

They hung love on the gallows

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A girl struggling, crying out amidst the pains caught in her throat—pains that turned into silent sobs and paralyzed souls, yet no one noticed.

- Love was hanged.
- I wanted to become a doctor, not a bride!

That night, as sleep refused to descend upon the throat of the night, my heart was strangely trapped in sorrows. In utter darkness, with a helpless gaze fixed on God's lit lantern—the moon—I sat in silence.

My self-sufficient Creator!
You know well that my soul had been paralyzed and in pain.
But what was my pain?
The captivity of my homeland, the sorrow of an uncertain fate, or both?

I don't know why sleep sometimes flees from me.
But I watched You in the face of the moon—when You shone like light and compelled me to speak.
I spoke to You as my tears poured relentlessly, blurring my vision.

The truth is, I have grown accustomed to seeking refuge in the moon during dark nights—a moon that, unlike humans, does not mock my sorrows but silently and calmly listens.

In that small boat of words, my speech had no end, and my heart was full of pain. But what a pleasure it is!
To speak with the Creator, to whisper His name with tearful eyes, and to gaze at the moon.

That night, I stayed awake until the depths of darkness, keeping solitude with the moon in the sky. Who knows that even the pains of Afghan girls are understood by those around them only as words and pretense—not as reality? Let alone the world, which has turned its back on us and our desires. That is why I prefer to speak only to the moon of God about my dark and bitter days—to find peace.

I stayed awake until dawn. My eyes burned, perhaps from sleeplessness, or maybe the relentless flood of my tears had set them ablaze. When the soul-stirring call to prayer caressed my ears, I felt my heart relieved of the sorrows of time. After performing my prayer, I found a peace of divine essence.

I didn't know why that day felt different. I didn't even know what day it was—only that I wished to pass through its seconds with closed eyes, to sink into a deathlike slumber. Yes! Sleepless

and longing to soar in the sky of my dreams, I closed my eyes—to sleep, to forget, to prevent the past memories and my uncertain future from coming to life before me.

I don't know how long I remained lost in sleep and unawareness when my phone rang loudly. Half-opening my eyes, without even checking the caller's name, I answered. The tremor in their voice made my heart race, and I quickly sat up in bed.

They began with a line of poetry:

"Does no one know where you are? Can someone bring you to me?"

I wondered—why were they not as lively as before? Why, unlike before, did they not tease me with the change in their tone?

Hearing their voice again pulled me out of my thoughts and threw me into reality.

They said, *"Nazi, I want to see you. Do you have time to come?"*

I replied, *"Yes! If you want, I will come to meet you."* Then I added, *"I have missed you so much!"*

Softly, they whispered, *"Me too,"* and the call ended.

A moment later, I received a message from them—it was the address of our usual meeting place. They had sent many messages before calling me, which I never read. But I preferred to go and see them rather than stare at their messages and waste time.

When I was ready and checked the time, it was eight in the morning. I stepped out of my room and saw my mother. I don't know what she noticed in my gaze, but for a second, I thought her look cried out my pain. Ignoring the curiosity in her eyes, I approached her with a smile and embraced her—so she wouldn't read the grief in my stare.

I told her about meeting my friend, and my mother said they had already called her before reaching out to me. I said goodbye to my mother and stepped out of our building.

It was strange! That summer day, the sun's rays shone dimly, partially veiled by small, intrusive clouds.

At that moment, our neighbor's daughter stepped out of their house, wearing a black burqa. I thought she, too, was like the sun that day—hidden, trapped by the clouds of this era.

Yes! That girl had once worked as a prosecutor in Kabul during the Republic—a girl who graduated from school at a young age and pursued her dreams.

Now, she is confined to her home, only stepping out occasionally for essential purchases. I have even heard she struggles with her mental health and lives under a psychologist's care.

As I watched her walk away, I thought to myself:

"You are lucky, girl! At least you had the chance to live your dream. But what about me and girls like me, who never even got to step onto the campus of our nation's universities?"

A voice within me shouted:

"Nazi, do you even know what she is going through? Why do you call her lucky? Don't you know she is fighting depression?"

I gave a bitter smile.

How helpless and unaware I am.

I whispered a poem that mirrored the state of my country—one that seemed to echo the agony of the girls of my homeland—unceasingly, sometimes pausing for long intervals, sometimes murmuring in a soft voice.

*"You told me spring is here,
The air is joyful, the rain is here,
I saw nothing but the scent of sighs and cries,
Cruelty is like a flame, it spreads here.
The atmosphere of solidarity has become rare,
On every street, there is a prison here.
You recite verses to me, saying,
'This is the good news, it is here.'
There is no color or scent of kindness left,
For bigotry now replaces faith here.
The business of worshiping truth is a trade,
It is visible everywhere here.
With my heart torn apart by the separation of my love,
Oh God, what era is this?
The voice of life is now choking,
The cry of eyes is endless here.
On the foreheads of hearts, there is a mark of humiliation,
This is the nobility of men here.
For going and learning,
Thousands of wounds remain in the soul here."*

Again, the faded glances, the lost smiles, and the reckless movement of the Taliban in the city troubled me. However, I tried not to be confined by my surroundings and decided to head to the café. Since the walk from our house to the café took about ten minutes, I walked toward

my destination. When I neared the café, I scanned the area with my eyes, looking for a sign of him, hoping to fly toward him. We used to go to the café together in the past, not alone.

