

## Whispers

By Taqdees Mahmood Mela

They chose me. As the closest female relative, they asked me to wash my dead mother's body. They said she died on a good day, a Friday. The most blessed of days. The heavens were created on Friday. Adam was created on Friday. He was admitted to Paradise on Friday. He was sent down to Earth on Friday. The last hour will be on Friday. All prayers are accepted readily on Friday. Friday was a good day to die. If I had to die, I would also pick Friday.

She was so cold and still. Never in life had she had the patience to be still. She was the ocean and we were the life she sustained in her depths. At 52, my mother Sidra<sup>1</sup> was a robust woman who loved to tend to her small garden patch in our home. Spending hours under the scorching sun planting and watering her vegetables, wrapped in a faded red chador<sup>2</sup> to protect herself from the sun. When I would urge her to come back inside, she would laugh at me, a full-bodied laugh that I could feel washing over me taking me in its embrace, saying it would take much more than the sun to fell a heavenly tree.

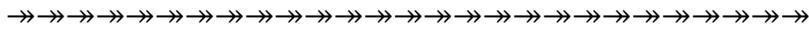
Her head lay bare, she seemed odd without her chador. Unlike herself. Her wispy white hair clung to her brown weathered face. Death had robbed her of her dignity. Lying naked and vulnerable in front of me. I traced her wrinkles slowly, the deep laugh lines bracketing her mouth, the thin feathery lines surrounding her eyes—the forbidding line in the middle of her forehead, daring me to step out of the house without my head covered. I could map her life by looking at her face, it was a beautiful face, a loved face, a face as familiar as my own.

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<sup>1</sup>Sidra means the heavenly tree in Arabic. Most Pakistani Muslim names are taken from the Arab language or directly from the Quran.

<sup>2</sup>A long piece of cloth taken on the head.

My lips were too numb to say ‘Bismillah,’<sup>3</sup> my hands were unable to move beyond her face. I stood frozen in time, until I finally gave up trying to resist the blackness clawing at my vision...

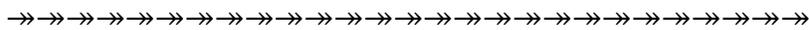


“Noor, Noor get up. They are taking Sidra Aunty to the graveyard soon,” said Amena, my childhood friend.

Someone thrust a juice pack in my hand, pushing it towards my mouth. I instinctively took a sip, washing away a rancid taste. I was in Ammi’s<sup>4</sup> room, lying in her bed, bathed in her smell. It was the room closest to the veranda where all our friends and relatives had come together to pray for Ammi’s departed soul. Outside the window, I could see a sea of pale colors, God forbid if they wore a dark color! I wanted to go out and shout and scream at them, Ammi hated white and pastels! She used to say, only when I am dead will you force me to wear white.<sup>5</sup>

Ammi’s body lay in the middle of the veranda on a charpai.<sup>6</sup> The air was filled with women softly weeping and whispering. “She died a good death, right? Look at how peaceful she is,” one muttered. “Yes, Azrael<sup>7</sup> has been merciful to her,” another replied.

But I couldn’t quite make out the insidious, indecipherable whispers that hung just below this conversation. I quickly walked away, but the whispers kept pace with me. I shook my head, trying to dislodge them, faster and faster until at last, they subsided.



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<sup>3</sup>In the name of Allah

<sup>4</sup>Mother in urdu

<sup>5</sup>Muslims are buried in a white cloth

<sup>6</sup>A light bedstead consisting of a web of rope or tape netting

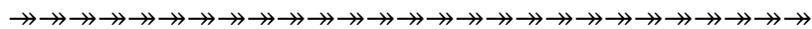
<sup>7</sup>Angel of death

Lines and lines of women were reading the Quran, praying for Ammi's soul. The softly uttered prayers were a soothing balm for my soul. I knew Ammi would have rejoiced to see so many mourn for her, to see so many pray for her.

The stillness was shattered by the nearest mosque repeating the news of her death. "Sidra Khan, daughter of Amir Khan, passed away in her sleep. Her Namaz-e-Janaza will commence in 10 minutes."

