The Land Drowned in Tears - Söyün'gül Janishif

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We started our day at three in the morning, in pure darkness. The atmosphere was dismal, and although we had been through so many painful experiences lately, so much torture and death, I sensed something even worse was about to happen, and my heart was heavy in my chest. There were over two hundred of us working out in the fields, and over the sounds of the shovels, hoes and pickaxes, we could hear the Militias shouting, “Work fast. Hurry up, get on with it!”

We carried on in silence.

I stopped at six o’clock and went home for breakfast. Only Ghayshe and Firdews were there, and both of them were panicking. Firdews couldn’t stop crying. “Sister, what is going to happen? I’m scared!”

“Nothing will happen, don’t panic. They are creating this atmosphere to terrorize people. It will end soon — Allah will protect us. I’ll live through this, don’t worry!”

My assurances seemed to comfort them.

I went to my room to plait my hair. I threaded a needle with cotton and stitched the hair up tight so that it wouldn’t fall onto my face easily if it was pulled. I looked in the mirror to see if it suited me, and was surprised to find that it did — my face was beautifully framed. I saw a pretty, youthful girl in front of me. “How awful to watch my precious youth being violated,” I said to myself. “These were supposed to be the loveliest days of my life.
And here I am spending them in hardship and brutality, facing threats and torture. My life is being trampled under their feet.”

Hajiye Banu burst in. “Quick! They have beaten a man to death, and now they’re approaching the commune, dragging the dead body with them.” Her face was pale with fright. I threw my jacket on and headed out. As I walked towards the commune, I saw a group of men dragging the corpse by its feet. There were a lot of women with them too, kicking the dead man and shouting as they went. I felt a sharp pain in my chest just at the sight of it; I couldn’t stop shaking. Among all the women, Kaynijamal’s voice was the loudest.

Lyo Jung’s words were echoing in my ears: “We can’t survive in this fight. They won’t stop until we are all dead.”

I could feel death in the air now. I rushed out to the work area, picked up my shovel and started digging. Crowds of people were heading towards where we were. Teachers had been dragged out from primary and secondary schools by the Militias and were being ordered to join us. Some refused; arguments broke out. It was a chaotic scene, and in order to restore some sort of calm, people were asked to line up in their production groups.

As always, I was placed in the first line of the “Class Enemy” group. The teachers were lined up separately.

They placed a pointed three-foot dunce’s hat on my head. It was decorated with coloured strings, and my face almost disappeared underneath it. Others were forced to wear them too. (I was forced to wear the dunce’s hat in countless public struggle meetings. At first it was hard to take, but after being forced to wear it so many times, somehow I became inured to it.)
I stood straight, head up, as if nothing had happened. One of the Militias brought out black wheel lubricant and began smearing my face with it. I felt degraded, hurt in the deepest way. What had I done for them to paint my face black? Time after time they tried to break me, to shame me in front of the public; but I had nothing to be ashamed of. I was fighting for our people’s freedom. I had sacrificed my career, my youth. I was even prepared to sacrifice my life for the dreams we had. The desire for freedom and independence burned in me like a fire, and even after all the humiliation, hardship, torture and death, it was still worth fighting for. From the minute I got involved in the movement for freedom, I knew that there would be immense obstacles to overcome. I had prepared myself for every kind of danger; I had no regrets. I was taking strength from these thoughts, and trying to tie up the colourful strings hanging from the hat so they wouldn’t fall in my face, when my hand was punched viciously. I felt like it had been crushed, the bones broken into a hundred pieces.

I heard the teachers shouting, and guessed that the Malitias were trying to paint their faces black too. One of the teachers, Ghalim, was shouting, “It should be people like you, the people who snuck inside our party and betrayed all the rules, being shamed before the public. Not us! You should pay for your mistakes and for what you did to all those innocent people. Qadir Bek, Qabbal, Saliq, all of you, listen carefully: You are the criminals in this community. You are the ones who need to pay for your crimes, not us!” As he shouted, a group of Militias dragged him out of the line and to the front. Then we heard teacher Eliqan’s voice:
“You are making a big mistake; I always helped you with everything you asked of me. I am one of you.”

He pleaded as if he himself were facing execution. The Militias called their leader Qabdal to make a decision. As soon as Eliqan saw Qabdal, he pleaded: “My brother, you know me. I helped you with that job, remember? Please help me!” He was shaking. Qabdal was relishing the power he held over him. He held his head up high and immediately ordered the Guards to release their captive.