I shielded my eyes with my hand and saw someone moving towards me. I wasn't sure if it was him, but I felt that person was familiar to my heart. Then, as the distance between us shrank to nothing, I realized it was him.

A girl with shining brown eyes, but that day I found her shine faded, her gaze dim. I couldn't believe it was my dear Lial, always cheerful and smiling, now so frail and changed after a year. Why had her smile disappeared? After the attack on our school (Kajo), during the mock entrance exams, Lial had suffered a little injury. I had visited her a few times after that, but after that, she always made excuses, and I had gotten used to not seeing her until that day when she wanted to see me.

I tried to act normal, forcing a smile that I knew was more of a grimace. She hugged me tightly, as if she hadn't seen me in years. I, oblivious to my surroundings, wished to find refuge in the arms of the girl who had once been the source of all my hope, but the suffering of this era had turned her, and even the distant land of my homeland, into a trembling shadow.

For a few minutes, I stayed in her embrace, silent, and then, with reluctance and anxiety, I pulled away. I was about to laugh and say:

"Lial, you have torn me apart, girl. Let's go inside and see each other well."

I didn't know the reason why things had changed so much. I held her hand and, though I wanted to lead her toward the café, her tearful gaze held me in place, and I truly felt lost.

At that moment, I whispered to myself:

"Ah, homeland! See what you have done to the girls living within you."

I looked at Lial, who was lost in her thoughts. Lial, who used to be known as "Firework" because of her bright, childish joy, was now quiet, calm, and immersed in endless pains that I wished she had told me about earlier. Unlike before, when she would choose the busiest corner in the café, this time she went to a quieter corner, where no one could see, making it easier for her to weave her tale. She let go of my hand and sat by the window, as they brought us the usual cake and coffee. I wanted her to speak, so I could understand the sorrow in her gaze.

I asked:

"Are you okay, Einstein of my homeland?"

I addressed her this way because she had always been praised by teachers and students for her talent in solving difficult math problems. That's why we called her "Einstein of my homeland."

I waited for her response, but she only said:

"Do you know today is the 13th of September 2023, the day when the results of the entrance exam in Afghanistan are announced without the participation of girls like us?"

Her eyes, hidden under her long lashes, looked beautiful, but they concealed a sorrow as vast as Buddha's height. I saw it and replied:

"I didn't even know what day it was. I didn't know the date."

I whispered to myself:

"I am so tired

Of counting the days of boredom,

The long sorrowful nights,

The endless routine,

This wretched era,

The prison of despair,

And the hope that no longer accompanies my heart!

That is why I don't care about the dates and days."

She took a deep breath but said nothing.

I said, 'Lial, please speak. Tell me about the pains that weigh heavy on your heart. My kind Liali! Say something to ease my sorrow and be a balm for your wounds. Your gaze no longer has its previous brightness; I know you're not in the best condition, but trust me and speak.'

She sighed and sadly said, 'My pain is beyond remedy, my dear friend, it's unmeasurable and imbalanced; do you see? I've become a chatterbox and withdrawn, lost in a life that is chaotic and confused. Do you believe that to me, life has become nothing more than a form of captivity? Believe me, I've been so broken by the barrage of relentless words from those around me that even breathing now seems as difficult as moving all the mountains of the world.' I wish I hadn't passed by these words of hers so easily! I wish I could have talked with her for hours about each word she spoke so that I could now find peace in my heart. She continued with a choked voice: 'I'm so tired, more tired than ever. I feel that misery, suffering, and hardship are written into the fate of us Afghan girls, and it seems like they are inseparable from our destiny.'

Tears dripped from her chin and fell on her hands. It felt like a stone blocked my throat, and the air around my eyes became cloudy. I just stared at her; I don't know why none of my limbs were working with me, even my tongue failed to speak the words that were overflowing in my mind. Now I realize that she had come to speak her heart out to me, not leaving anything unsaid. Liali, my suffering friend, once again took hold of the thread of speech: 'Is it possible to escape from this trap? From this Taliban-made trap that will mercilessly drown all of us?'

Voices from around us rose, saying, 'Farhad, that boy who was the rival of Einstein of Khorasan, with 348 points, has been accepted into the medical faculty of Kabul Medical University. God knows what kind of stir there would have been if Liali had participated.' No one saw us, but their words were audible to us. I muttered with inner rage, 'Damn the Taliban for not allowing her.'

I felt sorrow for our dreams that had been looted, and the lump in my throat was painful.

When I looked into Liali's eyes, contrary to what I believed, she smiled through her pain, and her tears had dried.

