

HamaaraBhaarat Mahan

“It is forbidden to kill; therefore all murderers are punished -
unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.”

- Voltaire

April 5, 2015

Anaya reached down to tie the brown shoelaces on her combat boots, looping the tattered ends of one into the other and then back again. She glanced at her self in the mirror, flipping her gray hair into a quick braid and holding it together in a bun. Her brown eyes flickered toward the door as she listened for footsteps, brows raised. Sighing with relief at the lack of activity in the ever-busy household, she sneaked out the bedroom door, gently tapping it shut in hopes she wouldn't wake her husband. She brushed her fingers against the wall as she made her way down the stairs, careful not to lose her balance.

Once outside the door, she hid behind the patch of land behind the shelter, crouched down, lit a small fire and clamped her wrinkled eyes shut. Lacing her fingers through each other, she bowed her head, old lips muttering old words. She threw a copy of Tanya's picture into the fire, like she'd been doing for the past fifty years, and wished to Shiva to keep Tanya safe in his arms. The words wafted around her, engulfing her in a hope that had her rocking back and forth on her heels, lifting her to the stories of Krishna, Ganesha and Parvati.

“Dadi?” Dhruv tapped his grandmother on the shoulder, “What are you doing?”

Anaya halted her mantra, glancing at him through graying eyelashes, “Oh, nothing beta,” she smiled at the innocence in his eyes, “I was just asking Ganpatibapa to help Didi get good grades on her test,” she lied.

“Can I pray with you?” the boy asked, crouching down beside Anaya and folding his palms.

“Ofcourse, baccha.” Anaya pushed her green dupata up her shoulder, tying it behind her so it wouldn't fall.

“Heh bhagvan – Dear God,” Dhruv began, bowing his head. Anaya fingered the ends of her shoes, tracing her index over the fading marker, *A x T*.

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April 4, 1965

“Ma!” Anaya called into the house, “Koi haikya – is anyone here?” Her combat boots left footprints on the dust that layered the stairs as she climbed them. “Papa?” she asked, knocking on the bedroom door.

“Kaha ho - Where are you?” She stumbled into the room, tumbling on a half-empty suitcase and plummeting into a pile of dirty clothes. Clutching the clothes in her fists, she stood up, *what a mess*. She’d been gone to military camp for six months and her parents had already proved they couldn’t take care of themselves, what would they do when she was sent to war? Lifting the clothes, she realized that Papa’s white kurta was stained in a deep red, and Ma’s purple sari had a hole ripped through its fabric. Picking up the rest of the clothes, she decided to throw them in the laundry and then set to the market to tell her parents she’d arrived home. She ripped the last piece of fabric off the floor and revealed a young boy curled into his bones and shivering in a slight slumber.

In shock, she shook the boy’s body, waking him from his rest. “Who are you?” she spat, “Intruder!” It was probably one of those beggar-boys looking for somewhere to sleep.

“Meranaam Rahul hai – My name is Rahul,” said the boy.

“What are you doing here?” Anaya felt her voice rise in pitch.

“Didi – Sister,” he stuttered, “I live here.”

“Live here?” she exclaimed, “This is my parents’ house.”

“I’ve lived here since they day the Pakistani *sooars* came and took the people away,” the boy looked at his filthy hands.

“What?” Anaya’s voice shook.

“Thosesaale Paki’s came and stabbed the old man in the chest and choked the old lady. I took their clothes and burnt them in the back,” the boy’s voice turned raspy, “They took away my sister.”

Anaya dropped the clothes in her hands, glancing away from the lone boy. “Have you eaten?” she asked, raising her eyes to the ceiling to stop tears from drenching her cheeks.

“Nahi, ji- No, Ma’am.” Anaya threw the boy a packet of chips she’d kept in her the front pocket of her military jacket. “Kya tum police ho – Are you the police?” the boy asked.

Anaya shook her head, a pitiful smile playing across her face, “Vo saale Pakistani-” she closed her eyes in an attempt to calm her rage, “Those Pakistani porks killed my parents.” She dropped to the floor near the boy, taking out her own packet of chips. “Where did they take your sister?”

The boy shrugged his shoulders, bones poking through the thin layer of skin protecting him from the war. “Pakistan,” he nodded, “They want all Hindustani’s.”

“What are they going to do with all of us?”

“Kill us,” he looked her in the eyes, undeterred by the idea.

“Kill us all?”

The boy nodded, tracing the lifelines across his palm. “Jai Hind,” he whispered, “Victory to India.”

