

Freedom

by Hananah Zaheer

It has been fifty years since Independence, and I am still waiting to die.

I sit in the veranda, in front of the TV, propped up by the wall of pillows behind me, and watch the parade while my granddaughters comb my hair. The soldiers, mere boys, are marching across the screen, feet stomping the ground in rhythm. My granddaughters are whispering about those boys and uniforms and breasts and things I would slap them for if I still had the will to move my hands. They see the determination in the set lines of their jaws, hard chests under those starched khakis. I cannot resist watching either, although my heart beats faster not the sight of the medals and insignia that adorn their chests and foreheads like a smattering of bullet holes, but at the knowledge of what these honorable men are capable of.

Look Dadi, my granddaughters say, there's Dada. And they giggle again. They think I am senile. They think that I might see a semblance of my own husband in the faces of these boys. But I've known he would never return ever since he boarded the train in '46, dressed in his army best, on his way to a ship embarking for England. I wrote him letters telling him that we were having another child, that the shape of my stomach was different this time and each time when the letter came back I told my boys to be patient-- he will return-- and I hid the envelopes with his name scratched out and the words "addressee unknown" scribbled across in a slanted handwriting that looked so much like his. I knew of his absence anew when the sounds of an angry mob banging on my door woke me and my children in the middle of the night ten months later, and I dragged the three boys, paralyzed by fear, and my newborn daughter out the back door into the streets of Batala. Amidst screams, we ran from the swinging scythes and the blazing torches, confused, and not yet realizing that the mere shifting of the clock hands to usher in the new day had declared us strangers in our own country. We were no longer the same; we became Muslims, traitors, enemies: Pakistanis.

To my granddaughters, my life is inconsequential. At best, I am a living wall to echo ideas off, an empty silent place to vent their anger against their father's strictness. In this house I am a guest, sometimes their plaything. A husbandless, breastless, lifeless weight. They dress me, feed me, arrange me on the bed as if I was a doll. They bring oils and combs and brush and braid my hair into intricate designs as if I were a bride going to my wedding bed. When the comb gets tangled in a resistant knot, they pull, sighing and clucking their tongues as if I were a disobedient child. I remain quiet, and I wonder what kind of mothers they will make. I wonder if they would know how to sacrifice for their children.

On the television, the soldiers are marching, flags raised. They are proud. The whole country is in celebration of surviving fifty years. I hear speeches and songs, and stories of the heroic escapes of the victims of Partition. Later, they will show the same interviews that I see every year. The same faces, familiar in the way their eyes dart from their hands to the sights only they remember, unable to forget, their voices trembling with the echo of sounds they still hear, my compatriots in this life that has become a land of banishment. And I will relive the night again, silently, while my son's wife will hold her daughters close and they will all shed tears in sympathy. They will mourn the dead wives, and the lost sons, the severed limbs. They will fiercely declare patriotism, and believe the soldiers—those ordinary men—as they pledge to protect their countrymen, their family, swearing this on the graves of their mothers. They will do all this and not look my way once.

And I will try to read my son's eyes as he stares through me, unblinking, hands buried under his legs. I'm sorry, I will think. I loved you best, I will reason, I was Ebrahim and you were the chosen one.

I wonder if these soldiers think about death as they lay in their wives' arms late at night, and what they would be willing to do in the name of justice, if they would surround a mother stumbling through the streets and, driven by visions of revenge and hatred, slice the air with their swords and daggers and offer her a choice, benevolently: The baby or the boy.

When my granddaughter bends to pick up my rosary from the floor, I can see her chest. Round, young flesh, ready to be suckled. I feel bile rise in my throat.

She bends lower, reaching under the string bed for something that has caught her eye. Her hair falls away from her neck and from where I sit, the red thread on which she wears a pendant looks like a thin line of blood. A fine slice of the sword, nothing like the unskilled hacking that severs a breast from a chest. She laughs, delighted by the discovery of a missing earring, and swings her hair back over her neck. Her eyes, when she looks up, are baby girl eyes, soft and sweet and innocent. I feel a pull in my own barren chest that belies my womanhood. I want to pull her to me, hold her there. But she stands up and moves away.

My son moves through this house like a quiet, ever-present shadow. He never says the words, but I know that he remembers that night. I see it in the way he holds his children to him, the fierceness with which he kisses the tops of their heads, his reluctance to let go until they say ‘Abba, that hurts.’ And I know it by the way we find lesser and lesser things to speak about since his first child was born sixteen years ago. He sits next to me, and speaks with his daughters, and holds his son in his lap, and occasionally his hand, a smile, wanders my way, next to him, and he leans over and says, ‘Amma, you okay?’