In that moment, I was shocked by her sudden change, but I wouldn't lie if I said that the shape of her smile was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and it will never leave my memory.

I looked at her to capture her smile, hoping it would become a source of hope for my weary heart.

Ah! Why had they put my dear Liali in such a dilemma that her state became unstable and fluctuating?

This time, she quickly said, 'I want to tell you the last decision of my life!'

I looked at her face, deeply and long, but I couldn't find the same Liali I once knew. Her tone, unlike before, made my body shudder.

I turned my eyes around, fixed them on her gaze, and became bewildered because she seemed colder than ever.

Ah! My last hope lay in her smile, but she didn't even try to make a smile appear, not even a faint one.

I felt sorrow; what had they done to her to make her this defenseless and indifferent? Her gaze wandered with doubt, and then she said, 'Don't be surprised. I was joking! Actually, we still have plenty of time to make the final decisions of our lives, don't we?'

I said, 'Yes! But you can be at ease with me, just like before. Even though the situation has changed, nothing has changed in our friendship, trust me! I want to hear from you today...'

Again, I noticed hesitation and indecision in her eyes, as if she was torn between speaking and staying silent.

She reached for her scarf, trying to regain some peace by adjusting it, but I could feel her hands trembling.

I had never felt so helpless, I didn't know which weapon to use to calm her down, and even though I had a world of words ready, I couldn't find the right ones.

I was lost in confused thoughts and the unsettling state of my restless Liali when I heard her voice again. This time, her tone was devoid of any emotion:

'Do you see? My condition has turned upside down, and I'm dissatisfied with everything, do you believe it? Tell me! Did you think I wanted you to approach me, give me hope, and sit in front of my starry eyes?'

Please tell me something I can believe, my good friend. And if that is the case, speak, and I'll be able to! I was strangely restless!

I looked into her eyes again, and my tongue froze because, for the first time, there was no hope in her gaze, and that could have been my death.

I tried very hard, even going through the words in my mind to find hope, but I couldn't. I averted my gaze and whispered, 'I have nothing to say, my tongue hurts!'

Ah! How could I have known this would happen? I wish I had spoken that day! I wish we lived in better times so that giving hope wouldn't have been so difficult for me!

I really want to go away and leave!'

She said coldly, 'Fate never satisfies my heart.'

I cried out with all my despair, 'I know what you're going through!

I've spent all night awake, shedding tears for our lost dreams. Do you believe me? I didn't even know that today was the day the results of the entrance exam would be announced, but last night I was nostalgic for the old days, the days when we used to go to school and dream.

Do you remember when we planned to study non-stop for two years to prepare for the entrance exam?

We had such thoughts, but look what has happened. But you, Liali, are the hero of my land! You're the same Liali who survived the smoke, the gunfire, and the attack on KAJ, and gave a new meaning to the word resilience. I'm not saying you will reach your dreams in the near future, but I promise that our Einstein of the land will one day raise the flag of success on the high peaks of Baba Mountain, not immediately, but surely.

Why don't you want to find peace? Why did you do this to yourself?

Where is the cheerful, fiery Liali we knew? Where is the talkative, ambitious girl we left behind?

My dear Liali, life still has value, believe me!

A tear fell from her eyes, making my heart tremble. My hands went numb, and I couldn't share in wiping away her tears.

These times have imposed an increasing amount of pain on my soul and body; depression, numbness in my hands, long and disturbing dreams, and sometimes even disturbing insomnia...

With a trembling voice, mixed with tears, I said, 'I'm sorry! I feel like I shouldn't have spoken so harshly, but I don't want to see hopelessness in your face and remain silent. Do you understand, my dear?

For all the sorrows you don't speak of, for all the unspoken words in your heart, for the coldness of these summer days, and for the dreams we've lost, please don't worry! I know it's impossible to forget, but at least try to endure the blindness of those who don't know.'

She remained silent!

Before me, there was no one but a girl who had lost all her spirit. Yes! She was more broken than anyone else.

Liali's joy and courage had been looted by the suffering of these times. Perhaps there was a deeper, deadlier reason hidden in the sadness of her gaze.

After a long pause, she looked at me, her gaze fixed, and with a tremor in her voice, she whispered the following lines of poetry, broken and wavering:

*"I've fled so much from my own nature,
Sometimes I miss myself!"*

And today, even if I write and shout that "curse the Taliban who have created such difficult conditions for advancing our lives," it will be justified.

I wish I could have remained in the minutes of that day forever, so I wouldn't have witnessed the great changes that followed.

Liāli, whose fragile shoulders had been bent under the burden of life's struggles, continued: "How long must we speak of longing, deprivation, false beliefs, and dreams that have flown away?

I am tired!

Tired of being nothing but a plaything in the hands of my fate,

Tired of having to cry to find peace.

Nazī,

The unfulfilled expectation of freedom's meeting

Will eventually break me.

I am truly exhausted, believe me, from life and its countless sorrows,

From living in it,
I am tired, that's all!"

