ESSAY

The Guilt Gift

by Maliha Khan



"Longing" by Elisabeth De Nitto

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It was a Saturday morning which meant no school. Yet I had to get up early as papa disliked us sleeping in till late. Of course, I was annoyed at him for being such a disciplinarian. If only he was one of those cool dads my friends had. Waking up was a real chore for me especially on school days; at the very least I wanted to be able to sleep an hour or two more on the weekends. But that was a luxury I could not afford when 'daddy-discipline' was around. Ammi never had that option anyway even though she did not get enough sleep at night. She had to be up early every day to send us off to school and then to send papa to the office, as if he too was a kid like us, only a grown-up one.

"Where is my belt?" Papa retorted from the other room, as he was getting dressed to go to work.

Ammi must have forgotten to lay it out with his freshly-pressed shirt, pants, *baniyan* and underwear for him to wear once he got out of the shower in his big brown towel wrapped around his lower torso. She was now preparing papa's breakfast but she quickly stopped rolling the *roti* mid-way to go look for the missing belt. I was praying to God she would find it soon, scared that she might be the victim of the same belt if it took even a second later than papa's patience running out. He would do that a lot, hit her with the first thing he could get his hands on. Once, he flung a full plate of *daal* at her when he didn't like it. The doctor had told ammi to put very little salt in everything she cooked. I heard her say salt shot up papa's blood pressure when she was crying and confiding in Farhat *choti ammi* on the phone. We ate bland food because of papa. But not him. Never him.

Allah must have heard ammi's *dua* — a prayer she is always murmuring under her breath whenever she is looking for something — because she found the belt, hanging on the hook board behind the back of the bedroom door. I never understood why people hang clothes behind doors. It looks so messy, especially when you keep piling one thing after the other upon those tiny little hooks. You can barely see the door then, except a foot of it from above and below. Anyway, ammi says the *dua* always works. It's magic. If you ever lose something, just recite *qaaloo inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raajioon* in your head and you'll either find it or remember where you kept it. But you gotta believe in it. I think I do. It works for me. It worked for her that day and she was spared. By Allah? Who knows.

Ammi went back to the kitchen to finish making breakfast while I tried to avoid papa, hoping to skip the lecture waiting on his lips. I reckon it would have been on the merits of waking up early. I was also hoping to get away from a task he would usually hand me which I didn't particularly feel like doing. I never liked what papa asked me to do. He made me do all sorts of things, from typing his English grammar books which he never published to his tedious office work. I wondered if it was normal for an eleven year old to be doing the work

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grown-ups do.

That day, I was desperately waiting for the *akhbaarwala* to deliver the newspaper which he usually slid in through the little gap on the sides of the main gate of our house. But it was only 8 a.m. and he wouldn't come until another half an hour. I hated reading *Dawn*, and only did so to pass the quiz my father would inflict upon us to test if we had read the newspaper that day or not. Saturday was the only day I looked forward to *Dawn* because of the children's magazine, *Young World* that came along with it. I absolutely loved reading *Young World*, especially the little stories that were published in it. I, too, always dreamt of seeing my stories published in the magazine one day with my name printed below the title. Papa always said that my stories were not good enough to be featured.

"You need to write better ones," he would say, every time I wrote one and showed it to him, hoping he would approve it and let me finally send it to the magazine. But he never did.

Since the *akhbaarwala* came late that day, I could not escape my father and he asked me to do something the moment he saw me. I had just woken up and was feeling extremely lazy. Annoyed, I went to our tiny kitchen and started whining about him always giving me something or the other to do. Little did I know that he was standing right outside listening to every word I had said. The very next moment, rage took over him and he resembled what I thought an ugly djinn would look like. Seething with fury, he grabbed the nearest extension board from the bedroom and charged towards me to hit me with it. Our kitchen being so small, I was trapped. Unable to escape in time, I was struck by him with the cord. The plug at the end of the black wire hit my back like a whiplash. It hurt and burned like hell as I turned my back and curled up in a ball, crying out,

"Sorry papa, sorry papa," repeatedly.

Not hearing my pleas, he continued to give me a couple more lashings until my mother was finally able to stop him. I am sure ammi, too, got hurt in the process of saving me from papa that day, as she usually did. I hated that. I would take a beating any day over her. But papa hitting ammi made my blood boil. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to take the very same cord and strangle him with it. I would often play those scenarios in my head where I was adding some rat poison I had seen on top of the fridge in his food or stabbing him with that big knife ammi only used on Bakra Eid to cut the meat after the goats were slaughtered.

