

The sun burns my back, sweat covers me, my shoes are worn out, and the water basket on my head weighs me down, making the trip back to my house even harder. Even through all the heat, sweat, and sand I can now make out the shape of my house nestled in the corner of my village.

As I enter the village, Sarita runs up to me. Grabbing me with her tiny, uncalloused hands, and jumping up and down, she yells, "Papa's back" over and over. When I hear it the first time I almost run, but know it will make the basin fall causing the clay to shatter and let the water spill out, and if that happened I would have to walk all the way back to the river. Instead I tell Sarita to calm down and walk with me. She tries to stay still, but she was too exuberant to stay still any longer than a few seconds before running ahead. She's beautiful in that way.

The smell of fresh bread is the first thing I smell as I walk into my home. I set down the basket, see Papa, and ran to him, hugging him tightly. I step back looking at him closer, I can tell by the way he's slumped, the circles under his eyes, and the hollow look in them that work had been hard. He smiles at us and tells Sarita, Mama, and I briefly about the new work he has found before sitting down. The rest of us jump down as well hoping he will tell us stories and give us presents like he always does this time of year. Sarita, who's always eager asks, "Will you tell us stories, Papa please?"

"Of course." Papa says in his deep booming voice. "But first we will eat. Sarita, Kashi go make dinner. Me and your Mama need to talk." Sarita and I get up, she heads outside to start a fire, and I go get the lentils for dinner. Mama and Papa stay where they are and talk in low voices so neither of us can hear.

When we finish making dinner we bring it back to the main room, where we do most things with the family. We usually don't eat here but it looks like Papa's tired and we don't want to make him move so we hand out the dinner. Sarita and I sit on the hard sandy ground and sit quietly while we eat.

The lentils warm my mouth, but taste rather bland without any spices. At least we have food though. Not all families in my village are as lucky as us. Many of them sleep on the ground without any mat and eat only once a day. Some even have had their children taken by the Englishmen that come every once in a while.

When the English come we hide. They are evil, they take everything we have and leave nothing behind. I have no idea why they take the children but I heard Papa tell Mama something about the children becoming something called slaves, whatever that is. As for the food and cloth, I guess they just take it because they're indolent, greedy, and spiteful, or maybe they just hate us and believe we are below them so they can do whatever they want to us.

"Kashi. We're talking to you, pay attention to what we're talking about." I look up at Mama and Papa. They both are staring at me. "Yes, Mama. Could you repeat what you said, please?" Mama gives me a pointed look, sighs and begins "Kashi, Papa was saying that he has to leave tomorrow so he can get back to work. Even with him working the extra hours you are going to need to get married or find work, I will also have to find work if we going to keep food in our mouths and a place to live in. Sarita you will have to do all the housework." I stare hard at the ground. I couldn't get married. I wouldn't get married, but where could I find work in the village? My village is too small and poor to find any good paying work for men, let alone women.

The rest of the day went on in a blur. Papa told stories that made even Mama laugh. The warm savory dinner now rests in my belly and the heat beats down on me as I lie on my mat and listen to the deep breaths that belong to my family. It's so peaceful. We breath together making a steady rhythm that soon has my eyes closing; even though I try I can't keep my eyes open for a second longer.

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Thick, hot air surrounded me. My breath caught in my throat and I began coughing. As soon as I opened my eyes they begun to sting and tears ran down my cheeks mixing with the sweat that drenched my clothes. Deep reds and gold's jumped at me through the thick haze of smoke and tears. I jumped up realizing it was fire. I could barely see, but my eyes searched the room for them anyway. I saw a dark shape through the wall of flames and screamed "Mama. Papa. Sarita. Are you there?"

My Mama's voice tried to fill the air, but is so quiet compared to the crackle of fire that roars in my ear. "Sarita, Kashi get out of here and hide, I'll get papa out. But you must hurry the Englishmen are here."

Sarita is in front of me as we race for the door. I pause at the door and look back at Mama hauling Papa toward me. She's about to collapse under his weight, and the ceiling is beginning to crumble.

A bit of the roof falls on Papa and flames roar up swallowing him like a hungry lion would a mouse. I run towards Mama, grabbing her shoulder, and pulling her towards the door. Flames fly through the air, landing in front of me and blocking my path. I look around frantically for anything that isn't already claimed by the fire. I spot the basin by the wall that's next to me. Before I can grab it Mama has it in her hands. She opens the lid and throws it on the flames that lead to the door. As soon as the water leaves the basin the fire sizzles letting up waves of steam and smoke. We don't hesitate before racing out.

