

the day i was dead

IT WAS A CHILLY DECEMBER evening in 1994, which had the stillness of snow without any snow.

I had turned eighteen that year, and for the first time in my life, I felt grateful for the dusk-to-dawn curfew. My grandmother, Bobeh, had died late that afternoon. It was because of the curfew that I could spend an extra night with her around. On an ordinary night, curfew swelled up the air with fear and uncertainty. It controlled everything. It disciplined people inside their own houses, animals on the streets, and had even tamed the loud sneezes of the tobacco-seller who lived

two houses from ours. That night, however, the curfew felt like a blessing.

I didn't get to say a proper goodbye to my grandmother, my Bobeh. Had I known on the night of 18 December that it would be our last one together, I'd have been more polite to her. The next day, she was already gone by the time I reached home after taking my exams.

The previous night, I had decided to stay up late to study. Bobeh stayed up with me as long as the dim light of the kerosene lamp lasted. She'd had an asthmatic attack recently, and that made her look visibly distressed. But it was her unwavering gaze on me that made me irritable.

'*I am* studying! Do you think I'll revise insincerely if you look away?' I told her, raising both my chemistry book and my voice.

She didn't respond, but continued to watch me, wheezing occasionally. She had had several asthmatic attacks before, but they had become more frequent since the time the firing of tear gas had become the norm. It used to be so harsh on her. Later I wondered if, on that night, it was also the torment of death that had shown on her face.

In the morning, after I had left to take the exam, a few adjoining neighbourhoods between home and school were cordoned off by the troops so that they could conduct search operations, commonly known as 'crackdown'. On such days, our roll number slips doubled as our identity passes and we were let through. By the time we finished writing our exam, at around

two o'clock, the search had been extended to more areas. By the time I reached home, it was around five.

Chemistry was the first paper on the schedule. I had done reasonably well and the feeling of relief that followed gave me a ravenous appetite. As always, I had been too nervous that morning to eat anything and had sat through my exam on an empty stomach. I was looking forward to a hearty meal, but the detour I had to take emaciated me further. Famished, I reached home to find a commotion of people outside our koche. My heart sank.

Was someone hit by a bullet?

Who could it be?

Was Father injured at the shop?

Was Mother hit by a grenade shell or a shrapnel?

As these thoughts came to my mind, my throat tightened, as if I was being strangled. I could barely breathe. I inched towards our house with wobbly knees. The main wooden door was open. A couple of shopkeepers from the neighbourhood were coming out of the house as I floated in bewildered. Sajida, our elderly next door neighbour, and the keeper of most secrets in the neighbourhood, was descending the stairs as I slowly climbed up. 'Go, have one last look at your grandmother.' As Sajida uttered those words, for a brief second, all I could see around me was a blackness. The turquoise shawl she had wrapped around her head disappeared. The darkness was followed by a sharp pain in my belly. I got my period which lasted less than a day.

In the corridor, I heard Father's voice say: 'How am I to take the responsibility of so many curfew passes? What if they shoot someone?'

Tey were trying to decide if they should bury Bobeh that very night or on the following day. Father seemed adamant about everyone's safety. He declared that the burial was to be postponed by a night.

Father, Mother, Ramzan Kaak and Pophtaeth, an aunt of mine who had come to pay Bobeh a visit, stayed up all night in the living room as some of the neighbours left. Tey spent the long hours praying for her. I didn't pray. I felt numb, and then restless.

Tat night, too, the room was dimly lit. Mother had arranged blankets under which everyone could sit through the night. Ramzan Kaak readied kerosene lamps and lined them by the door. Everyone had a booklet of Quran that they were reciting verses from. Had the body of Bobeh not been lying in the corner where she'd usually sit, it could pass off as the Night of Atonement or Shab-e-Baraat, when all of us stayed up the whole night to pray. The room was humming, but a strange silence befell the corner Bobeh was lying in. The heavy soundlessness of that corner was more overwhelming than the unease the silence of the dawn-to-dusk curfew brought on. I sat in another corner of the room, staring at Bobeh's still hands and her long, delicate fingers.

