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Autumn in Spring

Fareeha Khan

When Salma got near her shabby, little house. already the orange twilight had been transformed into darker shades of dusk. The nearby mosque minarets were reverberating the neighborhood with the Mughrib prayers. The cheerful chirping of the early riser birds exhibited their zest to go back to their shelter houses, nests, where they nestled together, only to be back to the grind next morning. “Even they have a home of their own” . The taste of word home was really acrimonious. The tall, dark complexioned, beady eyed, narrow jawed, dark thin haired, Salma, swallowed hard. She was in her mid thirties and had been coming back to her house after a laborious day working as a housemaid. As a mother of four young kids the only thing she longed for doing was to kill, to throw away everything , anything at all and kill everyone , herself and her children. Though she had already assassinated all her dreams, wishes, whims and desires but now she yearned for killing more and more until, there would not left anything for her to kill, to crush , to destroy. This desire of killing her children had been gnawing at her heart like the sharp edged knife in someone’s chest. “Life is so strange” sighed Salma, “it kills and implores you to live”. She was no scholar but after ten years of her marriage with Karam Din, birth of four children from her womb, her genes were mutated. Sometimes , somewhere at the middle of the night ,she woke up with a start, and envisioned herself killing four children.

Her matrimony with Karm Din was an ordinary one, the same kind of marriage that ninety nine percent of the Pakistani couples undergo. The solemn vow made at the altar “till death doth us part” meant no matter how much catastrophic their relationship might be they would not get a divorce. Karam Din was a daily wage laborer. Salma could not fathom why every night the monster of love came out of Karam Din’s bottle and how magnanimously, magically , it vanished at day time. The moment first ray of sunlight filtering through their room’s window this genie of adoration dematerialized , the feelings were transformed into abuse, physical torment, incessant shrieks, thrashing, bashing and tongue lashing. She was only seventeen then too naïve to understand the message communicated by noise of the day and silence of the night. The agony of love was so immensely powerful that she wanted to shrink away from it every night, to die , to fade away , to evanesce, dissipate only never to reappear on the surface again. With the daybreak when love was bottled up , to be used only at night time, she faced another dilemma, yet another trial, yet another altar to vouchsafe her loyalty. Her nights and her days, both were imbued with ugliness of love and shabbiness of hatred. They did not love each other and in the vicious web, in which Salma had got herself entrapped, love was merely an additional baggage. The nature played wisely and after giving her four emblems of his manliness Karam Din ceased to exist,

Karam Din was murdered by the only son of his brother on the dispute of property. But his physical disappearance just did not matter to Salma. She could feel him every where and this was the culmination of misery, pathos and blues. Every time she heard a voice or sound from any

smallest corner of the room she had goose bumps. She shuddered at the slightest provocation from any quarter. But above everything else Salma started having hallucinations but the illusory presence of her late husband. If life with him was inferno, life without him was conflagration. Every now and then she actually felt his presence, calling her to him, asking her to be prepared for her turn, telling her that she had not been forgiven even for the sins she had forgotten to commit and then imploring her to send his children to him, for he was turbulent without them. Salma was perturbed, she knew not what to do, how to evade this squalid presence of her husband. When he was alive she could have gotten some moments of respite, as he went out for some time, but once dead, his monstrous presence became a living myth, an estranged fact, an enigmatic riddle, an unsolvable riddle, an unknown truth. She had not been exonerated, there was no exculpation for her. Sometimes falsity became so strong that it compelled every single shred of truth away.

