

# Walking in the Dark

Short Stories

K. Ashraf

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To my family: My wife Kausar, sons Khaqan and  
Jabran, daughters-in-law Huma and Ayesha, and  
grandson Amaaz



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# Preface

Stories always continue to come into existence. There are billions of people in this world—people of different colors or creeds. Every human being has his or her own story. He tells that story moment by moment through his actions. Some stories catch the attention of a story writer. He pens down those stories with his sweat and blood and then passes them on to other human beings. The stories that do not catch the attention of any writer simply disappear in the dust of time.

Sometimes, these stories break the human circles and enter into other unknown areas of life. Such stories set human beings, both writers and readers, free from space and time. Then, they get in touch with such phenomenon that they themselves wonder how they reached there. They form a new relationship with life and the universe around them. By then, due to developments in science and technology, new modes of transmitting stories from one mind to another, from one human being to another, from one form of life to another, come into existence.

TV plays and films are such developments. Now, readers do not want merely to remain readers. They want to participate in stories. TV plays and films on large screens provide this opportunity to readers. Consequently, the art of storytelling has entered into a new phase. The traditional means of storytelling have been replaced by new modes. The impact of this transformation can be vividly seen in all forms of literature.

If this process continues, and it definitely will, we will see many innovative changes in various art forms.

It is even difficult to anticipate those changes at this time. It doesn't necessarily mean that many present art forms will disappear. No, they won't. However, the standards and nature of these art forms will change. New writers will create new forms to satisfy the imaginations of new beneficiaries of literature.

Having said that, now, I wish to share a few words about this book and these stories included in it. These stories were written originally in Urdu—a language widely spoken across Pakistan and India and among Pakistani and Indian diasporas across the globe.

These stories have been woven around social, cultural, economic and mythical issues. They deal with social and cultural situations in Pakistani and Indian contexts. They also deal with economic disparities and the social complications that take place as a result of those economic disparities. Then, many stories deal with the fundamental mythical notions of Islamic traditions which highlight the inherited contradictions in those traditions.

From a literary perspective, many old and new forms have been adopted in crafting the stories included in this collection. Some are inscribed in straight story format, some are jotted down in parabolic format, yet some others are written in abstract symbolic format. The stories written in an abstract symbolic format will test the readers' resolve to go through them and then catch their essence.

As a writer, I have benefited from Indian, Middle Eastern and European social, cultural and literary traditions. Readers will find the traits of all these traditions spread all over in my writings. If Indian and Middle Eastern traits are more visible, it is because I was born and raised in Pakistan where Indian and Middle Eastern civilizations form human characters in



unison. Religion plays a predominant role in Pakistani and Indian societies. All Pakistani and Indian social traditions are embedded in the religious experience of those societies. Literature, being a cultural expression, draws its resources and materials from the culture it represents. The stories in this collection are no exception.

I hope you will enjoy reading these stories. Please let me know how you did like the stories in this collection.

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# Kamo

Ramo woke up early in the morning and left his house. His wife was still sleeping. Due to summer vacation, the children were off from school. They were sleeping too. Ramo had to go to the market place in the close by city—a city he hated the most—but he had no choice. He owned a small produce market in the town which he inherited from his father. In order to operate the produce market, he had to get up every morning and go to the market place in the city to buy produce for reselling.

Before him, his father Deeno used to do the same. Ramo was the only son of Deeno. When Deeno died, Ramo was hardly 15 years old. He was an 8<sup>th</sup> grader at the local high school. The day after the burial of his father's dead body in the town's only graveyard, Ramo picked up his bag to go to school, but his mother stopped him.

"No son, you won't go to school any longer. Your father has died. The children whose fathers die do not go to school. Instead, they go to work," she told him in a voice full of pain.

Her painful plea brought tears in Ramo's eyes. He did not want his mother to see his teary eyes. He turned his face the other way and went back to the only room in the house to put his bag away. Ramo's young mind did not believe his mother's words. Before today, she always motivated him to go to school.

"How will you become a successful man if you won't go to school?" She told him. What had changed today, he was thinking. Only his father had passed away. As a lad, he could not comprehend why he had

to quit school after the demise of his father. Financial matters were not yet part of his understanding.

After putting his bag away in the room, he came out and asked, “Mother, mother, if I am not going to school, what am I going to do?”

His mother kissed his forehead with teary eyes, “Son, from now on, you have to go to the market place in the city, buy produce and sell it in the bazaar in your father’s place to earn our livelihood.”

With his mother’s command deep down in Ramo’s heart, unknown fears crept in. He thought he was too young for all this. He did not know how things worked at the city’s market place. He did not know how to buy produce at the market place and bring it back in the town and sell it to the local customers. Deeno never took him along to teach him the trade. He did not want his son to sell produce like him. Instead, he wanted his son to become a successful man. In Deeno’s mind, a successful man was one who studied in college, worked in an office and wore pants and a coat.

Like the saying goes, “time is the best teacher.” After a few months, Ramo’s father’s shoes fitted him well. His customers occasionally reminded him about his father, but most of them were now very much accustomed to his services.

When he became sixteen, his mother started talking to him about his wedding plans. “Your uncle’s daughter Kamo is almost of your age. You should tie the knot with her,” she would say earnestly.

Ramo loved Kamo too. However, he looked at Kamo as a sister. He did not have his own sister. He always told Kamo she was his sister and he would find a handsome young boy for her to get married.

Kamo's eyes always glittered with the idea of getting married to a handsome young man and then she would shyly run away without answering him. The young man in her mind was Ramo.

When his mother proposed that he should marry his uncle's daughter, he told her he did not like Kamo. He did not want to break his mother's heart by telling her that Kamo was like a sister to him and he wouldn't marry her.

One day when his mother insisted too much, he told her that he was in love with another girl in the town. The mention of another girl raised curiosity in his mother's heart. She wanted to know if the girl was prettier and wiser than her lovely niece Kamo. Obviously, there was no girl. Ramo just wanted to shift his mother's focus from Kamo.

After this talk between the mother and the son, a couple of years passed. Though she wanted Ramo to marry Kamo, she wanted to give him the opportunity to marry the girl of his choice.

He had already crossed his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Now, he was a grown up man. He had already replaced his father's image in the market place in the city, among the shopkeepers in the bazaar, and in his customers' minds. Nobody ever mentioned his father any longer. Instead, everyone dealt with him.

One late evening when Ramo returned from the shop, he saw his mother lying on a cart. Her eyes were shut and her face was pale. She was sobbing with severe abdominal pain. Finding her in this pitiable condition, he immediately ran to fetch the local doctor to get medical aid for his mother.

Upon listening his mother's condition, the doctor rushed with him to his house. After checking her pulse, the doctor gave her an injection and left a few

doses of pills for her, telling him there was nothing serious about her pain. Before leaving, the doctor told him he would return in a couple of days to check on her once again.

She felt relief in her pain after the doctor gave her the injection. With the pain gone, she immediately started talking to her son about his marriage. She told him she may not live too long. Therefore, he should marry while she was still alive.

Ramo kissed his mother's forehead and told her that she was going to live long enough to see him marry and play with her grandchildren. The idea of grandchildren made her smile. Ramo's mother asked him to arrange her meeting with the girl's family so that she could ask them for her hand.

He tried to shift his mother's focus by talking about different things, but she wouldn't budge. She insisted on knowing about the girl he loved.

He never knew any other girl. He had made up a story to calm her down. How could he know another girl? He did not have much time. His life was completely tied up with daily chores such as getting up early in the morning, going to the market place in the city, bringing the produce back to town, keeping the produce fresh by spraying water all day long and selling it. He did not have a day off. National and religious holidays were working days for him. It was a seven day job from 4 AM in the morning till 7 or 8 in the evening. He did not have time to think about himself. How could he find time to think about a girl?

In the past, he had only mentioned another girl to calm his mother. Her sudden sickness made her raise the issue again.

Under the influence of the injection, she felt okay for few hours. As the influence of the medicine ceased,

the pain came back. He gave her a dose of the pills the doctor had left for her, but the pain excruciated. Worried, Ramo again ran for the doctor. It was very late at night. The doctor was sleeping at his residence. Upon hearing the news about the condition of Ramo's mother, the doctor asked him to rush back to the house while he would follow him.

On the way back from the doctor's residence, Ramo stopped at his uncle's house and told him about the precarious health of his mother. His uncle along with his family rushed to Ramo's house. Kamo also accompanied them.

By the time Ramo and his uncle's family made it to Ramo's house, the doctor was already there reexamining his mother.

This time, the doctor broke the bad news to the family. He said the lady was at the last stage of abdominal cancer which had spread in many other adjacent organs and she may not live too long. He advised the family to take her to the cancer hospital in the city. For now, the doctor again gave her another injection to relieve the pain. After a second injection, she again felt a little relief.

After the doctor left, she told her brother that she was very sick and she may not live too long. She said she was afraid that if she went to the hospital for treatment, she may not even return from the hospital alive. She requested her brother to marry her daughter Kamo to her son Ramo for the sake of her happiness. As she had shown this intention earlier to her brother at many occasions, he looked at her with tearful eyes. His facial impressions reflected the pain he was feeling inside for his sister's suffering and pain because of her illness. He loved his sister very much. He would do anything for her. He pondered for a few minutes, and

then he told everyone present that he would leave now and return in a few minutes.

After leaving, he returned after a little while. The main mosque's Mullah and a couple of his friends accompanied him.

He asked his nephew and his daughter to get ready in a few minutes as the Mullah would perform their marriage ceremony.

His ailing sister looked at her son and niece with a pale smile. Her pain was evident from her gaze. Her pain tore down the hearts of everyone present. Her son and niece particularly felt very bad. However, they did not know how they could comfort her. They silently got up, freshened up with water in the rest room, wore clean clothes, and sat on a nearby cart.

The Mullah performed their marriage ceremony. He asked Ramo if he accepted Kamo as his lawful wife. Ramo answered "I do" in a meek voice. The Mullah repeated his question three times. Ramo answered in the same manner every time. Then, he asked Kamo if she accepted Ramo as her lawful husband. Kamo answered "yah" in a melodious voice. Then, he repeated the same question to Kamo three times. Every time, she replied "yah" in the same melodious voice. Regardless of the somber environment, Kamo sounded happy. Kamo's father's two friends became the witnesses of Ramo's marriage to Kamo. Then, the Mullah pronounced them husband and wife. Afterwards, he prayed for their prosperous and happy married life.

Upon pronouncement of their marriage, Ramo's mother looked at them with a pale smile. Then, she looked at her brother with thankful eyes. While looking at her brother, she flickered like a candle light and then breathing her last breath, she shut her eyes.



As soon as she closed her eyes, the somber marriage ceremony turned into a small mourning session. Everyone was sobbing and crying.

The next morning, instead of going to the city hospital, Ramo's mother's dead body was laid to rest in the local graveyard.

After the burial, the mourning was over. The grief was still in the air. Kamo's father and mother left soon after. However, Kamo remained behind with Ramo. Now, Kamo was Ramo's wife.

Ramo did not go to the market place in the city for the last couple of days because of the illness and sudden death of his mother. For these couple of days, his produce shop remained closed.

For these couple of nights, Ramo and Kamo slept on separate beds. The illness and death of their mother did not let them think like a young wedded couple. They both felt a little ambivalence in their new relationship. Ramo and Kamo both remembered their exchanges about the marriage.

She remembered how Ramo always told her that he would find a handsome man for her and how she shyly ran away from him. Her facial expressions at such occasions were still fresh in his mind too. The two cousins grew up side by side together, treating each other like brother and sister. Now, they were in a new role in their lives—a husband's and a wife's role, but they were both a little hesitant to accept this new role.

It is true they were cousins. Cousins' marriages are a frequent phenomenon in local culture. Nothing stopped them from marrying each other, but Ramo's mind kept wandering.

On the third day, early in the morning, Kamo asked Ramo to get up and go to the market place and bring produce and open the shop.

Ramo got up. He started taking a shower in order to get ready to go to the market place in the city. It was still dark around. His fair and strong body was lightly glittering even in the dark. Kamo saw he was trying to apply soap on his back but his hands wouldn't reach the middle of his shoulders. She took the soap from Ramo's hands and started applying it on his body.

The sudden touch of Kamo's hands gave good feelings to Ramo. After applying the soap on the back, Kamo wanted to hand over the soap to Ramo, but he asked her to apply the soap on the rest of his body. Wherever her hands reached on his body, Ramo felt a magical feeling. The water tap was running. Fresh water was flowing on his body. Kamo's hands aroused the sleeping man in Ramo. He turned his face toward Kamo and pulled her in his arms. She tried to slip away like a fish but Ramo's grip was strong enough to not let her. On that morning, Ramo and Kamo started a new journey. Kamo gave many beautiful children to Ramo. As a good wife and mother, Kamo took care of family matters whereas every morning, Ramo went to the market place in the city, brought fresh produce and sold it in the town. Life went on.

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# Krishna

The first time I saw him, he was galloping on mountain cliffs. From one cliff to the other was his one step. I had never seen a man with such a giant step in my life. How come Krishna could walk from one mountain cliff to the other with such ease?

For a moment, I lost all my wits. I could not think straight. Finally, Krishna came to my rescue.

“What happened? You look bewildered,” he remarked.

“Nothing! Really nothing!” I tried to hide my surprise.

I had never heard of anyone, and I say anyone, who could jump mountain tops like a monkey jumping from one tree to the other. It was unbelievable, particularly for a man of Krishna’s height and strength, who was hardly four and a half feet tall. Mountain tops were not a playground. And he did not have a strong build either. He was more of a skinny guy with black features — so black that even American negroes would call him a nigger.

But Krishna was not an ordinary human being. He was a god, and gods must have something unique that ordinary human beings lack. Somehow, regardless of Krishna’s giant steps, there was nothing unique about him.

“I know what you are thinking.” Krishna tried to appease me, relinking the broken conversation.

“What am I thinking?” I asked Krishna.

“You are thinking, how I do all this?”

“Yes! Yes!” I retorted with surprise.

“And you know what is more amazing about all this?” I asked Krishna in amazement.

“Yes, I know. You are wondering how I read your mind. It is easy. You know, everything in the realm of time is tied with a thought. The world of events is like a lengthy chain. Walk along the chain and you will know its every link. You can even touch and feel it. If you dare, you can live it too. Can you imagine living in different realms of time simultaneously?”

He said this, then he paused for a second and he looked at me. He was trying to see through my thought process.

Then he said, “For a moment, let us forget all this. First, let us handle your questions. Ask what you want to ask and you will be answered.”

“Open your heart to me,” I asked Krishna.

“I am a god and gods don’t have hearts,” Krishna replied with a witty smile.

“And gods do not steal either.” I almost outsmarted Krishna because I wanted Krishna to behave like a human. That is why I reminded him of his childhood act like stealing butter and eating it. But my move had little effect on Krishna. He remained calm. He did not want to revisit his childhood.

Instead, he remarked, “You know, in real time, there is no childhood or old age. There is eternal youth. Every living and un-living thing constantly stays in one state. There is no real change.”

Krishna, instead of acting like a human, wanted to pull me into his godly world. His amazing acts like galloping on mountain tops, talking in a mythical voice and style, and even showing me the lust of rejoicing with half naked gopies did not make me think about him as a god. As I always do during my interaction with gods, I kept my human attire. Krishna could not lift me to a mental state where he could control my thoughts.

The problem with gods is they want to share human sufferings sympathetically, but they don't know how because they do not like to come and live on earth. Only humans have to go through the spheres of time and suffer. Gods keep themselves out of the sphere of time. They live in pure time and pure time does not have a yesterday or tomorrow. Without the past, there is no beautiful or ugly memory, and without a future, there is no hope. Gods do not have memories that haunt them, and no hopes that break. So they don't feel pain. Without feeling pain, they cannot sympathize with humans. Only humans can sympathize with other humans because they know when it hurts and where it hurts.

Krishna read my thoughts. I saw the shadows of a burning fire on his face. He was going through a severe pain. I saw him crying deep down in his heart. What kind of god is he? A moment ago he said gods don't have hearts but now, he was crying like a newly born baby. Why? After all, why?

"Maybe my trick has worked on Krishna," I said to myself. Then, I just sat there calmly on the stone next to him. I did not want to interrupt the process he was going through. A human being was emerging out of a god.

After a few moments, I saw him wiping tears out of his eyes.

