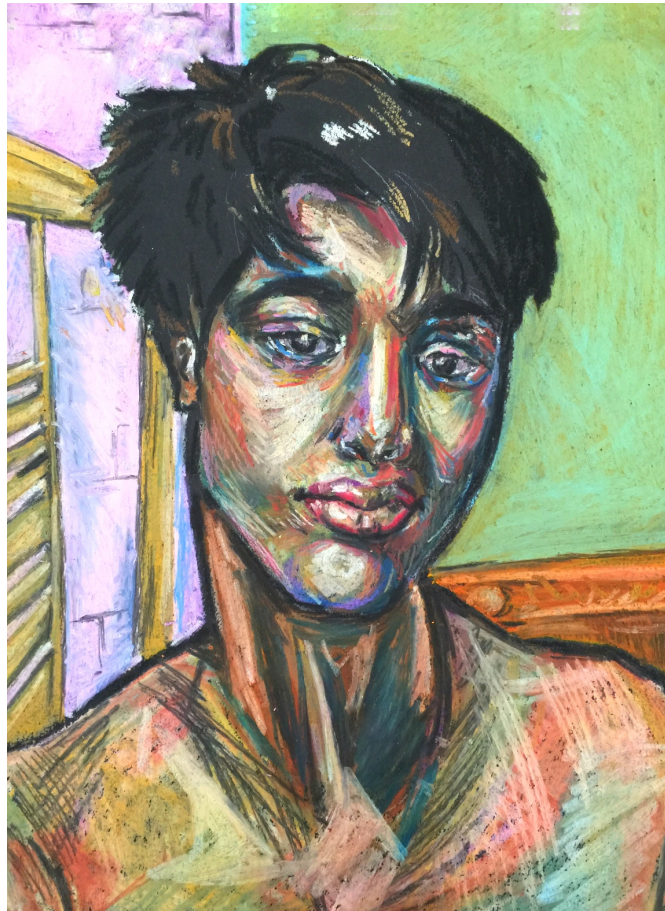


SHORT STORY

# A Piece of Mercy

by Satvik Gupta



"Self Love" by Ethan Lee

It was a scorching afternoon. A merciless sun was accompanied by dry and listless air. There was no trace of movement in the desert as far as the eye could see. Sand lay still and the leaves, as scarce as they were, hung dead. The entire arid landscape seemed to be devoid of life; except for whatever was left of it in a young man polishing his ancient rifle.

Iqbal rested his back against the coarse wall. The decaying outpost was an insignificant edifice in an indifferent sea of sand. Adjacent to it stood a tree robbed of all its leaves. It looked as old and worn-out as Iqbal's rifle. He wondered if the tree had ever been alive, if it had borne any flowers or fruits. How lovely it would have been to sit in its shade, to be lulled into an undisturbed siesta by a gentle breeze soaked with the sweet musk of ripening guavas. The thought of sleep, of fragrance, of life, in general, weighed him down. The naked tree in front of him stood solely as an eternal reminder of death and its permanence.

He stared across the dunes of sand to his east. They seemed to heave and pant as the gentle breeze caressed their heads. Beyond them lay the newly carved nation of *Hindustan*; India, as they called it. He spat in disgust. Those who once used to be neighbours were now foreign to each other; not just foreigners, but bloodthirsty enemies. Countless of his compatriots were killed by them; the same people who had once broken bread together were now at each other's throat. He caressed the scar etched into his chest and remembered the touch of the sharp, cold steel blade. Had it cut an inch deeper, he would have been dead. He was lucky; but his sister Iqra had not been. The blows and abuse she had received did not miss their mark. At that moment, frozen with fear, Iqbal had played dead and watched it all happen. He had cursed his luck and wished he were dead, but the pain in his chest kept him alive. By the time those savages were done with her, she was barely recognizable; barely human; barely alive. She had been reduced to a piece of discarded meat. It was only after they had left, that Iqbal found the strength to cover her body with a ragged piece of *dupatta*. He left without a second glance.

For the last two months, he had been guarding this desolate station near the edge of the mighty Thar Desert. Several other outposts were set up across the length of the border, manned by enthusiastic volunteers such as himself. Despite his rigorous watch, he never had to fire his rifle, even though he was confronted by occasional vagrants from the other side of the border. They dared to return, even after the partition, to claim what had once been their land and property. Had they not taken enough already?

