

Feast of the Dead

January changed the colour of the air. The world seemed grimmer and people went out only for work. There was nobody under the oak trees, in the courtyards of the mosques and other cool places where children gathered in the summer. The fountains were never completely deserted. Almost every day there would be someone to go there to fetch the day's water.

That noon the boy who had been to the fountain ran back to the street panting and told the first man he saw,

“Dursun Agha is dead !”

Dursun Agha, the water carrier, was a familiar figure on the street. He barely made both ends meet and lived with his wife and two children in a small house. His entire capital consisted of two water cans and a pole, with a chain dangling from either end. Hoisting the pole on his shoulder, hooking the cans by their handles to the chains, he set out every morning.

“Water. Anybody need water ?”

His voice would carry as far as the last house on the street. Those who needed water would call back, “Dursun Agha, one trip,” or “two trips,” or “three trips.”

‘One trip’ meant two cans of water. Then Dursun Agha would climb up the hill to the fountain, fill up his cans and go to and fro, between the fountain and the houses, all day long. He got three *kurush* for each trip. This way of earning was like digging a well with a needle. If they had had to rely only on his earnings, it would have been impossible to feed four mouths but thank God, his wife Gulnaz was called upon, three or four times a week to wash clothes. She tried to help her husband earn just a little bit more, cheating in pathetic, harmless ways using a can or two more water, so that her husband could earn a few more than three *kurush*.

Now all this had ended suddenly. Dursun Agha had slipped while trying to stand up on the ice that had hardened during the previous night and hit his head on the stone bowl under the tap. When Gulnaz heard the news, she froze. What was she going to do now ? It was not easy to be left with two children, one nine years old and the other six. How could she feed them only by washing clothes two or three times a week ? She thought and thought but could not reach a decision.

It is a tradition for the neighbours to send food, for a day or two, to the house where death has occurred. The first meal came to Gulnaz and her children from the white

house where Raif Effendi, the wealthy businessman lived. At noon on the day after Dursun Agha died, the maid from the white house appeared with a large tray. On it were dishes of noodles cooked in chicken broth, some meat in a rich sauce, cheese rolls and sweets.

To tell the truth, no one had thought of eating that day but as soon as the cover was lifted from the tray, the aroma of the food beckoned them. They gathered round the table and may be because they had never had such good food before, it tasted exceptionally delicious. Having eaten once, they found it natural to sit around the table at supper-time and satisfy their hunger with the leftovers of their lunch.

Another neighbour took care of the food for the next day. This went on for three or four days. None of the later meals were as tasty or generous as the food from the white house but they were all a great deal better than any that was ever cooked in Gulnaz's pot. If this could have continued, Gulnaz and her children could easily have borne their sorrow to the end of their lives but when the trays stopped coming and the coal they were buying from the store on the main street could not be bought any more, they began to realise that their sorrow was unbearable.

The first day the food stopped, they kept up their hopes till noon, running to the door each time they heard a footstep outside. But it was only people going about their daily lives. At supper time, they realised no one was going to bring them food, so they had to cook at home as they had done before.

They had got used to quite a different type of food during the past few days and found it difficult to adjust to the meagre dish Gulnaz cooked with hardly a trace of butter. They had no choice but to get used to it again. It was not long before they ran out of butter, flour, potatoes and grain. For the next few days they ate whatever they found in the house — two onions, a clove of garlic, a handful of dry beans found in a corner of the cupboard. Finally, there came a day when all the pots, baskets, bottles and boxes in the house were empty. That day, for the first time, they went to bed on empty stomachs.

The next day was the same. By the next afternoon the little one had started crying with hunger. Gulnaz kept hoping someone would send for her to wash clothes but the people of the street thought it would be inconsiderate to call her for work. The day after no one in the household thought of getting up. They all had visions of food. The younger boy saw soft and fluffy bread, the older boy saw sweets instead. If only he had them once more, he would eat them one by one, savouring each mouthful. What a fool he had been to have eaten all his share at once !

Gulnaz lay in her bed, listening to the murmurs of her children, tears flowing silently down her cheeks. Life went on in the street outside as before. A door closed. She knew it was the boy next door going to school. Footsteps sounded outside. This time it was Tahsin Effendi, the barber, walking down the street to open his shop. The next one

was the clerk in the electric company, then the shoemaker and then the bread man, who comes to the white house every day at the same time. The big baskets tied to both sides of his horse were full of bread. The creaking of the baskets could be heard from far away.

It was the older boy who first heard it and looked towards his younger brother. Gulnaz got up in the cold room and put a wrap round her to go out. She had decided to ask for two loaves of bread on credit. She could pay when she got money, from laundering. She opened the door and saw the baskets full to the brim with fresh spongy, white bread. A beautiful smell went up her nose and just as she was about to say something to the bread man, he shouted, “Giddy yap,” to the horse. And Gulnaz lost all her courage. No words came from her mouth and heavenly smelling food passed by her house but she could not stretch out her hand and take it.

