

Echoes of the Unborn

It was late at night. The hot weather outside clearly indicated what season it was. "Damn summer." Mazed thought to himself while lighting a cigarette, standing in front of his CNG. He had to make one last trip today to meet his daily quota, as he was planning to return to his village on Eid, which was only a week away. As he was about to take a sip of the tea he just bought, his phone rang. He knew who this caller was, as the call was at a routine time. "Have you eaten?" the caller asked.

"No, not hungry today."

"Please eat something. I want the father of the child I'm expecting to be able to see it grow up."

"Yeah, understood. I will eat something later. You take care now, Amena."

Mazed cut the call. Sure, he loved his wife, but he could always sense something in her voice. Was it contempt? Or was it anger or disappointment? He was confused. But one thing he could identify was that his feelings started after the incident. The incident that shook his life. This was the reason he decided to leave his village and come to Dhaka. But he had to hurry as the night was passing. So he took a sip of his tea, which was, albeit a bit cold, but anyone could vouch was satisfying, as the tea seller sitting by Mazed was quite popular here. Mazed took a sip and instantly spit out the tea on the footpath and said something related to the vendors mother and why he shouldn't have been born. The poor cup of tea had taken on the role of Mazed's medium of venting his anger. The seller was nonchalant, as he didn't care for much in the world and saw many types of customers throughout a normal business day. Throwing money at his little box of cigarettes and tea, Mazed got on his CNG and started driving. He was already running late to fill his daily quota, and the resurfaced memory of "the incident" wasn't helping it. "Whatever, I just have to make one trip now," he thought to himself, and then sweet sleep would be waiting. The roads were unusually clear; even if Eid was one week away, people don't usually leave this early. But then again, it was pretty late. Mazed took a turn and ended up in a pretty secluded area that had one or two buildings and mostly empty lands. As he was in a designated residential area of this city, it was pretty common to see roads like these. His eyes, however, were searching for any potential passengers, but the road seemed empty. So he looked at his rearview mirror to see if someone was approaching from behind, and at that exact moment, his hands froze.

Two children were sitting on the passenger's seat,. Their faces weren't clearly visible because of lack of light and the position of his mirror, but he could see their little hands and little legs hanging from the seat. Suddenly he heard laughter from the children, and his heart skipped a beat. It wasn't that the thought of stopping the vehicle and running for his life hadn't occurred to him, but it was as if his hands, along with his whole body, had frozen. The only thing he was trying to remember right now was Ayatul Kursi, but he could only remember the first line. "Keep cool, Mazed. Keep cool," he said to himself while turning on another road, hoping to see it full of people, but suddenly he realized he was on a highway and he couldn't stop. It's as if his hands were glued to the steering wheel. He had been sweating before, but suddenly he began to sweat even more intensely.

And then in that moment one of the toddlers spoke, "Take us home. Make us whole. We want Dad. Where is Dad?" Although Mazed was very close to having a heart attack or wetting his pants, and he couldn't determine which one would happen first, the words made the situation a bit normal for him. Maybe it was the words that put some courage in him to reply, "Where do you want to go? I don't know where your home is. Please leave me alone."

For a few moments, only the sound of the engine broke the silence. Then he felt the touch of a toddler's hand on his back, and a cold shiver went down his spine. Then he clearly heard, "Take us home. Make us whole. If you don't want your neck snapped." Mazed felt a slight crack on his neck as if it had begun to turn to the right side. "No, I have to live. I need to go back to my home" Mazed repeated to himself.

"Murderer."

