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Where to go.....?

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Heat burnt on the tin roof waking the baby every now and then. The withered toddler whimpered in his sleep and the elder one began to wail.” mama *ghaza mikham, gorosname... gorosname.*” The child was hungry and went on repeating... *gorosname...I’m hungry...I’m hungry.* That is the only thought and the only phantom haunted them these days.

Looking at the pale face and the tear dried filthy cheeks of the child she wondered how to pacify the little one.

She could only curse the moment she became the wife of their father. Otherwise, what she knew about marriage and life. It was not many years ago, she was in her early teens and still going to the village school when a man and an old woman in black velvet veil came to their house with fresh flowers.

Comparing to other girls in the village it was late for her to marry. Girls younger than her at times became the second, third or even the fourth wife of men who were old as their fathers. Sometimes the *mehriye*, the wedding gift a man paid was alluring. They were married off for a flock of sheep, a piece of land or for a few gold coins as *mehriye*...

So a young man from city was luck and the whole village rejoiced...Nothing was asked nothing was enquired and the next Thursday she was betrothed to the strange man came from a faraway city. The villagers praised her father for finding such a groom and she accompanied her in-laws the very next day with a bagful of country bread, butter milk and organic ghee. That was the last time she saw her village.

Dreams of city life were distorted when they lead her to the lines of tin roofed shacks at the end of a township where the scrap pickers, petty welders and dry ‘nan’ collectors lived. Shattered pieces of clothes flapped at their cabin doors, fluttering and singing the songs of awe and grief.

The little bride stood there hesitating to go inside...the dark hole devoid of light and air waited. The mother in law gnashed her teeth before she yelled at her.

“what do you want? A villa?! Look at her, she is showing face!!”

The new bride didn’t even dare to raise her eyes wondering how could a woman be this cruel, turn into an embodiment of evil in few days. The old woman was forever smiling when she and her son came to visit them in village and now, she was all possessed....

“ *chiye vaysadi?! why standing?! go inside!!* ” The mother in law poked her from behind.

The quivering bride groped into the unknown darkness inside the hut...

From then on, she waited daily for the son and mother to come back, at times they came back at night with some eatables and sometimes bundles of money along with clandestine packets.

Those days the old woman talked endlessly, forgot to nag the bride and happily shared the kababs they bought from the way side eating stalls. The woman would shout for the ‘sofreh’, the mat they spread for placing the plates but there were no plates except a few faded, cracked and chipped crockeries the groom’s great grandmother possessed. Then, the old woman would place the kabab at the middle with a few pieces of raw onions...

She loved the smell, the very smell she was brought up with in the countryside...the alluring smell of fat burning on charcoal, the heavenly smell of kabab... Back in her village, though they were poor there was kabab whenever they wanted. At times a chicken...or a nazri, offering given at the neighborhood. Whenever the aroma of kabab and fresh vegetables filtered into her nostrils, she sighed overwhelmed with a sweet nostalgia. It made her remember grandma’s myths and wished *Haji Firooz* to come, carry her back to her rustic village...

“ mama...I’m hungry...mama...” The child began to pull her apron and began to cry again...hearing him cry the toddler grunted in sleep

“What now?” She really didn’t know what to do...their father is away for days now... no news of him.

What might he be doing now? Might be sleeping at the roadside in hangover or loitering with the latest woman she picked up from the streets. Who knows, may be beaten up in some broker’s hideout for not paying his debt or might be locked up at a police station. where else can he be? where else can an addict, a petty drug seller end up?

She lost count of the days he came home, the interval between the arrival got longer and longer...

And now, she didn’t know how many months.

“ maaaa... i’m hungry...” The child wailed again for food making the toddler to startle in sleep and whimper feverishly....

Picking up the black faded veil hung from the cloth peg, she hurriedly wrapped it around her and grabbed the wailing toddler in haste while taking the child’s hand and leading them out of the darkness into the scorching sun light outside.

The narrow lanes burnt in the summer heat, sending mirages of vapors up.... Except the scavenging dogs and the dry ‘nan’ pickers resting on the shallow shades, the alleys were virtually deserted. She moved on not knowing where to go...

Crossing the filthy streets where the low classes lived, she reached the circle which connects the road to city center...cars screeched away...lorries honked...crowded city buses hooted like wild owls and sped away...She stood at the cross roads wondering where to go...

There were countless automobiles, a sea of them and they stopped at the traffic signal...She looked at the cars and the people peering at her and the wailing kids....

She stretched her hand unconsciously towards the faces peered at her from their affluent cabins. Standing there with her hand overextended, she slowly began gesturing towards the children expecting alms.....It was a spontaneous deed, came as an intuition for she thought it her duty to keep the children alive even by begging. But the crowd chattered like a raving maniac.

“go and work, shameless creature! no shame to stand and beg?!”

