

# The Braids

by

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It was the year of political unrest in Pakistan when I turned eighteen. A famous politician had been imprisoned, violence had taken over the streets, and Section 144 was implemented all over the country. Lahore was echoing with the slogans of freedom; from the tyrant government, the criminal justice system, and the villainous law enforcement agencies. Joining this landscape of struggle, I raised my own voice.

“I want to cut my hair short.”

To my surprise, my uncles who’d spend hours debating in our family hall about liberation and revolution while their wives dutifully agreed with them, mirroring their husband’s beliefs, went silent. The wave of emancipation had finally knocked at the doors of the Malik household.

My mother rushed to cover my mouth with her sweaty palms. “She doesn’t know what she is saying, forgive her, Malik Sahib,” she pleaded to the bench of judges sitting in front of us.

I pushed her back and stood my ground as I repeated my demand.

I come from a long line of successful housewives that are known for two things; having the ability to produce children in double digits, and growing the longest and healthiest braids. My mother fell short by two miscarriages but managed to maintain hip length hair all her life. When I was a child, she would narrate stories about my great grandmothers who used to make natural oils at home, a secret recipe that was passed down as a family heirloom to the women who were expected to carry on the tradition. It was a matter of honor and pride.

The whole room erupted in hysterical sounds coming from every corner. My aunts, crying and screaming, condemning the blasphemy that I had committed against the ordinance of the Malik family. My uncles, roaring like wounded animals, asserting the sanctity of our values and beliefs that I had destroyed. My male cousins and brothers throwing a tantrum, demanding my voice to be silenced. My mother stepped

away from me as if to disown her own offspring and dug herself into the wall behind her. While I was the focus of all the vultures gathering around me, my mother refused to even look at me.

“Enough!” my grandfather finally spoke, bringing the room to a pin drop silence. He stood up in his place, leaning in on his walking stick. One could only guess if his hands trembled due to his age catching up with him or his uncontrollable anger in the moment. “How dare you ask for such a thing?”

The mayhem had prompted my female cousins and sisters to become witnesses to the uprising that was taking place. They all gathered outside the room, trying to get a glimpse of the scene that was unfolding. My eyes wandered to them before I responded.

“I am old enough now to take my own decisions.”

The truth was that it wasn't just my wish to shorten my hair and be rid of the burden of carrying the family custom, rather it was an idea that was birthed during the late night secret sessions held on the rooftop by all the young women. Over warm cups of tea and the stolen hookah of our grandmother, we all shared the same sentiment that I had dared to put out in the open finally.

The room echoed with gasps and murmurs but no one dared to utter a single word. All eyes had turned to Malik Sahib to announce the sentence for the violation. “Are you aware of what you're saying, girl?”

Without a beat, I nodded.

My grandfather took a deep breath and sat back in his seat, stunned and lost for words. His wrinkly face had turned to the color of his white beard that he stroked anxiously. Silence hung over the room like a sword dangling on top of our heads. I

looked around, the room that was bustling like the Lahore Tea House a few moments ago had now turned into Madam Tussauds.

I was the second born daughter of my parents and fifth in line, followed by two younger sisters and a brother. My father was a hardworking man who lost his life in a car accident as he was on his way to welcome his youngest son. My mother had raised us as a single mother since, with the help of the enormous joint family that we lived with. Seven uncles and two aunts, one divorced and one widowed, lived under the same roof with my grandfather who wanted his legacy to be his united and consolidated bloodline. Three of my aunts, who were happily married with a flock of children, also lived in the same neighborhood and were present at this unprecedented event that was taking place.

“Leave the room”, Malik Sahib uttered, almost like a whisper. “Leave, until you’re called back.”

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An emergency session was called on the rooftop after the unfolding of the historic incident. All the young women sat in an oddly formed circle. I was given a special seat on the charpai with two of my elder cousins sitting next to me. Nobody said a word as we all impatiently waited for the verdict of my rebellion. An old radio placed on the stool was the only thing that made a sound.

“As the whole nation awaits the judgment regarding the criminal case against the beloved politician, our correspondents have been reporting of secret deals being carried out under the table for his escape. There are rumors that his life is in danger as several angry mobs are out to get him for...”

The commentary was interrupted by Taya Rafique’s daughter who had just stepped onto the roof with the latest updates. She was obediently carrying out the tea

serving duties, the only one allowed into the family hall but unknown to the adults, her loyalties were still with her sisters.

“They are talking about setting an example so no one else dares to follow your footsteps”, she said panting heavily. “Chacha Ehsaan said that Malik Sahib should banish you from the house but Phupa Amjad suggested to instead lock you inside as banishment would give you the freedom to do more than just cutting your hair”

All the women gasped at the shocking revelations. I sat there still, listening to every word carefully so I could analyze and predict the outcome before it was announced.

“Maybe when they call you back, just apologize to them all”, one of my sisters suggested with tears in her eyes. “Or maybe we can all step in with her and show solidarity,” another chimed in with enthusiasm, “I mean they can’t punish us all together, there are so many of us.” A few more solutions were thrown into the conversation, with everyone giving their opinion before it all died down again. Taya Rafique’s daughter rushed back to the kitchen, in order to avoid any suspicion, leaving us all with our worst nightmares flashing in our minds.