The crisis deepened as the time sped by. Now, she started harboring the wish of seeing her husband. She didn't know how the idea of murder crept into her mind. However, this desire was so strongly cogent that everything else receded into the backdrop of oblivion. The moment her youngest child cried in his piercing shrieking voice, she used to put both her hands on her ears and shout with gritted teeth "I wish all of you are dead, I wish one day when I come back, none of you would be here, one day my Allah will listen to my prayers>You scoundrels, black faced moths". Sometimes she felt herself truncated into two halves, one half pulling the children to its gravitational centre and the other repulsing them as far away as was possible. This repulsion initiated, all of a sudden one day when she was kneading the flour to make chapattis. Her elder daughter, surriya, had just come back from school, the thirteen year old had inexplicable radiance on her flushed face. "Amma I am hungry but I want to tell you that I have stood first in my class" Salma's face was deprived of emotions and her hands were moving mechanically, her large eyes were fixed on the big utensil in which flour was being kneaded and her lips were voiceless. Surriya, impatient on the nonchalance of her mother, stepped a little ahead, bowing her head towards her mother's bent face and almost shouted "Amma, are you deaf,? Are you not listening to what I am saying?" Instantly, her immensely shimmering eyes shifted from the brown flour she was kneading and dwelt on the flushing face of her daughter. Impulsively, without thinking, she grabbed her straw colored hair in her clenched, flour laden hands and pushed her to the wall. Bewildered Surriya shrieked and her sky high screams pierced right into every single breastbone of Salma. She was brought back to the world of reality. This shriek was a totem, an antidote, to transport her back to where she really belonged. She left Surriya's hair, caught her face in her hands and started crying so loudly. But once again when Surriya tried to come near her, she once again got hysterical and Suriya's strained effort to console her mother was transformed into a strange intimidation.

This episode, though first of its nature, was not the final one. After Surriya, younger Rukiya, still younger Saniya and the youngest Faizan fell victims to her incomprehensible rage, unfathomable, deep rooted anger This fit of exasperation shrouded itself into the incessant flow

of constantly inconstant unrestrained unleashing of violence, beating, abusing or any other recourse to ultimate assault. In some moment of frenzy the desire to take a resort to killing transmuted itself into a prolonged deliberation, when for hours, she used to brood over planned murders. She knitted various schemes to kill her children. Long hours of thoughts and plans sometimes shaped themselves into occasional slapping, uproar of emotions, spontaneous outburst of passion, yelling and the final receding into seclusion for days.

It was not that she never had her moments of sanity or clear mindedness. Sometimes, when receded defeated and vanquished into her squalid little room, she used to think about her children. The concern about their future used to penetrate into her heart of the hearts, somewhere, sometime at the day or night she delved deeper into her past, thought about her husband, unendingly, physical and mental bruises inflicted upon her body and soul, kept her perturbed for hours. However, these moments of retrospection and introspection only enhanced her bitterness. The feelings of care and tenderness that she harbored seldom for her offspring always ended up in nothingness. The smoke those burnt feelings only left behind nothingness, when her eyes saw nothing, her soul felt nothing and her spirit became as hollow as her mind was.

With a little jolt, she opened up her eyes and saw her eldest daughter, Suriya, standing behind her. She was her eldest child. Her heart gave a start. It leaped and missed a beat on the wretched sight of her daughter. Her disheveled hair and sanguine complexion betrayed long ignorance oversight of her mother. Salma stood still gazing longingly at her abject plight. She knew that she had been molded after her own cast. Her tall, lean stature, aquiline nose, thinly shaped lips, hauntingly black eyes, little swellings on her chest gave a lurch to her heart. But she did not know how and why a strong desire seized her once again. Desire to kill or get killed, a strong maddening desire to annihilate, the grappling sense of eternity in entirety captivated her and she fought with this inward struggle. Her intensely strained dilemma perhaps might be reflected on her face, her daughter read her face. "What's wrong with you Amma?, I have been observing you for so many days. You seem to be so much possessed of late."

