

STORY

Jinn Girl's Account, Rejected from The Times

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The day when my tongue grew longer than it had ever been before was a strange day, with a dry-mouthed sunset and a rain that was on the horizon but kept receding from apprehension. *Wahida* was the name my mother had given me, for I was the eldest, and before me there was nobody, and they had thought, given my mother's feeble condition after I was born, that nobody would come after. *Wahdahu la sharikalahu*, the maulvi from the masjid used to say. *There is no god but Allah, alone, without a partner*. And because only God is all alone, and I could not assume that position for myself, my sister appeared two years after me, waking everybody up with her loud cries and disturbing the entire household with her insistence on getting her way in the world.

The maulvi disappeared from our midst some weeks into my twelfth birthday. That was the day Zainab told my mother, aunt and me, as we sat together planning a *mehfil* for Eid, that on his last visit to our house, the maulvi's hand, his heavy hand with its rings of aqeeq and ruby, had slipped two inches into her shalwar. And stayed there- until she shrieked in fright. That is why, she told us nervously, please don't invite him home for any dinners or ceremonies.

Stunned into silence for a minute or two, the women in the house (our mother, aunt and housemaid) began to discuss, in a much louder voice than they had ever used before, of all the times when they had learned that they were no more than a piece of fleshy meat to be stared at, violated and devoured by men everywhere. The men in the family (our father and uncle) shifted upon their feet, uncomfortable in being made to listen when it was usually they who spoke, finally laughing jeeringly at what the women said, 'as if they were fifteen- year-olds, not almost forty.' There was a rupture in the sky which bespoke the breakdown of any possibility of discovering the truth of the matter, not only because justice is a self-reflective mirror which demands that your eye should be as clear of prejudice and as rejuvenating as the water of *zamzam*, but

also because denying the claims made upon you is easier than accepting that the world will become what you make of it: a sharp piece of glass that keeps cutting into your skin all your life, or a seashell full of the echoes of an ocean that is deep, wide and unerringly constant in its pursuit of love, beauty and vitality in everything that you see around you.

Those of us who were naive awaited divine justice and retribution, and learned much later, when the matter had been hushed down as it usually was, that the maulvi from the masjid was visiting houses in some other locality and would no longer be seen around us. Zainab was told to stop talking to and playing with the boys in the street and come and live silently at home, and that was that. And I wondered at the rage of the cloud that had gathered outside our window, and how the house had become a silent witness to something that we had not been told about, and how we got Zainab chocolates to cheer her up, and once she had eaten them, the notion of sweetness being enough disappeared from our midst; and the deep, burning anguish stemming from the fact that despite the presence of the cloud, it didn't rain then, as it wouldn't rain now, was not to vanish from our hearts in the days to come.

It was a simpler matter for me to put these thoughts aside and immerse myself in the prospect of building a purpose for myself. Forewarned is forearmed, and Zainab's story had become a cautionary tale for me to keep my head in my books and ignore the world whose cruelty could not be explained as simply as a linear equation. Occupied in my studies, I didn't understand for a long time what the world did to Zainab, and by the time I did notice that she was growing sharper and bonier, her eyes flashing at the slightest attempt to dismiss what she said and did, I found myself out of the depth required to take any consequential action. She often fought bitterly with those who hurt her, and her anger was as quick to flame up as coals in an angithi; but what really worried me, when I began to observe her more closely, was that she no longer knew how to distinguish between friend and foe, holding them all alike at arm's length. She would wander off sometimes, and give only vague explanations about where she had been; was touchy to the extreme when approached by strangers, and did not think twice before speaking sharply to the elders in the family who demanded unwavering obedience from her. These features, though tolerated in boys, caused uproars when detected in a girl of our house, and Zainab was often caught up in skirmishes that left her fuming to herself, or plotting vengeance on our relatives and neighbours for gossiping about her, or wallowing in a sea of self-pity and self-indulgent misery, aided by old Bollywood ghazals that created a mood fit for abject heartbreak and everlasting suffering. '*Bas karo*, Meena Kumari!' I'd cajole her at times, but then she would simply shut herself up from me too. I eventually gave up on trying to bring her

out of herself, and would consign myself to being an accompaniment to her suffering, bad taste in music and all.

Being more rational, I believed in a trip to the beach, films and baking different kinds of bread to cope with a self that tried to pull you into endless anxieties, unhappiness and resistance towards any internal change to make life easier. Everything seemed so terrible because we couldn't get away for a long holiday in the summer, couldn't afford to go to the cinemas very often and lived on far too strict a budget to accommodate experiments with baking. I was adamant that these luxuries would come to us with the money we would earn as soon as we began working, and for that we needed to keep our head straight and do what was in front of us without getting distracted by the obstacles that kept appearing in our way. I pitied Zainab and her rebellious ways, but also thought her a bit of a fool for creating unnecessary problems for herself. Because troubles were like a game of Jenga, with an ever-growing stack of wooden blocks. They kept piling up on each other, and if we weren't careful with how we dealt with the tottering blocks, they would all come crashing down upon you and bury you with their weight.

