



A Heart Warming Winter

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Magic

HEAVY SNOWFALL LASHES THE TOWN. There's a layer of snow on everything; roads, trees, cars, houses, just like icing on the cake. People make their way through the snow. Cars wade with difficulty looking like icing on the cake. People make their way through the snow. Cars wade with difficulty looking less like cars and more like "snow" moving, only the windscreen visible. Clothes hanging on wires becoming rock solid, water forming stalactites freezing midway dripping from them. There are stray footmarks everywhere in the snow with people nowhere to be seen in the vicinity, making them look like the work of ghosts.

Everything is pure crystal white.

Everyone is freezing in this bone chilling grim winter, finding it difficult to push themselves from their beds to work though snow here is more vibrant than the "stale" brown that people have gone bored of seeing. That's how life for people in Leh is— brown and white. (Leh, a high desert city in the Himalayas, in northern India's Jammu and Kashmir)

But Laini is happy, more than that, elated. She has got work now after months of doing nothing, to clear off the snow from the roads and her contractor will pay her a decent amount for the task. She rejoices clearing off the snow with her broom, her boots two inches in snow. Her cheeks tomato red from the cold, her eyes like pure Ladhaki... hardly visible, just a double line similar to an equal sign (=) with lashes. Its -10° C even at noon but that doesn't bother her. Work doesn't bother her as much as sitting idle at home being reprimanded by her father who is a shopkeeper in the Main Bazar. A cap covers her head and ear muffs her ears. She is dressed multilayered topped by a maroon gown up to the ankle, resembling a kimono. 18 years old and already out of school, she is clueless of what to do in life. She doesn't want to go to college as for that she would have to leave her homeland and go the big cities like Delhi or Chandigarh.

During summers, she drives a taxi showing the tourists around but that is only for four months. Those four

months are like carnival in the town, the only town of the Ladakh region. It's frenzy with tourists from all over the world that throng the area. Even the Bollywood (Hindi Film Industry) stars come for shooting sometimes and she makes some extra money by becoming the location guide.

But the winters are harsh. Everybody is practically jobless during these days; her father manages to earn a meager sum from the Army which is the sole to dwell. Those months are very difficult for Laini too. Sometimes the sun shines so brightly that it blinds her completely and sometimes the sky is so overcast with chilly winds blowing that freeze her flesh. But still she prefers working. She loves her work because she's helping local commuters. Many times people specially come and thank her and it fills her with pride. Occasionally when she takes break from the work for lunch, she goes to the nearest "Mane" and rotates it in the clockwise direction so that at every rotation, a bell chimes. She, like other Buddhists believes that it will spread positive vibes in the atmosphere. Her father wanted to send her to the Thiksey Gompa (Monastery) to study extensively and become a Lama (monk) but she resisted, knowing that a Lama's life is extremely tough. She never forbade religion but wanted to live a worldly life.

And suddenly a car skids along the sloping road on the ice and hits the pole. Nobody is injured. Such incidents are common when the road is not charcoal black but snowy white. The car driver is angry and shouts at Laini, but both of them know that it's nobody's fault. Laini does not give an ear to such shouting's, the only ones that hurt her are those by her father constantly irritated by her hopeless daughter. He wants her to something fruitful— help him in the shop or go to Delhi for further studies and become a doctor. But she doesn't want to run away from the place that she has been calling home since the last 18 years. Her father too had to do this he tells. He left his native village Nimmu, 4 hours from Leh, and started working when he was 20. Though the shop isn't a high paying job, but he manages to earn a living for his wife and child. He is 50 years old, but doesn't look a year more than 30. So does his wife he met at a religious festival in honor of Rinpoche in a Gompa rising out of a hill-rock back in his village. Something about her made him skip a beat—maybe her flawless skin or her expressive eyes or her vivacious smile. She was dressed up in a traditional Ladhaki outfit with a rich purple color ankle length gown made of silk-like fabric full of religious symbols in Golden Zari and black head gear prominently consisting of Firoza—the blue stone that Ladhaki's keep in high regard, silver jewelry with Firoza stonework hanging from her ears and her wrists, and gratifying her neck only added to her beauty. He had instantly decided to marry her and they both moved to Leh to start a family. He had been an extremely happy father when Laini was born to him and named as every child is, by a Rinpoche available, just by looking at the child's face and correctly predicting his/her future personality, as Laini, one who would achieve great popularity.