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The sun glazed off Anaya’s back as she crouched behind the truck, fingers laced between each other, head bowed, *vasu de vasu tum de vam*, she chanted under her hitching breath. She glanced to her right, taking in the twenty-or-so fellow Hindustani’s crowding the gateway from their motherland to the betrayers, eyes filled with an unfathomable rage.

“On my count,” began her aunt, looking Anaya in the eye. She held up one finger, wrinkles accumulating at her bruised knuckles. Anaya dropped her gaze, bowed her head and threw up another silent prayer, *please, God, save Hritikbhai and chacha and Rahul’s sister from the Pakistani’s*. Sliding open her eyes, Anaya glanced at her aunt as she raised a second trembling finger, lip quivering with the guilt of not being able to save her own son. She glanced down again, fingers laced, *and please save all the children, they did nothing to deserve this*. Her aunt’s third finger shot in the air, confident with rage and a terrifying determination to get her son back. Anaya’s eyes met hers, the sheet of tears crumbling behind the wall of fury. “Go.” Her voice shook with strength and an undertone of immense fear: this was it, the last revenge, the last chance, the last hope.

The Hindustani’s stormed Pakistani grounds, machine guns raised, hesitant fingers trembling over triggers. The air was silent but for the rhythmic stomping of the determined group. The sun spilled over the ground, inviting the Hindustani’s back into their homes. They treaded lightly, with each step, raising the stakes higher. They had one job: get in, save the Hindustani’s, get out. Do not engage with the *soars*. Do not stop when running out of Pakistani grounds, do not start a riot. Get out.

A cloud shaded the sun as if to protect it from the impending war. Gun shots silenced the rhythmic footsteps. The Hindustani’s rampaged forward, breaking into a run, saving themselves from bullets falling

down mountains, rushing into save the one's they loved. Anaya lead the crowd, jumping over rocks, ducking away from treacherous bullets, finger resting on trigger, not a shot fired. She made her way up the mountain, turning back a few times to check up on her fellows, muttering shloks under her breath every time she heard a shot break the sky.

The closer they got, the further their hope shattered. They had been ambushed, for every one body, the Paki's had three. Anaya had half a mind to send everybody back to safety but she knew none of them would retreat until they found their loved ones – dead or alive.

Anaya reached the Paki's faster than she had expected. They circled a pit of fire, faces covered with white cloths. It took a second for the smell to hit the Hindustani's - the undeniable stench of burning bodies. As the realization dawned upon her, Anaya came to a halt, stopping all those behind her. The Pakistani laughs echoed through the mountains as she yelled, "Retreat."

With hopes shattered, the Hindustani's turned on their heel, running away from the taunting bullets shot at their ankles. Anaya followed the troop, dodging as bullets whizzed by her ear. Pain shot through her calf, throwing her to the ground. Her palms hit the rocks, stopping her from rolling forward into the crowd. She looked behind her, noticing the Paki's closing up on them. If she called for help now, escaping would be a fantasy. Anaya let herself fall to the ground, clamping her eyes shut and catching her breath as heavy footsteps surrounded the ground near her. She lay still; in hopes they would believe they had killed her. A foot crushed her back and she bit into the ground so the scream building up in her throat wouldn't escape her lips. She curled her fingers around a shrub, releasing the intense pain growing down her lower back. Slowly she lost consciousness, the pain in her calf meeting the pain down her back and sending fits of angst through her body. She couldn't hear the footsteps anymore. She couldn't feel the grass cutting through her fingers. Her eyes were too heavy to open.

"Get up." Anaya's eyes flew open, face to face with a pair of almond shaped brown eyes and hands shaking her sides. She blinked, *where was she?* The girl standing on top of her took a step back. Anaya scrambled to her feet at the sight of the white cloth around the girls' neck. She reached behind her back, searching for her gun. The girl smirked at her, flipping her ponytail over her back as she pulled a gun from

her waistband. "I might be stupid enough to wake the enemy instead of kill her, but I'm not stupid enough to let her keep her gun in my territory."

"Well, you're still pretty stupid," Anaya replied, reaching into her waistband to pull out her knife. The girl dropped Anaya's knife onto the floor near her foot, her smirk growing on her face. Anaya raised her hands and dropped to her knees. "Please, don't make my death painful."

"Death?" The girl walked toward her, crouching onto the balls of her feet. "I'm not here to kill," the girl spat in disgust. "Ahimsa – Non-violence," her voice turned soft. "I'm not a murderer."

"Then, what do you want from me?" Anaya's voice shook.

The girl grinned, "What do *you* want from *me*?"

In utter confusion, Anaya shook her head, "Nothing. I just want to get out of her."

"Exactly."

"You want to leave your home?" Anaya asked in surprise, sitting cross-legged on the ground and releasing the tension in her calves.