"What happened, Krishna?" I threw a question at him because now, he was in a more real world. And it was not the world of gods but the world of humans who are born, live and die.

"Tell me your story," I waved another question.

"My story is nothing. I am an ordinary human being. I never got the love of my father and mother. So, I tried to find this love in my gopies. You know

why I went from one gopy to the other? I was trying to locate my mother in each gopy. That is what happens to a man when he goes from woman to woman. He tries to find his mother in each woman. When he does not find her, he creates another baby from her and this cycle goes on in his life or in the life of new born babies. It is the process of reincarnation.”

“Reincarnation?” I repeated his word in order to stay connected with the flow of his ideas.

“Yes! Yes! Reincarnation is not what people think of it. It is a process of going to the source and then creating another human being like yourself, nothing more than that.”

“What about the stories of the previous janam,” I asked Krishna.

“Human imagination is a strange thing. When a human brain wants to set itself free from the spheres of time, it uses imagination. It is imagination that turns human beings into gods. Otherwise, gods are nothing. They are human beings who have crossed the spheres of time. Once they are on the other side of the border that separates temporal time and pure time, they become gods. Then, they are empowered to intrigue the imagination of ordinary souls. They control their destinies through their thoughts. Some of them even make their dwellings in their minds. Ordinary souls tend to relate themselves to gods through their mantras, tantras, and meditation. The more they absorb themselves in those rituals, the closer they become to their gods.”

“Now, you are talking.” I gazed at Krishna with a smile as he started thinking more like humans. The time was right, so I threw another critical question.

“Why were you crying while you talked about your mother?” The question was abrupt and sudden.

Krishna was probably not ready for this question. He went into deep thought. It was like I hit the nail on the head.

“My mother, poorest among the poor, always remained buried in my sub-consciousness. I could really never set myself free of her thought, not even after becoming a god. She suffered a lot in her life. Whenever I think of her sufferings, I eat my heart. Life is a miserable thing for women no matter how high they go socially, economically, or politically. Their suffering never ends. Sometimes they achieve peace with themselves, but that peace brings them more misery at some point in life.”

My mother was no different than other women. That poor soul lived a life no honorable person would like to live.

As he talked about his mother, I saw he was sobbing and crying like an ordinary human and tears fled out of his eyes. I left him alone sitting under the shadow of the mountain. He was a god no more.

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# The Declaration of War

For the last many days, after waking up in the morning, it was his routine to first turn his face in the east and throw an abuse to God and then turn his face in the west and hurl an abuse to Satan.

God heard his morning abuse but never responded and always remained silent. Satan, noticing God's silence, always removed the spread from his face, looked at God, and went back to sleep. "If God is not replying to his abuses, why should I bother to respond?" Satan thought while lying in his bed.

After hearing his abuses for so many days, one day, God decided to engage with him to find out, after all, why he was so upset with him.

"Why are you so mad this morning?" God asked him.

Listening to God's question, he looked towards him and told him he was sick and tired of him and did not want to hear his name any longer.

Preserving his godly patience, God asked him what he had done wrong to upset him so much.

"What good have you done to deserve my respect?" In response, he threw a question to God.

"I created you. There was time when you were nothing. I equipped you with legs to walk, arms to work, a brain to think and a heart to love and.....and....."

".....and what?" He interrupted God sourly.

"And I showered so many blessings on you that if you try to count them, you will fail and if you try to thank me, you won't be able to thank me enough."

After listening to God, he softened a little. His bitterness lessened. Then after thinking for a few

seconds, he said, “I acknowledge you created me, you gave me legs to walk, hands to work, a brain to think, eyes to see and a heart to love.....and.....and.” He just finished saying this. Satan pulled the spread from his face and wiping his eyes said to him, “You hurl abuses on me every day too. I never bothered to respond to you. Now, since God has thrown his long list of blessings on you, I too want to set the record straight.”

He turned his face from God to Satan. God tried to stop him and told him he should not listen to Satan. Ignoring God’s pleas, he asked Satan, “If you are so concerned about the long list of God’s blessings on me, you can read out your list too.”

Satan smiled and pointing to God, said to him, “He is right. He created you from nothing. He bestowed upon you legs to walk, hands to work, a brain to think, eyes to see and a heart to love, but the truth is the movement in your legs, the strength in your hands, the versatility of thought in your brain, the ability in your eyes to distinguish colors and the passion in love in your heart is because of me. If you remove the passion and delightfulness out of love, the heart becomes a mere device to pump blood in the body. Its relationship with love ends.”

After listening to Satan, he looked towards God. God said, “Satan was lying. It is not like that. He is just trying to misguide you. The movement in feet, the strength to work in hands, the ability to see in eyes is built into the attributes of your body parts. He, the rejected one, has nothing to do with them.”

Satan watched him paying attention to God. He threw his spread aside and stood up straight and said, “He calls me a liar. Ask him, since when he has declared war against me? Millions of human beings

have been killed in this war, but his anger is not vanishing away. Who knows how many more people will get killed in his war. All of the problems in human beings' lives are because of him. Until he stops his war against me, the process of death and destruction will continue in humans' lives. Human beings will have to get rid of him to end this process of death and destruction."

Satan's hot remarks excited God too. "He blames me for wars, death and destruction. Ask him who is responsible for all the conspiracies in the world. Wherever I go, he makes it there before me and sets up his tent and starts inciting people against me."

So far, God was standing in the east and Satan in the west. They both were talking. Standing in the middle, he was listening to both of them.

He turned his face to God when God spoke and to Satan when Satan spoke. Then, they both started shouting simultaneously. They both were blaming each other.

He tried to calm them both down, but they were shouting at each other so loudly it became difficult for him to listen to them.

Eventually, tired of them, he put his hands on his ears to block their noise, but they were so loud that their noise was still pouring in.

God was telling him his all problems were because of Satan. He should declare war against him. Satan was saying his all problems were because of God. He should declare war against God.

When he failed to block their noise and his brain started cracking because of their noise, he addressed both of them and told them he was tired of both of them and had nothing to do with them. He declared war against both of them.

After listening to him declaring war against them, God and Satan both stopped shouting at each other and started laughing. Their laughter was getting louder and louder. They both were saying,

“Eventually, he declares war. We both win.”

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# Two Sides of the River Amu

Three countries fucked up the revolution: the Soviet Union, China and India. The Soviet Union fucked up revolution by crossing the river Amu and taking over Kabul. They did not need to do it, but the snow-head Russians, sitting in the Kremlin, did not want to hear junior army officers like Major Karamazov. All these snow-head Russians were CIA conduits who were anxious to push Soviets in Afghanistan. These CIA conduits had carved a theory to misguide Soviet leaders to lure them into Afghanistan. The theory was the necessity of providing access to the Soviet Union for the warm waters of the Arabian Sea.

Major Karamazov was called from the Tajikistan front to brief the snow-heads of the Kremlin. The KGB top guns had reported to the Kremlin about the dangers of moving across the river Amu. Major Karamazov was more interested in leaving Afghan revolutionaries to deal with the day to day problems of Afghanistan. He did not want the Red Army to fuck around in Afghanistan and put the Soviet Union in danger of disintegration. At some level, Major Karamazov had the sense that the Soviet Union was getting weaker inside and had the real chance of disintegrating as a country.

When Major Karamazov landed in Moscow, snow had covered the whole city. The residents of Moscow were running around wearing khaki long coats and

sipping neat Vodka, to beat the chill after the snow fall. Leafless trees on the streets of Moscow made the city look more somber.

Major Karamazov passed several security check points after entering the Kremlin building. At the end of a long hallway, he reached the briefing room where all the Moscow snow-heads were mulling over the worsening situation of revolution in Afghanistan. They were interested in saving the revolution in Afghanistan.

“Why do you want to save the revolution in Afghanistan?” Major Karamazov opened his remarks.

“The class structure in Afghanistan does not allow the perpetuation of revolution. It will be a while before Afghanistan can get ready for a revolution. Our Afghan comrades have acted prematurely. Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan will only make the situation worse.”

The Soviet Union was considered an iron-clad country. Somehow, the Soviet society developed a mechanism to relay the feedback of the Soviet streets to the Kremlin. It was the KGB or its loose contacts, the Communist party registered workers across the Soviet Union, who made this process feasible.

Major Karamazov’s off the cuff remarks had landed him in the briefing room in the Kremlin where he was presenting his views on the Afghanistan revolution in particular and the overall situation of revolution across the globe.

“Not only should we leave Afghan revolutionaries alone, we should also beware of our Chinese and Indian Comrades,” Major Karamazov warned the snow-heads of the Kremlin. “China is a capitalist country through its bones and it will revert to capitalism sooner or later. India is an economic black

hole. This economic black hole is sucking our Soviet economy. Not only should we leave Afghan revolutionaries alone, we should also pay less attention to the Chinese. We should not have economic relations with India at all. Otherwise, I see the Soviet Union going down”

The snow-heads of the Kremlin carefully heard Major Karamazov’s presentation and thanked him. They did not ask him any questions because they had already made up their minds to cross the river Amu into Kabul and strengthen the falling apart Afghan revolution.

Then, what Major Karamazov feared happened. The CIA planned to fuck over the Soviet Union by joining hands with the ISI and Mubarak of Egypt and the Saudis. They knew Islam was more interested in blood. Be it the blood of infidels or Muslims. Blood is the Muslim’s favorite drink. The mere smell of blood makes them drunk.

The CIA used the Muslims thirst for blood to the fullest extent in Afghanistan. The revolution that came without class struggle in Afghanistan could not sustain itself even with the help of Soviet guns.

When the first few stingers flew in the skies of Afghanistan, Major Karamazov, who had become a brigadier by then, wrote to the Kremlin, “Let us say goodbye to Afghanistan. The land and the people on this side of the river Amu do not belong to the Soviet Union. The sooner we pack up and leave, the sooner we will lessen the burden on Moscow. Getting buried in Afghan land is not a matter of honor for our soldiers. A revolution without capitalist fuck ups is no revolution. Let them do the job. Afghans will take care of their own revolution”

The snow-heads of the Kremlin eventually agreed

with Brigadier Karamazov and they gave him a green signal to cross back the bridge on the river Amu, not knowing that within a few years, they would even have to pack their bags from Tajikistan, the land on the other side of the river Amu.

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# A Cup of Tea with Buddha

It was a beautiful Sunday morning. The Hi-tech Café was full with people of different origins, cultures and lands. Though they all were sitting in the modern day café, as one can tell from the name Hi-tech Café, they all belonged to different times as well. Their dresses had the marks of their ages and times. The only common thing among them was the cups of tea they were holding in their hands. Each one of them had a different drink in his or her cup. As I could tell by looking at their faces, they all seemed happy and joyful with their drinks and interaction with each other.

Wow! There were so many great people of different times and ages and cultures at one place under one roof. It was all unimaginable. For a moment, I thought I was hallucinating. Otherwise, how would I see Confucius, Buddha, Krishna, Jesus, Moses, Homer, Umr-al-Qaia, Goethe, Karl Marx and Gandhi sitting in a modern day café? There were so many other great personalities of the past, but I did not know them. I had only seen pictures of some I have mentioned above and I recognized them; otherwise, they all were there (even those whose names I cannot mention out of the fear of persecution; I do not like the fate of damned Rushdie).

That is precisely the reason I decided to introduce myself to everybody else at the great Hi-tech Café and

stayed away from the few dangerous ones. I shook hands with Confucius. He put his cup away on the front table and held my hand for a few moments. I tell you, it was the greatest moment of my life. Holding Confucius' hand was not an ordinary experience. Through me, I felt the passing of thousands of years of the Chinese civilization. Confucius told me all the good things I had ever read in fortune cookies at different modern-day Chinese restaurants. Finally releasing my hand, Confucius gave me a thoughtful smile and I moved on to the next table.

There, I met Krishna. He was too busy with all his gopies. It seemed like he had just returned from the great epic war and was trying to have a good time. His gopies were giving him a massage and reciting to him beautiful rhymes in their slick beautiful voices. He did not have his flute in his hands. Instead, he was holding the Hi-tech Café tea cup in one hand and his other was busy playing with one of his gopies erotic back. There was an open window in the side wall of the Hi-tech Café. Out of the window, there was a long line of *bail garis* slowly moving away in a space and time unknown.

If I were in Krishna's place, a poor mortal and humble creature, I would not bother to greet anyone in those moments of joy and happiness. It was only Krishna who gave his Hi-tech Café cup away to one of his gopies and held my hand while his others were still fondling with the back of another beautiful gopy.

I had a great number of questions for Krishna that I wanted to ask him but I chose not to. I did not want to interrupt him in his ecstatic state. Imagine all those gopies, massaging, with their beautiful rhymes and rosy smells in the air. Only a fool would like an intellectual discourse in those kinds of circumstances.

Krishna had probably read my mind and heart. Instantly, energy started flowing out of his hand and into my hand, body and soul. It transformed me into a unique energy. All of a sudden, there was no Hi-tech Café, no air filled with rosy smells, no beautiful gopies and their rhymes and no Krishna. It was all pure energy flowing in the boundless blissful river of time.

I don't know how long I remained in this formless form. I could not tell. Even if I wanted to, I could not explain this phenomenon. I only remember when I came back to the Hi-tech Café, Krishna was busy with his gopies still holding a Hi-tech tea cup in his one hand and fondling the soft and curvy rear end of one of his gopies with the other. All my questions vanished. One of his gopies gave me a white lotus flower and I moved away from Krishna's table.

While walking on the floor of the Hi-tech Café, I saw all the great masters of their times, the times in the past and the times in the future, each one in his or her own bliss and ecstasy. As there is no past, present and future in the Hi-tech Café, I saw all the great future masters there as well. They were still preparing for the great roles they have to play in their times. But, I was more interested in Buddha than anyone else. He always inspired and fascinated me. I wanted to have a cup of tea with him. Thanks to the Hi-tech Café, it was now possible, and that was precisely my reason to visit the café on that Sunday morning.

I saw Buddha at the all-time highest spot on the Hi-tech Café floor. Due to his highest status in the Hi-tech Café, Buddha enjoyed a distinct privilege and authority. This authority was not like any earthly king's or a president's. It was unique, timeless in nature and more than real in the real sense. For a moment, I wondered why Buddha was so unique. Why

was he not like anyone else? Though he had the same Hi-tech Café cup in his hand, every other great master still wanted a small drop out of his drink.

Amazing, I thought for a minute, and then I walked towards him. Buddha had a strange peace on his face. It was a peace only an individual should have after hearing, knowing, seeing, becoming and forgetting everything, thus converting ignorance into blessing. Every step I walked towards Buddha, I felt like I was showered with horizontal and vertical multi-color lights with a growing peace like Buddha's face in my heart and mind. My consciousness converted into pure consciousness. I was not walking any longer on the surface of the Hi-tech Café floor. When I made it to Buddha, he pointed toward a window in the east.

"This is the window of temptation. Jump out of this window and get everlasting life," Buddha whispered in my head without using any words or voice.

"No." I did not shake my head or utter a word from my lips. But it was a plain no. Buddha pointed towards a window in the west.

"This is the window of all the knowledge. Jump out of this window and know everything," Buddha whispered again without using any words or voice. I looked through the window and again restrained going with the web of thought created by Buddha. Looking at my reluctance, he pointed towards the window in the north.

"This is the window of eternity. Jump out of this window and be the master of everything in the realm of time." I did not show any interest in becoming the master of everything in the realm of time. Buddha pointed toward a window in the south.

“This is the window of wisdom. Only gods enjoy this realm. Jump out of this window and become one of them.” I again refused to go along with the idea of becoming god. I did not want to go through all the troubles gods go through. All I wanted was a cup of tea at the Hi-tech Café.

Buddha looked at me, smiled and gave me the Hi-tech Café cup that he was holding in his hand.

I walked out of the Hi-tech Café. Krishna was dancing with his gopies. Buddha and Confucius were smiling while seeing me off. It was already Sunday evening. I walked towards my home because the next morning, I had to go to work.

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# Pension

Standing on the roadside, he continued staring at people walking by. He felt the people were not like before. They all had changed, but in which way? To find the change, he had to wait for a little while.

Meanwhile, his mind continued wandering in the mazes of the past. He did not know where those mazes started and where they ended.

He was born in a small town—a town where only a few hundred families lived. The town was circled by fields. There were small canals on all four sides of the town. The canals irrigated the fields around the town and carried water to many other towns before dumping the water in the river.