“knows to make children.... why do they make if can’t feed them?”

“oh so young! for other marketing she is here.... not for begging...”

“Saw her eyes? *Khomare!*”

Everyone had something to comment.... She wanted to answer them.... each and every one...She wanted to shout. “Where to go and work? Who will hire me with two rickety kids?”

How can the throng out there ever know how the little ones were thrown into her loin even before she was out of her childhood...none of them were born out of love or affection. They are the fruits of his chaotic intoxication. He didn’t even notice that she was his wife...

“For what other work I am here...?” She wanted to scream.

“You all know only one thing.....woman is only for this.... you think poverty makes poor woman commodities.... and my eyes.... you say *khomare*...intoxicated? you think they are from substance abuse.....!! yes, yes from abuse... it is from the abuse of being alone...being hungry for many days.... being abandoned for months together...Sleeplessness and malnutrition. You call this *nashe...khomari*...intoxication!”

She muttered in her voiceless voices. Yes, in one way she was intoxicated... woozy with the infatuation of death but can’t do it because of those children.

None gave her a riyal and at the end, a man popped his head out of a blue van and asked...

“coming for a day? I will feed you and your kids...*sighye yek rooze*” He was asking her for contract marriage for one day, a legal way of leading her into gender abuse....

She stood there shocked while the signal turned green and the man sped away winking at her in a vulgar way....

Before she could recover from the shock, another car stopped close by and one of the inmates began to pull her inside.... She sped away from the evil hands running with the toddler and virtually dragging the child on the streets...She ran and ran until there were no speeding automobiles and cars with polluted passengers.

As they collapsed on the roadside, she saw giant bungalows on either sides surrounded by high walls, opening with huge golden or silver gates.

Her frail fingers knocked at the doors and rang the bells but no one answered.

Are they all empty? Or could the inmates see her from inside? Who wants to open the doors for a poverty stricken woman with two choking kids.

The opulent street smelled of freshly made ghome sabzi and fried fish, Kababs and khoresh gheime...smell of saffron and warm melted butter, the peculiar affluent smell of Iranian cuisine and she felt her tummy churning...

She then thought, how much hungry the youngster might be now. And she peered at the child. He was quiet and had stopped crying long ago....walking and being dragged along the streets, there was no energy left for him to cry. He just gazed at her with vacant eyes and she sensed his eyes pleading, 'mother... food... food...!!'

At last a door bell answered, a girl's voice said." who is it?"

"Please come...." she implored in her faint voice...

The door opened in few seconds...

A pretty young girl came out. Seeing the kids and the woman standing there, she said.

" yes?"

"I came for work. Any sort of house work. I will wash the vessels... sweep... Clean...wash clothes. Anything you want...just give food to my children..." She said.

The pretty girl smiled as if the new worker was send by God. She had been waiting so long for someone like this...

"who's it there? Who came?" A menacing sound came echoing from the house...

"somebody... Mom."

" ...kiye..chi mikhad?... who? what for?" the ominous voice from inside went on enquiring...

"you wait here..." said the beautiful girl before she walked back to the yelling one inside.

She could hear that female voice screaming. “why did you open the door for strangers. You know, they are all thieves. They pretend as beggars! Workers! If you thrust open the door for anyone just rings the bell, you will be in street soon!”

“No Mom, A Poor one...she needs work to feed her kids “

“Ohhh! Feed her kids it seems! Who are you to provide employment? President of the country or a charity worker! A mother Theresa?! You know what happens if you do like that?”

“Nothing happened now. A helpless woman came for work. That’s all...”

“you call her helpless woman... You, simpleton...! you know they are all one gang ...send their woman first to check and then others intrude in, they either chop your head or the men rape you before they take away your goods....”

“What do you say Mom!?” The girl held her ears with both hands...

“It’s the truth! You can’t trust. I say, you can’t trust anyone in this city.”

“I thought this one can help me, there is lot of work...washing cleaning...”

“Shut up! You, stupid girl.... You hire her ok...? Hire her now only...!! you will either lose your property or lose your husband. You don’t know the men here.... they feel more pity for the wretched ones...oh!!how to tell this fool...!!” The woman went on howling.

Even before the girl came to announce the result, she understood what the young girl would tell her.

She didn’t want to be the cause of their fight anymore...

Holding the child, she slowly turned to go before the beautiful girl came to say a big No!

“wait ...” called the girl from behind.

“Take this for your kids.....” The young girl held out a disposable lunch box with thick red gravy dripping from the sides. The elegant aroma of freshly cooked Rashti rice and *khoresht gheime* spread in the air...

The girl didn’t say anything about the job and she didn’t ask what happened about hiring her. But, there was a sharing look in their eyes and both got it and both knew it.

She took the lunch box and slowly closed the door behind her...