For the first time, I found myself helpless, and my words had vanished. I didn't want to meet her waiting gaze. Suddenly, I stood up, and her look turned even paler, as though she thought I was tired of hearing her words and would leave her. But I had stood up to sit next to her. When I sat beside her, without hesitation, she placed her head on my shoulder and closed her eyes. Perhaps that day, the best thing I could have done was to sit by her side; she became strangely calm and silent, for a long while. At that moment, I realized that we Afghan girls have become so unfortunate that sometimes, all we need is a shoulder to lean on and find reassurance. A shoulder that is safe and supportive. Just like Liāli, who, by resting her head on my shoulder, forgot all her restlessness, even if just for a while; the one who became silent and calm. She placed her cold fingers into my hands, and slowly, I felt the numbness in my hands fade away.

She again took hold of the chain of words and said:

"It seems as if all the universe has conspired to ground our spirits. I know your condition is not good either, as your gaze speaks of endless tears, but I truly feel a great pain.

I wish you never know and never understand what I am going through! I am so tired, and I would rather not think about the past or worry about the future."

She fell silent again, and I remained silent too, for that day was hers, meant for her words; she had to speak because it was the day the university entrance exam results were announced, and her heart was more pained than mine. The same girl who, when she regained consciousness after the attack on the Kaj Educational Center last year, asked, "Please, is my exam entry card among my books?" Then she asked the pain-filled question: "Could anyone say that Liāli, more than me, yearned to enter the world of medicine?"

That day, I should have stayed silent so that she could weave her stories of sorrow, the ones she had kept hidden in her heart, which she never shared with me.

She continued:

"We, who were trapped in our own loneliness, why did fate write my story so poorly?"

Now that I am writing, I know well why she considered herself apart from us and said, "Why did fate write my story so poorly?" Her tone became milder, and her eyes were fixed on some unknown point as she continued:

"I wish we could rest in a shelter among the mountains, filled with love and care, unaware of the chaos of this troubled world. I wish being a girl in our homeland didn't leave us so helpless, and I wish life wasn't so hard on us girls (the deprived ones of this era), so that we could bring brightness to the heart of our homeland, Kabul. Nazī,

I know you must be wondering why I am saying all this to you, but the reason will become clear to you. Just understand that you are the only one who remains in my life after God. I hope you will forgive me!"

I wanted to speak, but she remained silent and said with a trembling voice:

"I was a bold and ambitious girl, and you know that well, but the games of life with its many tricks are trying to test my endurance and patience. What if I lose my strength? What if life takes away my resilience? I feel as if the howling of fate is not letting me rest, leaving me with

destruction. Please tell me, if we can no longer meet, what will happen?"
Then, with all her desperation, she cried:
"I just want peace, that's all!"

Sometimes, how easily we pass by the scattered words and struggles of others, when in fact, these days, we should be the shelter for those who seek solace and sympathy from us, not salt on their spiritual wounds.

For the first time in front of someone, my own tears fell drop by drop from behind closed eyelids, and I felt the tremor in her body, sensing that her eyes were also cloudy, and her gaze was rainy. I freed my hand from her cold fingers, which had made it immobile, and wrapped my arm around her shoulder to make her feel that she was not alone and unprotected. But her loud, inconsistent voice sent a shiver through me:
"Oh, don't, Nazī. Please, don't touch me!"

With fear and trembling, I withdrew my hands from her. I looked at her in confusion, her brows furrowed, and her face showed signs of pain. But she laughed, perhaps bitterly, and then, with a tone that seemed to disguise her intentions, she said:

"Forgive me, Nazī, I just wanted to bring some relief. Tell me, did you really get scared?"
And she laughed again.

I think if we can place pain inside a laugh, it becomes a masterpiece, and death itself; she probably thought I believed her words and laughter, but I, who write stories and have tasted the bitter taste of pain, did not fall for her behavior. Yes! I realized that her heart was wounded, and she was full of grief, but I didn't know the reason for it.

I felt saddened, perhaps because the struggles of our talkative Liāli had transformed her; the companion who once considered me her closest confidante was now hiding the sorrow in her eyes, and this was something no friend could bear. Now that I write about that day, my tears fall involuntarily, tracing the path down my cheeks, and I am powerless to control them. With a voice I tried hard not to let tremble, so my sadness wouldn't pour out,

I whispered:

According to Pouriya-Ashteri, who says:

What a beautiful autumn,

What a cloudy, rainy sadness!

I don't even know if a smile was planted on her lips, but with concern, she said:

'I will never forget this day. No, I should say, you must never forget this day, right?'

I quietly said: 'Whatever you say.'

Her phone rang loudly, as if someone was calling her. She stared at the mobile screen, sighed, and moved away from me to speak; this time, she came back pale-faced and said to me:

'Goodbye! I must go!'