These canals were constructed by the Britons during the British Raj. His thinking about the British Raj diverted his mind to Mall Road, the buildings around Mall Road, the High Court, the Government College, the General Post Office and the Museum. All these buildings reminded everyone of the glorious achievements of the British Raj.

Ignoring the buildings around Mall Road, his mind again wandered back to his home town. He saw uncle Karim sitting on cart smoking *huqqa*. He was sitting next to him on the ground.

“*Baita* (son), Britons were very nice people. They always did things that benefitted the common folks. Muslim rulers remained busy in building palaces and gardens for their harems.”

Uncle Karim was an illiterate man. He worked for railways and retired before the Britons left India in 1947. He still received a 35 rupee a month pension from the Western Railways. He had three sons and one

daughter. They were all married. The sons and their families still lived with him, but his daughter was married in a close by village.

In winter and summer, he always brought his cart in the open and sat there all day while smoking *huqqa* and gossiping with people who passed by. During winter, he put his cart where he could enjoy the sun. During summer, he laid his cart in the shadow of trees. As the shadows moved, his cart also moved along.

Every morning when Kama went to school, he always said “good morning” to Uncle Karim. Uncle Karim always asked him to come and have a little chat with him before going to school but Kama never stopped. However, after school, Kama always sat with Uncle Karim and finished his school assignments right there while talking to him as well.

Whenever Uncle Karim talked about Britons, he always nagged him.

“*Chacha* (uncle), if Britons were so good, why didn’t you go with them to England? There, you could sit in the park and smoke *huqqa* instead of sitting here all day in the open.”

“Kamy, you don’t know how intelligent the Britons were. Look at the good arrangements they made. I was an ordinary employee in the Western Railways. All day, I pushed the Sahib’s trolley on the railway track. I remained healthy all my life. No disease dared to touch my body. I am still strong enough to wrestle with a twenty-two years young man. I smoke *huqqa* all day. I am living my life with dignity and respect. Thirty-five rupees still suffice my and your aunt’s needs. Since the creation of Pakistan, the black sahibs have taken over the places of white sahibs. Nothing is working. Everything is in shambles.



Again, in his mind, the scene changed. He saw the wagons, cars, busses, cycles and horse wagons running on Mall Road. They were all in a hurry to make it somewhere.

“Why are they all in such a rush? Why don’t they stop for a few minutes and relax and smoke *huqqa* and do some gossiping?”

The thought of *huqqa* again took him back to Uncle Karim. He saw him sitting on the same cart smoking *huqqa*.

“If the Britons had not come to India, there would have been no railways, no schools and no colleges. No boys or girls would have gotten an education. I would not have gotten a 35 rupee pension and would not be able to sit here all day in the open and smoke *huqqa*. Instead, I would have labored for some landlord and died a few years ago by now.

After listening him, he always thought Chacha Karim was right. But Britons were foreign rulers. They conquered and occupied India. Indians were their slaves. After they left India, Hindus and Muslims became free.

After the freedom in 1947, he did not know how the Indians were doing. However, all the Pakistanis were sick—from top to bottom. The people on the top did not feel ashamed committing atrocities against their compatriots and the people on the bottom cowardly tolerated.

One day, Chacha Karim told him about an incident that took place in his town. The landlord in the town raped a poor land tiller’s daughter. The land tiller was crying and asking for justice when the *gora sahib* came to investigate and hand down the verdict. The *gora sahib* assembled the whole town. He asked everyone in the assembly what treatment the landlord

should be meted out. Everyone in the assembly said the landlord should marry the girl, the whole land should be given to the girl and he should spend the rest of his life as her husband.

*Gora sahib* right then called the title man and transferred the title of the land in the name of that girl. Then, he called a mullah and asked him to perform their marriage ceremony. He declared both of them wife and husband according to the wishes of the town assembly. Later, they both bore many children. They all went to reputable educational institutions and became doctors and engineers.

Now, the people die every day due to hunger and poverty. None of them is ashamed, neither those who die, nor those because of who they die.

He was still standing on the road side. Wagons, busses, cars and cycles were still moving with full speed. Everyone was trying to overpass the other. Even with all this movement, there was no change in the scene. With this stagnation in the scene, his eyes turned into stones. A streak of smoke coming out of the wind pipe of a hardly crawling truck ran into his nostrils. Chacha Karim's words again came to his head.

"Kamay, these dark sahibs cannot do anything right. We live in this small town. When you will go to Lahore, see what a beautiful city the British have made. Now, again, these dark sahibs have destroyed it."

"But chacha, in Lahore there is Shahi Qila, Shalimar Garden, and beautiful walkways; they were all built by Mughals." He tried to put words in Chacha Karim's mouth.

Chacha Karim puffed his *huqqa* and said, "The kings made the Shahi Qila for themselves. Now, it is

used to straight up the brains of politically incorrect people. They built walkways and the Shalimar Garden for themselves. For the people, they only built the Shahi Mosque, just to remind them that there is a God sitting up in the heaven. They have to put down their heads five times a day to show their loyalty to him and to his appointed king who is his shadow on earth.”

His stony eyes continued to watch the flowing traffic on the road but his mind was still engaged in dialogue with Chacha Karim. He was again talking about the British instead of the Mughals.

“The British still think about the interest of their people before doing anything. All their thinking, discussions and debates circle around the idea of how they can benefit their people. How can they improve their lives? However, these dark sahibs first think about their own gain before they undertake any project.”

“Chacha, forget the British. Now, your 35 rupees pension does not come from London. Now, the money order comes from the exchequer of the government of Pakistan.” He tried to irritate Chacha Karim.

“Exchequer,” Chacha Karim repeated after him and started puffing his *huqqa*. The wind in the open became a little stronger. Chacha Karim wore his shirt.

The busses, cars, wagons and cycles were still running with full speed on the road. The scene was still stagnant in his eyes.

Someone tapped on his shoulder. He looked back with stony eyes. Lullo, the son of the shoe-maker from his town was standing behind him.

He looked at him with surprise and asked, “When did you come from the town? Is everything okay over there?”

“Everything is okay. However, Chacha Karim has passed away. He was sitting on his cart in the open, smoking his *huqqa*, and the mailman brought him a letter. It was an official mail. The mailman read him the letter, “The government’s exchequer has become empty. There is no money in the exchequer to pay the pension.”

He heard the letter, laid down on the cart and said, “Why live in a country where the government cannot pay a 35 rupees pension,” and died.

The traffic was still flowing on the road. The scene was still stagnant. He slowly started walking with Lullo.

His heart was full of grief. How empty the open area in the town would be without Chacha Karim.

Then he looked and Chacha Karim was still sitting on his cart, smoking his *huqqa*.

“How good are the British? They do everything for the benefit of others. And these dark sahibs.....” He was saying.

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# Paradise Casino

This is Paradise Casino. God is the Casino operator and human beings are the gamblers. One, two, three...Adam and Eve hit the buttons on the slot machines and the symbol of “a trip to planet Earth” pushes them out of Paradise Casino.

They both fall in muddy grounds at two different places on planet Earth. They want to go back to Paradise Casino and play at some other slot machine, but they have to wait. They both have to look for each other and find the ways together to get back to Paradise Casino.

Here enters Mr. Devil on the scene.

“Ha, ha, I know the way back to Paradise Casino” he announces through the whistling winds.

“He is a deceiver. Don’t fall into his trap” shouts God, the Casino operator, through thunderous clouds.

Adam and Eve, bewildered, lost, trying to overcome the shock of “a trip to planet Earth” look towards the whistling wind and thunderous clouds.

“What is this whistling wind telling us?” Eve asks Adam.

“Whistling wind can make us fly. Let us listen to the thunderous clouds,” Adam whispers.

“You are right; we need water to clean the mud on our bodies before we can fly with the help of the whistling wind,” answers Eve.

They start exploring the planet Earth. Jungles, desserts, mountains, streams, oceans, sun, moon, stars, they like it all.

“Let us live here for a while,” Adam tells Eve.

“I am with you, here on planet Earth or there in the Paradise Casino, but what are we going to do here?” Eve asks Adam.

“We will till the land, sow the wheat, and grow in numbers—hundreds, thousands, millions and billions and then go back to Paradise Casino,” Adam explains.

Adam and Eve start tilling the land, sowing the wheat and growing in numbers. They start splitting two in four, four in eight and eight in sixteen ...and so on and so forth.

While Adam and Eve are splitting two in four, four in eight and eight in sixteen, what is the Paradise Casino operator doing? He is adding more slot machines in his Paradise Casino. He installs one new machine for everyone who returns to him, every machine with different symbols, representing different prizes, and different destinies. Where do the people go when they die? They close their eyes on this planet Earth and open them in the Paradise Casino, where they spin the machine prepared for them by the Casino Operator, and depart to seek the prize.

Some do win “a trip to planet Earth” over and over again, and some win “trips to other planets.” Yet, some stay in the Paradise Casino, rolling their machines, waiting for their machines to hit a prize.

Adam and Eve, after splitting in such great multitudes, are back in the Paradise Casino.

One, two, three, Adam and Eve are free. They enjoy their tango to the tunes of the whistling winds. God, the Paradise Casino Operator, is too busy with keeping up the slot machines for the ever splitting and growing multitudes of people on billions of planets in this wide spread universe.

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# How to please God?

How could he please God? He tried his best to find out the answer to this question. Neither the answer to this question was possible nor did he find one. Still, sometimes he tried alone and sometimes, along with others.

Tired of his failure, he decided to go to everyone who claimed to have any sorts of links with God.

For this purpose, he first went to the Mullah of the mosque in his town. He had never been into a mosque ever before. He never prayed, never fasted, and never participated in any religious congregation. When the Mullah saw him standing in front of him, he asked him what brought him there.

He respectfully stated that he wanted to know how he could please God.

The Mullah was shocked to hear his question. "What kind of person is he who wants to know how to please God?" the Mullah thought. "The others always wanted to know how to pray, fast, perform hajj, offer sacrifice, or fulfill the conditions of getting married."

The Mullah pondered over his question for a few minutes and then responded: "God is pleased if someone regularly observes the decrees of Sharia. By doing so, he becomes God's beloved and goes to paradise after he dies."

"And if someone can not follow the edicts of Sharia?" He asked the Mullah a bit worriedly.

"For him, God has prepared hell. Humans and stones are the fuel for hell. But God is also forgiving and merciful. Sending anyone to paradise is his prerogative," the Mullah replied kindly.

He felt somewhat relieved. He ignored the words such as "hell," "human," and "stone" and instead focused on "forgiving and merciful" and left. He decided to then only focus on "forgiving and merciful" and never think about paradise or hell.

He spent his next few days in a bliss of God being “forgiving and merciful” but not for too long. The question of “how to please God” started bothering him again. Apparently, the Mullah’s advice to observe the Sharia edicts was still in his mind, but he was so lazy in his practical life that it was impossible for him to observe the Sharia pronouncements.

“To show mercy and forgive someone is God’s prerogative,” he thought. “However, he may or may not forgive. Moreover, this way, one cannot find out for sure if God is happy or unhappy with him.” Therefore, he decided to go to a Sufi and ask him how he could please God. He knew a couple of guys, a part of their name was Sufi.

He went to the first Sufi he knew. The Sufi heard his question and broke into laughter. He told him his name was Sufi Mushtaq Ahmad. The word Sufi was just part of his name. He was not the kind of Sufi he was looking for one. Disappointed, he went to another Sufi. The same thing happened there too.

In dismay, he asked many people if they knew any Sufi. Many people told him about various Sufis who performed miracles. He decided to go to a Sufi who was the most popular among the people.

The Sufi heard his question and responded with kindness, “God does not care about if someone prays to him or not, fasts for him or not, or performs hajj for him or not. He loves the people who believe in serving others.”

He kind of liked the Sufi’s idea to please God. However, about serving people, he had some reservations. He did not know how to serve people.

“Like observing Sharia’s edicts, serving people is also a difficult task. But there is a delicate difference between following Sharia’s edicts and serving people. By diligently following Sharia’s edicts, one cannot tell if he makes God happy or not. But by serving people, one can immediately tell if God is pleased or not.”

Though he liked the Sufi’s idea, he still thought it was appropriate to wait for a while to fully agree with him right away. He did not want to repeat the mistake he made by



agreeing with the Mullah. He changed his mind after agreeing with the Mullah. He did not want to change his mind after agreeing with the Sufi.

After talking to the Sufi, he took a stroll on the road. He wandered purposelessly here and there. He talked to many people, but nobody gave him a solid answer to his question. So much so, his question became a quagmire for him.

Tired of struggling, he sat on a bench on the road side. He continued watching the passing by people. Young boys and girls were going to their schools. Clerks were going to their offices. Workers were going to their mills and factories. Newspaper men, vendors and the road cleaners were busy in doing their jobs.

Everyone was busy with something. Everyone was doing what he or she was supposed to do. No one was bothered about his issue. He felt God or God's happiness or unhappiness was not their issue at all.

This very thought made him happy. He started laughing. He laughed and laughed until tears started flowing from his eyes. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the tears in his eyes. Then, he got up from the bench and left for his job.

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# The Camel and the Bedouin

We the step-sons of the soil  
walking on the confusing paths of life  
have landed in a desert  
where east and west and north and south  
have lost their meanings.

Some of us want to go on the right.  
The others want to go on the left.  
But where there is no right or left,  
where reality and illusion  
often exchange robes with each other,  
there  
it is better  
to light a bonfire  
and sit and relax for a while.  
We the step-sons of soil  
walking on the confusing paths of life  
have landed in a desert.

“My friend, stop this tittle. I can’t take your poisonous song any longer.” The camel pulled his long neck out of the tent and admonished the Bedouin. When the camel entered in the tent and when the Bedouin walked out, they both forgot.

While this exchange was going on, the Bedouin saw dust flying far off in the desert. Sitting by the bonfire, the Bedouin pulled a *riq* out of his bag and started playing it. The camel again admonished the Bedouin while pulling his long neck back inside the tent.

“You warm yourself with the bonfire or play your *riq*. Your moment of doomsday has come.”

The Bedouin continued playing his *riq* without paying attention to the camel’s remarks. Meanwhile, a jeep emerged out of the flying dust. The jeep stopped close to

the Bedouin. A soldier pointing a gun to the Bedouin stepped down from the jeep. The Bedouin again started singing his song along with playing his *riq*.

“We the step-sons of soil  
walking on the confusing paths of life  
have landed in a desert.....”

The camel again felt a problem with the Bedouin’s song, but sensing the danger in the air, kept his neck in the tent.

The soldier put his gun next to the Bedouin’s neck and said, “Would you answer my question?”

The Bedouin stopped playing his *riq* and singing his song. Then he said to the soldier, “A gun is used to kill people. A question is asked with the tongue. So far, you have pointed a gun on me. You have not asked a question. Please tell me how can I help you?”

Inside the tent, the camel was hearing the exchange between the Bedouin and the soldier. He always had a very low opinion of the Bedouin. For the first time in life, he had good feelings about the Bedouin. He kind of liked the Bedouin.

The soldier turned the barrel of the gun down and said, “He and his comrades have lost their way in the desert. Their instruments have stopped working. They do not have much patrol left in their jeep. They want to go back to Baghdad, but they can’t find a convenient way.”

Hearing the soldier’s story, the Bedouin consoled him and told him not to worry. He said, “Your problem is an easy one. Even my camel can solve it.”

The camel got a little worried in the tent when he heard himself mentioned in the exchange. He immediately changed his opinion about the Bedouin. He thought the Bedouin was the stupidest person in the world.

The soldier looked here and there, but he did not find any camel around there. The camel kept his mum and waited in the tent.

One of the soldiers sitting in the jeep pointed his gun to the Bedouin and said to his comrade, “This son of a camel is trying to make us fools. There is no camel over here. He

is waiting for some of his terrorist friends. Before his terrorist friends come here, we should shoot him down.”

Sensing danger for the Bedouin, the camel brought his neck out of the tent and told the soldiers that he was resting in the tent.

The soldiers did not understand the camel. However, they found out the truth and turned down the barrels of their guns. The Bedouin again started singing his song.

“We the step-sons of the soil  
walking on the confusing paths of life  
have landed in a desert  
where east and west and north and south  
have lost their meanings....”