Mazed froze again. He had not heard these words since the incident. The whole event, the thing he tries to constantly suppress every day, suddenly resurfaced vividly in his mind. It was 4 years ago. His wife was pregnant with twins. Mazed was a overcome with joy, as he always wanted kids. His wife was pleased too. But it seemed no matter how much his wife tried, she couldn't win over his mother. Even at the news of becoming a grandmother her face didn't seem to show any visible sign of happiness. Her focus was mostly on work and maintaining the household, and whoever could lower that load for her would be considered worthy. Everyone revered the elderly matriarch, who had held the title of supreme authority since Mazed's father's death. So anything she said was a commandment for both Mazed and his wife. "Just bear with it for a few months; we will move to the city soon," Mazed tried to assure his wife. One couldn't say whether it was Mazed's

irresponsibility or his mother's cruelty, but his wife's miscarriage definitely wasn't an accident. It happened when one day Mazed's mother sought help for lifting some heavy objects from her heavily pregnant daughter-in-law. She lifted two boxes, but with the third box there was fatal bleeding, which led to an inevitable miscarriage. After losing the children, his wife lost her sanity, and it took her a year to recover; being a loving husband, he couldn't leave her. But the only time her insanity would occur is whenever she saw Mazed. On sight, she would utter the word "Murderer." Mazed couldn't believe himself when he first heard it, but little by little the word started to grasp him. Even after his wife came to her senses, the thought of his dead children keeps lurking in his head.

Mazed tried to make himself understand, "I wasn't home; I didn't have a say," but it was him who told his wife to abide by his mother as much as she could. He never even had the courage to apologize to his wife. He never had the courage to stand up to his mother. So he couldn't exactly forgive himself. His relationship with his wife soured, and whatever little bit was left of their love was keeping their marriage alive.

After all these years, when he heard the word again, his heart was pumping faster than ever.

"Murderer!!" shouted both the children. "Take us home!!"

Mazed broke down. At this moment, it was as if his lost children had returned. And they were taking their revenge. They were denied the light of this earth; they were denied a home, a father, and a mother, so they were here to claim all that. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Tears began to drop from Mazed's eyes. "Clock is ticking, neck is snapping," said both the children almost laughingly. "Please forgive me. I didn't know! I wasn't careful enough. But this time I'll be careful; I'll be a good father," cried Mazed. "Take us home!" cried the children again. "Please, let me go," Mazed cried as he felt his neck begin to shift to the right and he couldn't even turn it to the left. "I don't know where your home is."

"By the lake, where flowers dance with a gentle breeze."

The situation wasn't exactly the time for cryptic messages, but Mazed's brain picked up one word: "lake." He remembered there was a lake road nearby. He drove straight down the road without thinking anything else. The shouts of the children were getting noisier with each passing moment,

and he felt his neck snapping more with each second. As he was about to enter the road, a screeching, ear-deafening cry from the children hit his ears, and Mazed lost consciousness.

The next morning people discovered a crashed CNG on a lake road in the city. The driver, Mazed, discovered himself on a hospital bed with only the memory of the crash. The police asked him some questions, which only led them to be more confused. Reports indicate that there have been several late-night vehicle crashes in the area over the years, and the drivers involved later describe experiences that can only be classified as hallucinations. Although Mazed couldn't recount what happened, he remembers the ear-deafening cry. But the doctors were quick to cite it as a classic case of hallucination. The hospital released him after two days. Mazed, being a curious mind, went to the road of the crash and talked to some guards from the houses near the place where he crashed. According to the guards, there was an accident in the 1990s in the area where two children tragically lost their lives. They live in one of the houses near the lake road and have been appearing in vehicles late at night in the area. "What a bunch of idiots." Mazed thought to himself, "Believing in ghosts." After three very confusing days of trying to understand what had happened, Mazed decided he needed a new profession and returned to his village. His wife was there to receive him at the door. To her surprise, he held her hands, and the first words to come out of his mouth were, "I'm sorry, Amena."

Appendix

2 years have passed. Mazed and Amena have moved to their separate houses. His son can now walk but doesn't talk yet. It's not like his parents haven't tried, but he has a nonchalant look on his face when spoken to. One night the family was outside, sitting under moonlight, a bit further away from the house. The boy then uttered his first words, "Dad." Mazed turned his head in surprise. "Take me home." Mazed looked at his son for a few moments. For some reason the words sounded very familiar yet also so unknown. Suddenly a tear dropped from his eye. Amena asked, "What's wrong? Are you crying?" Mazed replied while wiping another tear drop "No, Im not ,no, Im not. I'm just sorry."