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Cool, Sweet Water

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Cool, Sweet Water

The war is over. The trenches that had been dug everywhere have been filled up. The houses that had been reduced to rubble by the bombs are now being rebuilt. When the war started, it was autumn; then came winter, and now it is spring. People appear as busy and happy as they did before the war. Businesses that had slowed down are doing well once again. Who knows if people still remember the agonies of war now that six or seven months have passed? The hustle and bustle of life make you forget everything easily. But what can I say about the others? As far as I'm concerned, even now when I see moonlight caressing the earth, it seems that it has lost its shimmer; I feel as if the moon is still complaining about our neighbouring country. If someone proclaims that the moon says nothing and hears nothing and all this is just nonsense attributed to poets and writers, then that's all right; these are matters that are related to the imagination. I am a writer; the emotions that I experience in relation to the moon are unusual. When I heard that the Russian spaceship *Luna 9* had landed on the moon, my respect for the reach of man's intelligence increased, but a sigh also arose from a corner of my heart. I looked again and again at the moon, and believe me, my frail eyesight managed to catch sight of the Russian flag on the moon's surface. I was also able to see the corpse of the old woman with the spinning wheel; her spinning wheel had been smashed by *Luna*.

Who knows what will happen after man's conquest of the moon? What will the gains be, what the losses? But all I feel at the moment is that the people who inhabit the earth have lost everything. Any attempt to associate the moon with images of beauty bewilders me; in my imagination, no lover appears weeping in remembrance of the beloved in the light of this shimmering ball of love and passion. When I compel myself to imagine this scene, I begin to ponder the kinds of metal available on the moon and I wonder what chapters regarding man's preservation and destruction will be written with the aid of those metals. Who knows when the surface of the moon will become a battlefield.

I was still drifting in the darkness hovering over the image of the moon when the Russian flag was also planted on Venus, the star that is the first to appear on the sky in the evening. How can I now look at someone's shining

eyes and proclaim that they are filled with stars? How will I say, “You people, when you are tired of enduring the hardships of this world, you will have no beautiful vision left. You will talk of the metals found on the moon instead of sitting in the moonlight and conversing about the beloved, and when you are tormented by thoughts of the beloved at night, instead of counting the stars you will think of building a bungalow on Venus”?

Oh yes, where did I begin and where have I rambled to? I was saying that to this day I see the moon as a doubter. Even now when I hear the fire-crackers go off in the neighbourhood at a wedding, I am reminded of the boom of guns and the explosions of bombs. I go into the kitchen and see the lantern hanging by a nail on the wall, and I still remember the seventeen days of darkness. We made each other out in the light of this lantern, bumped into furniture as we walked around, and so many times suffered bruised knees, cuts on fingers. No one has wiped clean the glass chimney of this lantern. I don’t want it to be cleaned ever so that I can remember that the nights of war are pitch dark.

I love peace, I hate war. But I love that war, as much as I love peace, that is fought for freedom, for honour, for the survival of one’s country.

Oh yes, so I was saying that the war is now over, but as long as I live, my memories will live with me. Now how can I forget the eight-year-old boy who was flying a kite on the roof of the house next door? There were so many planes flying that day that one couldn’t hear a thing. Even though I knew these were our own planes, my heart trembled with fear and foreboding. I screamed to the boy, “Come down from the roof!” He said, “When the enemy’s planes appear, I’ll bring them down with my kite. I’m not afraid like you.”

For a moment my trembling and pounding heart was stilled, but in the very next instant, when another plane flew overhead and the frightening sound of the siren echoed, I screamed fearfully, calling out for my son, Parvaiz, who was nowhere to be seen. I couldn’t leave the house because I was afraid my daughter, Kiran, might get scared. Thank God, Parvaiz was in the other room, studying. Leaving his books in the other room, he came to be with me. I don’t know what was wrong with me in those days. I kept a constant watch over the children. I wanted to cleave my chest and hide them in there. I wanted to protect them from the shadow of war. Again and again I remembered a scene from a film in which there were corpses everywhere after a bombardment and, walking among them, a child, crying for who knows whom. For some reason, when I had Parvaiz and Kiran by my side, I was besieged by an overwhelming desire to protect them. I kept thinking of the young boy who had been flying a kite on the roof. Was he still flying the kite? Oh God, what is this strange passion for freedom, which has never been vanquished by anyone, and does it blend into the souls of tiny beings? I don’t know if rulers of powerful nations also think like this or not. They probably think that big fish can swallow little fish.

They probably see very little difference between people and fish, though Viet Nam proved to the whole world that this adage, which has come out of ponds and seas, is of no account.

