



KHUSHBOO

from

KASHMIR

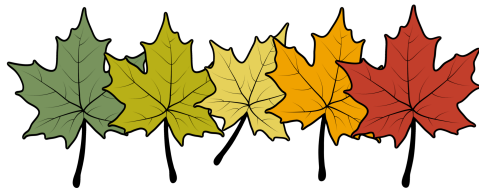
written by

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AUTHORS' NOTE:

Translated to English, this title reads as 'The Scent from Kashmir'. In a way, this poem attempts to capture that scent of life in Kashmir for a young teacher. A teacher named Khushboo who is living through an unprecedented time of uncertainty and hardship in the history of Indian Administered Kashmir. Namely, the revocation of Article 370 of the Constitution by the Indian government and the subsequent seven month lockdown of the entire valley by the Indian security forces to stamp out any dissent resulting from this decision. But this work is not about Khushboo's hardship. It's about her sense of duty, her strength, and her love and compassion for her students. The metaphor of the Chinar Tree (similar to Maple) in the poem serves the dual function of symbolizing individual perseverance while also emphasizing the enduring beauty of nature in Kashmir, in spite of the wars and the destruction. It is our hope that students (in middle school and beyond) who read this, if they are not currently in a conflict setting, develop a deeper empathy for their counterparts who are. And for students that are faced with the uncertainty of displacement, for them this story is a small message of hope. The hope that this too shall pass. That they, like the mighty Chinar of the Valley of Kashmir, will persevere.

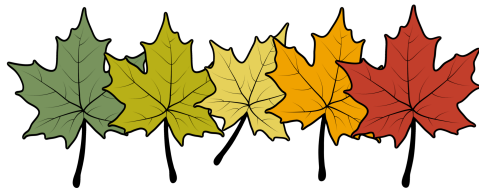


There was once a girl
Who lived in Kashmir
She had a beautiful name
She was called Khushboo.
"But what does that name mean?" many asked
The smell of flowers is Khushboo
The smell of a delicious meal is Khushboo
The smell of earth after rain is Khushboo
All the lovely smells in the world you know
Another word for these smells is Khushboo.

When Khushboo was little
She was asked what she wanted to be
A veterinarian, a historian, maybe an engineer?
"I want to be a teacher" she said
With eyes gleaming and a smile so sincere.

As a student, she was inspired by her teachers
To follow in their stead
To give strength to the voices of children
To set them on the path to success.
As the years went on
A teacher she became
But nothing in Kashmir
Was ever the same.

You see, the valley of Kashmir
Has repeatedly been in a state of conflict
Locked in an incessant tug of war
This Valley has been like an heirloom
That both India and Pakistan have been loth to yield.
But in the August of 2019, the government took away
Kashmir's right to make its own rules
You couldn't leave your house
The policemen were very strict
Everything was to remain shut
Shops, markets, and even schools.



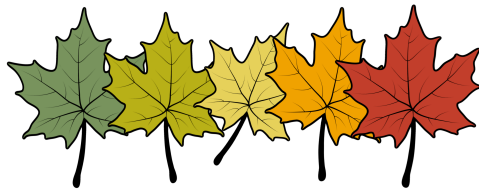
Khushboo sat in her room
And gazed outside at the Chinar Tree
Standing proud and tall
Its branches heaving with leaves
But soon this tree would have to shed
The leaves it had sprouted with so much love
Or else be undone
From the wrath of the cold winter breeze.

Her mother had planted it in the year of Khushboo's birth
"A royal tree for my little princess" her mother used to say
And it truly was majestic, especially in the fall when its leaves changed color
A symbol of the splendor of Kashmir.

As her eyes rested on its lush leaves
Dancing in the wind wild and free
Her thoughts turned to her own students
Who were now shut inside their homes
Bereft of the freedom to dance and be merry
Like the leaves of this royal tree.