"Home?" The girl let out a laugh, "I wish." She looked away from Anaya, "My home was burnt by the Hindustani's."

"The Pakistani's killed my parents," Anaya retorted.

The girl looked at her, eyes soft. "I'm sorry," she muttered.

"Me too," Anaya replied, licking her lips, "For your home, I mean. That sucks."

"All of this sucks," her voice was hushed but rusty, odd sounding with her soft face. "That's why I'm getting out."

"Wh-" Anaya gnawed her lower lip as pain shot through her calf. The girl looked down at the blood, tears prickling the sides of her eyes.

"I hate this, I hate this, I hate this," she mumbled, ripping the white cloth off her neck and fastening it around Anaya's wound. "Where else are you hurt?"

A smile invaded Anaya's lips involuntarily, "I'm okay. Thank you."

"Are you sure?" Asked the girl, rising to her feet, "I could run and get a first aid kit."

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“No,” Anaya smiled, “I’m okay.” The girl reached her hand out and Anaya took it to pull herself up.

“What’s your name?” the girl asked, eyebrows raised as she snaked her hand onto Anaya’s shoulder to help her limp away.

“Anaya.”

“That’s a pretty name,” the girl smiled. “I’m Tanya,” she nodded.

Anaya smiled, hesitantly, she asked, “Tanya, where are you going to go?”

With her arm still around Anaya’s back, she led her down the mountain. “Anywhere except here.”

“Aren’t you scared?” Anaya asked, curiosity killing the cat.

“It can’t get worse than this, can it?” A sad smile painted Tanya’s lips.

“I suppose.”

Silence fell as they reached the foot of the mountain. Tanya led Anaya toward a rock hidden between trees. “Sit,” she instructed, leaving Anaya on the rock before climbing behind it. She came back a minute later, a first aid kit curled under her fingers. “Lie down.” Anaya did as she was told. “It might sting a bit,” Tanya warned, pouring something wet onto her wound after untying the cloth. Anaya shoved her hands under her thighs to stop herself from reaching out and pushing Tanya away as she dug the bullet out of her calf. “I’m sorry,” Tanya’s voice was velvet, “but I have to do this.” She pulled out a string from the first aid kit and threaded the needle. “I’m *so* sorry.” Tanya pulled the string through Anaya’s flesh and Anaya bit her tongue down in pain, clamping her eyes shut so she wouldn’t cry in front of the girl. “All done,” Tanya said after a beat, tying up the loose ends of the string. “You okay?”

Anaya nodded, opening her eyes with a small smile, “Yeah.” She began to sit up but was soon pushed back down.

“You should rest,” Tanya said, launching herself onto the rock next to her. “Come on. It’s late. You won’t be able to go anywhere in the dark.” Anaya lay on her back, following Tanya’s lead. “And also, the snakes come out at night.”

Anaya laughed, “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you from the snakes.”

“Hey, they’re real threats. They can poison you and then kill you. Very slowly. It happened to my uncle,” she nodded.



Anaya shook her head with a giggle, “Of course.”

“Goodnight,” Tanya smiled.

“Goodnight.” Anaya replied, bowing her head and thanking God for sending her an angel.

April 5, 1965

Anaya woke to pain roaring down her stiff back- sleeping on a rock did not agree with her. She lifted herself up with the help of her hands and swung her legs off the side of the rock. Groaning, she re-tied her hair into a plait and twisted it into a heavy bun. Claspng her hands into each other, she murmured her morning prayer, palms raised to the Sun. Her back prickled as she heard Tanya yawn near her.

“Morning,” Tanya’s smile hung off her face. “Feeling better?”

“Yes, thank you,” Anaya replied, lashes heavy against her cheeks as she finished up her thanks to God. She felt Tanya come sit by her as she straightened out her back. Conscious of their close proximity, she flickered open her eyes. Tanya’s hazel eyes sparkled against the sunlight, bright with excitement and uncertainty. Anaya broke the silence with a small laugh.

“What?” Tanya’s brow furrowed.

Anaya tried to keep a straight face as she picked off a red, black and yellow snake off Tanya’s shoulder. Holding it in her palms, she raised it to Tanya’s face. Tanya’s scream ripped through the sky echoed only by Anaya’s laugh. Tanya shrugged her shoulders, patting them to make sure she wasn’t bitten, eyes alert with fear.

Anaya wrapped her palm around Tanya’s mouth to stop her screaming. “Don’t worry, it isn’t venomous,” Anaya nodded, pointing to the snakes’ stripes, “Red touches black, you’re okay Jack; red touched yellow, you’re a dead fellow.”