Why didn't she say 'see you' or 'hope to meet again' as she always did? Why did her unstable mood burn me in the corners of impatience and pain? Why didn't she let me find her pain not just in her eyes but in her words as well? Ah, these pointless whys torment my memory every moment. She laughed lifelessly and embraced me, longer than ever before, but I stood

motionless, unable to wrap my arms around her for fear that once again her cry would echo, and I would be the helpless one, always finding myself powerless. I don't know how long we stayed in each other's arms, but then she stood before me and fixed her gaze on me; a look that seemed to close off the winter's chill, a gaze that spoke of the calm before the storm. From that moment, I was restless, a gaze that had driven all emotions away. It was strange! She, who hated anyone leaving without a goodbye, didn't say goodbye herself and left. It is true what they say—real departures have no goodbyes. Why couldn't I read the words in her gaze? Why did her look remain an unsolvable puzzle to me? Why didn't she look back one last time to warm my heart?

I didn't even know how many hours we had stayed there. Only when I left the café, did I realize the clouds had cleared and the sun was shining harshly. I walked back home and, after a few minutes, arrived at my quiet little house, the place where I seek refuge in my room and, with some effort, try to forget the countless pains of the past. There, where sometimes my mother's gaze, drained by my pains, meets mine, and I just try to color her soul, more exhausted than ever. I felt strangely tired; I often thought of my meeting with Lial at the café, which only increased my curiosity. I lay down on my bed, curled up in myself; I don't know when I fell asleep, but I woke up with my voice calling out Lial's name. Cold sweat was rolling down my forehead, and I was lost in a nightmare I had in my sleep. I don't remember much, but the last moments of my sleep are still clear: Lial was moving away from me, and in desperation, I called out for her to come back, but she didn't! She left and disappeared into the hall. When I stared at my phone, it was three o'clock in the middle of the night. I didn't know if what I was doing was right or not, but I took a deep breath and dialed Lial's number. The first call went unanswered; the second time, she didn't pick up, and my heart was pounding, scared that she had gone somewhere and left me behind. With hopelessness, I dialed for the third time, and this time, her sister's trembling, fragile, and tearful voice made my heart stop for a moment, turning my nightmare into reality. I felt as if I had fallen from a high peak to the ground.

'Nazee, she... she committed suicide. Lial is no more...'

I ended the call and whispered under my breath:

'No...! It can't be, my Lial was stronger than that! She must have wanted to scare me again, and her sister must be playing a part in this, but the breaks in her sister's voice, crying uncontrollably, screamed that this was not a trick. She has really gone, leaving us all behind.'

I was upset and sorrowful, but I didn't shed any tears because I had turned to stone, cold and numb. I kept repeating under my breath:

'You were foolish, girl!'

Once again, I became the helpless one, and I stared at the sky from my room window:

'My incomparable Creator,

I know You are watching,

Do You see?

Wherever I look,

There are barriers, and it feels like I'm surrounded!

I look up to You in helplessness,

But!

A destructive storm has blown,

To the extent that it has stolen my happiness.
I am restless,
My heart is trembling,
My heart has stopped beating,
Ah! Time doesn't pass through the throat of my life,
Even my feelings have said goodbye...
Why do all the memories of my life circle in front of me?
Why is there silence mixed with such piercing echoes?
A voice within me rose:
'It's an era of sorrow and despair,
A time that has captured your soaring spirit!
You, who were the problem-solver for those around you,
What will you do now?
Will you find a solution?'
No! I have found no solution, and I won't. I had to suffer as an Afghan girl and be condemned to silence.
I wished I could close my eyes until the morning, hoping that when I opened them, all that had happened would be nothing but a nightmare.
Alas! We live in times where our dreams are like reality, and our awakenings are like nightmares, confusing and distorted.
Morning came, but the dark evening of my life hadn't found its dawn.
I wanted to go and see Lial in person. I thought I should go; maybe she would be okay.
This time, when I stepped out of my room, I saw my mother, worried, saying:
'It's been three days, my daughter hasn't eaten. I'm worried about her, but she has become more stubborn than ever and won't listen to anyone.'
My heart ached, and this pain had started since midnight, tormenting me until then. I was upset because I never wanted to upset my mother, but for a few days, my efforts had been in vain, and she had realized that something was wrong with me.
The results of the entrance exam came out, and the girls, including me, had never participated in it. What was strange was that there was no uproar; nothing in the daily lives of anyone was disturbed, except for Lial and probably hundreds of others like her across the country, whose struggles and despair ended their lives.
No one noticed the pain we went through, or how our once soaring dreams brought turmoil to our souls and bodies. Everyone congratulated those who made it to universities, but no one expressed sorrow for me and my peers who hadn't participated, as if our hearts didn't need any warmth from their support and empathy.
My mother's voice broke my train of thought:
'Nazee, are you okay?'
I looked at her, confused and bewildered, not understanding why she asked this, but then she sighed in relief and hugged me tightly.
Maybe being embraced by my mother was the best thing that could have happened to me in that moment of despair. The peace I felt in her arms was so comforting. For a moment, I thought of Lial's embrace, the one that pulled me close outside the café, unwilling to let me go. I stepped away from my mother and looked at her, her gaze colder than ever and more lifeless

than I had ever seen, but she looked at me with such reassurance that I couldn't help but wonder, if my mother wasn't here, how would I bear this pain? How would I survive?