There was a night when Bobeh looked close to how she looked after passing. Pale, silent and stiffened. It was on the eve of Eid in 1989, the Eid that set a precedence for future ones to come. Tat Eid eve, as a twelve-year-old girl, I decided unwittingly to never participate in festivities again. In fact, from then on, I began associating inexplicable melancholy with Eid, and the heaviness that settled on the heart that day sank deeper each year.

Before 1989, my anticipation of the festivities on the eve of Eid usually surpassed the excitement I felt during the festival itself. There was an eagerness to wear new clothes, along with matching shoes and fashionable accessories. The rich, spicy aromas that wafted from every kitchen in the neighbourhood, suffused not just the individual courtyards but the entire mesh of interconnected narrow streets. The menu at our house was carefully selected. Mother would cook some of the dishes herself while the rest were ordered from Ashraf waze, the renowned chef of our area. Father would sit quietly in a corner of the living room, away from his usual spot. With his back towards the door, he'd stealthily count the crisp currency notes that he'd distribute among his sisters and their children as Eidi the next day. The whole evening would be punctuated with the sound of the main door being opened and shut by my sister Hina, who'd invariably have to go out for her last-minute visits to the tailor and the salon.

In comparison, the day of Eid was rather muted. It began with wearing fineries, sitting in front of the Dastarkhwaan, drinking kahwe, breaking bread together as a family. The rest of the day was spent waiting for the relatives to visit our house with my share of Eidi.

When I was around eight or nine years old, Father would pack me in the back of his car - an ochre Range Rover, JKD 7575 - on Eid as he'd drive along with Ramzan Kaak. Ramzan Kaak was Father's assistant at his clothing shop in Boher Kadal. He was roughly Father's age, physically stronger, and the most

trusted man of our household. I remember seeing the mass prayer congregation that year at Eid Gah where hundreds of men, clad in crisp Khan dress and skull caps, had gathered to pray with their children, who were dressed up in bright colours. Rows of vendors selling wooden horse carts, ratlers, red strips of crackers and colourful plastic toys surrounded the large field where the men prayed. I didn't know then that the same prayer-ground would come to be known as the martyrs' graveyard.

I was never attracted to toys, and that was perhaps because I wanted to do the things my beautiful sister, Hina, did. A decade elder to me, she was past her age of playing with dolls and so, I, too, didn't develop a liking towards them. In fact, that year (1989), as I turned twelve, I was finally allowed to take the first step in emulating Hina's ways. After much bargaining with and emotionally blackmailing Mother, I could visit the salon that Hina used to frequent. Moving up from the barber who used to cut Father's hair at home to the hairdresser famous for styling fashionable cuts, felt like a rite of passage for me. The occasion chosen for that was Eid. No one said no. But the yes was delayed interminably.

The salon, where some of my friends had already been for their grown-up haircuts, was in the posh neighbourhood of Raj Bagh. As per my sister's advice, we scheduled the salon visit for the evening so that our coiffure would retain their shapes the next morning. I felt very glamorous in my freshly trimmed, salon-washed, blow-dried hair. I felt like the model from a shampoo ad who turned her head from left to right and right to left as she flaunted her straight, lustrous, bouncy hair. *'Halo*

giiiiiiiiirl,' the jingle played in the background as she looked happy and confident with her lush hair.

We were among the last few customers at the salon. By the time we left, it was already dark, but we noticed a marked shift in the air which had nothing to do with the inky, funereal colour of the evening sky. Shopkeepers were bringing down the store shutters in a frenzy. Instead of the pre-Eid festive chaos caused by the shoppers and shopkeepers alike, the roads began emptying out. There was barely any traffic. Police vehicles were whizzing past us and there were policemen all around.

'Looks like a curfew. Like we're under Gul Karfi again,' Hina whispered to me. 'Hold my hand and don't look up.'