My brothers Shan and Mir crossed the sea of female bodies to pick up the charpoy where Ammi's body lay to start the funeral procession. The graveyard was a stone's throw away, so they had decided to carry her there themselves. The last time they would carry any burden of hers.

An unending wail rent the air.<sup>8</sup> A tortured animal cry. I dimly wondered who would be callous enough to hurt the dead. And why wasn't anyone stopping it. Amena pushed my face against her shoulder, at last stopping the horrid sound.



It was a deliciously hot afternoon. Amena and I sat in the veranda sipping cold lemonade. The light seeping through the shuttered panels danced on the floor, changing patterns and shapes.

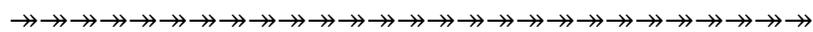
I traced the shapes with my toe. "I can't wait for Ammi to come back from Umrah. I cannot believe she decided to stay there for another two months without giving a thought about me. I have a long list of complaints that I need to talk to her about," I said.

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<sup>8</sup>It is believed in South Asian culture that screaming and wailing for the dead, hurts their soul.

Amena gave me an odd look and I started laughing. “You know Shan and Mir have been behaving in the strangest manner possible. I don’t know what’s up with them. You know last night when I told them I was going to the park, Mir insisted on coming with me! He said, I got lost last time when I went alone! Can you imagine? I have never gotten lost a day in my life!”

Amena gingerly scooted to the edge of her seat and took my hand in hers. I turned to get her another glass of lemonade, and she started whispering.



The long hours of the night stretched before me; I could hear the whispers outside. Shan and Mir had progressively gotten worse. Why wasn’t Ammi coming back from her friend’s house in Islamabad?

I got up to lock the door to my room when I heard Mir mutter furiously, “Noor needs to go to a professional, she thinks Ammi is going to come back! I cannot constantly shadow her and you have your office!”

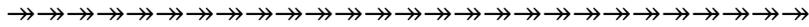
Why did I need constant supervision and why would Mir think Ammi isn’t coming back? I wanted to storm outside and ask him, but I know he would just shut up and give me that look. And start whispering, the minute I turned my back.

Ohh! How I hated the whispers! I would give anything in the world to shut out their voices. I could hear them at night the most clearly, the day would drown out the whispers with the hubbub of the living.

I was determined to find out why they were conspiring against me. Sometimes, I would surprise them and open the door quickly, but they were quicker and would be back in their beds.

Sometimes, I would hear them outside my window but when I would look, they would be black shapes becoming one with the night.

I hated it but I would find out what they were planning. I would be ready.

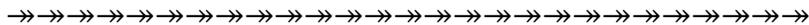


The night invited me to lie in bed and explore each softly uttered word. Stringing the errant words together, to wear them like a necklace. Cool and refreshing against my skin.

Usually, I would sleep through the day, staying in my room, pleading with a headache or tiredness. I knew they would plan at night when they thought I was fast asleep. Their number had grown.

The voices had gotten louder and more distinct. The voices were almost discernable now. I was never quick enough to catch them. I chased them in the house, I chased them in my mind but to no avail.

They haunted me, every hour of the day now. Following me even on the veranda. I was tired, my eyes two twin lifeless pools. I wondered if I should write to Ammi and ask her to pray for me? Or would that worry her? I hope she was having fun attending her flower show in London.



Standing at the precipice, it is always the whispers that tell you to jump. Not a shout, nor a scream, but quiet rational insidious voices telling you to take the plunge. I could ignore the

screams, the long rants but what about the softly uttered suggestions that tear the heart out of you. I couldn't ignore them anymore.

Today, Shan took me to the graveyard and forced me to see the name on the gravestone. He said that the soft mound of dirt was where Ammi's body lay. How could that be? I saw her a few days ago. I saw her. She said she would be back in a few days and we could all help her with her vegetable patch. But Shan got angrier and angrier and said he couldn't keep the trouble at home anymore...

I have to go; I have to go before the bleakness of the hour devours me. Before they send me somewhere Ammi can't find me. I have to go.