Before, only the camel was upset about the Bedouin’s song. Now, the soldier got upset too. He again turned the barrel of his gun to the Bedouin’s skull and ordered him to stop his stupid song. Otherwise, he would burst his skull.

The Bedouin stopped singing and said to the soldier, “He is a very tasteless man. Playing with guns, he has lost his sense of art and beauty.” He said, “In his song, he is complaining about the same thing that he has lost his way in the desert. His camel is his last hope. The camel has refused to walk further. He has thrown him out and taken over his tent and now he is resting in the tent.”

The soldier again turned the barrel of his gun to the ground. He looked a little confused. He did not know what to do with the Bedouin.

He and his comrades had lost their way in the desert. They were wandering in the desert for many days. They had lost all their contacts with their regiment because of malfunctioning with communication and GPS equipment. They had run out of food and patrol. This was the first Bedouin who they had come across in the desert in many days. By killing him, they did not want to end their last hope.

The camel in the tent was listening to the Bedouin’s and the soldier’s exchange. He was happy to know they were so bewildered. The Bedouin’s forefathers were using him for

so long in this desert. The soldiers had ruined the peace of the world. They are strange people. They are neither happy this way nor that way. They want to turn seas into deserts and deserts into seas.

The camel in the tent was thinking all this while the soldiers sitting in the jeep were feeling very hungry. They had not eaten anything for many days.

Tired of the lengthening exchange between their comrade and the Bedouin, an idea flashed in their heads. Having consensus, they stepped down from the jeep.

The camel sensed the soldiers were coming towards the tent. He tried to get out of the tent and run. But one of the soldiers fired two shots, one in the camel's heart and the other on his neck. The camel fell right there. The soldiers cut his meat with their Swiss knives and roasted it on the bonfire and started eating.

The Bedouin silently watched them roasting and eating the camel's meat. The soldiers offered him some meat too, but he refused to join.

The killing of his camel saddened him. But he could not do anything against those armed soldiers. He again started singing his sad song along with playing his *riq*.

“We the step-sons of the soil  
walking on the confusing paths of life  
have landed in a desert .....

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# Satan

Pilgrims from all over the world were throwing pebbles on Satan. Their excitement was worth watching. They were quite soft while performing the other rituals of hajj, but as soon as they gathered pebbles for throwing on Satan, their excitement went quite high. Although they were wrapped in their white pilgrim ihrams, their softness turned into toughness. They collected the pebbles and quickly moved towards Satan.

Asghar also went along the other pilgrims to perform the ritual of throwing pebbles on Satan. However, unlike other pilgrims, his feet slowed. It became difficult for him to walk towards Satan. So much so, that he was left behind everyone else.

He slowly gathered the required number of pebbles and gradually moved towards Satan. When he reached the first Satan, most of the pilgrims had already performed the ritual and left for the Ka'ba.

He took one pebble in his hand and tried to throw it at Satan. Satan looked at him, smiled, welcomed him and said,

“You too.....?”

Satan's sarcastic query made his hand suspended in the air. He wanted to, but he could not throw the pebble at Satan.

“Yes, I too.....”

“I always thought you were my friend, but you've proven you are one among the rest of the Muslims,” Satan passed a sarcastic remark.

“Yes, how can I be separate from them? I was born among them. I was brought up among them. I am

going to die among them. I cannot think of being separate from them,” he explained to Satan.

“Did I ask you to leave them? You have already gathered all the required pebbles to perform the ritual. Your hand is still suspended in the air. I don’t know what made you not throw pebbles on me?” Satan said.

“Just because of one thought, my hand stopped,” he answered Satan’s mocking remark.

“Yes, thought.....thought is the real power. Thought is the seed from which comes the plant of action which eventually becomes a tall tree. God and I control people through their thoughts. He penetrates in some peoples’ thoughts and I enter in others’ thoughts. Human beings do the rest of the things.”

After listening to Satan’s conversation, his suspended hand came down. The pebbles fell from his hand. His heart longed to have more conversation with Satan.

He asked Satan how he felt after so many pebbles were thrown at him by so many millions of people. After listening to his question, Satan loudly laughed and then said, “They think they throw pebbles at me. In fact, they throw pebbles on the Satans sitting inside them. As many people as God creates, I create that many images of myself. Then, I install one image of myself in each human being. Then, the game starts. Human beings think they struggle against me. Actually, they struggle against my image sitting inside them.”

After listening to this conversation, the rest of the pebbles in his hand fell down on the ground. He decided not to perform the ritual of throwing pebbles on Satan. He felt Satan had taken him over. Throwing pebbles on Satan is an important ritual of hajj. Without



performing this ritual, hajj will remain incomplete. He felt he wouldn't be able to complete his hajj.

With this feeling, he again tried to pick up the pebbles from the ground but somehow he could not.

He again recited many spell repelling ayahs from the Quran, but he still could not pick up the required pebbles. Satan enjoyed his helplessness for a while and then he picked the pebbles up and handed them over to him.

"Here you go, my friend. I know your predicament. I am your old friend. I can help you this much."

He extended his hand and took the pebbles from Satan. He thought now he could throw the pebbles on Satan and complete his hajj ritual. Again, regardless of his desire to throw the pebbles on Satan, he could not do it.

Satan saw him struggling with himself. He broke into a big guffaw.

"Look, my friend. When you picked the pebbles up, you could not throw them on me. Now, I have given you these pebbles. These pebbles have lost the strength to reach me. Now, even if you throw them at me, they won't reach me. These are my pebbles, not yours. How can my pebbles hit me?"

Asghar helplessly looked at Satan. He silently prayed to God to seek his help against Satan. But God had deserted him when he started talking to Satan. His sobs stuck in his throat and the tears were in his eyes at God's irresponsiveness. He felt he was Christ hanging on the cross, abandoned by his God. But Christ had to pay with his blood for the sins of billions of his followers. Whose sins was he made to pay for?

Again, he cried and sought help from God to enable him to throw pebbles on Satan. Eventually, God

pitied him and he succeeded in throwing the first pebble on Satan. But instead of hitting Satan, the pebble fell short of him. He tried again, but the pebble did not hit Satan. The third time, the same thing happened.

Satan watched him with amusement. Then, he walked close to him and said, "Here you go. I've come close to you so that you can throw your pebbles at me and complete your hajj rituals. But, I want to let you know that even if your pebbles hit me, your hajj won't be complete."

When Asghar heard Satan's logic, he curiously asked....."Why is he saying so? I've come from far to perform hajj. I've performed every ritual according to Sharia. Then, why won't my hajj be complete?"

Satan heard Asghar's conversation and sighed. Then he talked about Muslims of early ages. He told Asghar their many stories.

When Muslims of early ages threw pebbles at him, he enjoyed. He appreciated their sincerity and truthfulness. After every hit, he felt some men of character were throwing pebbles at him. Now, when Muslims of the day throw pebbles at him, he feels pained. He feels a mob of liars and hypocrites is throwing pebbles at him. "You are one of them too. You are also a liar and hypocrite. You've no relationship with God or his prophet."

Asghar indignantly heard Satan and said, "You are a wicked liar. You are trying to seduce me to turn me against my own brothers in faith. We offer our prayers five times a day, fast in the month of fasting, pay our religious tax, offer volunteer prayers, sob and cry on TV channels while praying, light fragrance sticks, earnestly send our blessings upon the Holy Prophet,

and sing songs in his honor.....” Asghar continued his tirade.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Satan asked him to stop. “Throw a few pebbles at me and get lost. Add the title of honor of being a pilgrim before your name. You all are nothing but a big crowd of ignorant people. You guys are burden on the planet Earth....a bunch of parasites. You are not worthy to even be considered humans because to be human means to be full of action....constant action.....action to improve oneself.....action to improve the universe.....action to make the humanity today better than it was yesterday. But you guys are the dirt of planet Earth.....garbage. God created you as humans, but because of your inaction and ignorance, you lost this right too.”

Satan’s tirade made Asghar tired. He lost his strength and wits. He could not hear Satan any longer. The pebbles fell down from his hand. He walked towards the Ka’ba.

Satan watched him go. He called him from behind. “Haji Asghar.....please throw your pebbles at me before you leave. Without throwing pebbles at me, your hajj rituals won’t be complete.” But Asghar ignored his call and continued walking towards the Ka’ba. Tears were flowing from his eyes. He was murmuring, “I don’t want to perform the rituals of hajj. I don’t want to be a Haji. I want to become a human being.....only a human being.....a good human being.”

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# The Wind has Told it to Everyone

One day,  
days will change.  
One day,  
darkness will vanish.  
One day,  
all humans' brains will become clear  
of darkness and ignorance.  
One day,  
all humans will see  
the face of truth  
glittering like the sun.  
On that day,  
all titles will come off.  
Only humans will remain,  
pure and simple.

He wrote these lines on a piece of paper and then started preparing a cup of tea for himself. He had not eaten anything since morning. Still, he did not want to eat because he was not feeling hungry. He was tired of writing. He decided to make tea to relax for a few minutes.

His whole empowerment was limited to a pen and a piece of paper. Everything else was out of his authority. Every day, he heard bad news from all over and felt bitter about it. When bitterness became unbearable, he always jotted down his thoughts on loose pieces of papers. Those loose sheets of paper were always spread all over his room.

When his wife was alive, she maintained files to properly file his writings: poems in one folder, articles in another, and short stories in a different one.

Even in those folders, she had several sub-folders. In the poems folders, she had a sub-folder for romantic, revolutionary and esthetic poetry. In the articles folders, she had sub-folders for political, social and economic articles. In the short stories folder, she had sub-folders for abstract, social and metaphysical stories.

She had one folder with many sub-folders for abuses. Those sub-folders were for abuses to the government, abuses to the system, abuses to the leaders, and abuses to hypocrite intellectuals and journalists.

In the abuses sub-folder for intellectuals, she had more sub-sub-folders. One of the sub-sub-folders was about the intellectual who told white lies. They knew they were lying, but they continued to lie just to preserve their interests. Another sub-sub-folder was comprised of abuses for those intellectuals who did not know they were lying, but they were motivated by false propaganda literature. Then, there was a sub-folder for those who lied in the name of God, and for those who supported capitalism, and for those who propagate Islam because they were born Muslims but they never knew anything about Islam.

His wife collected his writings all day long. She read every word he wrote and then put it in an appropriate folder. While reading his writings, sometime she smiled, sometime cried and sometime got worried.

He always evaluated the impact of his writing by looking at his wife's facial reactions. He considered her facial reactions the reactions of the general public.

His idea of the general public started and ended with his wife.

The poem he had just written, he had written many such poems before. Like Faiz Ahmad Faiz, he fully believed a day would come, and that too in his life time, when all crowns would be snatched, all thrones would be dismantled and the people would rule the land.

Waiting for that day, his wife had already died. Any such day did not come in her life. But he was still writing. Now, no one was there to properly take care of his writings, which was precisely why all writings were spread all over his house.

He worked as a lecturer of literature at a local university. Being a government employee, he could not participate in political activities. But, government employees have emotions too. They are part of the society. Like common folks, they also feel the brunt of price hikes. If the prices of daily use commodities go up, their budget is also disturbed. Consequently, they start losing mental balance.

Similarly, if there is political instability in the country, incapable leaders become rulers and insult peoples' intelligence on a daily basis or plunder the national exchequer or treat laws of the land as their concubines. The sensitive people become emotionally disturbed and start looking for ways of catharsis.

During his employment with the university, he used his writings to deal with his anguish. He wrote whatever he felt and threw the paper on the floor. His wife picked up the sheets of paper from the floor, read them and put them in an appropriate folder. This way, he got rid of his frustration without hurting his employment interests. His writings also got preserved.

After the death of his wife, making tea was a difficult task for him. He had to think ten times before boiling the water to make tea. He preferred to sleep hungry instead of preparing dinner for himself. Preserving writings seemed like the hardest task to him. The paper sheets all over the floor looked like leaves on the garden ground in autumn.

If leaves are dry, they can easily catch fire. If there is fire, there is smoke. If there is smoke, the people gather there too. If people gather, there is a commotion. If the people rise, there is a revolution. The governments would be thrown out.

When he put the water on the burner to prepare tea, a light wind started blowing. As the water boiled, the winds became stronger. The door was not locked. The winds opened the door. His writings spread over the house floor spread all over the city. Some people got poems, some people got articles, and some people got stories which touched their hearts. He tried to catch the flying sheets, but he got tired and sat on the floor. What he wrote over the years spread in the whole town within no time.

All of a sudden, all those writings became the talk of the town. Some people said, "An angel of God has written this message for the people so they should stand up for their rights." Some people said, "A neighboring country has thrown these rebellious writings from a plane to incite people to rebel."

A retired professor's rebellious writings eventually reached peoples' hands. The people read those writings and had agitation. He made his tea and started drinking it sip by sip from the cup. He was thinking, how powerful is a written word? He had hidden all these writings from people, but the wind had distributed them among the people all over the town.



While sipping his tea, he looked out of the window.  
The people of the entire city were gathered in front of  
his house. They were all singing his poem in  
unanimity.

One day,  
days will change.

One day,  
darkness will vanish.

One day,  
All humans' brains will become clear  
of darkness and ignorance.

One day,  
all humans will see  
the face of truth  
glittering like the sun.

On that day,  
all titles will come off.

Only humans will remain  
pure and simple.

One day.....

One day.....

One day.....

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# Maulana

“God is just. He is the creator. Every living thing deserves respect. From ants to humans, all will gather in front of God on the day of judgement and pray for justice. So much so, that any ant that got crushed under a man’s shoes will ask for justice against that man. How would it be possible that a humble creature of God calls for justice and the just God ignores his or her call?”

Maulana was speaking and all his students were attentively listening to him. No one seemed tired or bored.

Maulana stopped a little to proceed with his conversation. One of his students asked him, “Maulana, an ant is so small. A human being cannot see it while walking. If it gets crushed under his shoes, what is his fault?”

After listening to his question, Maulana cast his focus on the students. All the students saw they were gathered on the day of judgement. All other creatures were gathered there too. Ants, flees, mosquitos, goats, buffaloes, camels and human beings were present. An ant was complaining to God against a human being for being crushed under his shoes. Consequently, she died. She wanted God to do justice to her.

God ordered his angels to bring the accused man. They immediately obeyed God and brought the accused man in the presence of God. His mouth was sealed and he was not in a position to speak. Then, God asked the ant to repeat her accusations. The ant told her story without any ifs and buts.

God questioned the accused. He said he had no excuse, but he did not know when he crushed her under his shoes.

God rejected his excuse saying he created him as the best of creatures. He gave him eyes to see, a brain to think and wisdom to decide. To be careful was his obligation.

Then, God turned to the ant and asked her in her mind how she thought justice would be served? The ant looked towards God and said, “Oh Lord of the times. I want that he should go through the same pain that I went through when he crushed me under his shoes.”

God heard the ant and ordered one of the angels to crush the man the same way he once crushed the ant.

The ant interrupted God, “Oh Lord of the times, if an angel crushed him, the justice won’t be served. You should turn me into a man and him into an ant and then I would crush him the way he crushed me.”

God immediately acquiesced with the ant. He turned the ant into a man and the man into an ant. After the ant became a man and the man became an ant, the man crushed the ant. He had to go through the same pain the ant felt when he crushed her. Afterwards, God turned them into their original forms. Justice was served. The ant and the man were both happy being an ant and a man.

Students saw this scene in a trance. Maulana again turned his focus to his lecture. He was saying, “God is just. On the day of judgement, he will do justice to everyone. So much so, that he will do justice to an ant if it is crushed under a man’s shoes. How is it possible if a God’s creature asks for justice and he denies?

On the day of judgement, the truthfulness of everyone’s faith will be revealed upon him. Many

peoples' faith will be like a shackle on their necks. Very few people will be without a shackle that day.

One of the students again asked Maulana, "How will peoples' faiths become shackles on their necks?"

Maulana again cast his focus on the students. They saw the activities of the day of judgement were still on. All the creatures were celebrating the justice of God. Then, they saw a lot of people who had shackles on their necks. Some shackles were light, some were heavy, and some were really heavy. Very few people were without shackles on their necks.