My heart trembled with gratitude for her love.

Indeed, I was sure that my survival was only because of my mother; otherwise, what does this time hold that I am still not finished? My gaze was restless, constantly turning from one side to the other. My mother, with her natural calm, said:

'I want to talk to you.'

But I stood motionless, muttering that I had to go see Lial. I felt her color drain, and she must have thought I didn't know anything because she said, her voice trembling:

'C... Could you go see her another day?'

I replied in a tone devoid of any feeling:

'No! If I don't see her today, I'll never see her again. She has faded away, Mother!'

This time, she only murmured:

'I wish I could do something, my daughter! I wish!'

Without saying a word, I left the house and found myself in a street I used to walk with long strides to reach my classes. My only concern back then was learning more. I don't know how long I walked, but when I finally looked around, I found myself in the street in front of Liala's house. I could feel the street reek of death, and it seemed to rule there. Anyone going to Liala's house was dressed in black, and this silent confirmation weighed heavily on my heart. My legs couldn't carry me into the life where I had always seen Lial smiling, looking out from the gate to see me, ready to discuss life's problems, weaving stories, and laughing together.

I became weak and defenseless. Leaning against the wall, I sat on the ground. I was staring blankly at the door when they carried Layali's coffin out of her home to take her to her final resting place—the cemetery.

I tried so hard, but I couldn't take a step forward because I didn't want to see Layali silent, with eyes that would never open again.

I didn't want to see her wrapped in those white pieces that screamed she was no longer here.

Layali was gone, and the cars of those present followed the vehicle carrying her lifeless body. A strange silence overtook the alley, as if no one could believe that Layali, who was always smiling, had really left.

I rested my head on my knees to escape my headache when I heard a voice soaked in pain whispering:

*"They are taking Layali away, oh alleys, do something!
My proud beloved, my dear one, they are taking her away!"*

*Oh alleys, do something!
They are taking my love away, oh Lord, stop them!
Layali, my tall and graceful one, my beloved with flowing hair...
They are taking her away, oh alleys, do something!"*

Then, a long, painful silence.

And with a trembling voice, he wailed, *"They are taking Layali away, oh alleys, do something!"*

I sighed but didn't lift my head. I felt like I should only hear Layali's name from his lips to understand what paradise truly meant. His voice was familiar, but I wasn't sure who he was.

Then, he continued softly, barely audible:

"We have become so used to pain that we no longer recognize love.

Oh God... why me?

Where is my love? Why can't I breathe in her scent anymore?

Why did you let her take her own life?

How... how can I endure without her restless glances, sometimes curious, sometimes full of love?

Oh, Merciful Creator!

Why did fate never align with her heart's desires?

She even made peace with the scars left from the attack on Kaaj...

But why? Why did you end her story?"

His voice trembled with emotion, turning into a cry, as he recited a verse by Kazem Bahmani:

*"Oh soul, rise from me and stop at the end of this alley,
If you go any further from my body, I will die!"*

My heart trembled at the depth of his love, and my gaze lost its color.

I wondered why true love always seemed to come without union.

My migraine flared up again, nausea overtook me, and I couldn't stay there any longer. Weakly, I stood up, choosing to leave rather than sit in sorrow.

I didn't see him again—he had collapsed near a fence that felt invisible to me.

I got up and walked toward an unknown destination, but not a single tear fell from my eyes.

I kept moving forward, hoping the road ahead would lead to freedom and flight, not to a dead end and an even greater wall.

Dragging my feeble legs behind me, I reached a crossroads where I saw a Talib laughing.

Every time I have felt unwell, I have seen them laughing.

I wanted to scream—not just for my own pain, but for the silent suffering of thousands of girls in my homeland, in the outskirts of cities and the heights of Baba mountain.

I wanted the world to tremble at the weight of our endless patience.

As I stared at the crowded road ahead, taking slow steps, I whispered under my breath:

*"The world thinks of the moon, Mars, and Jupiter,
While we collide with beards and turbans."*

I lost track of time. But when I finally returned to the present, I found myself in my room.

Have you ever been so lost and adrift that you don't know how you reached your destination?

Have you ever felt your heart torn apart by words left unsaid?

Can you be an Afghan girl and not have tasted the feeling of death?

Impossible.

Two days had passed since Layali had perished. That evening, her sister arrived at our house, carrying a package.

She was in a hurry and had to leave soon. But before going, she looked into my eyes, hesitated, and then handed me the package.

My hand reached for it involuntarily—it looked like a book.

She finally spoke: *"I found a note with this book in Layali's room. It said that only Nazy should receive it. I've delivered it to you so her soul may rest in peace."*

My mother invited her to stay, but she refused and left.

As soon as she walked away, I rushed to my room and opened the package, my heart pounding.

