

The Kite-maker

by Anu Kumar

(Adapted story. Intermediate level)

If war divides your country, village from village, family from family, it is safer to stay at home and not travel anywhere. Only a bird can fly freely over war-torn countries.

Or a kite - a toy made of brightly painted paper and wood. It climbs high into the sky, turning and dancing on the wind, as light as the air, as free as a bird...

Weeks before utraan, the yearly kite-flying festival, Ahmed Rasool stayed up late and worked at nights. He was determined to make the finest kite he had ever made. His only companion was an old oil lamp. Zaheera, his wife, no longer stayed up with him while he worked, because recent events had left her terribly unhappy. Their village had been almost destroyed by riots, their son had disappeared without leaving a note, and Zaheera had lost her previous enthusiasm for life.

Now she laughed bitterly at Rasool for his plans.

'When there is so much hate, do you think people will fly kites?'

'What's happening now in our country is just madness. It can't go on. In the end people get tired of war.' Rasool

refused to lose hope. 'The kite I make will be for peace. It will fly high into the skies and even the gods will listen to our prayers.'

Later, Zaheera agreed it was the finest kite he had ever made. It was shaped like a dove, and its beak held the olive branch of peace. Rasool had even fixed silver bells on its legs to make it sing with the wind.

But no one else thought it was any good. 'It won't fly very far,' they all said. 'It's heavy, and look, there isn't any wind yet.'

The night before utraan, Zaheera painted eyes on both sides of the paper, white in deep black.

Rasool laughed at her. 'Do doves really have eyes like that? I think they look rather like a chicken's eyes.'

'Be quiet,' she replied, half crossly, half smiling. 'In my grandfather's house, he kept doves. I know, I used to take care of them.'

An old pain returned with that memory. Zaheera's grandfather's house was on the other side of the border - a family divided by one of history's strange turns.

'Maybe there's a little wind now,' Rasool said, hurriedly changing the mood. 'Shall we try and fly it, just once?'

Together they went up the stairs, taking the kite with them. Zaheera laughed quietly to herself as she remembered a time when they were young and she had often climbed up to the flat roof to meet Rasool.

On the roof, the wind had suddenly become very strong. It tried to pull the kite away from Zaheera's fingers.

'Careful, careful!' Rasool warned.

The kite turned and danced in the air, its bells ringing in alarm, but the wind was stronger. A thick, cold cloud wrapped round them as the fog came in from the desert, and they could see the kite no more. The sound of bells was lost in the wild desert wind.

'It's gone, just like our son,' Zaheera said bitterly. She cried herself to sleep that night.

In the morning, when the festival started, the children flew kites outside. Their kites fought other kites, the stronger ones winning and the weaker ones breaking into paper tears before falling to the ground. And Rasool tried to cheer Zaheera up.

'Eid is nearly here, and that's a time to be happy,' he said. 'I will buy you a young goat, the best in the market.'

But Zaheera's face was empty of all feeling.

A week before Eid, they heard a knock at the door one night. Terror returned to Zaheera's eyes.

'Don't worry,' Rasool whispered to her, 'it can't be riots. We'll soon be voting, so no one wants to make trouble now.' He went to open the door.

Three or four men in uniform stood outside.

'Is this yours?' they asked. And in the torchlight Rasool saw his lost kite. Its body had been torn and all its

bells were gone, but the eyes Zaheera had painted still shone.

'We found it across the border,' one of the men said.

And they pushed someone forward. Someone who looked very hungry, with an untidy beard.

Zaheera fell to her knees, crying and thanking Allah at the same time.

'We found him very ill, your son. He could not remember a thing, but the moment he saw this kite' - the men laughed, shaking their heads - 'he began talking about his village and the kite festival, and begged us to take him home.'

Rasool remembered his manners. 'Come in,' he said to the men, 'for tea...'

'No,' they said, 'we must go - didn't get permission to cross the border. Eid Mubarak, Happy Eid.'

- THE END -

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