The people with shackles on their necks were trying to get those shackles off their necks but without avail. They were praying to God to release their necks from those shackles. God was telling them he did not put those shackles on their necks; they wore them by themselves. With astonishment on their faces, they said they never wore those shackles on their necks. God was telling them, "The shackles on your necks were in fact your faiths which you held throughout your lives. You all carved images in your brains and then worshiped them all your lives. Those images were your creations. They had nothing to do with God. In worshipping those images, you thought that you were worshipping God. I had informed you in your lives that I was beyond anything your brains could imagine. But you continued worshipping the images you had created in your brains until those images destroyed you. Now, those faiths have become shackles on your necks. You are so naïve that you cannot even tell the heavy shackles on your necks are in fact your beliefs."

Maulana was speaking and tears were flowing from students' eyes.

Maulana saw them crying and said, "Instead of crying, you should celebrate. You are the few lucky

ones who have found a teacher who knows the real form of justice from the beginning of time till the day of judgement and who knows how God's system works with this justice.

Due to this justice system, many ignorant will be freed on the day of judgement because of their ignorance but many scholars will burn in the hellfire. Their knowledge will turn into hell blazes for them."

After listening to this, the students wiped the tears from their eyes and celebrated with joy. One of the students asked, "Maulana how will the scholars' knowledge become blazes of hell for them?"

Maulana again cast his focus on students. They saw the proceedings of the day of judgement were still to continue. Many angels were grabbing scholars from their foreheads and throwing them in the hell fire. The scholars were dreadfully clamoring, but angels were not paying any attention to their hue and cry. Anytime an angel threw a scholar in the hell fire, blazes cleaved him. Those blazes were their false knowledge which they used to fight with others about God. They knew well they had no monopoly on God and God was far above and beyond their comprehension. They chained life and tried to stop evolution in the name of religion. God wanted evolution to continue to further express the colors of his creativity.

Maulana was speaking and students were all ears to listen to him. Enlightenment in their eyes and astonishment on their faces was evident.

One of the students asked, "Maulana how can we tell the real knowledge from the fake so that our knowledge does not become blazes of hell for us on the day of judgement?" Maulana affectionately looked at the student and then said, "The test of true knowledge is practice. The test of the practice is its

result. If the result of a practice helps to evolve life further, it is based on true knowledge. Otherwise, it is false. Stay away from false knowledge.

God is just. He is the creator of everything. Every living thing is respectable. From an ant to a human being, all will gather in front of God on the day of judgement and ask for justice. So much so, that any ant that got crushed under a man's shoes would ask for justice against that man. How it would be possible that a humble creature of God calls for justice and the just God ignores her call?"

Maulana finished his lecture. All of the students stood in his honor. Their hearts were filled with the fragrance of love of Maulana. They wished everyone could become Maulana's student and learn from him. But everyone is not lucky enough to find teachers like Maulana. The world is full of so-called scholars who spread ignorance in the name of knowledge.

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# The Princess

There are too many stories and not much time. Whose story should I listen to and write first and whose should I write later? That mountain girl walking on Mall Road in Murree asked for my help or was it the one who was kidnapped in Ghana and sold in South Africa? Then, she was later smuggled to the United States as domestic servant.

Or, should I write that Iranian infant's story who was stoned to death along with his mother just for entering in the world of the pious and pure through the door of momentary sexual intercourse of two forlorn souls captured in an emotional situation? Some stories are full of tears and some of chuckles.

When I see people around the globe trapped in miseries of life, I just want to write the stories which may help them escape those miseries for a few minutes and fill their lives with momentary pleasures. Then, a Christian woman from Pakistan holds me and wants me to write her story. She has been accused of insulting the prophet of Islam. She has been sentenced to death for committing blasphemy. I do not yet finish listening to her story that a homeless poet wants me to listen to his free verses.

"My friend, I don't have a taste for poetry. Can you recite your poem to someone who can really appreciate it?" My remarks hurt him. Tears start flowing out of his eyes.

"Life has been unfair with me. You are also trying to ignore me. Don't listen to my verses if you don't want to, but at least be kind to me," he says in a gloomy voice.

I do not finish talking to the poet when an African panhandler girl comes to me. She asks me for spare change.

I ask her name. I can tell from her appearance she is very poor. She says, "My name is Princess." I put a hand in my pocket and I give her all the coins I can grab saying, "If you are a princess, you should look for a prince. Why are you panhandling?" She walks away without responding.

The poet looks at me with strange eyes. I see pleasure in his looks. He seems pleased that the panhandler girl left without speaking to me.

I ignore the poet's sarcastic remarks. They are not worthy of a response. The girl walking on Mall Road in Murree asking for my help has gotten lost somewhere. The girl kidnapped from Ghana and then smuggled through South Africa to the United States has vanished in the crowd. I am purposelessly wandering on Park Avenue in New York.

Due to the falling snow, I am wearing a woolen cap on my head, dark colored glasses on my eyes, leather gloves on my hands and a long overcoat on my frail body. While leaving my house, I made sure I was ready for the snow fall. Still, cold is passing through my bones.

I enter a close by McDonalds. I intend to buy a cup of tea, sit in the lounge, watch TV and when the snow fall ends, catch an underground train and go home.

All of sudden, it occurs to me that I have forgotten my wallet at my house. The few coins I had in my pocket, I gave to the black panhandler "Princess." I get worried for a few moments and then enter the bathroom to take a leak. Before taking a leak, I take off my leather gloves as it is too difficult to unbutton my overcoat and then pull the zipper down with frozen

fingers inside the gloves. After taking a leak, I pull my zipper up, button my overcoat and wear my leather gloves.

Then, I walk out of the rest room. I see “Princess” coming out of the ladies rest room. I wave my hand towards her and say, “Hello, Princess.” Instead of responding kindly, she gives me a dirty look.

I again wave my hand and say, “Hello, Princess.” She ignores me and stands in the line. I also follow her and stand in line behind her. She doesn’t like it. I again call her “Princess.” She tells I am mistaken. Her name is not Princess.

I remind her she just asked me for spare change out on the road and I gave her all the change I had in my pocket. I asked her name and she told me her name is Princess. She again looks at me angrily. She says, “Would you leave me alone or I should call police?” Listening to her warning to call the police, I immediately walk out of the McDonalds.

The snow has fallen many feet, but the snowfall is still continuing. Regardless of falling snow, New York is still on the move. Cars are passing by, and people are walking. I look around. Stories are spread all over in flocks. I have put many stories in my empty pockets for writing later.

There are too many stories, but not much time is left. I am still looking for the girl I met on Mall Road in Murree. She wanted to tell me something. She wanted my help. Ignoring her, I moved on. I might help the girl kidnapped from Ghana and smuggled to the United States through South Africa to get her freedom. The Christian woman being hanged in Pakistan for committing blasphemy needs my help too. That Iranian infant was stoned to death for being a bastard child. Her poor young mother cried for pity.

Her wailing voices went all the way up to the sky, but that little innocent did not even cry. He died with the very first stone without crying.

Stories full of tears, stories full of guffaws, which one should I write first and which one I should save for later?

The poet is still wandering in the snow. I call him as at the moment it is the easiest thing to listen to his poem. He ignores my call and moves on. The “Princess” comes out of McDonalds holding a coffee cup in her hands. She is asking for spare change from another close walker by. Tears are flowing from my eyes and freezing on my cheeks.

Seeing the poet’s egotistic attitude, I think of a few poetic lines by myself and start reciting them in the falling snow.

“Oh, life, I am ashamed of you.

Human beings are so unconscionable and insensitive.

Are they all your sons and daughters?”

The “Princess” got a few coins from a pedestrian and carelessly walks by me. She listens to my poetry and stops. She asks me:

“Why are you crying?”

“You have saddened me,” I reply.

“Look stranger, this is life. Learn to live it. If you get sad like this, how will you live it? I am a panhandler. I sleep on the road side in front of the closed shops. I live by peoples’ charities. I don’t worry about yesterday or tomorrow.

I was born in Ghana. My kidnappers sold me to many people in many countries. They made me do hard labor. They raped me. I forget my name of birth. If anyone inquires, I say my name is Princess.”

I listen to her story and move on. She asks where I am heading. I tell her I am going back to my house. She asks if I live close by. I say no. I live far off. She says why don't I take an underground train. I say I don't have any money.

She puts her hands in her pocket and puts a few coins on the palm of my hand. "Here you go. You can go anywhere in an underground train in New York with this much money." I say, "No, no," but she walks away.

The snow is still falling. Stories are spread around me, all over. I forget everything and walk downstairs to go to the underground train platform.

In the train, I'll think about the girl I met walking on Mall Road in Murree. I have met the princess kidnapped in Ghana. Maybe I run into the mountain girl I met in Murree somewhere on the way.

For now, the stories of the stoned to death bastard infant and the young mother in Iran and the Christian woman charged of blasphemy in Pakistan waiting to be hanged are still in my pocket.

I'll write their stories when I find some time. There are too many stories spread around me all over, but I am running short of time.

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# The Swamp

Shaikh Hassamuddin picked up his gun early in the morning and left for geese hunting. As usual, he also took his lovely dog Tum Tum along with him.

He wanted to make it to the lake before the rise of the sun to hunt the geese when their flocks arrive from the far off lands in the north. Since childhood, it was his habit to go geese hunting every morning during the winter.

After the sunrise, when he returned to town, he would stop at his friends' houses and give them the hunted geese hanging on both his shoulders. By the time he would reach his house, his shoulders were free from the burden of the hunted geese.

Tum Tum always helped him collect the hunted geese. Tum Tum had become so good in collecting hunted geese that the moment Hassamuddin would aim and fire at the flock of the geese, he would run and start collecting the falling geese.

One day, a strange thing happened. The moment Hassamuddin fired at the flock of geese, a few of them fell in the swamp close to the lake.

The people of the town had made many stories about the swamp. According to some of the stories, the swamp was so deep that if any animal or human entered it, he wouldn't come out. Over the years, many dogs, goats, cows, buffalos and humans had lost their lives in the swamp. The people of the town tried to fill the swamp by adding more soil in it, but it did not help. The swamp remained as dangerous as ever. Still, if any living thing entered in the swamp, it would never come out alive.

That morning, when Hassamuddin fired at the flock of geese, some of them fell in the swamp. As usual, Tum Tum ran after the falling geese and entered the swamp.

Shaikh Hassamuddin loved Tum Tum. Without wasting a moment, he jumped in the swamp to save Tum Tum. Now, Tum Tum and Hassamuddin were both sinking in the swamp. Being man's best friend, Tum Tum was trying to reach Hassamuddin to help him. Having so much love for Tum Tum, Hassamuddin was trying to reach him. The more they struggled to reach each other, the more they sank in the swamp.

It is a routine in small towns that people get up early in the morning and go to their fields to finish the work before the sunrise to avoid the heat.

Hassamuddin saw some peasants coming back from their fields. He called them for help. They were so far from him that his call for help did not reach them.

Tum Tum had already sunk in the swamp. Only the tip of his nose was still visible. His dreadful sounds were breaking Hassamuddin's heart, but he himself was sinking deeper and deeper by the minute. He could already see his sorry terrible end. He cursed the day he bought his gun for hunting. He cursed his friends who engaged him in the sport of hunting. But now, it was too late. Cursing at anyone could not help him. Instead of moving his body to get out, he closed his eyes and resorted to his fate.

The moment he closed eyes and stopped his movement, the process of sinking stopped. With his eyes closed, he prayed to God to seek his help to get him out of the swamp but God was as far from him as the blue sky.



Eventually, he lost his hope. God was not helping him either. He saw eagles flying high up in the blue sky. The flying flocks of geese were constantly coming from the north and landing in the lake. The geese he had shot with his gun were already dead. The tip of Tum Tum's nose had already vanished in the swamp. His dreadful sounds had become silent. His own body was still slowly sinking.

No matter how intelligent a person is, at some point in time in his life, stupidity takes over. He does something and gets trapped in a swamp. Then, the more he tries to get out, the more he sinks in.

Hassamuddin thought about all his friends whose houses he visited every morning to give them hunted geese and brag about his hunting.

Khawaja's wife always refused to accept any hunted geese from him. She always advised him not to hunt the geese. She used to tell him, "These geese travelled thousands of miles to escape harsh winters in their homelands and to spend some time in mild weather in our areas and give birth to their next generations but we kill them."

He used to laugh at her advice. He always asked her to cook buryyani with goose meat in it and see how tasteful it was. She always refused.

A few times, Hassamuddin's wife cooked buryyani with goose meat in it and sent it to the Khawajas. Mrs. Khawaja accepted the buryyani out of courtesy but never ate it. While she accepted the buryyani from Hassamuddin she said, "He might have to pay with his life for hunting all these geese."

After a few days, Hassamuddin ran into Mr. Khawaja. He asked him how the buryyani cooked with goose meat was. Khawaja replied, "My wife threw

away the buryyani. She did not want anyone in the family to eat it.”

Hassamuddin went into deep thought after listening to Mrs. Khawaja’s sentence. But in a few days, he forgot all about it.

While he was trapped in the swamp, Mrs. Khawaja’s sentence came into his head. With his eyes still shut, he thought maybe this was the time that Mrs. Khawaja predicted. Maybe he was going to pay with his life for killing all those geese.

While these thoughts were going through his head, his body was gradually going down and down in the swamp. Seeing death slowly moving towards him, he lost his senses. He surrendered himself to his fate.

One peasant was going back to his home with a couple of his bulls after tilling his fields. He saw Hassamuddin trapped in the swamp. He immediately threw a lasso on Hassamuddin which slipped through his neck under his arms. His bulls pulled Hassamuddin out of the swamp.

The peasant cleaned Hassamuddin’s body with some fresh water. Then, he rubbed the palms of his hands and toes. In a few minutes, Hassamuddin opened his eyes. He thanked the peasant with tears in his eyes.

When the peasant was ready to leave, he picked up Hassamuddin’s gun and gave it him. Hassamuddin looked at his gun for a few minutes and then he threw it in the swamp. He desperately called his best friend Tum Tum. He started crying when Tum Tum did not respond. The dead geese Tum Tum ran to fetch were still lying in the swamp.

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# The Market

Two hundred miles from Jakarta, in a small town, there was market to buy and sell girls and boys. People with lust for sex came to that market from all over the world.

This was not a story from the age of antiquity. This was the story of the time when people were flying supersonic planes to reach far off destinations in the world within a few hours.

Jim was a factory owner in Bradford. Tens of people worked in his factory. All these workers were the sons and daughters of those immigrants who immigrated to the UK when the sun did not set on the British Empire.

Some of his Indonesian workers told him about this market. He did not believe them. In this age and time, who would allow such a market to function? He wondered.

On one weekend, Jim decided to visit Indonesia and see for sure if such a market existed 200 miles away from Jakarta where one could buy boys or girls.

When he reached Jakarta, and from there on a private car to that town, he was surprised to see a market of that kind did exist. A large number of Americans and Europeans were busy in buying girls and boys of their liking. After making sure that such a market did in fact exist, he talked to a few Americans and Europeans to understand the tricks of the trade.

A trader from New Zealand, whose name was Martin, told him he had bought a house in the outskirts of town a few miles from the market. He told Jim he spent many months in a year in this town. Sometimes,

his friends also came with him from New Zealand. Here, they bought girls and boys of their liking, had a lustful time as long as they liked, and when they wanted to leave, they resold those girls and boys to someone else. Sometimes, they even made money in such deals.

“Is this business legally protected in Indonesia?” Jim asked him.

“Yes and No.....” a surprised Jim looked at Martin. Then he said, “How is it possible a business should have and should not have legal protection at the same time?”

“This business does not have legal protection because there are no laws on the books to protect this business.” Martin did not need to explain further. Jim got the gist of the issue. Then he said he had seen the boys and girls being sold in the market, but wondered how this business really worked.

“This whole trade takes place through agents. As soon as you enter in the market, an agent attaches with you. You choose the girls and boys and then go into his office close by. There, he tells you the price. The duration is fixed. You pay the price and the girls and boys of your choice are delivered to your address.” Those agents’ workers monitor those girls and boys. No girl or boy can violate the terms of sale. If anyone does, he or she is killed within no time.”

After learning the details from Martin, Jim also bought a house in the town and then bought one girl to begin with.

The girl was hardly 17 or 18 years old. She was an Indonesian girl with a fair complexion. She was bought from some far off rural area. Her poor parents had sold her for some small amount of money.

Her name was Amina. Jim bought her from an agent for a few thousand pounds for one year. After purchasing her, Jim brought her to his newly purchased house. Because of his new house, he knew now he would have to visit Indonesia quite often. He lengthened his stay in Indonesia because of Amina. He informed his factory manager in the UK that he had extended his stay in Indonesia for a few weeks. He gave him the necessary instructions on the phone and instructed him to phone him if he had any questions.