But now he was worried about her daughter's future. He wants her to be better off than him as every father desires. He simply didn't want her daughter to marry her like all his friends had. And for that he has to be strict with her, even though he loves her very much. His wife, torn between her husband and daughter, keeps mum. A car's horn wakes up Laini from her daydream and she resumes task. Sometimes gliding, sometimes sliding, more like skiing on the snow, conquering it. It's been her favorite past time since childhood—wading her way through the snow on her gumboots sliding. Sometimes she would get stuck in a thick mass of the white devil and fall but that didn't deter her spirits. She loved the snow. She had an amazing fascination for it, as if a past birth connection. That was the reason when everybody "tch tched" the snow for disrupting their daily lives. She welcomed it with open arms... dancing in it, gliding, sliding... with a comfortable ease. That's why she took up the job of a snow clearer that fetched her both money and satisfaction. It's dusk. The sky is changing colors from orange to yellow to crimson to pink eventually to be gulped by darkness. Laini is still busy in her task when she sees a man walking towards her leaving deep footmarks in the snow. She has never seen this man before. Just a bit taller than her with a rigid body frame, must be around 25 she thought. Laini is perplexed at first and then curiosity leaps in as to why this young man is approaching her. Two minutes of distraction and she turns to her job. That man is far. He might be going somewhere else, she tells herself.

Yangchen Wangdoo is a National Level Skier. He goes to National and International tournaments held in Gulmarg and Auli in the states of Jammu & Kashmir and Uttarakhand respectively every year with his team and they never return sans gold, be it relay or individual events. This year too they had gone for the National in Auli. It had been a cakewalk for them as always. But what was unexpected was the injury of their talented team member, Eido. She, while skiing for an individual event, had missed a flag post and fallen into a trench. Though she was rescued, her femur had broken at 3 points and ankle severely crushed. Doctors had operated on her and fixed a rod so that after six months of bed-rest, she could walk but skiing again was out of question they had said. That had shattered the entire team. Everybody loved Eido. As a friend and as a skier, she was the best.

More so as the injury of their loved friend had hurt them badly, they could not ignore the need of a new skier for the team. They had searched a lot but had not found someone competitive enough. And that was when Yangchen's mother had called him back to his hometown Leh to come and see her. Too tired of the hectic exercise, he came home.

It was when he had gone to the market to buy some flour he first spotted Laini sliding on the snow, cleaning it as if he befriended it. She had such an ease with the snow that no other person he had met till now had. He observed him for the next whole week and decided that she would be the person to take the place of Eido. Yes,

he was sure!!!

The entire day he had rehearsed how he would approach this girl and ask her if she was interested and persuaded her to. He was confident he would be able to convince her. At dusk he started walking towards her repeating those same lines in his head.

By now Laini was becoming conscious. She was just a few feet away when Yangchen stopped. “Juley”, he was greeting her in the Ladhaki way. “Juley”, replied Laini.

“I am Yangchen. What’s your name?”

“I am Laini. Do you need some help?”

And yes he did.

He told Laini the entire story about what he did. What had happened and what he required of her.

Laini was in state of disbelief, that a sportsperson of such high stature had approached her offering her a more than respectable job and a handsome salary of one lakh per tournament. She could not utter a word and her body froze. Her jaw dropped open. Definitely, it was not the freezing cold or the lack of oxygen felt at this altitude while breathing through the nose that was reason. It was this offer, this life time opportunity she had been bestowed upon by the kind gentlemen. It was a moment of bliss for her, a moment of realization that she was worth something that her future held for her success and achievement. Maybe even the small measure of happiness that her father was seeking for her. She imagined herself standing with her head held high in front of her father after moments of stark exaltation; she could only utter the words, “Om Mane Padme Hum”. That was their religious, most sacred chant and Yangchen understood.

The next two months she was extensively trained at Gulmarg by the entire team and they all were surprised at her way with the skies though she had never used them before. She was a quick learner. Soon she was ready to fill in the void left by Eido whom she respected a lot. After all she was a life turner for her. In the trial match she had performed extraordinarily well, much above the expectations of her team members. And then came the first big tournament at Auli. She had an individual event at first. With her hands tightly on the ski sticks dug in the snow, her feet tightly tied on the ski, her clothing apt for chilly weather, she whisked through the crowd cheering her. Though they were seated too far she easily located her parents. Her father was clapping so hard that his palms would be hurting. His wide tooth smile reflected in Laini’s eyes and she was filled with a sense of pride and accomplishment to the reason of her father’s contentment. She held her head high with confidence, her eyes gleaming with a new found victory even before the competition.

AND THEN SOMEBODY BLEW THE WHISTLE!!

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