

Borders Drawn in 80 days

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The sun had already set, but its afterglow still painted the sky with warm hues of crimson and vermilion, illuminating the mountainous landscape of Kashmir. The soft, drooping, purple blossoms of Jacaranda trees were just beginning to fall, the unfortunate ones trampled into a beautiful, brown-tinted slurry. Hangul grazed wild in numerous herds roaming many a field; their long twisting antlers and scarlet coats were seen for miles. Similarly, on the mountains themselves, hundreds of decorative and delicate kites of every colour and variety, a show of great pomp, soared high above in flocks of their very own, dancing in the strong gusts.

Asgheri walked through a rising field with her younger brother, Hakim, giggling at his funny antics and his absolute excitement and innocent wonder as they made their way to the Chand Raat kite festival with a kite in hand. They continued their trek up the hillside. In the far distance, Asgheri could make out a small figure. She immediately realised what it was. She dashed to the nearest tree, pulling her brother along, instructing him. "Come on, Bhai, just climb the tree." Her brother was going to question this but thought it was best to just go along with it. "Jaldi Bhai, there is a surprise at the top."

By the time her brother had managed to get to the top, losing his footing many times, it was clear what the figure was: a hangul. It was rare to find one by itself and even rarer to get so close to observing one. It had a certain grace and a golden sheen to its coat. Its antlers were like a crown adorning its head, rendering the animal regal with an enrapturing beauty. It decided to settle in front of the pair's view, quietly grazing. Asgheri was at a loss for words, taking in the enchanting sight of the animal. If an onlooker had seen them, they would have seen the surreal image of two children dangling from a branch, awestruck by an animal larger than both of them.

Within the quaint peace, the hangul was startled by a foreign noise, as if something threatening was hidden in the landscape. The previously calm creature became agitated and frightened. Its muscles tensed, and its eyes surveyed the surrounding area for a threat. In the blink of an eye, Asgheri saw it run off towards the western border of Jammu Tawi.

Wondering what could have startled the creature, she tugged Hakim down the tree. His kite was crushed, the delicate paper frame ripped in two. His eyes welled up as he cried out to his sister, but Asgheri paid no regard to his tears. A shrill scream of a child in the distance echoed through the mountainous landscape. An overwhelming feeling of terror crept up Asgheri's spine as she grabbed Hakim's sleeve and pulled him alongside her, transfixed on keeping her little Chhoti Bhai safe.

As they ran breathlessly down the rocky terrain, Asgheri finally caught a glimpse of safety as she saw smoke wafting above, and her lungs filled with the familiar spiced scent of her mother's daal. Asgheri called out, her voice quivering. "Ami Jan, get inside!" She finally had a chance to look back, seeing the outline of a mob consisting of hundreds of people descending the mountain and the fires that had broken out in neighbouring villages.

She let go of Hakim from her close embrace the moment they got inside. Without saying a word, both she and her mother knew if they did not flee, they would be killed by the approaching mob or suffer a fate much worse. They grabbed everything they could in the few minutes they had left. Asgheri did not have time to say goodbye to the house or even goodbye to this part of her life. Her brother was still in tears over his kite, oblivious to the massacres that had just happened and the danger their lives were in at the hands of reckless men. They all ran out the door, Asgheri's mother holding Hakim, his hands clinging onto the back of her kameez. They ran. There was a train station at the base of the mountain. It was the only way they could flee.

When they arrived, dozens were brutally shoving each other to try to get on board. There was no attempt to control the crowd. The tickets-people themselves were pushing others out the way to get on the train. Others piled on the train's roof, inhaling the fine coal dust and the train's repulsive and sickening exhaust. They pushed their way through, eventually being forced to jump down onto the platform. Without a moment to lose, they, with desperate hands, grabbed the very edge of the train.

The train screeched and began to move forward. One or two poor souls were left behind on the station's platform. Asgheri's life beyond this point was uncertain. She would be safe in Pakistan, but for how long? Her thoughts were entirely muddled. The train sped forwards, the landscape of Kashmir disappearing into the horizon. Her memories of the old forest where she and Hakim used to walk together and the tall hills where he took his first steps. Asgheri's Kashmir was all gone. All that was left now were her fleeting memories. The last thing she saw of her old home was a singular gliding kite flying above the mountaintops. Asgheri knew she could never return to her old life, but it would always be a part of her.