’ deliberately from his address, he adds, But... what shall I say.....? Sensing that she does not say anything, he adds, “You are beautiful and everyone in the village likes you. See, I have a wife at home but I like you so much”. To this unexpected shower of sympathy coated sexual abuse, she does not tell anything. How could she? As she stands silent, he comes close to her, almost trying to kiss her but she slightly moves as if not knowing anything. He takes her silence as the consent to his will and further says, “Muna, you are so good looking and young too. How long do you wait like this for the man who never comes to you?” He does not take time to speak out his mind, so says, “You are so young. I understand you well.” Stammering a bit, he adds, “Everyone knows us as the bhauju and Dewar and we can be very nice to each other in private! She understands his tone but what could she do except enduring the abuses of various kinds from those she respected highly.

Muna has had such experiences at large and she reminisces almost all of them at this sleepless night. Images flash in her mind one after another as if in the screen of television. She remembers how after the disappearance of her husband, the villagers are estranged from her, for the reason she never understands. People hardly speak to her, nor come to her for anything. She doesn’t know who is married to whom in the village. She hears about the marriage of the village’s boys and girls but no one invites her to these ceremonies.

She further remembers how much happy she was when a village elder invited her to attend the wedding of his son. She finishes all her domestic chores and goes to attend the marriage. When the groom is about to set off, all the invitees feed him curd, the symbol of good omen one after another. But when she goes to feed him, one of the village women says, “Muna you should not

feed him..... on this happy day of his life.” It takes her no time to understand what she meant. So she leaves the wedding home and comes to her thatch roofed mud house quite devastated. She cries out in utter despair and agony for a couple of hours. But who cares if she weeps! Tears are the only things that she can readily spend!

Insults, humiliations and abuses have frequented but she has no one to share these things with. She doesn't know where her husband has gone, nor does she know when he will return home. Many years have passed in the waiting. Even their daughter has grown up ... knows not how old. And there was no sign of hope until that letter came. So she has ensconced that letter in her breast. She doesn't know what is written but she is sure that it was from her husband. Deep in the heart, she is angry with herself for not being able to read. But what could she do? She never knows what the hell letter means. She could tell the bearer to read it for her but who gives this knowledge to the unlettered?

She regrets for not seeking help from the bearer. But basically, she gets angry for not being able even to read the letter. “Our days were different!” echoes in her soul. But she will manage to send her daughter to school. After her husband comes, they will work hard and join her daughter in a boarding school. Both will go to meet the principal and get her admitted. If her daughter does not make due progress she will go to meet the principal and say, “sir why should I send my daughter to you if she does not make progress?” And the principal will heed to her complaints and her daughter will be given a special care. She also plans that she will work and her husband will help daughter in her homework in the morning and evening. While swimming with the deluge of thoughts, she listens the cock crow and comes out of the bed happily, leaving the piece of her heart asleep in the bed.

The whole night passes without a wink of sleep, yet the letter snugly kept in her breasts gives her the due freshness. She spends a crabby sleepless night but her bosom dances with rhythm that she never heard before. She doesn't concern with the cattle in hut and runs to Mukhiya's house on a tiptoe. As she reaches there, Mukhiya has sat in a cot, puffing hookah. Seeing her at his home quite early, he outshouts in his usual manner, “Hey Mune! What so early for?”

“Mukhiya Ba, I came to give you the pain.”

“Your caste (meaning for women) never gives us a peace. Need to come even before the dog sees the shit?”

“He has sent us a letter, so I want to get it read here.”

Mukhiya, though a loudmouth, is kind in heart. He melts in hearing good of her. His eyes well with the tears of joy. “Thank god, you finally have mercy on this girl” he mumbles in whisper. He wipes the tears with a tip of finger, trying to avoid her sight. He is the only man in the village who reaches to her doorsteps and asks of her wellbeing. He calls his daughter out, saying, “Nani, Muna bhauju has come with a letter. Just read it for her”

Muna hears the footfall in the wooden ladder and guesses that Mukhiya's daughter has climbed down. She heaves a sigh of relief with a hope that her letter will be soon read out. Nani tears the envelope and reads out the letter which says:

Dear one,

We really apologize for what you have suffered and appreciate the tolerance that you have shown at the most adverse moment of your life. We feel how much you suffered in the absence of your beloved member. But the sense of revenge does not take us anywhere and the civilized society moves smoothly when we all learn to forget, forgive and reconcile. So we, on your behalf, have granted forgiveness to the victimizers of your husband. Hope you comply with this and help maintain the social harmony.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The Government of Nepal

As the letter is read out, tears roll over her cheeks, leaving the streaks visible. Still she does not know what had happened to her husband, nor does she understand what she is to do. Mukhiya sprouts his lips and spits into the sky. He wonders at the justice delivered to this loner!