She came inside but did not dare look into the fevered eyes of her sons, waiting hopefully. Not a word was spoken in the room. The boys simply looked at her empty hands and turned their eyes away. It was a long time later that the younger boy broke the silence.

“Mother, I can’t stand it any more. Something is happening inside my tummy.”

“Don’t worry, my sweet son. It is hunger. I feel it too.”

“I’m dying. I’m dying.”

The older boy opened his eyes and looked at his brother. Gulnaz looked at both of them. The little boy was silent. His face was darker, his lips dry and parched, his bloodless skin faded and hollow. Finally, Gulnaz beckoned to the older boy and they left the room to talk outside.

“We must go to Bodos, the grocer. We must ask for some rice, flour and potatoes. Tell him we will pay him in a few days.”

The boy’s shabby coat was not heavy enough to keep out the cold outside. He had no strength in his legs and had to steady himself against the walls as he walked. Finally, he reached the store on the hill and entered the warm room. He waited until all the other customers had left, hoping to be able to talk to the grocer in privacy and to enjoy the warmth a little longer. Then he left his place by the fireside and ordered a pound of rice, a pound of flour and a pound of potatoes. He put his hand into his pocket as if reaching for his money and then pretended to have left it at home.

“Oh, I seem to have forgotten it at home. I’d hate to have to go all the way home in this cold and come back again. Write it down and I will pay you tomorrow.”

It was a brave effort but the grocer knew the tricks of the trade too well.

“First bring the money. Then you can take the goods. You have become so thin. Some one who has money at home doesn’t get so thin.”

The boy hurried out, embarrassed to have his lie found out. He found the iciness of the street more unbearable than he had before he entered the store.

At the corner, he saw smoke coming out of the chimney of the white house. How happy were the people who lived in it ! It did not occur to him to be jealous of them. He had only admiration for these people who had given him the best meal of his life.

He walked home as fast as he could, his teeth chattering. There was no need to say anything to his mother and brother. His empty hands told their own story. He took off his clothes and went to his bed and when he spoke, he said, “I am cold. I am cold.” The blanket rose and fell on his trembling body.

Gulnaz piled on him whatever she could find. The trembling lasted for nearly two hours. Then came the fever and the exhaustion. The boy lay on his back motionless, his eyes staring vacantly. Gulnaz lifted the covers and tried to cool the burning body with her cold hands.

She paced through the house till evening, desperate. She did not know what to do. She could not think. The sun went down. She noticed the small pile of covers she had taken off the boy’s body. Wouldn’t there be anybody to give some money for all that? She remembered that her neighbours had talked of a junk store where they bought used things, but it must be closed. She would have to wait till the morning.

With this decision came peace of mind and she stopped pacing and sat down by her son’s bedside. The boy’s fever increased. She sat staring, motionless. The younger boy could not sleep for hunger. He, too, was watching, his eyes open. The sick boy moaned slowly and tossed and turned in his fever. His cheeks were burning and he talked in delirium. The younger one sat up in his bed and asked in a voice audible only to his mother, “Mother, will my brother die ?”

She shivered as if touched by a cold wind on her skin. She looked at her son with frightened eyes. “Why do you ask that ?”

The boy was silent for a moment, then he leaned close to her ear and said softly, trying to hide his voice from his brother.

“Because, then food will come from the white house.”

- CEVDET KUDRET

About the Author :

Cevdet Kudret (1907-1992) was born in Istanbul, he worked as a teacher of literature at various high schools in Ankara. He is known for his collection of poems 'The First Act' (1929), his play 'The Wolves' and his novel 'The Comrades' (1943).

About the Story :

Dursun Agha, the sole breadwinner of a poor Turkish family passes away. In accordance with the muslim custom the food arrives for the mourning family from wealthy neighbours. After a few days the food stops coming & the family grows impatient. The elder son in sheer desperation gets out in the chill to get some supplies, the grocer spurns all attempts made by the boy to obtain the supplies on credit. On reaching home the boy falls ill while the younger brother asks his mother whether the elder one is going to die, thus paving the way for the food coming again from neighbouring houses.

Glossary

dangling	-	hanging loosely
bereaved	-	sad because of the death of someone close
lima beans	-	edible pale green beans having large flat seeds
beckoned	-	made a gesture with the hand asking somebody to come nearer
trembling	-	shaking (of the body due to fear)
shivered	-	shook slightly because of cold or illness

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative :

- Dursun Agha's entire capital consisted of ____ water cans.
(a) three (b) two
(c) four (d) five
- The older boy asked the grocer to give him a pound of :
(a) rice (b) flour
(c) potatoes (d) all of these
- The older boy's _____ lasted for an hour and a half or more.
(a) trembling (b) fever
(c) stretching (d) hunger