He is a dutiful son, and a good father.

But can he understand what it is like to look at two children, one your life, the other your heart, both your flesh, and try to decide which one you would let die, and which one your husband might like to see if he ever returned?

Thunder rumbles like cannons overhead and my granddaughters are worried. I can hear the frowns in their voices. The flag will get wet, they say, and what will happen to the mela? They cannot bear the thought of missing the fair, of not holding their father’s arms as they make their way through an avenue of admiring eyes. Their new green and white clothes, the hair braided and scented with coconut oil, the henna on their hands, it will all be wasted. Last night, they brought me henna too, as I sat on my perch in the veranda, the TV flashing in front; giggling behind clenched mouths, they drew names in the vines and flowers that crawled over my hands. I felt their hands holding mine and, because I closed my eyes, I could imagine what it would have been like if it had been my daughter holding my hand, turning it over to smell the henna, her soft breath hovering over my palm.

My daughter was light, a small and quiet load in my arms. It was my youngest son I had to worry about giving us away. When the men, no longer British

soldiers, but mere men who knew nothing more than to follow orders and to kill, took to the streets, we crouched, trembling, behind bushes along the sides of roads, too afraid to breathe, I clamped my hand over the youngest's mouth. He fought to free himself, and his brothers held him down. Tears poured down his cheek and I slapped him. I wanted him to be strong, like his father, like his brothers. Instead he cried like the girl that my husband had wished he was.

And the pack of hunters heard him.

I wanted my children to live. So I told them to run. The older two listened, but not him. He stayed, loyal, scared, child that he was; he found his place behind my legs and I felt his hands on my knees, shaking.

My grandson sidles up to my perch. I can see the mischievousness in his eyes. He slaps his sister's knee, lightly, and waits to see if she reacts. I can sense the sting of the little hand in her eyes, but she is singing patriotic songs along with the TV and doesn't protest. I look at her, trying to convey sympathy with my eyes. But her eyes are glued, dreaming, enchanted by the boys on the screen. I drop my eyes. My grandson has heavy hands, just like his father. He runs the thick, long fingers along the edge of my veil. It seems that he wants to linger. If he sat next to me, he might ask me for stories from when his father was young. I could tell him about the house in Batala and the guava tree my sons liked to climb in the front yard. I could tell him about his father, who was mischievous just like him, and whom I spent hours sitting by at night, watching as he struggled against his dreams, his face breaking into soundless screams even years afterwards. Until he became a man. Suddenly, overnight it seemed, he no longer needed me to comfort him after his nightmares, no longer wanted my hand resting on his chest as he awoke, panting. And I never found the courage to soothe his hurt. I just trudged on, pretending it never happened, but knowing it all along in the way my son's eyes started to question me, as if he was trying, and failing, to understand.

I lift my head. My grandson grins and slaps my hand before he bounds away, off to his corner, to behead another doll that his sisters are missing.

When my husband left, the women had all thought I should die too; what is a woman abandoned by her husband? That night, when the men, mockingly still dressed in the shirts that denoted their ranks and regiments, surrounded me, they told me the same thing. But I wanted life.

I bore it willingly when they stuck their swords under my shirt and ran the tips in painful lines down my chest. I pushed my son's head lower when they

snatched away my veil, and tore the front of my shirt open. My daughter wailed when they pushed me to the ground and forced themselves into me, and I would have shed tears also if I had not been struggling to recognize in those familiar faces any hints of neighbors, friends' husbands, the fathers of my sons' playmates. I bore it all so that they might allow my children freedom. But they wanted blood.

I feel a pull around my neck, like tiny soft arms slipping around me from behind. I want to tilt my head back, to find a soft cheek, a head fragrant with almond oil. But my granddaughters are gathering up my hair, tying up the loose ends. They giggle away, slap their little brother on their way into their room. I watch him wail, wipe his tears with the back of his hands, then bound off to his parents' room. His steps are brisk, the motion of his legs sharp, quick. I am left alone in the veranda. The voices from the TV echo against hollows inside my head, interrupting, as I lean forward and listen for footsteps returning.

I hear my son laugh, a deep, loud happy sound, and I wonder if this year will be different, if this time we will resurrect the question that lies between us.

