

## The School Project

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Kashish was busy making her school project in her summer vacation when she heard her neighbors shouting. She left her paint brush and rushed towards the window of her narrow two-storeyed house. People were gathered down in the dingy lane where barely two scooters could pass at the same time. She spotted her father amongst them. She called out to him but her voice could not cut through the enormous shouting down below.

Excited to see the commotion, she ran downstairs barefoot to be a part of whatever congregation everyone was a part of. At the same time, her father, an office clerk came running inside the house, breathing heavily and called out to everyone in the house which included, Kashish herself, her mother, her two sisters and a toddler brother. Her father asked them to wear their shoes and run out of the backdoor to an uncle's house, three blocks away. This uncle was a very close friend of her father and Kashish had seen him since as long as she could remember. Her mother understood the fear in her husband's eyes' and without saying a word rushed, putting a dupatta on herself and shoes on her children. Kashish being the eldest helped her mother in utter confusion. Who was coming? Why were they running away like this? And why to use the backdoor? They weren't thieves then why run like this? she thought. Streams of questions passed through her mind. The shouting outside grew louder, clearer and a lot scarier. Her father opened the backdoor and let them outside, immediately locking himself back into the house, closing the windows and barring them with locks.

"Why isn't papa coming, ma?" Kashish asked her mother. Her mother, a solemn young woman of 38 answered, "Because someone has to stay back and look after the house, everything is back there. Oh God please help us!!" Her mother started some incantations of sorts that she usually did when she was scared of something. Why is she crying like this, Kashish wondered, looking at her mother. They were running through the streets to get to her uncle's house. All she could hear through the streets were the screams of women and children. People were locking their doors, some were running with bags in their hands. It all

appeared to be a haze to her. She suddenly stopped in her tracks. She saw it. Why was it burning? The flames were scorching high. This was where she went with her parents to pray twice a week. Her parents told her every time she went with them that this was the house of God. And nothing could go wrong in there. They were safe in the lap of God. She had just come there a day before. The enraging flames had engulfed the building next to it, a tiny general store whose owner was the ever generous and lovable old uncle. Kashish started praying, tears rolling down her face. She hoped her old uncle was fine and safe. He wasn't related to her but he had loved her since she was a tiny baby. He adored the children of the neighborhood and timely treated them with candies and chocolates. He secretly loved it when the neighborhood kids teased him about his old bent back. Kashish wanted to run and see if he was fine and perhaps ask him to join them to go to their uncle's house.

"Come fast, Kashish" her mother called out to her. Kashish couldn't move. Her legs were frozen. She was watching the flames go higher and higher when she noticed an angry group of young men running towards her. They had burning sticks and things which looked like guns to her. She had seen such objects on TV, and had believed till then that these things were meant to be used as props in movies only. She stood there, watching them. There were some familiar faces, the faces she saw every morning and evening, the faces she saw while playing and the faces that usually smiled at her when she greeted them. Her mother jolted her out of her frozen state, "Do you want to die and kill all of us too?" Her mother screamed at her. Kashish started running, pulling along her siblings. They reached their uncle's house in what seemed like eternity to them. Her uncle pulled them in from one the windows, the door being locked from outside. They all rushed and hid inside a storeroom where already a family of five was hiding. They sat together, silent, hungry and afraid. Even her baby brother made no noise, just whimpered in his mother's arms. They sat there, huddled together for almost two days. No one asked for food or water. Unaware of the sun rising and the sun setting, they sat together under an old yellow bulb that flickered after every few minutes. They barely ate anything for those two long days. Tiny packets of biscuits and namkeens were given to them from the cupboard in the store. Her mother sat with her children around her continuously murmuring prayers. Her uncle would come time and again and talk in hushed tones with the three elders in the store. Kashish had been noticing her parents talking in similar tones since a few weeks. She felt uneasy when she saw them whispering to one another after watching

some news, however she couldn't ask them what was the thing that was bothering them. She was too young to understand these things, she had been told previously. Sitting then in the store room, they would all hear banging doors, children screaming and wailing women. The moment her eyes dropped in utter tiredness, she would sit back upright, hearing the howls of the mob. If anyone of them had to use the washroom, they would literally crawl to the small toilet made for the servants next to the store. The toilet started to stink after a few hours and they all sat there, unbothered by the smell.

After what seemed like ages to them, they came out of the store when the uncle told them that their father had sent a message for their return. Her father was fine, after all. They used the main door to come out of the house. A spectrum of varied, pungent smells hit them. Kashish was unable to differentiate one from another. The walk back home was a long one and a rather slow one. Kashish saw torched cars and burning tires, tired faces and scared eyes, charred buildings and vacant streets. The water on the ground had magically turned red, a crimson red, the red of the sherbet she used to have when she went out to pray with her family. She looked at the burnt down building, where ashes still flew and refused to believe that it was the same place where she had felt like a child of God.

She saw her house. They used to front door to enter. The windows of her home lay shattered, pieces of rock strewn all around it. She saw familiar faces which didn't seem familiar at all. These faces appeared strange to her with all the agony and pain that they bore. Her father crushed them all in hug, a hug she never wanted to end. She felt safe in his arms. His eyes were dull and he suddenly looked much older. All of them were crying, silently, Tears gushing down their faces. They all were thankful to have each other back, alive. Her baby brother made funny noises for the first time in three days as if sensing the relief on their faces.

Kashish started climbing the stairs when she heard her father tell her mother that the old uncle had died. He had been burnt alive, with a tire around his body. Kashish stopped in her tracks and couldn't move. Shaking, she entered her room. Dust strewn all around. Windows were broken and the glass lay making abstract designs on the floor. She came to her table, where she had left her school project. The paintbrush on the paper, the paint on it dried. Secularism, she had written in bold letters, the title of her school project.

She collapsed on the bed. Something died inside her that day.

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