Iqbal's job was to capture such miscreants and hand them over to the government officials. What they did to them was none of his concern. He had heard rumours, however, that none of the prisoners were ever returned to their country. Most of them came from the village beyond the eastern dunes. He knew the place very well. His father used to take him there for

the bi-annual fair, before the partition, of course.

Last night, Iqbal had captured a young boy who was using the guise of darkness to infiltrate the land. Another wanderer in pursuit of past possessions. When he had pointed his rifle at him, the boy had begun to sob. Iqbal had locked him in the makeshift prison — a sparse little room at the back of the building. The sub-inspector would deal with that one during the weekly inspection.

He felt thirsty. Holding onto his rifle, he entered his living quarters and drank from the pitcher carefully. He thought about the boy sleeping in the adjoining room. He must have been a few years younger than Iqbal. He seemed an all right kid. Iqbal was not much troubled by him. His fate, as that of those before him, hung in ambiguity and confusion. No matter how innocuous the boy seemed, Iqbal had to hand him over to the authorities. He sat on his cot and pressed his fingers over his scar. A silent throb of pain shot across his chest, ridding him of the doubt clouding his senses that plagued him every so often.

As the sun began to drop below the horizon, Iqbal heard a woman bellowing in the distance. Instinctively, he gripped his rifle and waited for her to call out again. The voice seemed distant and not very threatening. East, Iqbal figured. The *stubborn* east. Who, in their right mind, would be foolish enough to scream out loud in this hostile territory? He sat beneath the windowsill and waited for her to come closer, for there was nowhere else to go. Most of the vagrants mistook the dilapidated station as abandoned. It was an oasis in the middle of an unrelenting desert. And it was precisely why the government had chosen this place. The enemy was drawn towards it, like flies to a pot of honey. Iqbal sat in anticipation as the voice grew louder and clearer.

“Raghav!” the woman screamed. Her voice was filled with dread.

Iqbal jumped out of the window and scanned his surroundings. A middle-aged woman wearing a tattered *kurti* waddled across the sand. She clutched her *dupatta* as the evening breeze tried to pry it away from her. When her wild gaze fell on Iqbal, she marched right towards him instead of running away.

He aimed the rifle towards her and yelled, “Stop!” The woman froze; but her frantic eyes kept on searching. “Why are you here, old woman?”

She raised her arms towards the heavens and spoke slowly, “Help me, please! My son has been missing since last night. He must have crossed the dunes in a fit of rage. Have you seen my boy?” Her face was glistening with sweat and her hair was dishevelled.

“All *Hindustanis* who try to trespass into these lands are my prisoners,” roared Iqbal. He would have captured her too, but it would have been an insult to the Holy Quran if he

harmed a woman or a child. He was not one of those *Hindustani* wretches.

“Please forgive him, my son. He's just a boy. I'll make sure he never sets foot in your territory again.”

Iqbal felt the butt of his rifle pressing against his scar. “I'm *not* your son! I'm not one of you animals. You and your folk have killed my brothers and sisters. Your barbarity knows no bounds. And you have the audacity to call me *son*! How dare you?”

“Forgive me, *soldier*. But I'm sure my son meant no harm to you or your people. You see, he's a young boy who has seen a lot he shouldn't have.”

“Go back to where you came from.” He kept the rifle pointed straight at her. “Don't force me to shoot you.”

“Show some mercy, soldier.” She clasped the *dupatta* tightly in her fists. “My stupid boy ran away in search of his father, who is dead, but I haven't had the heart to tell him that. So, I lied and told him that his father is still in our old house. I meant only to shield him from a darker truth.”

“You have no house here!” Iqbal was himself surprised at how loud he was. His ears felt hot all of a sudden.

The woman stared at him in a state of utter helplessness. “We have no house here,” she pointed in his direction, “We have no house there,” she motioned back across the dunes. “We have been uprooted like weed and thrown away on the other side. We did not ask for any of this. This wretched partition has taken everything from us. Even our neighbours were taken away from us. Now all I have is my son. Take him away from me and I have nothing left. Nothing at all.”

“You and your hypocrite nation,” said Iqbal, his voice trembling. “You talk of peace when we have you cornered and yet you massacre us at every chance you get. *Hindustan* is red with the blood of my sister and countless other innocents. Your son will grow up and do the same. You're all murderers. Nothing more.”

