Normalcy

Letter from Kashmir

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So, how do you find Kashmir? When confronted with that question – as one often is when visiting this beautiful place – I could only reply, *I don't know*. A third person commented *That is the only honest answer to the question*. Who knows and *No one knows* have been waging silent war against each other in the Valley since August 5th.

There were three deaths in the neighbourhood I was staying in. One, who must have been an older woman, was a school teacher with my host, they retired together several years ago, *She died too young*. Another was a young man of thirty who died in a car accident. The last was an older man who died of natural causes. There was much wailing in the air. Adding to it were the difficulties being faced by the bereaved trying to perform last rites. Relatives responsible for bathing the dead, for instance, could not be reached because of the ongoing communications blackout in the new Union Territory of India. The Kashmiri dead are being sent to heaven unwashed.

Kashmiris fly to Delhi and elsewhere to check their email. With them fly members of the Indian armed forces. Airlines offer special priority boarding for army men, provided they show proper ID. In the airport waiting lounge the soldier and the civilian sit separately. In-flight their elbows touch and their bags caress each other in dark overhead bins. Civilian and army men alike video and take photographs of the female flight attendants. Until they are told not to. The pilot invites *only* children into the cockpit. When the flight returns to SRX, Captain JK will not make announcements about mobile phones. Or maybe she will. Who knows?

Today was the happiest day of my life. Mamoo's friend came and we all played badminton and Ludo. Ha ha.

A thousand and one goats are marching down the hill. Winter has come a month early to the Valley. One stops to eat leaves behind a fence. A dog has a case of mistaken identity. Through villages, between cars. Past love letters to Gaza graffitied onto roadside walls and fences, doors and shutters. They march. At a brisk trot and exhibit a sense of purpose rare these days. It is as if the goats know that history is written on the ground, not in books and memos.

is heartbroken today. He is running from pillar to post. He needs signatures. His papers are otherwise in order, have been so for some time now. His dissertation is bound and ready. All that is left is the permission of the head of department for him to submit. And she won't sign. Professor's Lane, where his supervisor lives, would have been unreachable had معمول been without a car. It turns out that the supervisor no longer lives on Professor's Lane. It is harder to submit a thesis than it is to submit to the will of Allah.

In the middle of a gathering someone's mobile phone rings. Eyes turn. *My husband is in Essential Services*. Among the many meanings of freedom, in the techno-state freedom is like a faucet that can be turned off and on: on for essential, off for non-essential. The overwhelming majority of Kashmiris in the arms of the state are non-essentials who provide non-essential services.

Do I matter? Does my life count for anything? One no longer need go to Hajj to be reminded of such profound questions. Go to Kashmir instead.

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