The night air usually pitch black with stars in the sky, now is smoke filled and full of sparks from the fire's that engulf huts, trapping innocent children and mothers, killing hard working men, and destroying old along with their many years of wisdom. Outside the huts people run in utter chaos trying to protect themselves and their loved ones from the blazing fire and the men on horseback. The riders are riding through the flames brandishing torches, trampling my people and occasionally picking a child or two from the ground and racing off into the night.

Strong hands wrap around my waist, yanking me from the ground. I struggle against the hands, hoping they will drop me. They don't, instead they set me on a horse, holding me in place. The smell of horse fills my nose as a thick rough rope is wrapped around my waist, ensuring that I won't be able to escape. It's as if I'm a dog that needs to be put on a chain to keep from running away.

A scream suddenly erupts from behind me. Then a body falls into me, pressing me down and making it hard to breath. A weight lifted from my lungs as the body falls away from me. Taking a deep breath and turning around to see what has happened. Laying on the ground about 6 feet below me is a body laying face down in the dirt with a knife protruding from his blood soaked back. I recognize the

knife as my family's knife that we use for cutting meat. I turn to the other side to see who hit him, and there stands Mama. She looks slightly startled but when she turns toward me and her face is placid again, like it always is.

Her hands reach toward me, pulling me down from the horse. She embraces me, and for just a second I begin forgetting about what's happening around me. Instead of fire I see my Mama's beautiful face, smiling at my. She hands me a cloth to press to my bleeding arm and says, "you'll be fine, it's just a small cut. Now come inside and have a mithai to make it feel better." I jump up and run inside. She laughs and says, "see it's already better"

"Get on the horse, get your sister and get out of here." I look up and see to my surprise that the horse is still where it had been when the man had fallen off. I look toward Mama again and see why; she holds the horse's reins. I grabbed the reins and then ask, "Do you know where Sarita is?" even though I know she probably doesn't.

"I saw her running around the house, I imagine she's headed toward the desert to escape." Mama replies in her sweet melodic voice that's now tinted with urgency.

I carefully grab the horse's neck pulling myself onto her back and pulling her reins to stop her from running away. "Mama, what will happen to you?" I whisper, tears yet again tumbling out of my eyes.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. I'll meet you at Uncle's village. Now go." I let the reins go just enough for the horse to trot around the house.

Sarita stands just outside our yard, a look of pain on her face as she watches our house burn. It saddens me to see her like this. She shouldn't have to watch her home being destroyed. She's too young, too full of life and happiness. I'm afraid it will damage her forever, and she won't be able to return to the person she was before, the person everyone loved her for.

Before I forget completely what I'm supposed to be doing I jump down from the horse, run to my sister and grab her shoulder saying "Sarita, come on we have to get away from here. I have a horse. Get on her." Sarita stands up and grabs my arm tightly and begins crying. Grabbing her I set her on the horse's back and then pull

myself up to join her. "Where's Mama? Is she coming? Is she alright?" whispers Sarita.

"She's going to meet us at Uncle's place." I say hoping my words aren't filled with lies. Looking sideways I see the village through a fire slowly spreading across the huts and catching some of the unlucky people lying injured on the ground. No more tears will come even though they should as I stare at my village. There will be nothing left to come back to, half the people that once lived here in peace are gone. Either captured or killed.

The noise and Bright light of fire dancing on the houses was too much for the horse. She had already been nervous but now she had been here too long and was now was panicked and began bucking wildly trying to escape the reigns that held him in this place full of fire. My hand began slipping on the reins letting go just slightly so I could regain my grip, but before I was able to get control of the reins the horse began racing wildly toward the pitch black night and away from the smoke stained air.

Wind ripped at my face as the horse ran. I pushed myself against Sarita who is forced to press herself into the horse. It helps even though it's uncomfortable, at least now I'm steady on the horse and am able to see. I pull the reins making her turn around and face my village. We are now far enough away that the horse has calmed down enough to turn around and stay still as we all stare at what was our home. It looks like the kind of bonfire's you have at festivals, the kind you are supposed to view from far away, the kind mothers warn their children not to get close to. Now that bonfire is my village. I stare at it watching the fire curl around the huts engulfing them until there is nothing left but the bright fire.

I turn away and the horse races toward the rising sun. Knowing that by doing so I'm turning my back on my old life and everything I've ever known.