A few days after the war started, Zaheer decided to take the children away from Lahore so that they would not be frightened by the thundering booms that continued day and night. I resisted strongly because I didn't want to leave my loved ones behind, but the look of terror in the eyes of my dear daughter, my Kiran, convinced me that it was important to take this little creature away from here. The next day, my two children and I started off for Multan by car. Only I know how I clutched Lahore to my breast and bid farewell to it. I became very emotional at that time and began weeping. The journey was very trying; I was sitting in the car exhausted, my face hidden in the pallu of my sari. Suddenly the car came to a halt with a jolt, and when it didn't start again for a while, I raised my head to look out of the window. A long line of army trucks loaded with soldiers was ahead of us, the trucks passing one at a time because of poor road conditions. I wondered what front they were headed for and how many of them were going to return. I said goodbye to them in my heart and hid my face again, but in the very next instant, the sound of clapping drew my attention back to them. The soldiers in a truck in the rear were dancing a bhangra, and as I watched them, the soldiers in the other trucks began dancing bhangra as well. They were laughing boisterously. Some had cigarettes between their lips. There was such fervour in their clapping—oh God! I was watching them, and I couldn't believe my eyes. Oh God! Were they really going to fight cannons and bullets? I stared at them in disbelief. In truth, there was no trace of anxiety on their faces. Their faces were illuminated with the bloom of flowers.

Finally the trucks packed with soldiers got on their way, but I kept watching them until they had disappeared on the horizon, kept listening for the sound of their clapping, kept asking myself, *Am I afraid of death?* For the first time, the thought of death was like the taste of honey.

How badly one sleeps during war. It was our second night in Multan. Our hosts and all the children were asleep. I had been awakened by the rumble of planes. I got up and looked out the window and in the distance saw red lights in the sky. I thought I should wake up the hosts and ask them what this was when suddenly there was the sound of a tremendous explosion. The windowpanes rattled and the walls shook as if they were about to fall on our heads. There was no reason to make inquiries anymore. Everyone was awake and walking about. My children were calling for me. I quickly advised everyone to huddle together under the tables in the gallery.

Then there was another explosion, which was more severe than the first one. Under the tables, the children knocked into each other. I put my arms around Kiran and held her close and whispered in Parvaiz's ear, "Don't be

afraid of death. You remember those dancing soldiers, don't you?" He laughed and sat up straight. But I felt he was trembling. A few minutes later, there were more explosions, but they weren't very strong, the sound now coming as if from afar. Then suddenly we heard a plane fly over the roof. I remembered all my relatives who were not with me. I experienced a deep sense of disappointment. How sad to die far away from home, in a strange place. I saw everyone's face in my imagination, but the faces disappeared in the twinkling of an eye. Soon there were two planes flying over the house. I thought of God, I prayed for this moment of danger to pass, and I felt great peace.

Gradually the roar of the airplanes became less distinct and then disappeared altogether. For a while after that, there was neither an explosion nor the sound of another plane flying over the house. Complete silence prevailed, disturbed only by the occasional barking of a dog and the sound of weeping coming from the house next door.

Moments later the all-clear siren went off, and we stood up. My hostess, who had been bending over her three-year-old child during all this, spoke for the first time. "Apa ji, how dear our children are to us. If the roof had fallen in the explosion, it would have come down on me, but Munna, snug under me, would have been completely safe, wouldn't he?" She left the room without waiting for my reply.

The children went back to sleep in no time, but I remained awake all night. I kept wondering about the place where the bombs had actually fallen. How had the innocent women and children fared there? Troubled by this thought, I hugged my sleeping children and held them close. In the dark, I thought I could see the bodies of dead children, I could see wounded children thrashing about in pain.

The night passed in torment. Early in the morning, I dressed and left with my hosts to see the places where the bombs had fallen.

Two or three miles outside of Multan, we came across a crowd of people. A great many mud homes and thatched dwellings had been razed. The women were retrieving things that were buried in the rubble. There were pots and pans scattered everywhere.

The children looked bewildered. Many of them had bandages around their heads and on their feet. Some women squatted with their hands folded, staring at the demolished dwellings as if they had lost everything, as if these were not just ordinary dwellings but palaces. The men were informing visitors that there had been no loss of life.

I stood there quietly, anxiously observing what was going on around me. Despite the large crowd, I felt as though I was isolated. But I was relieved to hear there had been no loss of life. About seventy yards from where I was standing, a group of people had gathered, and all of them seemed to be looking down at something. On questioning the steward, I found out that this was one of the spots where a bomb had landed.

Later, when the crowd had thinned, I too approached. A small crater had formed where the bomb had fallen, and sitting next to the crater was an old man with a sheet spread out beside him. Strewn about on the sheet were innumerable coins. As soon as he spotted me, the old man cried, “A donation, Begum Sahib. A well will be dug on this spot, and out of it will come cool, sweet water.”

I placed whatever I had in my purse on the sheet, and the old man, as if moved to sudden liveliness, started calling out loudly:

“Cool, sweet water, sa’in, cool, sweet water!”

Translation from Urdu by Tahira Naqvi