Within a few weeks, Jim came to know the whole town and its surroundings really well. He learned about all the hotspots in the area.

He started visiting all such spots along with Amina. He met many European and American visitors in the area. Both European men and women bought girls and boys to indulge in their sexual fantasies.

These Europeans and Americans always arranged parties where they had a lot of exotic activities. Such parties usually took place at someone's house or at some remote hotel. Usually, the purchased boys and girls participated in these parties. Sometimes, these boys and girls were exchanged among the participants.

These people visited this place because the laws in their home countries did not allow them to engage in the human trade. The governments of many third world countries looked the other way from the human trade just for earning foreign exchange.

In these gatherings, Jim learned such a market existed in Thailand, Nepal, Sri Lanka and many other third world countries.

Amina had a beautiful body and a sharp mind. She could easily understand the complexities of situations. She always thought that she would change the circumstances under which her poor father sold her.

Although she was Jim's sex slave, as a woman, she knew her power over men. Soon, she grew her influence over Jim through her innocent and loving acts. She became Jim's psychological need. Once this process started, Jim's psychological dependence on Amina grew stronger.

Jim had bought her for one year. According to the terms, he had to bring her back to the agent on the expiration date or sooner.

During one year, he went back to the UK only a few times. Every time he went to the UK, he told Amina he would be back in a few weeks, but he always returned within a few days. There, he missed her more than ever.

Amina started learning English from Jim as soon as she entered in his life. As Jim did not know Indonesian, her learning English was his need too. She always attended exotic parties with Jim. She always drove the participants of those parties crazy with her youth and beauty. Many of them offered big money to Jim for buying her, but he always refused such offers by pulling her in his arms.

One year passed like a flash of eye. The day to take Amina back to the agent at the market came closer and closer. Before the contract date, he met the agent and showed him his intention to buy her for another year. The agent informed him many other buyers had showed their interest in buying her.

This news made Jim a bit worried. He was a rich man. However, there were much richer businessmen than him from Europe and the USA who were engaged in this business in the market. They were keeping an eye on the expiration date of her contract.

Here he was, worried about losing Amina and on the other hand, his lengthy absence from the UK was

taking a toll on his business. His business was going down by every passing day. His manager was a corrupt man. He maintained Jim's money supply, but usurped all the other vital business resources.

Before Amina had to return back to the market, Jim's manager informed him over the phone that the judge at the Municipal Court had ordered to auction off his factory. This bad news broke Jim's back. He called his attorney in the UK to find out what exactly had gone wrong. Why had a successful business gone bankrupt in one year? His attorney told him his manager had plundered whatever he could from the business. He did not pay the bills to vendors for the whole year. They went to the court and sought bankruptcy orders to recover their losses. The judge obliged them and issued an auction notice.

The day Jim had to take Amina back to the market, the court had set the same date for the auction of his factory.

At last, the day arrived. Before the sun set, he arrived at the market with Amina. The agent informed him about the various offers he had received for Amina. Her admirers had made such high offers which Jim could not beat. With a broken heart, he handed over Amina back to the agent and returned to his house.

As he entered in the house, the phone rang. He answered the phone. It was his attorney speaking on the other end. He was saying that one of his competitors had purchased his factory. The money raised through the auction was not enough to cover all the bills of the vendors. The judge ordered to sell all his personal assets in the UK to pay his liabilities.

With a broken heart, he poured wine in a glass and started drinking. Tears were flowing from his eyes. He

was crying for Amina. In a human trade market 200 miles away from Jakarta, his everything was auctioned off.

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# A Tour of Hell

On the Day of Judgment, everyone's deeds were being examined. My name was too far down in the list. I thought, why not take advantage of the free time and visit hell and meet the people over there with whom I'll have to live forever.

I humbly requested a few angels to give me a hell tour. First, they were surprised to hear my wish and then angry because the process of reviewing peoples' deeds was still going on and I already wanted to visit hell. Surprised, everyone was afraid of hell but I wanted to visit hell as if it was a white sand beach in Mexico.

Seeing them angry, I asked them to take my request to the angel in-charge. Instead of honoring my request, the angel in-charge ordered the angels to have my head examined.

The angels verified the fact that my head was okay and apparently there was no defect in it. Hearing that my head was okay, the angel in-charge was kind enough to approve my request. He ordered the angels to give me a hell tour. While ordering them to give me a hell tour, he instructed them to give me a fireproof dress, as I was not officially declared a resident of hell.

I told angels I had a burning fire inside of me. The hellfire wouldn't have an impact on me. They insisted I must wear fireproof gear before they took me on the tour of hell. Upon the angels' insistence, I wore the fireproof gear and left for the hell tour along with them.

The keepers of hell felt quite comfortable in hell. Although the blazes of hell were flying high, they were walking in the blazes like they were taking a stroll on

beach sand. They were teasing each other while going deeper and deeper in hell.

After reaching in hell, I realized the farsightedness of the angel in-charge. If I had not listened to him, I would have turned to carbon regardless of my poetic internal fire. While walking with the keepers of hell, I felt the strength of the blazes. I asked the keepers how they determine who should stay in which part of hell. The keepers informed me they make this determination on the basis of the sins of the sinners.

I asked them if the same criterion is practiced in paradise. They told me they did not know anything about the arrangements in paradise. They were not allowed to enter paradise. Moreover, by constantly living in hell, they had gathered so much fire in their bodies that if they entered paradise, the residents may feel discomfort. They could only move back and forth in hell. They were prohibited from going towards paradise.

Walking along with the hell keepers, I reached a point where all the religious leaders were burning in the hellfire. These leaders included Jews, Christians and Muslims. I asked the hell keepers why so many religious leaders were thrown in this hell pit. They instructed me to ask this question directly to those religious leaders.

Encouraged by the hell keepers, I asked one of the mullahs who was burning in the hellfire why he was thrown in hell.

Burning in hellfire, the mullah answered, "In life, religion was the psychological need of human beings. We exploited their psychological need and misguided them for our personal gains. God created human beings to share his knowledge with them but we engaged them in rituals. God promised them

everything they worked for. We insisted they could get anything they wanted through prayers. We taught them inaction. Consequently, their lives turned into hells. The more they suffered, the more they depended on us and the more we benefitted from them. Now, we are burning in hell.”

I felt bad for them. I decided to stay away from religious scholars. I moved onward along with the keepers of hell.

All of Pakistan’s leaders were in hell. There was no distinction between generals who took over the country illegally or the politicians who were elected legally. They were burning in hellfire alike. They were crying and screaming with pain. Nobody was there to help them. The keepers of their part of hell were so dreadful that I felt a pain in my stomach. They were throwing blazes on them like mothers throw water on babies while showering them. When the keepers threw blazes of fire on them, they screamed with deep pain and suffering.

I knew many of those Pakistani leaders. In my lifetime, I always wished to shake hands with them and have my picture taken with them. Luckily, I never got a chance to shake hands with them or take pictures with them.

I felt a little satisfaction to see them burning in the hellfire because I could not shake hands or take pictures with them in my life.

I asked one of the fellow keepers the reason why those politicians were thrown in the hellfire. They again encouraged me to ask this question directly to them.

Ignoring the politicians from other countries, I talked to the Pakistani politicians. I asked them why they were thrown in this hell fire. They said politics

provided them the opportunity to improve peoples' lives, make their lives easy, by taking necessary steps, but they used politics for personal gains. They knowingly took decisions which made peoples' lives difficult.

“We knowingly kept them poor. We chained them in invisible chains so that they could never enjoy their God given unalienable right to be free. It was our responsibility to insure and protect their God given unalienable rights and secure them from internal and external exploitation.”

Leaving the politicians behind, I moved on with the hell keepers. On the way, I saw many generals, bureaucrats, official workers from various countries and nations burning in the hellfire. They were already sentenced to burn in the hellfire.

I asked many of them why they were burning in the hellfire. After talking to all of them, I realized that most of the people burning in hell were those who created barriers in the process of evolution, enhancement and the beautification of life, and those who halted the progress of knowledge knowing or unknowingly.

Before I could go further in hell, the keepers of hell sent me back, saying my name was now on the top of the list.

Now, it was time to have my deeds examined.

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# The Murder of Dialogue

Ahmad was an attorney by profession. His family was in this profession for the last three generations. His father and grandfather were both attorneys. His family had a lot of influence in the whole town because of their legal profession. His routine was to leave his house for a long walk after dinner. Sometimes, his acquaintances stopped him at a café or a beetles' shop to discuss current affairs with him. Such discussion sometimes lasted for hours.

The same thing happened today. As soon as he appeared on the street, some of his acquaintances stopped him to have a chat with him. These were college students who stopped him. After a handshake, they bombarded Ahmad with questions. They were worried about the current state of affairs in the country. They wanted to know what exactly was going to happen.

Listening to the students' concerns about the country, Ahmad pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pants' pocket and lit one cigarette. Releasing smoke in the air, he said, "Pakistan has come off the tracks. In the beginning, it was okay, but later, it changed its direction so many times. It lost its vision. Now, even if someone wants to put it on the right track, it won't be possible." Then, he waited for few seconds and said....."The fact of the matter is nobody wants Pakistan to come back on track."

The students heard Ahmad's comments and became more worried about their country. His comments disturbed them. They were like a patient

who knows his disease but who does not want to eat medicine.....particularly a bitter pill.

Feeling bad about their disturbance, he said, “Pakistan can again become a stable, prosperous and vibrant country, but the solution is like taking a bitter pill.....”

“Ahmad, please suggest the solution. We will eat the bitter pill and pull our country out of the terrible crises it is going through. We will also request the masses to try your solution no matter how much of a price they have to pay for it.”

Ahmed heard their response. He went into deep thought. He deeply inhaled his cigarette smoke and said, “Start thinking and acting like human beings. All other problems will automatically be solved.”

The students laughed loudly, but due to their inexperience, the students could not grasp the depth of Ahmad’s thought. Still, they asked, “Ahmad this is not a bitter pill. We are all human beings and think like human beings, but our problems are getting more and more complicated.”

“All Pakistanis are human beings, but they do not think like human beings. They prefer the dead ones on the alive, and kill the living ones to show respect for the dead. They make their and their compatriots’ real lives difficult for the illusionary life after death.

They think like Muslims or Christians, but not as human beings. Those who want to go deeper think like Shias, Sunnis, Wahabis, Brailvis and Qadianis. Some others even think like Punjabis, Sindhis, Balochis, Pakhtoons or Muhajirs.

Ahmad’s argument made the students mum. They understood Ahmad’s point of view. To live like human beings, act like human beings, think like human beings, independent of faith and ideology, and to

respect others regardless of all sorts of differences is indeed a difficult task.

Ahmad continued his discourse, “As a human being, doesn’t everyone need a good house to live?” he asked them a question like an attorney.

The students looked at each other and then said, “Yes, why not, every human being needs a decent dwelling indeed.”

“If it is true, then why do we not plan such housing projects so that every Pakistani regardless what his faith is has a nice house to live?”

After hearing Ahmad’s argument, the students started laughing. They laughed and laughed. Then said, “Ahmad, we know where you gradually want to lead us.”

“Where am I leading you?” Ahmad asked. Then he inhaled and released the smoke of the cigarette in the air. The smoke spread in the air in between Ahmad and the students like a caricature.

“You want to lead us away from religion.” They looked at Ahmad with glittery eyes and answered.

When Ahmad saw those students were not ready to think out of the religious box, he threw another question at them.

“Okay, if all Pakistanis live in good houses, enjoy good meals three times a day, send their children to good schools, get good treatment in case they get sick, enjoy modern transport facilities to travel on well-designed roadways and railways, get good jobs, and work in neat and clean environments, will it put religion in danger?”

All the boys were answerless. They did not know how to answer Ahmad’s question. Deep down in their hearts they tended to agree with him.

Whatever Ahmad had said made a lot of sense. Religious peoples' quiver is never without arrows. Particularly, if young people are trapped in religious thinking, their thinking frames are completely changed. Their point of view about life is fully changed. They prefer religion over everything else. So much so, that if needed, they would sacrifice their lives for religious causes.

"In flourishing and prosperous societies, people curtail religiosity in their lives. Instead, they participate more in cultural activities. Religion loses its priority".....and.....and.... some of the boys interrupted Ahmad.

"In that case, Mullahs lose their control over the people. Their business of selling ideology and rituals goes down. For that reason, they want people to remain poor, jobless and sick so that superstition continues in the society and people keep coming back to them," said Ahmad.

Ahmad was a very respectable man. He was no ordinary attorney. He was well known in the whole country. Nobody would dare to encounter him. But people can say anything behind anyone's back. The boys who raised objections went quietly back to their homes, but the next day, they gathered religious minded students at the college and planned to eliminate Ahmad's enlightenment struggle. They incited them against Ahmad. They leveled charges of blasphemy against Ahmad. Consequently, a large group of students marched towards Ahmad's law office near the court house. They were shouting slogans against Ahmad and demanding that the government should arrest him for spreading hatred against Islam.



The police chief noticed the mob moving towards Ahmad's office. He called Ahmad and informed him about the roaring mob coming towards his office. Ahmad briefed the police chief about his discussion last night with a few college students.

The police chief heard Ahmad and said:

"Mr. Ahmad, do you know how much nonsense has taken over Pakistan? Now, there is no more space for free dialogue in this country."

Ahmad patiently heard the police chief and according to his advice, left his office and went home for the day.

The police erected many barriers in front of the mob so that the angry crowd could not reach Mr. Ahmad's chambers.

Seeing so many angry students ever inclined towards violence, the mullahs also joined them along with their followers.

In fact, they were waiting for this kind of opportunity. They knew about Ahmad's enlightened ideas and wanted to curb him a long time ago. Before joining the students, the mullahs announced the demonstration plan and requested God fearing people to join them on the loudspeakers. The God fearing people who wanted to earn more divine rewards shut down their businesses and joined them.

Demonstrators continued their journey towards Ahmad's chambers, removing police barriers and burning and destroying properties along the way.

At some places, the mullahs stopped and delivered provoking speeches against Ahmad. The demonstrators' emotions further drove high in result of those speeches. Their shouts against Ahmad created a frenzy among the mobsters.

Then, they started struggling with the police. In order to control them, the police opened fire on them. Many demonstrators died from police bullets on the spot. In this commotion, no one could provide them first aid.

On the police chief's advice, Ahmad had left from the office for the day before demonstrators had reached there, but he was very sad about the whole situation. He felt bad about his dialogue with the college students last night.

Alas, he had not discussed anything with those students last night. His forefathers were in public life. They were practicing law since the British Raj, but they never faced this kind of situation ever.

Thinking all this, Ahmad turned on the TV. He watched the news about the demonstrations in the town. Demonstrators had burned down many properties. In response, the police had opened fire on them. Many demonstrators had died. Quite a few of them were students at the local college. Thinking about the wastage of life, Ahmad started sobbing. He could not watch the news any longer. He turned the TV off.

He felt so many young people died because of him. They were their families hope. If they were alive, after finishing their education, they could help their poor parents. They would live full lives. Now, they were dead because of the police firing. This all happened because of him.

Out of remorse, he called the police station and inquired the addresses of the killed students. He pulled his car out of the garage and started driving towards the houses of killed students to share their grief.

After driving a while, he reached the house of one of the killed students. There was a big crowd in front

of the house. When the crowd saw Ahmad coming there, without asking him why he had come there, they attacked him. He tried his best to tell them that he had come to offer condolences to the parents of the deceased, but no one paid attention to his words. He tried to pull his car back, but the crowd set his car on fire.

The car was burning with Ahmad inside it. The crowd was shouting in excitement “Allah-o-Akbar.” The attorney who spoke about enlightenment was burned to death alive in the shouts of “Allah-o-Akbar.”

The next day, all of the college students along with the mullahs from the mosques were rallying in the city to celebrate the death of Ahmad. They were shouting “Allah-o-Akbar.” In their shouts, there was a burning car. In the blazes of burning car, there was Ahmad standing tall. He was saying to the people,

“If you start thinking and behaving like human beings, many of your problems will be solved automatically.”

The smoke of his burning body was flying up and up towards the sky.

