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Chasing Butterflies in the Days of War

Victory bonfires blazed on the India-Pakistan border. The proud generals stood on high ground, blaring out the same message to the goose-stepping soldiers below:

“We salute all who sacrificed their lives to save our Motherland.”

Commandos, lined on both sides of the border, raised their legs high and slammed their feet to shake the earth.

Rumble of thunder in the distance mocked the transience of human victories.



Not far from the celebrations, Kumla, a ten-year-old autistic boy, squatted in the corner of a refugee camp building, gnawing on a rock hard hunk of bread. His eyes squeezed shut with every bite, the sharp crust made his gums bleed. It was all he had to eat. He no longer remembered the taste of his favorite foods.

The camp had been Kumla’s home for almost a year. He wore a red stone around his neck, loosely tied with a leather cord. His father gave him the stone as a good luck charm before going off to war. Little balls of grime formed on the smooth surface as he patted it.

His parents had named him Sahir, but everyone called him Kumla, which meant silly, and it stuck because of his quirks. His big blue eyes always darted back and forth. A long shirt did little to hide his malnourished body. Dandruff and dirt clung to his hair. Frizz exploded all over his head. That entire shaggy halo gave him a wild and feral look.

“Why don’t you play with the other children?” his mother suggested. Her long hair, shining with oil, fell across her dark eyes as she pulled out her sewing supplies from the small plastic tub that held their meager belongings. Kumla shook his head and pinched the stone. He imagined a graceful butterfly flapping its way toward the sky, dancing in the rising sun. He loved the vivid colors of budding flowers, butterflies, birds, and bees. Once, a butterfly landed as soft as a breeze on the tip of his nose. That precious moment ended when it fluttered away too soon, and he scratched at the spot. He yearned for the experience again.

In the village where Kumla lived before he was a refugee, the officials believed he was unable to learn, so they barred him from school. He didn’t mind because the beauty of flying colors taught him how to go on with life. He roamed the expanse of his small village, enjoying the petal soft flight of multicolored wings near the giant oak tree in its center. Rocks of different shades surrounded the tree, and Kumla enjoyed jumping from one to another.

Now, in the gloomy camp, Kumla missed the sunlight, fresh air, and butterflies. He didn’t understand why he couldn’t still have them.

With these thoughts floating in his mind, Kumla slipped past his mother, who sat repairing his socks to venture outside. He had not gone

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far when he glimpsed a small boy sitting cross-legged on the uneven grey floor of the alley. The boy bounced a ball against the opposite wall. Kumla stopped to speak, but voices in the alleyway distracted him.

In the passage leading to the barracks, Kumla saw two guards with guns hanging from their shoulders. Kumla crept to within earshot. The potbellied guard tapped a cigarette against the wall. "God bless those who are fighting our enemies. Kashmir will become part of Pakistan or remain independent, but we will never be part of India."

The other sentry rubbed his big mustache and nodded. "It's like my father used to say: 'Live free or die.'"

Kumla knew about the hatred between India and Pakistan, the cause of the fires and destruction, but he couldn't understand why they killed his butterflies.

"Butterflies shouldn't have to die in war," he said to the men.

The two guards turned, unslinging their weapons, then lowered again when they saw it was Kumla.

"Butterflies?" The potbellied guard scoffed. "The whole land's turned black, and you're worried about butterflies?"

"They will return," Kumla pointed to unseen fields. "The snow covers them in winter, but they return in summer."

"Go back to your mother, kid."

"But my butterflies..." Kumla raised his hand. "Out there."

"Your father is there taking care of your butterflies." The potbellied guard said with a smile that held no warmth.

Kumla pictured his father. How could someone who loved animals fight and hurt people?

"Will Father ever come back?"

"Yeah, with all your precious butterflies."

Kumla looked into his eyes, unblinking. "Yes, he is good at catching them."

He turned to go, cursing the day of coming to the camp. His mother had dragged him out of bed, saying they were going on vacation. "It's a nice place," she'd said, hustling to pack their clothes. Kumla pictured a happy place where colorful insects of all shapes and sizes flew. Instead, they'd come to this place that was little better than a mass grave.

That seemed like a lifetime ago. Now, his mother always worked, even on holidays, mending others' clothes all day. Here the food tasted as stale as the air, and there was too little of both.

Kumla played mostly with younger kids, because older ones made fun of him. He had few friends because he was different.

Through holes in the grimy wall, he looked out at the open sky and sun. Rubbing his lucky stone, he imagined running and playing with the kids in the village.

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That night, he fell asleep thinking of his village. He dreamed of his father playing with giant and delicate butterflies. Their opal, gold, and purple wings, floated in the sweet blow of spring.

"Please bring these to me," Kumla begged his father in the dream.

"How many?" His father smiled.

"Billions!"

His father clapped and butterflies appeared, some bigger than flamingos. The sky darkened as countless butterflies obscured the moon, the planets, and even the Milky Way.