The other teachers stared at Eliqan with disgust. But Eliqan was so relieved he almost burst into tears, and as he left the group he raised both hands to the sky, shouting: “Long live Chairman Mao! May Mao live for many millions of years!” He ran to the stream and washed off the black paint; but when he came back he wasn’t sure where to stand, as he knew he couldn’t go and rejoin the rest of the teachers. He stood as far away from them as he could.

We were all taken in strict order to the Courtyards where the denunciation meetings were held, one group after another. As soon as the first group was in, there was a thunderous shouting of slogans. When I passed through the gate, to my horror I saw Meyder Molla on the raw earth floor, lying unconscious in a pool of blood. He was the eldest, kindest and most respected figure in the community. Seeing him like that made my heart tremble with rage. Then for a terrible moment I began to fear he was dead. I felt an overwhelming desire to cry, but I held back my tears.

As I was walking towards the stage, ten Militias, as well as Qalay, Saliq and Qengnet, jumped in front of me like lions ready to tear at their prey. They dragged me into the middle of the circle of people and started
attacking me. Punches came from all different directions, landing on my face, head, ribs and chest. I felt heavy boots kicking me. “Bow to Chairman Mao, Bow to the people!” They screamed as they beat me. “Tell us, where is Chairman Mao? Where are the people?”

Blood covered my face, and the hat lay forgotten under their feet. I cannot remember how many times I must have fallen to the floor only to get up again — the fear of being trampled and killed made me leap back up every time I fell. After a while, they dragged me on to a bench and pushed my head forward, forcing me to stand in a bowing position. For a long time, blood poured quietly from my nose.

As well as the Militias, there were many revolutionary rebels from the different regions. They were trying to break into the courtyard. After standing in a bowing position for some time, I raised my head slowly and saw more than ten solidly built men coming towards me. The commander of the Militia, Siyitqan, who was standing on the roof, shouted: “Stop them from coming into the Hall!” But the rebels didn’t seem to listen to him, and replied: “Leave the counter-revolutionaries to us. We will slash their noses, tongues and ears. We will gouge their eyes out.” They flashed their knives in the air as they approached me.

I closed my eyes and started praying: “Oh Allah, protect me from their torment, you are the only protector I have! Please don’t let me suffer under their feet. Oh merciful Allah, you have heard what they are saying, please don’t place me in their hands!” I prayed from a place deep within myself. I prayed again and again.
Sayitqan shouted loudly from the roof again. “Comrades, revolutionaries, let us punish these people first. We can ask them to repent for their crimes, and to give us information about their criminal acts. Let us punish them first. We will hand them over to you once we are finished, then you’ll be free to do whatever you wish with them.”

The Public Struggle Meeting lasted the whole day, from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon. And I had been stood bowing on the bench for the whole time. The pain from being beaten up was unbearable; and my legs were almost giving up. Just as it seemed to me that my body would seize up completely, and that I could not take any more, Say Tung announced over the loud speaker: “Let the Class Enemies leave the meeting now!”

“I must get out here before the crowd,” I said to myself. I tried to gather all my strength, but I could hardly put one foot in front of the other. People ignored the orders, and were already heading for the gates. “Oh Allah, Help me! If I fall down before I get out of here, this mad stampede will kill me.” Just as I was struggling to move, five or six thugs got hold of me, and their punching and kicking started again. They wanted me to fall to the ground, but I clung on to the people in front of me, and managed to move forward with the others.

The crowd surged towards the gate like a wave trying to find the shore. The thugs were standing on both sides of the crowd, kicking, punching, and whipping the “Class Enemies” as they went through. The victims held one another to keep moving.
Then, to our astonishment, the International Anthem began playing on the radio through loudspeakers that had been rigged up everywhere. The Militias, cadres, and activists looked equally bewildered; stunned momentarily into the silence of disbelief. Of course the quiet didn’t last long and Say Tung, a member of the army personnel, screeched at the top of his lungs, "Stop, Stop! Whoever is playing this must stop it right now!” his eyes widening, bulging with fury. They all ran towards the commune where the radio had been placed, but the song had finished by the time they reached it.

At times like this, I felt happy. The spirit of resistance was a tonic - giving me not just hope, but the strength to carry on. Finally I managed to get through the gate alive.