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# Burden

Mr. Shaikh was known among his friends as a mild mannered, kind and thorough gentleman. Everyone respected him from the bottom of his or her heart. Mr. Shaikh was a very successful businessman. He had everything nice one could wish to have in life.....a fabulous house, a beautiful car, a chauffeur, any army of servants, a loving and caring and beautiful wife, and beautiful well-mannered children.

However, Mr. Shaikh's life was not always like this. He was born to a very poor family. He could barely afford to finish high school.

He was in high school when his father and mother passed, one after another. He was the only child of his parents. He did not have any close by relatives except for one aunt. She was not a real aunt. His father had a far off relationship with her. Whenever his father explained how she was his aunt, he could not comprehend it.

After the death of his father and mother, his aunt offered him her support but he thankfully refused. After the funeral of his parents, he told his aunt that he would rather live alone in his ancestral house. His aunt tried to convince him but he rejected her support saying if he would ever need her help, he would always knock at her door.

His aunt embraced him and left him with teary eyes. After a few days, he passed high school with distinction. He wanted to continue his education, but after the death of his parents, his biggest problem was how to earn a livelihood. In order to manage his affairs, he took accounts of the limited assets his parents had left for him. His father had left almost

nothing, but his mother did leave some gold bangles and necklaces and rings. Perhaps her parents had given her those ornaments as a dowry when she had wed his father. She preserved those ornaments throughout her life with the hope to pass them on to her future daughter-in-law. He sold those gold ornaments to a local goldsmith and with the proceeds, opened a small gift shop in the local market.

With the opening of the gift shop, his life started focusing around his work hours. He would get up early in the morning, take a shower, dress up, and leave for the shop. There, he would buy a cup of tea and a biscuit from a close by café and have his breakfast. Then, he would arrange and dust off the products and start his business day. Customers would come all day and buy products. Whenever he found few free moments, he ate his lunch from a close by restaurant. His whole day went by this way.

In the evening, he locked the gift shop and left for his house to rest for the night. As soon as he would lie on the bed, the memories of his parents came to his head. However, the exhaustion of a day of long hard work would put him to sleep within no time.

Such was the routine of his life. He would work 6 days a week from morning to evening at the gift shop. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day, he would take a day off from the gift shop, go to the whole sale market in the town by train, and return in the late evening with the next week's supplies.

In a few years, his business grew in leaps and bounds. He hired a couple of workers to assist him in the business. One day, he questioned why he couldn't build his own factory to produce the gifts he purchased from the whole-seller. The idea of building his own factory flashed in his mind like lightening in dark

black clouds. He immediately decided to put his idea to practice.

For this purpose, in the beginning, he hired a few lady workers who knew this type of work and turned part of his house into a factory. With the passage of time, all the gift shop owners who used to go to the town by train to buy supplies for their stores started purchasing their supplies from him. Over the years, he became a big business man. Many whole-sellers around the country started purchasing products made in his factory. The factory that started in a small house turned into Shaikh Industries.

Once he became a big industrialist, many successful and famous families in the country wanted their girls to wed him. By owning a large industry, not only he had become thickly rich, but he also had a very handsome and alluring personality. Consequently, he got engaged with a beautiful girl in a very famous, rich and successful family.

After a short courting, he wedded his fiancée with a great pomp and show. All types of celebrities from around the country participated in his wedding ceremony.

In a few years, Shaikh's life was full of joys and happiness. His every move showed how happy he was in his life. Every step he took, he touched new heights. With the passage of time, his wife gave birth to three children: two sons, and one daughter. They raised their children with tremendous love and care. To fulfill the desires of their children was the most important obligation of their lives.

To take care of their children in the best possible manner, Mr. Shaikh and his wife decided not to bear more children.

After this deliberate decision, Mrs. Shaikh became pregnant a couple of times again, but they terminated each pregnancy with the help of a doctor. They had unlimited resources- no shortage of money, an army of servants, and a big bungalow in which many families could live at a time, but they decided to terminate the pregnancy. They wanted to fulfill their dreams through their three children. They wanted them to have every success in life.

All the time that Mr. Shaikh could spare out of his business, he spent it with his children. He took them to school in the morning, picked them up at the end of the day, took them to the park in the evening, ate dinner with them at one table, and read them story books before going to bed.

When the children grew up, they were the biggest source of pleasure and enjoyment for Mr. and Mrs. Shaikh. All three of them got degrees in medicine and became doctors.

The best day of happiness in their lives was when their oldest son got married. He married one of his class fellows in the medical college. She was the daughter of a powerful bureaucrat in the government.

After the marriage, Mr. Shaikh opened a big hospital in the town for his son and daughter in law. Since they both were trained in child care, within no time, their hospital became the center of sick children's treatment.

In a year or so, Mr. and Mrs. Shaikh became very happy grandparents as their daughter-in-law gave birth to a beautiful boy.

Due to a busy schedule at the hospital, the young couple wanted to hire a nanny to take care of the boy, but Mr. and Mrs. Shaikh took it upon themselves to take care of the baby.



Now, they spent most of their time taking care of their grandson. For the first few weeks, the baby would drink milk and sleep all day. Then, the days turned in weeks and weeks into months. Now, the baby became more aware of his environment. He recognized his papa, mama, grandpa and grandma. He knew his name too. Whenever, they called his name, he responded with excitement and extended his little arms towards them as he wanted to go to them.

Mr. and Mrs. Shaikh's son and daughter-in-law always felt good about their parents love towards the little boy. They thanked the Almighty in their hearts that they had such loving and caring parents.

As the little boy grew a little older, his innocent playful movements delighted their hearts. Particularly, Mr. Shaikh loved to play with his grandson. He would jump up and down, make his faces, and make different animals with his hands to cheer up the little boy.

Although Mr. Shaikh always seemed very happy with the little boy, sometimes, gloom also reflected from his face. He would play with him like a little boy. He laughed and cried with him to keep him joyful.

Mr. Shaikh's family members felt the random reflections of gloom on his face while playing with his grandson.

One evening, when the whole family was having dinner, Mr. Shaikh's son asked him about the sudden reflections of gloom on his face. While eating his dinner and simultaneously playing with his grandson, Mr. Shaikh deflected their question. However, the signs of gloom continued to reflect on his face.

After many days, Shaikh's son and daughter-in-law saw the same shadows of gloom on his face. They asked him what was causing him pain. He again tried

to swerve their question, but they insisted that they wanted to know what saddened him from time to time.

When Mr. Shaikh saw their insistence, he asked them if they terminated pregnancies in their clinic. Both his son and daughter-in-law told him they were trained in medical college to terminate pregnancies.

Mr. Shaikh looked at his son and daughter-in-law and said that when he watched his innocent grandson play, it reminded him of the pregnancy of his wife that he advised her to terminate. Then he started crying. He was saying, “By terminating the pregnancy, I murdered my child-----a child I didn’t even know was a boy or a girl.”

He was saying that when the tablet to terminate the pregnancy would have cut the little embryo in pieces, what agony and pain would it have gone through? Alas, he would not have done so. He did not need to do it. Had the baby been born, he had enough resources to take care of him or her. Instead, he murdered him or her by terminating the pregnancy. If he or she had been born, he would have been a grown up man or woman now.

The son and daughter in law tried to console Mr. Shaikh. “In the early stages, the embryo is nothing but a piece of meat. It takes it a little while before it becomes a baby,” they said. But they could not console Mr. Shaikh.

After crying for a while, Mr. Shaikh felt a little relieved and he asked his son and daughter-in-law to make one promise to him. Both his son and daughter-in-law said his each word was a command for them. They would act on it in letter and spirit.

Listening to his son and daughter-in-law, Mr. Shaikh wiped the tears from his eyes and said, “I want

you to promise me that no matter what it comes to, you will never terminate a pregnancy in your clinic.”

The son and daughter-in-law looked a little reluctantly at each other and then at Mr. Shaikh and said that they promised never to terminate a pregnancy in their clinic.

With their promise, Mr. Shaikh felt relieved. A wave of peace emerged in his face. It looked like a big burden was removed from his heart.

He picked up his grandson in his arms. He kissed his forehead and started playing with him.

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# Karim Agha

In his family, it was everyone's calculated opinion that Karim Agha was a weird man. Maybe he was weird or not, but he always had different thinking from others. Perhaps it was his different thinking that compelled everyone to consider him a weird person.

His family members did not make this opinion about him in a day or two, but from his whole life in front of them. They always thought he was somewhat different than everyone else.

Karim Agha's father, Jamil Agha was a very religious person. He always offered early morning prayers at about 3 o'clock in the morning, then recited the Holy Quran for an hour and then proceeded to the local mosque for regular prayer. This was his routine regardless of winter or summer or whatever season it was. After prayers, he would go to the graveyard to pray for the dead and then go to his bakery.

Karim Agha's mother was not any different than her husband. She regularly offered her prayers and fasted in the month of Ramadan. She always woke up in the morning along with her husband. After getting up, she cleaned her teeth, washed her hands and face, recited the Holy Quran and offered her prayers.

Then, she would start preparing breakfast for her family. She would make Kashmiri chai and paratha, put Kashmiri chai in the thermos and the paratha in the tiffin carrier and give it to Karim Agha to take it to the bakery and hand it over to his father Jamil Agha.

Jamil Agha was never happy to see his son early in the morning. Without expressing his unhappiness, he would take the thermos and the tiffin carrier from him and start eating his breakfast. During his breakfast,

Karim Agha would silently sit near his father. There was hardly an exchange of words between them.

It was not always like this between the father and son. Only for the last few years the father and son had compromised with each other's truths.

In the beginning, Jamil Agha like his other son Raheem Agha tried to take Karim Agha to the mosque for morning prayers, but he could not develop the habit of morning prayers.

Karim Agha was a very soft spoken young man. However, he had very hard stance against religion. Jamil Agha and Raheem Agha always stressed upon him to offer his prayers, but he ignored their requests by saying the day Allah would ask him to pray, he would happily offer prayer. Otherwise, he would not go to the mosque and waste time in offering prayers to an unknown and unseen Allah.

A couple of times, Jamil Agha and Raheem Agha forcefully took him to the mosque, but as soon as they started praying, Karim Agha left the mosque.

A few times, the mosque fellows tolerated Karim Agha's leaving of the mosque during the prayer, but then they asked his father not to bring him to the mosque forcefully.

Jamil Agha was a kind and affectionate father. He did not like to continue using force on his son to make him pray. He left him alone, thinking that one day, he would start observing his religious obligations. But Karim Agha was a different type of character. He had different thoughts and world views than the rest of his family. He was always like this.

In his childhood, when it was time to join a school, he refused to go to a school where he had to wear a uniform. He said he did not want to look like the other boys at the school. There was not a single school in the

town where he could get admission. Jamil Agha used his connections to seek his admission in a school where the head master allowed him to attend classes without a uniform.

The head master thought that he would change in a few days. Seeing other students in a uniform, he would start wearing a uniform too. But he never wore a uniform. However, he impressed his teachers very much with his talent. Impressed with his talent, all the teachers ignored his habit of not wearing a uniform. The head master also permanently exempted him from the requirement of wearing a uniform.

Karim Agha's elder brother Raheem Agha was also a student at the same school. He was also a very talented young boy, but Karim Agha was exceptional.

Anytime any of his teachers talked to him about the issue of wearing a uniform, he would say, "Beauty does not lie in symmetry; it is in asymmetry. Life is beautiful because it is asymmetrical."

He used to say the same thing about offering prayers along with so many other people. Doing the same thing with so many other people kills one's individuality.

He talked like this in his childhood. He had not yet developed a systematized thinking process. When he grew old, he was a free man... free from religion, free from traditions, and free from social etiquettes.

Like his elder brother Raheem Agha, he finished his medical degree from a distinguished medical college. But, he never joined any medical institute to practice medicine. Instead, he continued helping his father at the bakery. He thought he could maintain his freedom by working at the bakery.

Jamil Agha, being a father, was always concerned about his son's weird behavior. However, he always

admired his mild manners. After every prayer, he prayed to Allah to change his son's heart and show him the right path. To him, the right path was to strictly follow the religious edicts. But, his prayers could not change Karim Agha.

Now, the situation was like this. Every morning, Jamil Agha went to the mosque to offer morning prayers, then to graveyard to pray for the deceased, and then to the bakery. Karim Agha followed him with a thermos full of Kashmiri chai and tiffin carrier with a paratha in it. He would leave after his father finished eating his breakfast. Jamil Agha worked at the bakery until mid-afternoon prayer. The moment the caller called for the prayer over the mosque's loudspeakers, Jamil Agha would leave for prayer and Karim Agha would replace him.

Karim Agha's independent and indifferent outlook had become the talk of the town. Many young people were becoming fond of him. They liked his ideas so much that they started following him. With respect, they addressed him as a great teacher.

Karim Agha's fans built a small temple style hang-around hall for him. The hall was carpeted wall to wall with round pillows for the audience to sit against the walls. One wall had only one round pillow, whereas the rest of the walls had many of them.

Every evening, after evening prayer, Jamil Agha would leave for his home. Karim Agha would close the bakery and head towards this congregation hall. Upon his arrival, his fans would respectfully stand up in his honor. When he sat against the one round pillow, they would all sit around him. Then, he expressed his views on the topic of their liking. He spoke like the flowing spring water which cleaned all sorts of doubts and delusions from their minds.



Usually, he talked about religious, philosophical, psychological and art-related issues. Instead of talking of bookish knowledge, he heavily used common folks' everyday observational knowledge to express his views. Consequently, every word he uttered directly registered in their hearts and minds.

One evening, he closed the bakery and left for the congregation hall. His father Jamil Agha also accompanied him. He wanted to know what attracted so many people to hear his son. When the father and son reached the congregation hall, about 50 young men were sitting against round pillows against three walls. One round pillow against one wall was still available. They all stood up in honor Karim Agha and his father Jamil Agha.

Karim Agha offered the round pillow to his father and then they both sat against that wall. Karim Agha looked at everyone in the congregation hall and then started his discourse:

“Knowledge constantly evolves. This process never stops. Sometimes, this process speeds up and sometimes, it slows down, but it continues to evolve. This process maintains its continuity by travelling through fresh minds. Whichever culture provides it fresh minds, it migrates there. As long that culture provides fresh energies to this evolutionary process, it flourishes there. As soon as that culture stops providing it fresh energies, it moves to another fresh culture. This way, not only does knowledge save itself from decadence, but it also continues its evolution. The cultures that continue refining themselves with evolving knowledge flourish. The moment they break away from the evolutionary process of knowledge, they become weak and eventually die down.

Life is a one way journey. There are no u-turns in life. Be it individuals or nations, the knowledge demands their full commitment to grow with it. The moment they get tired, their social lethargies them over. Eventually, they get buried in graves. Sometimes, tombstones tell who they were. Sometimes, they even don't have tombstones. They are forgotten forever. No one knows who they were."

Karim Agha was speaking. His fans were listening to his discourse with full attention. Jamil Agha was also listening to him. The lights of glowing lamps in the hall were reflecting on their faces.

Karim Agha was speaking and Jamil Agha was crying. Tears were flowing from his eyes. Today, he was seeing his son in a different light.

Karim Agha finished his discourse. Then, a question and answer session started. Karim Agha affectionately answered every question.

Jamil also asked for the permission to say something. All of the young men sitting in the hall attentively looked towards Jamil Agha.

Jamil Agha said, "I am very pleased to join you guys. I like Karim Agha's discourse. May I join you guys in your daily sessions?"

Everyone's eyes glittered when Jamil Agha uttered these words. The lights in the hall became sharper. Karim Agha took his father's hand in his hands and respectfully kissed it.

Jamil Agha pulled his son in his arms and then kissed his forehead. Then he said, "Karim Agha, whoever and whatever you are, I am proud of you and I'll always remain proud of you. I am thankful to Allah who gave me a son like you. I pray to Allah that he should grant everyone a son like you."

Listening to his father for the first time in his life, Karim Agha felt a big burden from his head was removed. Tears of joy started flowing from his eyes.

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# The Druggie

After getting a vote of confidence from the parliament, when Mr. Syed reached in his office as Prime Minister of Pakistan, his staff candidly welcomed him. His private secretary introduced him to his every staff member. After the proper introductions, the private secretary asked the Prime Minister if he needed a cup of tea or coffee to start his day. The Prime Minister thanked him and sat in his seat.

The Private Secretary, holding his notebook, walking behind the Prime Minister, entered in his office. The Prime Minister asked him to close the door. The Private Secretary obliged the Prime Minister and closed the door.