“You have lost a lot. I understand your pain because I have as well. Mistakes have been made by both sides. But we must not let hatred consume us. Give me back my son. You know that I can't leave without him.”

She took a step forward. Iqbal aimed his rifle a few feet away from her and fired a warning shot in the ground.

“Get back!” he roared.

She did not succumb to his warning. Her body was trembling, yet she kept walking towards him. He fired again, but the woman was heedless of the danger. Iqbal realised in that moment that her resolve was stronger than his rifle could ever be.

“You foolish woman!” screamed Iqbal. He felt slightly dazed, stunned by the recoil of the fired shots. “How ungrateful could you possibly be? I'm letting you walk away. Had there been another officer in my stead, you'd be dead already.”

“Do you call this living? Do you think I want to live?” She no longer looked like a frail old woman. She had transformed into a formidable force. “I would happily die if it were not for that boy.”

“When your countrymen attacked our village,” she said, “our lives, too, were destroyed. They killed my husband in front of my eyes. They put a spear through his heart. I had a packet of poison with me, like all the women in our village. We had decided that we would kill ourselves before letting any of those monsters touch us. I knew that they were coming for me and I had the poison, but I threw it away. Do you know why?”

Iqbal stared silently at her.

“I did not want my boy to lead the life of an orphan. He was fatherless already. I had to be there for him. So, I let those men rape me.” She stepped closer. The wind snatched her *dupatta* away, but she had nothing left to hide. “One by one, they did unspeakable things to me. And then they did it again the next day, and the day after that, and after that and after that. I lost count of the days. When they left, one of those bastards tore off a pack of poison from a dead woman's *kurti* and threw it towards me. ‘A piece of mercy,’ he said.”

Iqbal kept staring into her eyes. They did not tear up as she re-lived those horrors. Just as Iqbal's didn't when he had witnessed Iqra's death. He saw in her eyes his own and realised that their grief was cut out from the same cloth. She waited for him to say something but what could he say? What could anyone say? Who was to blame? The people? The governments? Where was all his pain and hatred to go?

“My son is the reason why I still live. If you are taking that reason away, you might as well take my life along with it.”

The woman spoke again, “So tell me, soldier, who are the *savages*? It's not as black and white as you would like it to be. Now that we have hurt each other in excess, should we not tend to each other's wounds? There can be no partition of humanity. Love begets love. It does not work the same way with pain.”

Iqbal looked towards the dunes in the east. For as long as he was posted here, he did not know where the border was. He did not know where Pakistan ended and Hindustan began. Iqbal realised that if both sides were victims, then both sides must be monsters as well. All the killing and the raping and the looting was borne equally, blows traded like spices in the streets. There was no place for morality in all of this. Pakistan was as red as Hindustan. Iqra had died because of this barbarity, but this woman, this woman had to live with it. Which was worse? He did not know. There were questions inside of him which had still to be discovered, not yet answered. He had been blind, or perhaps he had only had partial vision. Now that both his eyes were open, the reality which they presented him was grim and felt too heavy to bear. But he had to make do with it. The rifle in his hands felt as useless as the hollow threats he had spat at the woman; what used to feel like an extended limb, now felt like a foreign object. People, he realised, could be killed with bullets, but not effaced off the face of the earth. They continue to live in the suffering and anguish they leave behind in their wake. Grief cannot be killed. It cannot be erased. It can only be shared.

“I’m sorry,” she continued. “I’m sorry about your sister. And your brothers. I am sorry all of this happened to you and your people.”

He looked at the woman and saw his own eyes staring back at him. “I’m sorry too,” he whispered, “I’m sorry about what they did to you.”

He dropped the rifle and for the first time saw the woman smile. It could very well have been the smile of his mother. As the woman strode past him towards the door at his back, he apologised to her again.

“Our governments will never stoop so low as to apologise to each other. And it is us, who had to do it in their stead,” she said.

It was true. National pride would not allow an apology to tarnish its shining armour. So, two very insignificant persons took the onus upon themselves to ask forgiveness for their people's crimes. And just like that, two young and aggrieved nations let go of their animosity and embraced forgiveness.

A few days later, the Sub-inspector arrived at the station and asked him if he had any new *goods* for him. Iqbal kept on pressing his scar in search of a familiar pain. But it was no longer there. The whispering embers of a dying fire had been extinguished. He stared blankly at his superior and said, “No sir. It has been awfully quiet lately.”