On the day when my tongue grew longer than ever before, Zainab and I were busy in making dinner, and sat surveying the slices of fish laid out in front of us to see whether they were thick enough to withstand deep frying. A distant relative had been offended by Zainab's lazily-said *adaab* to her (she hadn't used her hand in a salute-like gesture, only saying the word verbally and nonchalantly to this person), and our mother, after telling Zainab that she was making life hell for her, had gone off to placate the wounded relative and convince them that the girl had no disrespectful intentions. Zainab had merely rolled her eyes, saying to the head of the dead fish that we sat rubbing with turmeric to free from stench, 'I bet you never had to hear of such stupidity in the sea as you get up here with us.' I giggled and added to her, 'If you don't take care, you might just be thrown into the sea by all the enemies that you've made for yourself, just to get a taste of life down there.' She held up the fish with her thick but nimble hands, her brown eyes twinkling. 'I'll already get a taste of the life down there tonight!'

That day was a very strange day indeed. Though the memories began to swim away from me all too soon afterwards, I remember vaguely thinking about how oddly things seem to happen in the world. Just when you have learned how to laugh, you learn the futility of laughing. Just when everything seems meaningful, some strange inexplicable incident is thrust upon you from which you cannot make out anything at all. A few people whom I overheard talking afterwards would say among themselves, in a

whisper, that it was the day of a festival, and this was why things had happened the way they did. Others said it was because elections were at hand, and yet others were of the opinion that it was because some houses in our *mohalla* were rumoured to be illegally occupied. All of these things, to these people, were just as certain as the divine retribution that never fully arrived. We, unthinking idiots, had simply thought that the hush on the streets was because of the drowsiness of the summer and the torpor that it induced on everyone, and had busied ourselves in making a preparation of fish curry and dried mash dal for the evening. The only sign of unrest that I had noticed otherwise was in the dogs in our street, who had been whining and howling for most of the afternoon. As I'd got up to lock the gate after Amma left, I'd looked at the dogs, who were peering into the house from a few feet away, and they had looked back at me with a warning sort of glance. They saw something- was it naivete?- in my eyes, something which I have never understood myself, and turned their faces away towards other people who were around and who also did not suspect how life was about to be derailed in these streets.

A cat, when cornered, finds itself sleek enough to slip out between window bars, jump onto the tin roofs of red- brick houses thirty feet below, and trust the back-alleys of the *mohalla* to camouflage its skin with the myriad other nameless and faceless objects that will always be found in these streets. Dogs lack this finesse; loyalty is their undoing where danger is at hand. But danger is a big word, and newspapers have proven this already. Danger is the bearded man and the clothed woman, the place of worship, the tribe which does not give up its customs, the forest which does not cave in to the city and the mind which does not stop thinking on its own. Danger is a category awarded to those who don't fit the prescriptions of the modern- day world, and the thirty or so- armed men euphorically declaring that they were here to end the bloody traitors of the country as they spread out in our *mohalla* were very much part of the system that had convinced people that those who are shown as the danger are meant to be stamped out of existence for the safety and survival of the innocent, guileless masses.

When seen from the sky, earth is just a flatness wrapped around a melted iron core; green in some places, littered with concrete bricks in others. When seen on a map, people become non- entities existing invisibly among deliberately and obnoxiously sketched lines. When seen in the midst of imminent violence, self is transformed to a schizophrenic compression of nightmare, reality and dream. Zainab and I have disappeared from the room where we sat laughing over marinated slices of fish. We never return. Instead, with barely even a 'Hey, Presto!' or a rabbit appearing, perfectly unconscious of being magical, out of a magician's hat, you have two girls who hide

behind the water- tank on their terrace, raising their heads from time to time to see how close the mob is to their house. *Let's run!* the elder one says urgently, pulling on her sister's arm, *this is no time for playing a heroine, let's climb over the wall and hide with the people next door.* The younger is carrying a ruler made of steel to match the men's arms. *They already ran off, and if we are found alone in the streets---* she doesn't complete her sentence. Both the girls are well aware of the stakes. Someone is banging at their gate, warning them to come out unless they want the worst to happen. The elder girl is fighting with her sister, trying to drag her to leave their hiding- place, but the younger is resisting, saying *let's stay here! They won't do anything to us if they can't find us!* The elder is looking helplessly from the girl crouching beside her to the men collecting at the gate. *Get into the water tank then. But don't jump- go headfirst- softly- no noise- unseen-*

The smell of smoke and laughter. Someone who will never be named in an FIR has poured petrol over the gate, and lighted a small and innocent match which bears no culpability of the crime. They set fire to the gate and the adjoining walls. The younger girl is already in the water tank, half- immersed in rainwater, holding her head above everything. Her sister had begun to climb in too, but her hand slips- she falls back- they half- see a glimpse of her blue kurta, shout *there's a girl on the terrace!* The girl is slipping to her knees, is realizing that she is no girl who can run away from herself, that she is really- only- me.