“Are you sure?” Tanya’s brows rose.

“A hundred percent,” Anaya nodded, laughing.

“Phew, I thought I was going to die,” Tanya sighed, loosening up her tense back.

“I told you I’d protect you from snakes,” Anaya nudged her through giggles, “Scaredy cat.”

Tanya pouted, “I was not scared at all, okay.”

“I was not scared at all, okay,” Anaya mimicked.

“Shut up.”

“Shut up.”

“I don’t talk like that.”

“I don’t talk like that.”

“Will you stop,” Tanya pushed Anaya’s shoulders back with a chuckle. Anaya flopped back onto the rock with laughter, pulling Tanya down with her. Tanya looked straight into Anaya’s eyes, intent hiding behind uncertainty. Silence stroked the air, falling around them, heavy with anticipation.

Tanya’s face only inches from hers, Anaya caught herself catching her breath. She shook her head, *what time was it?* “I should get going,” Anaya nodded, getting up and re-tying the shoelaces on her combat boots.

“Yeah,” Tanya nodded, running her fingers through her hair.

“Thank you,” Anaya smiled, squeezing Tanya’s hand before climbing off the rock, “for everything.”

“No problem,” Tanya shrugged, eyes laden with something Anaya couldn’t recognize.

“I’ll remember you,” Anaya looked to the grass.

“You better,” Tanya guffawed.

“See ya,” Anaya turned to leave, shoving up the sleeves of her jacket.

“Hold on!” Tanya called behind her. Anaya faced the girl, heart racing against her ribs, wishing she didn’t have to leave. Tanya pulled out a marker, grasped Anaya’s hand and pulled her to the floor. Ripping off the cap of the marker, Tanya scratched *A x T* onto the side of Anaya’s combat boots, “Now you can never forget me.”

“I never would have anyway,” Anaya whispered, “you saved my life.”

Tanya laughed, “Drama queen.”

“You did,” Anaya shrugged, getting onto her feet. Tanya rose after her, tucking the marker into her pocket. “I’ll see ya?” Anaya asked, searching for a little string of hope.

“Probably not,” Tanya sighed.

“Oh.” The string of hope shattered as Anaya looked to the horizon.

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“Unless,” Tanya trailed off, shoving her hands into her pockets.

“Unless?” Anaya face crumpled in confusion.

“I come with you,” Tanya raised her eyebrows, asking for permission.

“To Hindustan?”

“Or,” Tanya laced her fingers through Anaya’s, “We could run away.”

Anaya looked at their hands, “Uh-”

Tanya laughed, “I’m just kidding,” she shook her head, “Of course to Hindustan, where else?”

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The corners of Anaya’s lips rose, “Okay.”

“Okay?” Tanya jumped.

“Let’s go,” Anaya grabbed Tanya’s hand tighter, pulling her toward her home.

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“You sure about this?” Anaya tilted her head toward the outskirts of her town with a small shrug, the last tendrils of sunlight disappearing under the sea behind her.

Tanya nipped at her lower lip, shrugging her shoulder, “Yeah,” she nodded, “I guess.”

Anaya took Tanya’s hands in hers, lifting them up to her chest and bowing her head. “Heh baghvan – Dear God,” she began a soft prayer, murmuring the familiar syllables over.

As the Sun fell away from them and into the sea, Anaya rose her head, “Allah-Akbar,” Tanya said, finishing Anaya’s prayer with a soft smile. “Let’s do this,” Tanya nodded, determinedly, ringing her arm around Anaya’s elbow and syncing her footsteps with Anaya’s combats.

Once inside the town, Anaya was flooded with her fellow Hindustani’s. With sullen faces and sighs of relief they welcomed her, seemingly ignoring the nervous girl hiding behind her soldier. The streets were lit with diyas in remembrance for all the lost bodies and the center of the small town was decorated with a red and white rangoli in hopes for further peace. The townsfolk, close to Anaya and her parents, clambered after her as she made her way to her house up the winding path.

“You’re alive,” Anaya’s aunt sighed, wrapping her arms tightly around Anaya’s waist.

Anaya nodded, planting a kiss onto her aunt’s cheek. “I’m sorry about Hritikbhai, he was a great cousin.”
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“And a great son,” the women nodded, flashing her eyes to the locket around her neck, “A brave one.”

“Very brave,” Anaya agreed, “I’m glad you got here okay.”

“I’m glad you did too,” her aunt gleamed, hiding her pain behind a dazzling smile.

“All because of Tanya,” Anaya pointed to the girl curling into her shoulder, “She saved my life.”

“Oh,” Anaya’s aunt cupped Tanya’s cheek, “Thank you beta,” she handed Anaya a spoon, “Have some kheer,” she pointed to Tanya, “and you too darling.”