I clutched Hina's wrist, and feverishly wished that we'd somehow vanish from the streets and land straight into our living room with Father, Mother and Bobeh. I could feel the tears pooling in my eyes, but the tears just wouldn't roll down. Perhaps it had something to do with the panic that was building up inside me.

Home was some distance from the salon and we had to break our journey into two halves. We took a minibus until Amira Kadal and managed to negotiate the second leg of the journey with an autorickshaw driver who sensed our desperation and didn't charge us for the ride. He dropped us in Nawab Bazar, around a kilometre away from our house.

'*Yath tcha nih patah kith haalat roazan.* Can't say how the circumstances will shape up.' With that, he drove his autorickshaw off, like a bullet, as they say.

As we took a few steps forward, a police jeep was doing rounds and announced a message in loop in as hostile a manner

as possible: *‘Awaam se appeal ki jaati hai ki apne gharoon se baahar na nikleyn, sheher mein shoot at sight ka order hai.* People are requested not to step outside their homes for there is shoot at sight order across the city.’

Hina urged me to walk faster. I cannot recall with certainty, but perhaps I was slowing down to look at the shards of glass and plastic scattered on the road. Amidst broken lamps, coloured glass bangles, stomped-on plastic kitchen sets, dolls with soiled and squished faces, there was debris enough to distract one all along the way. We reached home after walking for what seemed like an eternity and arrived to Bobeh’s sobs.

Our legs having transformed into trembling, rickety appendages, Hina and I dragged ourselves up the stone steps leading to the living room. We could hear the phone ring incessantly and grew more anxious because of that. Bobeh sat beside it, oblivious to the noise and panic that it was creating. A map of purple lines appeared on her temples as her daej, the embroidered, square bandana, with which she covered her hair, lay crumpled on the floor. She was breathing laboriously; her asthma seemed to have worsened. The moment she saw us, she held her uncovered head in her hands. Even in the moment of panic, my brain registered what an uncommon sight it was.

‘Are you really alive?’

Bobeh repeated her question in a broken voice as she held my face in her ice-cold hands. While my face was still in her corpse-like hands, I pulled away from her, as if someone had pushed me. I could hear my heart beat loudly and felt my body shake.

I was in a daze, hardly being able to take note of what was happening. Mother walked into the room and held us close to her. She asked us questions, most of which were answered by Hina. I cannot remember where Father was. I heard his voice coming faintly from the direction of the courtyard of his cousin, the one who lived next door. The phone kept ringing. Someone, possibly Ramzan Kaak, finally picked up the phone and said, 'Shukur, she's here, they're safe.'

Mother said that all our relatives were calling to ask after me. There was news that a twelve-year-old from our clan had been killed. Asiya, one of my friends from school, who lived nearby, had been calling, as she too had feared that it was me. Neither Bobeh nor anyone else could confirm anything until they saw me in flesh. Unbeknownst to us at the time, my second cousin, exactly my age, had also gone out with his father. They had been out to buy shoes for him for Eid. As they were returning home in their car, he was hit by a bullet. His last words to his father were, '*Myeha log haehyis toat*. I am feeling warm on the side of my stomach.' He bled to death on his way to the hospital.

At that point, no one knew what exactly had happened. Ramzan Kaak came to the room and said that there was news of multiple shootings, and the city was under curfew. Barely a kilometre from where our house was, next to Father's shop in Boher Kadal, there was a shooting incident involving a popular militant Mushtaq Latram. Absorbing the news from all around made my hands shake. In a moment of confusion and fear, I plucked a chunk of my hair from right behind my ear. It hurt to pull the hair out, but my hands needed to clutch at something.

I pulled some out again to punish myself for not being able to make sense of what had befallen us as a people. I couldn't help but feel that none of this would have happened had I not troubled everyone about going to the salon. Somehow, I felt responsible for all of it: for being rumoured to be dead, for Bobeh's condition: she had begun to wheeze uncontrollably. Since then, a dark, silent cloud of death hovers above me every Eid.