While getting beaten up by his belt was nothing new, it had been a while since papa had used a wire to hit me, which left bleeding cuts on my back. The only other time it had happened was several years ago on a Sunday morning when we lived in a small flat. I still remember it all so vividly. I was alone at home with papa, hiding again from him even though it was

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extremely difficult to do so in a two-room apartment. My mother had gone out for some work leaving me in his care. I wonder why she would do that. Didn't she know any better? I must have been six or seven at the time. In the bedroom, a stray red wire lay on the floor, leftover from some electrical work my father had done a day before. Not bothering to clean up his mess, he left it for the maid or ammi to do so. However, since it was Sunday, the maid hadn't come and the clutter was still lying there including the wire. I hadn't really noticed it until I did something papa didn't like and in a quick turn of events, he picked up the red wire from the floor and ran after me. With very little room to run around our tiny apartment, I was once again cornered between the bedroom wall and the closet. I turned around like a hunchback, hands behind my head trying to protect myself from what was about to come. But alas, the red wire hit me hard on my back and searing pain ran across my flesh and shivers down my spine. Once. Twice. Thrice. Maybe he would stop now, I thought. He did.

He went to the living room after that, while I sat in the same spot I was thrashed at, cursing my fate. It was almost noon and Ammi had still not returned. I wiped away my tears and just as I was about to get up, my hands clasping the closet handle to support me, papa came into the bedroom and asked if I wanted to go get some *halwa puri* — a Sunday delicacy we could only afford on special occasions. I always loved watching the shop workers fry the *puris* as much as I enjoyed having them later with the spicy *chana salan* and the sweet saffron-coloured *halwa*. The whole way there, I kept wondering what special occasion led papa to allow us that delicacy. I couldn't think of anything.

No more wires were used to hit me again until that dreadful Saturday morning a couple of years later. I remember going into my little dark hiding corner behind the living room door and crying my heart out. I could never cry in front of papa. I couldn't let him think I was scared of him. Squeezed in that little space, I felt so small and life simply did not seem worth living at that time. I had sneaked a fruit knife from the kitchen when ammi was not looking. At that moment, I wanted to slit my wrists or stab myself in the stomach. I was scared of the pain though. I also thought of ammi. What would she do without me? Who would protect her from papa's rage?

As the hot tears kept rolling down my face, I couldn't help but ask God, why this was happening to me; why my father was so cruel and what I did to deserve this kind of pain. I even wrote Him a letter once. I never got a reply. I think I stopped believing if He even existed that day.

Eventually when papa left for the office, my mother and a cousin of mine who lived next door came by to console me and clean the bloody lines on my back. I went to the bathroom afterwards and caught a glimpse of the long red bumps on my bare back in the mirror and

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started weeping again. I like to look at myself crying in the mirror. It makes me feel like I am in a film.

Soon I had to wipe my tears and get busy with the household chores since we were hosting a *dawat* for papa's siblings that night. A lot needed to be done and I was the only one who was expected to help ammi, as boys are never asked to do any housework. I always resented that but I also felt bad so I ended up helping her anyway. My brothers never felt bad. I presume they got it from papa.

I didn't like papa's side of the family very much. They swore in Urdu at each other, especially dada. *Behenchod. Madarchod. Harami.* That's where I learned my *gaalis* from. I didn't really know what they meant except that they were really bad words that you said to someone when they hurt you and you wanted to hurt them back. My grandfather and uncles swore regularly while my aunts did it on occasion when they fought with each other. So of course, I wasn't exactly thrilled that they were coming over. Dadi was the only one I liked. She never swore. Just like my mother.

It was around 9:30 pm that everyone finally graced us with their presence, except papa. He hadn't come home from the office and I was pretty glad about that. Secretly I wished he had met with an accident on his way home and died on the spot. Just as we sat down on the floor around the *dastarkhwan* to have dinner, I heard papa's embarrassing dingy motorcycle stop outside the back door. The keys clanked against the metal door as he opened the lock and made his way into the house. He had his worn out black and red helmet in one hand and a cardboard box in another, about the size of a shoe box but narrower. I wondered what was inside the box but quickly turned my lingering gaze away from it onto my plate of *biryani*. I didn't want him to think I had forgiven him for what he had done to me earlier that day. Be cold, I told myself.

I didn't notice until papa extended his hand with the box in it in front of my face and handed it to me without a single word. I was confused. Why did he hand me the box? What could possibly be in it and why was he giving it to me? The suspense was killing me, perhaps not as much as it was killing everyone else; so I couldn't help but open the box to take a peek. Inside lay amidst crumpled up newspapers, a beautiful doll with golden hair and persimmon-coloured wings, matching her long flowy dress carved in resin. My heart skipped a beat, not only because it was so exquisite but also because it was completely unexpected. Suddenly, I was no longer angry. In fact, I was happy he didn't die in an accident on his way home. Yet, I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that papa never gave me presents, not even on birthdays. Why today out of all days? I kept wondering. I could never bring myself to ask him that. I didn't want to embarrass him or myself.

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