Anaya’s eyes danced with the familiarity of the sugary sweet as guzzled down the rest of the bowl. Grabbing the *lota* from her aunt, she drank water, quenching her parched throat, before handing it to Tanya. Awkwardly, Tanya lifted the jug to her lips, the metallic taste hitting her tongue with the elixir of life.

“Didi?” A voice called behind Anaya, breaking at the end.

Anaya turned to the young boy, kneeling to stand at his height. She looked at her hands, “Maafkardo – I’m sorry,” her voice tore.

“Did you see her?” the boy asked, digging his toe into the soil.

Anaya nodded, “They were burning the bodies.”

The boy fell to his knees, tears slipping off his face and onto the soil. Anaya wrapped her arms around his weak shoulders tenderly, “I’m so sorry.”

“I-It’s not your fault,” the boy stuttered through sobs, “It’s those *sooars*.” He rose to his feet, ripping out the edges of his hair. “It’s those traitors,” he screamed, “they killed my sister, those porks, they killed my *only family*.” The boy screeched, pacing circles around Anaya, eyes wild with rage. “They murdered my sister, and what, on *our* land,” his fingers shook with rage, “Those traitors, murderers – *vosaale*.” The boy stopped his pacing as he faced Tanya. His brows furrowed in rage as he charged toward her, pulling the Pakistani necklace off her neck. “Pakistani!” He yelped. “You’re a Paki!” He turned his rage to Anaya, “You brought a *sooari* into our land,” the boy hollered, “Traitor!”

Anaya’s aunt stepped forward, face painted in horror, “Is this true, Anaya?”

Anaya glanced at Tanya, fear growing from the pit of her stomach.

“Traitor!” The boy cried, “Kill her, kill them both!”



The crowd began to lurch forward but halted as Anaya's aunt held up her palm, "How can you think of bringing a Pakistani into Hindustani grounds? Did she manipulate you? Have you lost your senses?"

Anaya shook her head, "She's not here to do any harm-"

"It doesn't matter," the women wailed, "We must kill her before she tries to kill more of us."

"No," Anaya howled, "She's not like that, please, *please*."

"Kill them both!" Rahul cried, "She's a traitor too."

Anaya's aunt stood in front of her, calm with false confidence "Kill the girl only. Anaya is not a traitor, she has simply lost herself."

"Really?" the boy raised a brow at Anaya. "Prove it." He handed her a pistol from the waistband of his shorts. "Prove you are not a traitor."

Anaya's aunt pressed the cold gun against Anaya's palm. "*Please, please*," Anaya cried, eyes fixated on Tanya as they tied ropes around her wrists. They pushed the girl to face Anaya, crowd intent on the gunshot and ready to attack if they didn't hear it.

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"Do it," Anaya's aunt commanded, "Come on," she encouraged, "Be a true Hindustani, stand up for your country, for your people, for Hritikbhai, for your parents."

Anaya lifted the gun, pointing it at Tanya's chest, eyes filling with tears. "Come on," her aunt muttered, "Before they kill you too."

Her finger lingered on the trigger, hazel eyes staring back at her, strong with a slight nod as if to say *do it, you have to, I forgive you*. Tears sliding down Anaya's face, she flashed her eyes shut, threw up a silent prayer and pushed down on the trigger.

The bullet hit Tanya square in the chest. Blood poured down her front as she doubled over and, as if in slow motion, fell to the ground. Anaya's scream ripped through the sky as she ran to the fallen body, holding the girl in her arms.

"Victory to India," the boy cried, echoed by the crowd. Anaya's tears smudged the rangoli below Tanya's body and she rocked back and forth, the heat of the trigger still warm against her index. The wind

blew with a mighty gust, dying out all the diyas on the street. Anaya whispered prayers to keep Tanya safe, *I'll see ya soon*, she repeated, a silent mantra thrown at the silent corpse.

The crowd behind her stomped their feet in unison and cried, "Jai Hind."

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April 5th 2015

The fire roared louder behind the shelter. Dhruv had been sent inside to brush his teeth and get ready for school. A picture of Tanya lay near the fire, burnt at the edges. Anaya's hair tie was set atop the photo to prevent it from flying away. The combat boots stood near the picture, *A x T* alight with the light of the fire. Anaya stood barefoot on the soil, head bent in prayer, repeating her incessant mantra, *I'll see ya soon, I'll see ya soon, I'll see ya soon*. Anaya leaped into the fire, bringing with her the Indian flag.

Jai Hind, she guffawed at her burning skin, burning flag. *Victory to India*.

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