The package was not wrapped with the care Layali was known for. It no longer reflected her delicate taste.

As I unwrapped the paper, a note fell to the ground.

"My dearest Nazy, my good friend,

I hope that when you receive my diary, you are well and not missing me too much.

To be honest, I wanted to burn these writings, to turn them to ash...

But after I saw you in the café, after I saw the worry in your eyes for me, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

So, let this diary be my keepsake for you. And know—I don't want anyone but you to see it.

I am going to meet God. But you... take care of yourself!

From a sorrowful Layali, to a kind Nazi!"

I whispered to myself: *"You left, so why do you ask me to take care of myself? Why did you do this, my Layali?"*

With trembling hands, I opened the small book she had left behind.

To my shock, the pages were messy, words scratched out, their meaning lost.

In the center of one page, she had written in large, beautiful letters:

"My transcendent love"—but she had drawn chaotic lines through it.

That was when my restlessness began.

Had my Layali fallen in love? Had she been nothing but a lovesick girl?

On the next line, she had written:

"They have hung love from the gallows."

And below that:

"I wanted to become a doctor, not a bride."

A teardrop had fallen onto the page, sealing her endless sorrow.

My heart clenched. Something was stuck in my throat—was it a sob or the bitter taste of death and finality?

Leaning against the wall, I slid down and sat.

I drowned in the turbulent ocean of hidden sorrows within the pages of that notebook.
It was written:

"In this unfinished life, one day my story will come to an end.
I may not have become the hero of my own life story.
It is not unlikely; I will probably be nothing more than a sacrifice.
Even my struggles to be hopeful and to give hope will no longer be of interest...
Who knows?
Perhaps, contrary to expectations,
I will be gone much sooner than anyone could imagine.
One day, you will not find me,
but you will only be faced with a cold stone bearing this poem:

'See the cruelty—no one poured water on my fire,
Though, like lightning, I burned entirely with heat.
I burned from the fire of my heart amidst waves of tears.
See the misfortune—I burned in the embrace of the sea!'

The end of my unfinished story is near."

I turned the page and encountered heartbreaking lines:

"Oh God...!
It was not meant for us to be so helpless in the first decades of our lives,
nostalgic for the past,
troubled by an uncertain future,
and gasping for breath along the path of time.
So what happened?
Why does fate look upon us with wrath?
Why has the invasion of dark clouds frozen our hopes?
Are You angry with us?
Tell me, unknowingly, what have we done to deserve such a heavy price?

Shall I say something, my only One?
Forgive me for speaking this way; I remember I had promised not to give up, but...!
My heart longs to escape from everything, do you believe me?
They want to marry me off.
I—who wanted to become a doctor, who wanted to remain my beloved's only one.
Why do my words no longer matter to my family?
Why do I feel like the loneliest person in this vast land?

Oh, my Farhad!
If only you had never looked at me so deeply and lovingly,
if only you had not captivated me with the sight of your eyes,
then today, my heart would not ache even more.

If only you knew—this is Afghanistan, and one should not fall in love with anyone!
I remember how Nazi, upon seeing our deep gazes, used to taunt me and say:

'You have fallen in love with that boy? He is Farhad.
You should be searching for Majnun because your name is Layla.
And of course, he should go and find his own Shirin.'

Now I see she was right.
Our story will remain the most unfinished love tale in the world.

Forgive me, my beloved, my heart's solace!
We had promised to both become doctors,
to remain each other's,
to strive for the prosperity of our homeland.
But time betrayed us and our love.
Do you remember?
We had made a bet—whoever scored higher in the university entrance exam would propose first.
But now, fate has been cruel and severed the lifeline of my existence.
I no longer want to breathe or continue.

Even in my imagination, I cannot betray you, let alone in reality by giving myself to marriage.

For five months now, a boy from our distant relatives has been sending his family every weekend to ask for my hand.
But I have endured until now.
Never think that I gave up or did not try to stay for you.

Last Friday, my mother was not home, and my brother spoke to me for hours to convince me to marry a boy from across the border.
He presented seemingly logical yet, to me, utterly ridiculous arguments.
He said the boy is from a familiar family and loves me,
so if I accept, I will be happy.
But how can I let my heart soar toward you,
yet resign myself to be nothing but a lifeless body next to another?

Never be sad or sorrowful, my Farhad!
I brought a thousand and one reasons,
but my brother struck me with a hard slap.
I never expected such a thing.
I lost my balance and fell to the ground.
Oh! Believe me, with ruthless cruelty,
he kicked me so hard in my right side that for minutes,

I thought every cell in my body had failed,
and I had come to an end.

Enduring his beatings was no longer difficult,
because I had become numb,
left behind in that heavy kick.

In those moments,
I thought of nothing and no one—
no dreams, no ambitions—
except my father.

If only the Taliban had not imprisoned my father for being Hazara!
If only my father were alive,
so I could be understood,
not sacrificed.

