

Sanjukta Shams

## Fire

Muharram is when Shiite Muslims flagellate themselves to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, grandson of Muhammad. Even as a small child, I witnessed men and small children as they hit their chest with sharp razors and bled. I didn't understand the ritual but imagined it was rather painful. My family was Sunni, and therefore Muharram was not a part of our tradition.

During Muharram in Dhaka, Bangladesh, there would be a celebration that included bazaars filled with clay miniature pots and dishes for kids. I remember Abba buying them for us. My sisters and I would spend hours playing with these clay toys. The flagellation ceremony did not affect us. Abba, my father, usually kept us inside so we could not witness the bloody scene. Sometimes, my sisters and I would peek through the window and watch blood cover the streets of Dhaka.

In 1972 at five years of age, I found myself living with a cult leader in a compound filled with followers mesmerized by his teachings. All of these followers were uneducated, except for my mother. Amma, my mother, had studied in Dhaka and was an English literature teacher prior to marrying my father.

In the village, people didn't know if they were Shiite or Sunni—all they knew is that they believed in Golam and his promise of heaven. These poor, uneducated individuals followed his teachings since they could not read the Koran for themselves.

I do not know how much of Golam's teachings were actually extrapolated from the Koran or if he simply made up things to suit his need to control and manipulate. Regardless, he managed a compound with several hundred people, all of whom never questioned him. Perhaps they lived in utter fear; all I know is that they executed Golam's wishes without any regard to their personal torture or pain.

A true believer of Islam and a follower of Shiite doctrine would probably

---

Here I was in control of my body; here I alone inflicted pain upon myself; here I alone held the razor that could cut through my body, my flesh.

---

view Golam as a desecration of their sect and the significance of Muharram. Nonetheless, Golam used Shiite doctrine as a tool to further his control over his followers, including my mother.

The fire pit would burn violently as if the fire knew that evil was about to take place in its presence. Dancing, chanting, and the smell of wood burning would fill the air. Some of the women were completely naked as they moved, uncontrollably. Some would take hot flaming sticks and burn their body in the name of Allah and Golam.

Utterly fearful at the age of five, I stood there and bore witness to this madness. Wearing my white frock, I tried desperately to hide—to no avail.

I watched my frock light up into flames as I stood there naked like the rest. I don't recall ever burning myself; if I did, fortunately I have managed to erase it from my memory. I still have several burn scars on my body and do not recall their origin.

A bag would hang over the fire. In the beginning I didn't know its content. In the middle of this ritual, the bag would be lowered down and individuals would reach inside to pull out hot razors. I, too, reached inside, burning my hands as I pulled out a razor. Perhaps the heat did not inflict as much pain; it was all painful back then, and now.

Like the rest, I was forced to bang my chest with this razor and witness myself bleed. It was a symbol of self-sacrifice; it was a symbol of our powerlessness over God and Golam. I still bear the scars from those rituals as well. My body is a constant reminder. There is no hiding from my past. It is openly displayed on me.

The fire would burn late into the night. At times, I would drift off to sleep as the flames bathed my skin. Other times, I would sleep standing up, leaning against a tree for support. Though I so desperately wanted to crawl into a bed and sleep, I knew the evil that was waiting for me out there was far greater than the fireside. Here I was in control of my body; here I alone inflicted pain upon myself; here I alone held the razor that could cut through my body, my flesh. At least tonight, it was not Golam who ripped my skin and caused me to bleed. It was me.

It is not my scarred flesh that keeps me seeking answers. I wish it was so simple. I have seen many plastic surgeons and am confident that one day, should I choose, my scars could disappear. I only wish the scars on my soul would disappear along with it; knowing that nothing could erase those deeper cuts, I have never sought plastic surgery. The superficial cure is not what I seek.

I have been to countless Girls Scout camps with my girls, where we build fires and roast marshmallows. I've witnessed the innocence of these girls as they laugh and eat. I do not want my girls' perception of fire to be any different. I so desperately want to join in their fun. Instead, I find myself drifting off to my early childhood where fire only meant pain and blood.

I no longer want the flame to stop. Fire no longer scares me but reassures me that all things will eventually burn into ashes. It is those ashes that will take flight and land in the meadow where Randall, my imaginary friend, and I run freely. Fire has the power to burn wood, flesh—it has the power to burn everything and anything to oblivion.

I am counting on fire to burn away my memories.