The flames are starting to catch on, and the dust is flying higher than it has ever been. Water in the tank smells strongly of ammonia. I remember how the large vessel in which the marinated fish lay, dead and cut up into pieces, fell to the ground with a loud clang; we had upturned it as we raced to the terrace, breath held back in our throats. Everything grows louder, as if a fiercely-beating drum has suddenly been placed in touch with my skin; then it recedes, along with Zainab's face and remembrance of my name, becoming fainter, more distant, as distant as thought itself. I shut my eyes and think desperately of the beach, but the image of the sea eludes me. I am slipping lower than my knees, the tight cloth of my kurta suddenly too loose for me. It flaps around my shoulders, which are no longer my shoulders- my arms are on the ground now, and so are my legs, though they seem like four limbs indistinguishable from each other. My skin cracks from the joints and sprouts fur, and canines emerge from my mouth that has grown so dry that it feels as if it is on fire along with the gate and the walls and the rest of the house. My tongue becomes longer than my mouth itself, curling inwards when I pull it in. Why couldn't I get into the water tank with Zainab? My heart grows smaller and smaller and smaller, then expands instantaneously to immerse the whole universe in itself.

There is no time to think- already their slippers are heard slapping against the terrace steps. I shake myself free of the kurta and bound towards them, a fierce, hungry howl escaping my throat. They fall back, at first surprised; I sink my teeth into one of their ankles and they yelp in pain and try to shoot at me. But I am lashing out at first one, then the other- slipping between their legs. If they want to kill me, they will have to risk killing each other too. They turn back from the terrace now- telling themselves it was a mistake, there was no girl up, only a filthy dog of these filthy katmullahs. And howls continue to escape my throat, refusing to let go, as if my teeth biting into their flesh, will make them realize that these streets will not be left unprotected and bare.

I have some memories of the girl hiding in the water tank. She is- was- my sister. Her face is a blurred warmth that I cannot quite reach, no matter how hard I bite into the men's legs. The house is on fire; smoke is crawling up my nose, but I am chasing them out of the gate. They look for other prey, convinced that some *jinn* presides over this one, now seen in the shape of a girl, now appearing like a snarling, savage dog. The flames are rising higher every second, and I run this way and that, grabbing a stranger's sleeve between my teeth and dragging him towards the house from two streets away, just beyond the barricades that the police has set up to ensure that nobody can reach those inside. The girl has emerged out of the water tank, and she is standing alone on the terrace now, waiting to find a way out through the fire. I howl until the man sees her and shouts out that he will bring help. Then he disappears, and we wait, the girl and I, for some rain to quench the flames. The rain that doesn't arrive.

It has been many cycles of summer and winter now. Forgetfulness comes like a heavy cloud closing over the sky, obscuring what cannot be recovered with the mercy of distance and vapour. The burnt remains of the houses all around have been replaced with either tall buildings or temporary shacks that they call *jhuggis*. I have grown used to the smell of the sweating human flesh as well as the charred, the sweet sickly odour of human blood as I continue my life in these streets. Few people live here; most just survive. Many of those who were once safe in their homes are now safe in prisons. Their families have moved away, trying to find a place near their new habitation where catching sight of them is still possible.

I have learnt how to live on in these streets even so. What I am now is simply what is necessary for our survival. I follow every stranger to their destination, and keep my ears pricked up for sounds of trouble even when I am asleep. Sunlight does not burn me. I am only afraid of the rain, and wriggle into one of the *jhuggis* when monsoon has decided to declare itself. Seeing water collecting in puddles fills me with a strange

twisting in my belly, as if I have seen the echo of a dream. I have discovered that seeing the thing which appears when I look at a puddle of water drives me to a mad viciousness; a state in which I am ready to attack anyone and everyone in rage and despair.

The girl who lives at the far- end of the street often cries when she sees me. I slink away from her touch and her scent--- they disturb me quite a lot. She is one of the few people who have not been driven out of their homes, and stay on in this *mohalla* for some strange reason. She has been visiting me along with a boy these days, someone whom I did not know and was on the verge of attacking with all my ferocity. But they smiled at each other, hushed me, and threw some burnt chicken breast and rice in front of me before walking away. I stared after them, and sniffed at the meal. It seemed overdone, but I wolfed it down anyway, stomach rumbling in pain for hours afterwards.

And now, what is left to say? I have no name, and spend my nights scouring rats in the drains. I understand nothing of human affairs, except who is here to cause trouble and who comes in peace. That is my devotion to you, God- the simple acceptance of the violent and unhappy fate that is mine to live out. My life has its sardonic pleasures even so- a certain maulvi chanced into these streets once again, and I had the freedom to bite into his posterior and chase him out for a first. Forgetfulness clears in brief flashes sometimes...I am learning to depend on it slowly, day by day...perhaps it will even deliver me an identity someday, though I no longer know what I would do with such a useless thing anymore.