Stunned by the suddenness with which my daughter stopped screaming when the sword slid across her neck, I didn't remember to look for my youngest son until hours later.

Stumbling, bleeding, I found him in the street behind our house. He lay on top of the breastless, faceless body of another woman, his head buried in the crook of her arm. I pulled him out, fighting his struggling limbs with fists. When his body went limp, I kneeled before him, broken. He stared up at me, body shaking, eyes wide with accusation. I tried to speak, but it seemed that the men had cut off my tongue along with my breasts.

I could not tell him why I had pushed him forward when the men had held a knife to my throat, asking me to choose, why I had called his name, panicking, when he ran, why I yelled at him to stop for my sake, when we both knew what I was asking of him. And so I stared back at him. Perhaps if the world had not been whirling around me, I might have held him against me, as a mother should. But all that echoed inside my head was a scream so loud that I could feel it piercing every nerve, silencing every thought. So I held his hand, and pulled him into the darkness. And we walked away.

My older sons forgot me like their father did. They could not remember that I held their hands when they trembled in fear at the sight of dead bodies littering our path, that when they ran, I made more noise so those men wouldn't hear their footsteps on the cobblestones. They never knew of the two years after partition that I spent sitting outside government offices, laying bare my desperation for all to see, begging for news of my children.

I sewed clothes, and I washed floors and with the money I saved, I looked for my sons. When I found them, they were men. They refused to recognize me, happy in the lives they had found, a fatherless, motherless freedom, so they stopped speaking to me. The youngest stayed by me, because he felt my guilt. This I know.

My granddaughters are emerging from their room, dressed alike, smiling alike, their eyes wide with suppressed excitement. They call to their father, and check each other for an errant wisp of hair, a wrinkle in the perfectly ironed clothes. Soon, I know I will hear the music from the streets outside; rambunctious children will ride their bicycles down the streets honking their horns and wailing songs of joy. As the sky becomes brighter, the sounds will become feverish, the smells more aggressive. Fruits and flowers and burning oil, smoldering wood, charred carcasses of goats and chickens, fresh blood.

My son emerges from the room with his wife. He is carrying his son on his shoulders. The family gathers near the front door, a combed and perfumed unit. They glimmer with such excitement that I have to look away, blinded that I am by their happiness. There is silence. I know they are all looking at me, trying to decide, the silent discussions hovering between them. I keep looking away, knowing I am not wanted, wondering if my son is thinking of the same things I am. I can hear the shuffling of feet as someone approaches. I look up to see him, his smile dark and old, kneeling down. My grandson sits on his shoulders. I hold back tears, try to read his mind. He lays one hand on my knee.

“Will you be okay alone, Amma? We won't be long.”

I search his eyes for meaning behind his words. I knew him so much better when he was little. I smile, wanting him to know that I remember. It is difficult to hold the smile for the trembling in my chin, but I try. He looks back at his family, his other hand rubbing his son's ankle. They wait at the door with impatient faces. It is a big day, and the celebrations will be bigger than the years before. I stay quiet, feeling the weight of his hand on my leg, remembering the same hand on my knee

so many years ago. I wonder if he remembers me as I used to be, if he remembers his sister.

His eyes look away from mine, start to dissolve into something familiar. Stay with me, I think. I want to hold him to me, to feel his heart beating against mine, to remember that I am, scarred, still a mother, and not a remnant of his past that he cannot bear to hold closely. A fly buzzes in and lands on his finger. He withdraws his hand, waves the fly off. My stomach feels hollow. A child cries somewhere, then quiets down. We sit, quietly, each awaiting a move from the other. My son sighs, glances at his family again. I sense him shifting, moving away before he even gets up.

“Stay.” The word is strange and intrusive as I speak it, even to my ears. Pick me, I am thinking, pick me even though I didn’t pick you. My throat, unused to demand, is constricting. I turn my head towards the wall, not wanting to see the shadow that has suddenly slid into my son’s eyes. I cannot let him see that his surprise stings. I pull my veil around me, feeling as naked as the day he and I crossed the border into Pakistan, blood and body peeking through tattered remnants, desperately trying to preserve whatever dignity I had remaining.

“You’ll be okay,” he says after a while, the words escaping his mouth quickly as he rises. “We won’t be too long.”

The family hurries out through the door, noises of excitement trailing behind them. The door creaks shut. I close my eyes, and wait.