Growing up, we used to gather on the same rooftop in the summer. Our mothers would sit there for hours, oiling our heads in a routine that was sacred and meant to be learned and preserved by us. They’d start by gently combing our hair, untangling every strand smoothly. Then they’d pour the secret herbal oil onto their palms and massage our scalps while commenting on the growth of our hair like a teacher sharing the report card at the end of a semester. We would eagerly wait to hear about how well our hair had been doing and how we could make it better. Later, our mothers would tightly tie it up in braids and pray for it to be healthy with each knot. It was as if they weaved all of their dreams and hopes into those braids where they could watch them grow.

I got up from my seat and walked over to the trunk placed in the corner which had safe guarded the tools and instruments used by our mothers to nourish our hair. Hidden under the combs and hairbands and bottles of oil, I found a pair of scissors that I brought back to the gathering. Everyone just stared at me in silence. From the expressions around me, I could tell some of them were excited and hopeful of what my next action would be, but some of them were equally frightened and petrified by my courage.

Phupa Amjad's daughter, the eldest one of us all, stood up and touched the scissors in my hand. She didn't snatch them away or knock them off, instead she just stroked it with her fingers and murmured, "Bless you". Following her lead, one by one, every woman present at the site gave their blessings, either silently or with tender prayers.

This was an act that was customary and spiritual to all of us. Every year on the day of Eid-ul-Azha, before an animal was sacrificed in the name of God, each member of the house was called to bless the knife that would end up taking a life. We were taught that this action took away all the evil spirits that hovered over us and testified that the sacrifice was made with a collective intention.

I pulled my braid to the front, with its band in the mouth of the scissors, holding it like a spectacle for everyone to watch.

"May this hair never grow again for me to carry its curse."

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My fate was sealed as I was called back into the family hall. The walk from the rooftop to the hall was a long and crucial one, yet I kept my head held high for that I had won already. As I stood in front of the doors that opened up to the room where I would be handed the verdict, all of my accomplices stood behind me, hand in hand. It was a moment of truth for all of us.

“Bring her inside”, Malik Sahib was heard ordering.

We all held our breath for what was about to be unleashed.

The door opened. I walked in, covering my head with a shawl that Chacha Ehsan’s daughter had lent me for my protection.

Malik Sahib was sitting where I had last seen him, with all the men gathered around him while the women stood behind them. My mother sat on a chair in the corner. She looked at me briefly, just for me to notice the disappointment and disgust that she held for me, before looking away.

“Is there anything you wish to say?” Malik Sahib asked me, his voice echoing in the room like thunder. He raised one of his eyebrows, demanding an answer.

“I want to cut my hair short.”

My voice didn’t tremble, rather it had an equally demanding tone which surprised most of my audience. Faint whispers were heard in the room. My grandfather tapped his walking stick on the floor like a judge banging the gavel for silence.

“Your hair is not yours,” he began delivering the speech that he had prepared, “it is the glory of the Malik household, the legacy of the generations of women that came before you. It is their identity, their pride, and their oblation. Every woman of this family has upheld this long lasting tradition. They have respected the custom, and never did they ever question the wisdom of their elders. Who gave you the right to defy all that and stand before us today demanding such a fatuous and ineffable thing?”

I looked at him and saw a flare in his eyes as he spoke. The fire burned brighter than the time when he faced the killer of my father. The man who had hit him with his truck and ran away. My grandfather didn’t sleep for days until he was caught.

When the police presented him to my family, no one had dared to say a word, not even my mother who was hurting with a wound greater than anyone else. It was only my grandfather who walked over to him and cursed him for life. He cursed him and his family and his future generations that satisfied the vengeance that we all had for that man. That is how Malik Sahib had a way with words.

To witness my grandfather flaring more than that, ignited an equally dangerous fire inside me. The fire that was burning the streets outside for days, the fire that had caused the whole country to turn upside down, the fire that waved the flag of freedom had finally entered the Malik household.

“No one.”

Everyone in the room looked as if they had seen a ghost. Their jaws open wide, their eyes popped out. I saw the desperation on my mother’s face, pleading with me to not say another word, but my vision was blurred by the burning flames.

“No one gave me that right. That is why I am taking it myself. For generations, the women of this family have been hiding their pain and trauma behind the veils of these traditions, locking them away in braids so thick that no one could ever see them.”

Malik Sahib sprung up from his seat in rage and stepped towards me. Before he could respond to the grave sin that I had committed, I felt the room filling up behind me with all the young women who shared the same fire as me. I took off my shawl and displayed my chopped off hair in front of everyone to behold.

“It is not our pride, it is our burden.”

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The court had announced a death penalty for the politician on trial. War broke out on the streets. People were demanding blood. Centuries old institutions were



razed to the ground. The fire that was burning for days transformed into a living inferno. Riots, unlawful arrests, torture, and murder.

It was the year of political unrest in Pakistan and a year of personal unrest for me. The songs of liberation echoed in every corner. Joining this landscape of struggle, I raised my own voice, for the liberation from the patriarchal traditions that fortified the Malik household.

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