The very voice of Suriya, like a knell, transported her back to the realm of present. With coming back to the present the first thing she realized was that she hated her eldest daughter. With a shock she envisioned that she loathed all four of her kids. The repugnance was so intense, so powerful, so cogently strong that it immediately engulfed her whole self categorically. She shuddered hard, as if trying to shrug off some unwarranted thoughts. But this derive for immediate murder refused to die. They, like a ghost, like a spirit got so evilly over her nerves that she could not breathe. She discerned the lips of Suriya moving but could not decipher anything. She felt words emanating from the mouth of her once beloved now hated daughter, but they refused to reach her eardrum. These words, possibly, melted in the air. Her head was dizzy and it sprung like whirlwind. Mother and daughter, confronting each other, the mother defiant, staring blazingly, the daughter cowed down, shrinking, averting her eyes, waiting impatiently for an answer. The answer only this blazingly staring mother could give it to her imploringly waiting.

mother. Uncountable unanswered questions, circulated, mutely in the air, lingering, waiting to be caught and answered Sometimes questions can be murderous and the questions hovering around the air could thwart someone's existence, jeopardize life, put at stake everything one can ever possess. These silent questions of nerved Salma further. She was pushed fiercely, ferociously, to the brink of disaster, to catastrophe to the ultimate end.

A thick veil of fanaticism clouded Salma's mind. She could not think straightly. In a queerly enigmatic voice she said, "Suriya , darling , come to me I have got something for you But I want you to call all your siblings. This one really would surprise you Believe me , you will forget all your complaints against me. It will absolve you for good my darling, of all the things you ever did or undid, it will be the beginning in another end" Surriya, innocently, nodded her head, with the blind trust that a child vest in its mother Nature has its own ways of desperate frivolity. Inwardly she knew that she was treading on a perilous path laden with shed and unshed tears, but she loved her poor mother so much. How much dearly her mother has paid for being their mother, she thought. She wished to tell that like any other child of this world her mother too meant the world to her. She longed for one great hug from her estranged mother but she did not say anything and went out of the room. When she came back, she was not alone, her three other siblings, like her trusting their mother blindly, entered. Salma's head was spinning, her world was being turned upside down and in order to fix it she had to eliminate these abominable elements All four of them , standing in a queue, cherishing her , basking in her presence should be killed at once. She looked at them with eyes so transparent that made Suriya exclaim , "Amma, I love your eyes. They always make me wonder about paradise" Salma did not reply. She was transfixed Her mind was spinning webs and she barely could think With a sudden start she woke up and in a strange voice said to them, "Stay wherever you are I am just coming back, you will be surprised at my valuable present, the one that I have brought for you" Leaving behind her own flesh and blood she came out of the room All four of them waited solicitously for their mother to come back Their eyes were shinning with anticipation, their hearts beating faster than usual, they were getting surprise of their lives Suddenly they heard a latch key sound. The eldest one, Suriya turned the knob but could not open it Infuriatingly, she gave it another try but to no avail. All of her other siblings gathered round her, looking up to her as their savior. In agitation she took her head in her hands, her heart was thumping fast against her rib cage and she wondered why at all they have been locked Suddenly, the door opened, the benign face of their mother surfaced She had something behind her back. "Amma, what's all this?" cried Suriya, but her voice was curbed by the loud noise of screams from her brother and sisters In alarm she turned back and felt something dripping from her head to toe. Before, she could understand what it was the room was on fire. She was being burnt in the inferno for the sins she never committed, for the crimes she even never intended to do, she was being burnt alive by her own mother The sky high shrieks could not reach Salma's ears

She had put all of her children to fire. Everything she once owned had been destroyed. God was furious with her and with the sacrifice of her children she had tried to appease Him. Now

perhaps, her husband, Karam Din would come back to her. He would be thrown at her feet. But to her dismay, her head was twirling and she found earth slipping from underneath her feet. Salma tried to grab the nearest wall for support but the even the formidable façade of wall was not within her reach. Instantly, the ferocious shrieks of Suriya rang in her ears, she was calling her, shouting for help. “Amma, it is too hot, please Amma, help me, Amma I would not do anything to you, Amma, I will not go to Asma’s house again without your permission” Her other three kids’ voices were harmonizing with the accentuated pleadings of Surriya. She put both her hands on her ears. The deafening noise of silence was piercing her ears. She shivered and shuddered, she trembled obviously and visibly. She was shaken but still the voices of pain and agony, of torment and anguish , of disbelieve and uncertainty were lingering in the backdrop of oblivious and this oblivion was engulfing her completely, annihilating her categorically into the environ of nothingness forever and ever.