If only I had never given my heart to someone's gaze,
so that, like many girls in my land,
I could marry without anxiety and without the agony of separation.

Oh God!

Would You mercifully place a final dot upon the line of my life, so I may cease to be?
When I come to You,
I will weave countless strands of sorrow, pain, and suffering,
so that You may never again look away from even a single Afghan girl for even a moment.
So that You may always guard their souls and hearts.
Then, without a doubt,
the joy of Your rainbow's presence in their moments
will lessen the weight of their exile, homelessness, helplessness, and sorrows.
Call me to Your side, please!

'For the sight of You, I have come with eyes overflowing!'

At least this once, do not disappoint me, O Lord..."

Layla's voice had become a rasp against my soul,
scraping away at my spirit:

"Is it even possible to escape this abyss?
I am in immense pain.
I hope you never know or understand what I am going through!
I have been shattered under the relentless rain of words from those around me!"

At the end of her note,
heavy teardrops had fallen from her eyes,

blurring the ink and making the words appear slightly larger and faint.
She had written:

"Do not let me see the sorrow in your eyes, my beautiful one!"

But my lips trembled with sobs.
I tried to quell the storm inside me,
but it was useless.
My entire life was burning in the ruthless fire of these men,
and ironically, the entire century (the Taliban) was burning.
Under my breath,
with a choked voice,
I kept repeating:

"How can a brother become so low and cruel?
Layla never considered anyone close to her except her brother and mother.
Even their love was so mysterious that I had never noticed it,
only occasionally catching glimpses of their stolen glances—
perhaps the most beautiful love story,
one that, if allowed,
could have become a legendary tale for the world.

She had already suffered enough from being deprived of education,
from missing the entrance exam,
from the crushing weight of emotional distress.
Why did her brother do this to her?"

The end of that same day was truly painful.

Layla did not even live to see the results of the entrance exam.
At the final moments of that night (11 PM),
she hung herself with the scarf that Farhad had gifted her,
so that in the air of love, medicine, and her dreams, she could die.

With a heart burdened by sorrow and eyes drowned in tears,
I turned the pages of her notebook
and was met with words written in bold red ink at the beginning:

"A tragic farewell."

The continuation read:

"Tonight, the supermoon shines beautifully,
and the stars sparkle in celebration.

It seems my Creator wants me to come to Him
and cry in His embrace for all the deprivations imposed upon me,
so I may finally be at peace...

Life is beautiful if it is with him.
And death is beautiful if it is for him!"

Oh, my shattered dreams!
I did not ask much from life,
yet even my smallest wishes remained unreachable.

I am sorry, Layla the doctor.
I am sorry that I could not reach you and make you proud!

Please forgive me

My mother, Liali the healer, my Farhad, and the reader of my writings, Nazy, my companion (!

In the next page of her booklet, she had written:

*"The air is cold, and I am chasing my dreams
Like a whirlwind, I wander aimlessly!
Neither do I see anyone on this side, nor on the other side of these valleys,
Where am I?
Where are the eyes once before nothingness?
Oh, nightmare of the nights,
I think I have become trapped...
Alas!
I wished
To close my eyes in a place full of greenery and fragrant flowers!
Merciless and solitary around!
We have become so accustomed to suffering that often we do not recognize love, comfort, and
attainable dreams!
And in the end, I want to call myself a healer, not a bride, even if it's just a lie.
With respect!
The fallen healer of Afghan land!
The love that preferred death to captivity,
Love over helplessness and marrying another besides her beloved!"*

From the middle of the booklet, she had written her past memories, but I stood stunned with teary eyes and trembling hands. It seemed that I could not dive into the past joys of Liali, while she had hung herself.
She did not commit suicide; rather, they killed her!

Yes! The killers of our innocent Liali
Are the Taliban, outwardly Muslim, with false beliefs and the betrayal of her family.
How simply they hung her in the name of love.
Oh! How did her fragile body endure the beatings from her brother? Our Liali, with all her
innocence, had no choice but to leave this world of deception and depart.

**Final words from the writer:*

*But I have endured with every line of hers. With full assurance, I say that this story was born
from my imagination. My Liali has never been far from the truth, and I am certain that
somewhere in Afghanistan, under a different name and in another way, she has taken her life.
Liali is not just a story; it is the tale of dozens of forgotten girls, who, though not victims of their
family's decisions, had no option but to turn to death for refuge.*

Liali, sleeping under heaps of cold soil!

*Innocent heroes like me take up the pen to ensure that your story is not forgotten by history,
that you do not fade into oblivion. Rest in peace, travelers and refugees in the arms of our
Creator!*

You, oh Taliban!

I am drowning in agony if today you think I am weak, never!

*And if I speak from the depth of my heart, I, an Afghan, swear by Allah, my head will never bow
nor submit!*

You, reckless ones!

Know that with my pen, I will shamefully expose you and your leaders...

I do not wish to take up arms,

But remember this:

With the dance of my pen,

I will bring you to ruin!

With respect!

Nazy "Mysam

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