The whole month passed
There was violence, there were protests
Another month passed
There was so much fear, so much stress
And yet another month passed
There is no communication, no internet,
Feelings of safety gave in to feelings of threat
And then another month and another riot,
Streets stained with blood and all was quiet.

And then another
Until it was February of next year
And Khushboo was awakened by her mother
"Get up! The lockdown is over! Go teach your students", said mother.



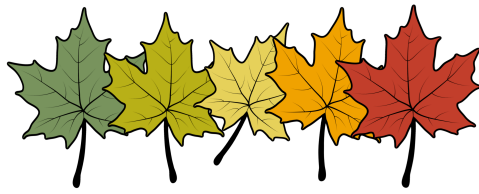
Khushboo couldn't believe it
She got dressed and sat down for breakfast
She was so excited to see her students again
"I hope they all come to school today, they must!"

As Khushboo made her way to the school
She hoped to see a smile on each face
But when she entered her classroom
There was no joy
Not even a trace.
Sure, her students were with her now that school was open
But Khushboo sensed immediately their resignation
She knew their faith in education was broken.

"What is the point of learning?" one student exclaimed
*"I can't leave my house, I can't do anything ...
This government won't let me be me",* he blamed.
But Khushboo would not let her students despair
She turned to them with love and care

*"When I was young, there were wars too
But I loved coming to school, in hopes of seeing a friend or two
My teachers created a sanctuary
For us to come together
So I showed up every day despite the weather
Because the sun doesn't cease to rise
And flowers too will bloom again
Coming to school is an important part
Of a routine, we must maintain.*

*Like my teachers before me
I too, want you all to know
That in being together and learning together
Lies a well of hope.
So despair we must not
For I have you and you have me
Here in this place, we call our school.*



*But lie to you I will not.
Our schools and our shops
Our mosques and our temples
May still be closed again
For that has been the way in Kashmir
Even before you and even before me.*

*But hold on to these books
Keep your faith in them
Even when all else goes gray
Knowledge is your safest haven
Keep seeking it
For in education lies the spring of hope
For you and for me.*

*Be responsible for not just your own learning
But for your friends' too
You are integral in building a future brand new
After all, if not me, if not you, then who?"*

Captivated by her story, the class picked up momentum
And with each passing hour on the clock
Khushboo was greeted by her favorite smells-
The smell of old textbooks and crushed up chalk.

Two weeks later
Khushboo learned that schools had to be shut down again
"But it's not just Kashmir this time", she noted
The whole world had been brought to a halt
By a virus named COVID.

School had been open again for only a few weeks
And now Khushboo stood across from her students
Watching the all too familiar resignation in their eyes
She had no reassuring words that sounded wise.



But as Khushboo let her thoughts wander
Her mind quickly led her to the first day of class two weeks ago
When she saw her students wearing similar expressions
She smiled,
She knew what had to be done.

*“Come now, my students
Let us not despair
This is just a virus
We have seen worse
We know what it feels like to not feel free, to feel caged,
And now this virus has got the whole world enraged.
We will not stop our learning
We will continue
On our computers and our phones
We will persist through this
I can feel it in my bones.”*

As students began to feel calm
Khushboo’s eyes wandered over to a Chinar Tree
She suddenly had another idea.

*“Come, class, let’s go outside
One last walk, before we have to hide.”*

The earth was coming back to life
As the scent of spring filled the air
They walked towards the Chinar Tree
That stood tall, leafless and bare
But with buds starting to sprout
All along its branches.

Khushboo gathered the class around this tree
Ready to reassure her students, she rolled up her sleeves.



*“All of us have grown up under the shade of the Chinar Tree
This tree is not just a tree of Kashmir
This tree is Kashmir
Each spring, it sprouts countless leaves
Beautiful green leaves
And yet, every autumn, these leaves turn yellow
Then orange and then they fall off
But this tree does not give up
It survives
It perseveres
And so will we.”*

She points to the buds that will soon grow into leaves
*“As long as you hold on to each other and keep learning
We too will remain as strong as this tree
For I have you, and you have me.”*