Kumla choked, waking up in the musty air. The rust-colored stone walls jarred his senses. He closed his eyes to prevent his tears from staining the fleeting images of his wonderful dream. His fancied butterflies dipped in and out of flowers and flapped away. The colors disappeared, and the pastures turned black.

The dream gone, he came fully awake and ran to his mother. He sobbed and pleaded, trying to persuade his mother to take him home.

"This is our home now." She stroked his hair. "We are safe here."

"But I miss my butterflies, Ma," Kumla begged, and wiped his stone with the hem of his shirt.

"We've got to live here a little longer, Sahir. This place isn't so bad, is it?"

"I want to go home where all my butterflies are—"

"Your butterflies have also flown somewhere that's safe." Her face grew distant, as she too wished for their lost home.

"At our home?"

Kumla's mom cleared her throat and took a deep breath. "They're not there now. There's a war."

Kumla wiped black gum from his stone. "With bombs?"

"Yes, but I don't think they killed your butterflies. They've flown to new fields, full of bright and colorful flowers."

Kumla dragged the stone across his thigh. "Why is there war, Ma?"

She sighed. "When men become mad, they get guns and start killing one another."

"Why?"

His mother's eyes narrowed. She lined up the thread, pursed her lips, and moistened the end. Squinting, she slid it toward the needle and pushed it through then turned to look at him. Her wicker stool groaned in protest.

"Ma, they..."

"I have a headache, Sahir."

Kumla took a jug from the smooth concrete and poured dingy liquid

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into a tin cup. "Here, Ma." He frowned, spilling a few drops. "When will this war end?"

"Only God knows, my son."

"You told me God created everything in this world."

"Yes, He did."

"Even butterflies?"

"Everything."

"But butterflies don't make wars! They love flowers. Men destroy flowers and kill butterflies. Why doesn't God come down to stop the men? You told me He is all-powerful."

"He will. He will." His mother gripped his shoulders and held him close. "When all this is over, we will go home. I promise."

"Will Dad be there?" His voice muffled in the folds of his mother's shirt.

She bit her lip, gently pushed him away and returned to her sewing, despair clouding her face.

When the war had begun, and sirens wailed, God called his Dad to go away to save the butterflies. Kumla boasted about it to all the children in the camp.

That night, Kumla lay in bed and rubbed his stone. His mind roved, caught up in dreams about all that he would do when he escaped. He remembered talk of a man's escape and knew it was possible. But the guards with their sleek and black guns were always watching.

Kumla awoke before dawn wishing to catch the sun as it rose. He crept to the guard station, something he had done many times before, and crouched below the counter. His tiny fingers gripped the edge, and he lifted himself to see the man on duty sleeping. Kumla didn't hesitate, but darted past the guard toward the glorious outside.

"I will catch the sunrise and chase the butterflies," Kumla whispered in excitement, clutching his stone.

He ran, eager to see his fields again, but the surrounding land seemed alien. On the horizon, black clouds wound their way into the sky. Where once there were fields, only ash remained. Uprooted trees lay splintered across the ravaged land. Big steel machines lay smoking and ruined, tipped onto their sides. Everywhere pieces of clothing lay in tatters.

Kumla's eyes widened. His modest village should have been in the valley below, but it was nowhere. Where had it gone? He picked his way through scorched debris and earth, trudging into the night, until he stopped fifty feet short of the remains of a tree. He could barely recognize the thing which had inspired so many of his favorite winged creatures. The broken tree, stripped bare of foliage, standing less than half the height of the one from his dreams was dead. All but the thickest branches toward the bottom of its trunk had been ripped away.

Kumla circled the once-majestic tree. Something crunched under his

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sneaker, stabbing through the worn sole of his shoe. Yanking his foot up, Kumla's eyes flooded with tears. The jagged corner of a pale, red rock poked through blackened soil. Multi-colored stones encircled it.

Summer's here, but where are the butterflies?

Kumla hid his face in his hands. It was all gone — the fields, the butterflies, the beauty. Barren lands, endless dust and blackened earth stretched to the horizon. The world had changed. Death, not the sun, rose in the sky.

"The sun is dead! The sun is dead!" he cried. No birds flew away at the sound of his voice; no butterflies flitted.

Kumla's eyes located the spot where his house once stood. He climbed over the debris looking for some reminder.

After long, strenuous minutes of digging, Kumla climbed out of the rubble and fell to the ground. He raised his fingers to rub the lucky stone, but it wasn't there.

"Dad!" He groaned into the dirt, frantically trying to find the stone

A shadow flew above him, blocking what little light there was in the sky. It looked to Kumla like a giant butterfly.

"They have grown big now, like in my dream."

He waved his arms, coaxing it nearer. Its brilliant red and yellow colors streaked fast against the black sky. Then he saw it was not a butterfly.

"Mama!" he screamed.

The bomb exploded fifty feet from Kumla. The blast lifted his little body, hurtling him into the jagged trunk of a dead tree.

In death, he finally flew like a butterfly. He was free to follow them.