Just as I felt myself free of danger, I was attacked yet again by thugs; I fell to the ground immediately. I mumbled in pain as they kicked me with their heavy boots. After a while, I heard someone shouting over the loudspeaker: “No one is allowed to leave; all of you go back to the courtyard right now!” I could hear people’s screams and the sound of horses’ hooves everywhere. It was the Militias on the horses trying to herd people back to the courtyard from all directions. They were kicking me harder now, trampling all over me and shouting aggressively: “Get up, I am telling you to get up!” I was trying to get up; no matter how hard I tried my body had finally given up. I couldn’t do it. Soldiers also came by on horses and ordered the people who were attacking me to go back to the courtyard. Then out of nowhere two strangers gave me their hands, so I grabbed them tightly. They helped me to stand up, and we rushed into the courtyard.
“Oh my Allah: help me! If I do die, let my faith be my companion!” I prayed as I walked back inside the courtyard struggle. I could no longer see those who had been lying unconscious on the floor earlier. Even their blood had been cleaned up. So many of them were beaten, I thought. Where have they been taken?

All those that had been subjected to the public struggle meetings were now herded on to the stage one by one. Say Tung started his speech. Duysabay’s son Kalybay grabbed my hair from behind and started hitting me. He snatched at my jacket and ripped pieces from it. I held the people next to me tightly. The Militia Kabdalkan joined him, grabbed me from behind and ripped my jacket, throwing it on the floor. Teacher Ghalip, who was standing in front of me, turned around and stared at them with rage. They suddenly left me and moved to attack him instead.

Finally Say Tung finished his speech. He shouted, “Class Enemies, get out now!” I hardly had any strength left to walk; I could not see how I would manage to pass through the gate again. Then, unexpectedly, I heard my name being called. I turned my head in the direction the voice came from; I saw those who had been subjected to the public struggle meeting today had gathered in one place. The group had locked themselves in a circle by placing their heads in between the legs of the person in front and holding onto their knees. The Militias were trying to untangle them. My work friends were calling me: “Come this way, join us here quickly.” I was about to move and join them, suddenly someone opened the back door near where I was standing, I got out from the back door to the square by grabbing whatever I could. All of us gathered in the square. About two hundred people had been
subjected to this struggle meeting, and about half of us were left.

Suddenly some more people arrived on horseback, whips flailing in their hands. They whipped us as they circled around. I noticed the managers of the production team, Qani and Qanighet, who whipped poor Orazaqin so viciously that he fainted and collapsed. Eight or nine others also passed out.

I heard a woman screaming from a distance. I looked up and saw a man and woman being whipped and led along by two horsemen. They were heading in our direction. The poor woman couldn’t bear the pain, and screamed and begged the men, “My brother, please stop whipping me, I belong to a very poor class family. Please, I beg you, we are all brothers and sisters, don’t do this to me.” They didn’t show any mercy to the lady’s pleading, but whipped both of them with all the strength they could muster. When they stopped in front of us, other riders who were already there joined in - soon the man fainted. The sounds of the woman screaming and pleading echoed from the Nanshan Mountains and caused a great tremble in the air.

I struggled but finally reached home. I felt like I was fighting to hold on to my last breath. Life is so precious! If it is not one’s turn to die, one can survive in any condition.

I looked at myself in the hallway mirror. My face was black with tar. Whole clumps of my hair, which I had so neatly stitched that morning, it had been pulled out from the roots. My face was badly swollen and there were cuts around my eyes and lips. My summer jacket was in tatters, with only the
collar and front hanging from my neck and the rest gone. My white blouse was stained red.

The figure I saw in the mirror frightened me — I looked ghoulish, horrible, like something from a tasteless film. I almost cried, I wanted to scream; but somehow I found the strength to control myself again. And I was grateful to Allah that I had come out alive. I don’t know how many of my fellow sufferers had been killed, but I prayed for their souls to rest in peace and for Allah to grant them paradise. “We are heroes, they can never break us!” I thought, comforting myself. “We are living with a good conscience, and if we die, we die with honour.”

Both of my younger sisters Gheyshe and Firdews were in the courtyard when I walked in, shaking and with one hand reaching for the wall. My appearance shocked them. They stared at me in horror for a few seconds, then ran to me, held me tight and cried uncontrollably. I tried very hard not to break down as they hugged me, and told them that everything would be all right.

I went over to the kettle for some warm water and washed my face.

I was my parents’ precious daughter, and had always been the star pupil of all my teachers. I was very popular at our Medical University; I was well respected by my classmates and loved by my friends. I had never once been bullied in all that time, but my life had been turned upside down the day I was arrested. I had been through such hardship and trauma since then, had been shoved, slapped and punched. There had been so little gentleness.
I felt sadness at my own suffering, of course, but what was truly unbearable was to witness so much horror inflicted on others by these cruel, mindless thugs. Most of their victims were men older than seventy.

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