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A hundred beats
Forty-eight hours in Balochistan
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The shift between places and cultures while crossing the border between Sindh and Balochistan is imperceptible, it is a minute change. We belong, after all, to the same country. We are the same people, unidentifiable as others and familiar in our many varied skins. At Dera Allahyaar, right on the border, I see the ghost of Akbar Bugti for the first time. He is painted, resplendent in his white beard and sunglasses, on the back of a truck.

Balochistan is a land of not so hidden secrets; a landscape of untold suffering, suffering that has been forced into silence but that is felt deep into the province's core. This is a journey that will be told in two parts, the first through the colours and history of Balochistan's canvas and the second part told through the suffering of its men.

Part one.

One hundred and twenty nine kilometers from Quetta, on the dusty and gravelly roads leading into the province's heart, are small shacks manned by wizened old men. They are holding up water bottles filled with a reddish liquid, advertising its sale for thirty rupees. It is Iranian diesel, smuggled across the border, cheap and dirty. It is a sign of remarkable poverty, that one would make the journey to another country, crossing national boundaries, only to return with a basic fuel, but one that is unaffordable in one's own country. What a country we live in, what a destiny.

Sibi, the world's hottest place on earth almost every year, is decidedly cool this November day. It is your average town, but Sibi is a Guinness record holder and that in itself makes it quite a destination (though not in the summer, mind you).

Under the Kundlani Bridge, nestled in between magnificent mountains shaded beige and earthy brown, lies water so turquoise my Karachi mind immediately presumes it is polluted with some sort of nuclear substance. I start racking my brain, where did we test the bomb again? Was it here maybe? I panic. But it's not nuclear, it's fresh and it's pure. It's a dazzling blue, a shade that matches the Technicolor sky so clear it seems to have come out of a cartoon.

Quetta, once ruled by the Moghul kings and the Persian Sassanid Empire in their heydays, is both a new and an old city. Ravaged by a powerful earthquake in 1935 much of Quetta has been rebuilt and reconstructed in the memory of its former image. It is a born again city.

We are staying at a hotel across the street from an army recruitment

and selection center. In a land fraught with civilian- army tensions, this does not bode well. I squeeze my eyes shut every time we pass the recruitment centre, wishing away any ill that seems only too likely to befall this troubled city.

It is a chilly November morning and the streets surrounding Unity Chowk in Quetta are full of young schoolgirls, dressed in red cardigans over their uniforms. They huddle at bus stops for warmth, rubbing their hands together excitedly at the first sign of winter. The men of Quetta are made of hardier stuff; they wear nothing to signal cold. It is still too early for these robust, strong men to shiver at the chill. Quetta, enveloped on every side by mountains, is a dusty city. It is not colourful, but its colour is visible from everywhere, from the multicoloured Baloch topis worn by young men, from the painted backs of the weather proofed rickshaws, from the school boys decked out in green and playing cricket in deserted parks and parking lots, from the decals on local buses that range from quirky sayings ('ma ki dua janat ki hawa, ma ki badwa jao beta rickshaw chala' or loosely: if your mother prays for you, heaven's breeze will pass over you, if she doesn't you're stuck driving a rickshaw) to memories of their suffering – I see one decal of hands gripping barbed wire and bleeding drops of fluorescent red, 'Balochistan' it says underneath.

The University of Balochistan, young in years, is a campus dissected by a train track. The first part of the campus is academic, clusters of departmental buildings and administrative offices and the second, protected by the locomotive passageway, is populated by the hostels. It is like any other university in the world, but it reminds me of Tehran University. Large Quetta pine trees line the campus's avenues and co-ed students exchange furtive glances at each other across university benches. Like Tehran University, the birthplace of the Revolution, the University of Balochistan sits directly in the making of history. It is located on Sariab Road, known as the most dangerous street in the city. When Bugti was killed in 2006 Sariab Road was so damaged by angry protestors that it has had to be rebuilt. Like everywhere else in this city, the university is crawling with Military Police. The MPs are there to keep order, but what order can be kept on a university campus? Universities are places of unbounded creative energy, of restlessness, of chaos. To control their order, they must be put to sleep. But I'm told that it's necessary here in Quetta. Things are too dangerous to allow space for the creative chaos of youth to flourish.

What does thrive in Quetta, surprisingly, is religious freedom. Unlike the secrecy which defines religious minorities in Pakistan's other cities – in Karachi, for example, where temples and churches are hidden behind gates and are guarded by police – there is an openness to Quetta's religious minorities. We visit a Krishna Temple in the

middle of the bazaar, not far from a Hindu reformist Arya Samaj temple, and are welcomed in by the Pandit. Quetta is home to approximately one thousand Hindu families and they preserve and practice their religion comfortably. The mosaics on the wall of the temple, the Pandit tells us, date back to pre-Partition. The tiles depicting Hindu folklore survived the 1935 earthquake that devastated much of the temple's previous foundations. They are proudly kept and displayed next to a large devotional poster gifted by the Khatwani Naresh Memorial Krishna Mandar in Larkana, my home.

On this same day, en route to Hanna Lake, Quetta's prime picnic spot, we pass a Christian cemetery. It is guarded not by Rangers or imposing walls, but is wide open and full of people. It is All Souls day, the day where Christians commemorate the faithfully departed, and the believers here in Quetta have come out en masse to tend to the graves of their dearly beloveds and spend an evening in prayer and remembrance. Some families place fresh flowers on the tombs, others stand in silence with their robed priests, while others cleanse the air with incense. Sometimes, this country we live in and its destiny is glorious. Sometimes, it is free and fair.

Further up in the mountains, in Ziarat, it is the smell of the Juniper trees that clouds the air instead of incense. Ziarat smells all at once of orange blossoms and pine. The clean air and beautiful vista of Ziarat is why our nation's founder, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, chose to spend his last days here. We are visiting his residency on the evening of November 3rd. My family and I, along with friends and comrades, are standing on Jinnah's footings when we are told that Emergency rule has been declared. We are standing where Jinnah breathed his last breathe when we are told our country, Jinnah's country, seems to be exhaling it's own dying breathe. Irony, it's a strong Pakistani suit.

But it's not us who are dying; it's not our country. That is not fair to say, remember that. We, the people, will survive this. History tells us we were made to survive. It is the status quo that is dying. It is the monster that has lorded over us, the many-headed hydra that has fed itself off our country and people for many years, that is dying - and we wish it good riddance.