The Prime Minister handed the Private Secretary a list of things for his daily use. He asked him to have those things ready for his use all the time.

The Private Secretary looked at the list. On top of the list was written "OPIUM." "Opium," he looked at the Prime Minister inquisitively.

"Yes, dear. You know I am not only the Prime Minister of Pakistan. I have multiple other social responsibilities. I am a syed (someone from the holy prophet's lineage). I have thousands of followers. Their forefathers were the followers of my forefathers. They are my followers. They bow in front of me and kiss the ground. They kiss my hands and feet and present their offerings to me.

This is a very difficult task. That's why I start my day by taking a dose of opium. If I don't take a dose of opium, it becomes difficult to have that many people kiss my hands and feet and accept their offering all day long. Now, I have become the Prime Minister of

Pakistan. My responsibilities have triplicated. I cannot even think of starting my day without having a dose of opium in the morning.”

The Private Secretary heard the Prime Minister and looking at him inquisitively said, “But sir, there is no opium shop in the capital. No previous prime minister ever used opium. I have to find out where I can get it from.”

The Prime Minister affectionately looked at the Private Secretary and said, “It is not difficult to find opium. In my city, I have sole proprietorship rights to sell opium. Many ministers of my cabinet are syed like me. They also regularly use opium. You can talk to their private secretaries. If they need opium for their bosses, you can get opium for them as well from my dealership. Send them according to their need and save enough out of it for my daily use. Sometimes, I use it more than once during the day.

Also, find out if the President also needs it. I know he uses it regularly. If he needs it, you can supply him opium from here as well. But there is one warning: make sure, the word opium is not mentioned anywhere in the papers. We are political people. We don’t want that the people should learn about this matter. This whole thing should remain under your control. You can pay for the opium from my discretionary funds. After all, I am now the prime minister of the country. To fulfill my needs is now a national responsibility.”

The Private Secretary promised the prime minister to send a helicopter right away and get as much opium as possible from his dealership.

After taking instructions from the Prime Minister, as soon as the Private Secretary entered in his office, his assistant told him that the private secretaries of many ministers and presidents wanted to talk to him.

He looked at the list of the private secretaries who wanted to talk to him. They all worked with ministers who were real syeds. They all wanted to get opium for their bosses.

He immediately called in the helicopter pilot from the Prime Minister's air squad. He ordered him to fly to the Prime Minister's home town and get all the available opium from his dealership as soon as possible.

The helicopter pilot had never heard this type of command before. He inquisitively looked at the Private Secretary. He read the signs of urgency in the Private Secretary's eyes and immediately ran to his helicopter. He turned on the helicopter and within a flash of the eye, flew to the Prime Minister's hometown.

After flying for about an hour, he reached the Prime Minister's hometown. There, he found some open space close to the local police station. He landed his helicopter there.

When the police officers in the police station saw the helicopter landing close by, they immediately ran towards it. The pilot told them he had come from the office of the Prime Minister. He was there to get all the available opium from the dealership and take it to the nation's capital. One of the police officers immediately ran to the opium dealership. There, he learned another helicopter had come before him and took all the available opium.

The helicopter's pilot was very much disappointed and hopeless when he heard this detail from the police officer. He was disappointed because today was the Prime Minister's first day in his office and this was his first order of the day. He was hopeless because he flew that far to acquire opium, but he was returning empty

handed. What would he now tell the Private Secretary to the Prime Minister?

He thought about some other close by cities where he could pick up some opium instead of returning empty handed. He could not think of any other city that had an opium dealership.

In fact, so far, all the prime ministers or presidents who ruled from capital did not consume intoxicants. Those who did consumed liquor instead of opium, etc.

He knew some syed presidents and ministers of former governments who consumed alcohol, but he knew none who consumed opium. Those who consumed alcohol did it privately. Even their staffers had no clue about their alcohol consumption. Now, the things had reached the point where the Private Secretary to the Prime Minister had asked him to fetch opium from a far off opium dealership.

His helicopter was flying to the capital and his mind was entangled with such confusing thoughts. Many past presidents who consumed alcohol emerged in his mind. Alcohol was always available in their office or residence. They could take a drink or two whenever they liked.

He thought about contacting the control room and informing the Private Secretary about his returning without opium. Then, he thought he would be back in the capital before his message would reach the Private Secretary. Moreover, the Private Secretary had warned him in the morning that the news of the opium purchase should not leak to anyone.

With these thoughts, he reached back to the capitol. He immediately landed his helicopter on the helipad and tiresomely ran to the Private Secretary to break the news of failure to him.



When he entered in his office, the Private Secretary was talking to someone over the phone. He read from his conversation that he was talking to the Private Secretary of some other syed minister. He was saying:

“It is indeed good news that the ADC of the President has taken upon himself the responsibility of opium supply in the capital. Now, they don’t have to worry about it. Now, all those who need opium they can directly get it from President’s ADC.”

Before the helicopter pilot could open his mouth to give the bad news to the Private Secretary, the Private Secretary told him he did not need to worry. The President’s ADC had fetched all the opium from the Prime Minister’s dealership before he made it there.

The helicopter’s pilot and all of the other staffers looked at the Private Secretary meaningfully and said that they had not heard anything, seen anything, or known that the President, Prime Minister and many of their ministers were druggies.

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# Eyes on the Trees

Who he was looking for, he did not know. Mosques, temples, churches, bars, discos and the naked beaches of oceans, he went everywhere.

He felt like his eyes were always on the trees circling in all directions, waiting for a lovely face, a beautiful voice, and a pleasant fragrance to emerge as a feeling so that he could cleave with it and turn in whirling smoke.

He turned on his computer. Thousands of emails were waiting for him in his inbox. Without bothering to look at them, he deleted all of them with the push of one button.

Then, he browsed Facebook. Too many friendship invitations, messages and commentaries tried to engage him. All of the names, faces, and pictures were of unknown people and places.

The variety of names reflected those who had sent him friendship invitations and they did not belong to one culture. They were from all around the globe .....from China, Japan, England, India, the Middle East and Europe.

The pictures reflected the people whose eyes were on the trees and they did not belong to one gender or the other, one age or the other, or one kind or the other.....men, women, girls, boys and some animals.

However, it was difficult to tell from the pictures of animals if they really represented the nature of the people who were using their pictures.

Then, he realized it was not only he whose eyes were on the trees. There were many more like him who had their eyes on the trees. All the time, their eyes

circled all directions in case suddenly, a lovely face, a beautiful voice, a pleasant fragrance emerges from somewhere and they cleave to it.

To wander in mosques, temples, churches, pubs, discos and on the naked beaches for thousands of years is not an easy task.

For how long one can listen to the mullahs' yawning sermons in mosques, the pundits' murmuring songs in temples, and the fathers' tiresome reasoning in churches to prove that God had a son, his name was Jesus, and the Romans hanged him to redeem our sins that we never committed? For how long can one wander in pubs to see fake smiles of bartenders and in strip clubs to watch the bare bodies of swirling girls and on naked beaches to see with wounded eyes the open shells spread all over, each waiting for a single drop of rain which is never going to fall?

“Who are you, brother?”

Two eyes from a tree asked.

“Who are you.....?”

“Look, I am dying. I need your help.”

“Who are you and where are you?”

“I am in Islamabad.....I wandered all night naked on the streets of the city, but I did not find a single man.....”

On Facebook, it was not only him who had his eyes on the trees circling in all directions waiting for a lovely face, a beautiful voice, a pleasant fragrance to emerge as a feeling so that he could cleave with it.

He hurriedly turned off his computer, put a towel on his shoulders, and left his apartment to wander the streets. San Francisco proved much better than Islamabad.

In a few minutes, his brown hair spread all over his face with a wet fresh breeze coming from the ever restless Pacific Ocean.

He was luckier than the restless unlucky soul wandering on the streets of Islamabad. He did not have to wait longer for a lovely face, a beautiful voice, or a pleasant fragrance to emerge as a feeling so that he could cleave with it. His body was already drenched in perspiration.

San Francisco is jungle of lovely faces, beautiful voices and pleasant fragrances. There is no compulsion of day or night. The drops of perspiration were falling like pearls from his brown hair because of the kind fresh breeze coming from the Pacific Ocean.

He wrapped the towel around his head. The drops of perspiration were absorbed in the towel. He removed the towel from his head. His skull felt a little cold.

In the city, the wind was jumping like desert herds on the roofs of tall buildings changing their faces at every jump. With a towel on his shoulders, he continued walking towards the naked beach. On the way, he saw that Christ's dummy hanging on the triangular tower of the church had turned upside down. He smiled. Then, he threw a flying kiss to Christ's upside down hanging dummy and continued walking.

A little farther from church, a few drunken boys and girls were walking out of a night club. A few of them were walking naked. The others had multi-colored hair standing in the middle of their heads. For a while, he continued wandering in the city. A lovely face, a beautiful voice and a pleasant fragrance was still with him, but by now, his desire had died down.

His eyes on the trees were already tired. They were getting red because of the strong flow of blood in the nerves.

He picked up his eyes from the trees and tried to clean them with the towel. He saw streaks of blood on the towel. He ignored those streaks of blood on the towel and continued walking towards the naked beach. Then, he felt the touch of kisses of cold sand under his feet which filled his whole body. A pleasant unknown fragrance was nestling within his body.

Standing on the naked beach, he looked at the waves of the Pacific Ocean. A full moon was taking a shower in the waves of the ocean in the darkness of night.

He picked up his eyes from the trees, put them in their sockets, and lied down with the thousands of other open shells on the naked beach, waiting for a drop of rain which may or may not fall.

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# Red Rose

I think about you a lot. I think about you so much I don't even let my mind slip away for one moment. I like to think about you. When I look at your face, I feel like I should continue looking at you.

When you lie down and close your eyes, you look so good I cannot even move my eyes from your face for one moment. Then you open your eyes. When you open your eyes, you look even prettier. I start thinking about what is in you that I love the most.....your eyes, your eyebrows, or your nose? I cannot make up my mind. I just keep looking at you. I feel like I should move forward and touch your silky hair. Before I touch your hair, the mere thought of touching it creates a swoosh in my hands.

Your lips, you cannot imagine how I feel when I look at them. Their slight movement sometimes gives me life and sometimes death. There is a strange longing in this life and strange delight in this death. I cannot decide what I should ask for, life or death.

You know when you say A the first letter of my name, the movement of your lips and chin vibrates my entire universe. I feel somehow that the movement of the entire universe depends on the movement of your lips. I want to sacrifice my life for this movement. But I control myself.

My self-control breaks down along with my world of lights and fragrances when your lips pronounce S, the next letter in my name. I get intoxicated when the S slips through your slightly opened mouth touching your tongue behind the upper parts of your teeth.

Then, your hair slips out of my hands like silky threads. I move forward to hold them, but they

transform into a strange light fragrance. It becomes impossible for me to hold the fragrance. I try again and again to hold them, but the fragrance enters in every particle of my body.

I start rolling like a snake on the floor. I feel good about my snake like condition. I feel like my poison has spread in my own body.....deep and deep.....all over. I wish I could narrate this feeling in words, but I don't find any appropriate words. All the words silently slip away from me.

I do not come out of this condition yet, but your tongue moves a little forward to say R, the next letter in my name.

Watching this movement of your tongue, my hands reach my collars. I tear my collars like a madman.

Finding me in this condition, you change your mind. You leave my name half pronounced. The colors of the rainbow turn into a smile and spread on your face.

I feel like I am on the floor kneeling in front of Maryam's statue. Maryam is looking at me and smiling.

"How does nature create such beautiful things," I think. Thousands of colorful flowers start dancing all around me.

So many beautiful colors, so much attraction, that my heart leaps towards them. I move forward and kiss one red rose.

You open your eyes.....beautiful eyes.....so beautiful.....all the words that can describe their beauty slip out of my mind.

I run after those words like a kid who runs after butterflies in a garden. I plead with you to complete my name. I say, "So far you have uttered the first three



letters of my name. You have to utter five more letters to complete my name.”

You refuse. You say “no,” you cannot do it. You say the way the utterance of the first three letters of my name impacted me scared you. You say you cannot take the chance of uttering the rest of the letters of my name.

I notice when she says no to me, a strange sadness spreads all over her face. Her sad face breaks my heart into thousands of pieces. She collects the pieces of my heart with the delicate and slender tips of her fingers. I see her fingers bleeding. She makes tattoos on my body with her bleeding fingers. She says, “I don’t know what your two restless eyes keep looking for in me. However, here is a red flower for you.”

I start kissing the red flower madly. Her hair again slips like silky threads out of the palms of my shaky hands.

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# Freedom

Haji Rehmat Ali was a successful man in every respect. Worldly, he had everything a person could ask for. He belonged to a business family. He himself owned a brokerage company with a large cliental base. Religiously, he followed all religious edicts in letter and spirit. He stayed away from music and never allowed anyone in his family to play any instrument at any family occasion.

Luckily, he also had a well-mannered, beautiful wife who walked with him through all the thick and thins of life.

Like Mr. Rehmat Ali, she also followed religious edicts strictly in her life. She regularly offered the five daily prayers. Allah bestowed them four babies, one after the other: two boys, one girl and then another boy.

Haji Rehmat Ali and his wife brought-up all their children according to religious codes. From childhood to youth, they followed religious edicts in such a way that everyone in the town felt envious of them.

All four children, along with following religious codes, were very successful in their worldly affairs. With the passage of time, each one of them married into well-known families and founded a successful family.

By the time Haji Rehmat Ali and his wife ended their worldly journey, their children had several of their own babies.

Haji Rehmat Ali's daughter's name was Razia. Like his other children, Haji Rehmat Ali made sure Razia followed religious edicts throughout her life in

letter and spirit. When she grew up, Haji Rehmat Ali arranged her marriage to a perfect religious gentleman.

Razia was a true image of her parents. She gave birth to several children and brought them up just like her parents had done with her and her brothers. Like her parents, Razia was also well-off in her life. She had everything one could ask for. But still, she could not fulfill many of her wishes. Since her childhood, she had a small wish—a wish to play drum and sing with her friends at family events that took place from time to time. She could not fulfill this wish because Haji Rehmat Ali had imposed strict religious codes in the family. No one was allowed to play or listen to music, listen or sing songs or dance at family occasions.

Whenever a marriage ceremony took place in the families of close relatives, young girls played drums, sang songs and danced. Razia always sat on the side. She could not participate in any such activities due to the strict religious discipline imposed by her father.

In her own family, when her brothers got married, Haji Rehmat Ali did not allow any such festivities. Her brothers' marriage parties took place without music or any other glittery event according to the nature of the function. Their father did not allow them to perform any pompous marriage related activities. Just the family went to the brides' houses, mullahs ritually declared them wives and husbands and they brought the brides to their houses.

When Razia got married, no such festivity took place at her or at her in-law's house. Her in-laws were not any different than her own family. Her father-in-law also believed in strict religious discipline. That is how he brought up his family too. Her husband, on the day of her wedding, just wore one garland around his

neck and arrived at her house. The mullah recited a few ayas from the Quran, asked them if they accepted each other as their spouses and declared them husband and wife. Both families congratulated each other. They ate some sweets together and she left with her in-laws to her husband's house.

Razia lived all her life with her husband as her parents had taught her. She gave birth to several children. She brought them up as her parents had trained her. She made sure her children strictly followed the religious codes. Her children also became successful persons when they grew up. She arranged their marriages like her own.

Every time any of her children got married, she wished to have a big wedding party. She wanted to invite hundreds of people, play music, sing songs, have the girls dance, and make a big show, but she could not do it. Her husband, like her father, did not allow her to do all this. He conducted his children's marriages like his own marriage was conducted.

Slowly, slowly, her children gave birth to their own children. It became a big family in which her children, her daughters-in-law, and their children lived together. Because of so many family members were living under the same roof, there was a lot of hustle bustle at the house all the time. Everyone in the family was still following the same religious codes that her father Haji Rehmat Ali had adopted for his family.

In this routine of life, one day came when her husband got sick, remained bedridden for a few days and eventually passed away. She buried him with all the religious rituals.

After her husband's death, she became the center of the family focus. Everyone in the family looked towards her for guidance and advice. Her

grandchildren always made her very happy. Even after the death of her husband, her grandchildren giggled and played with her so much that she never felt the absence of her husband.

Still, whenever marriage ceremonies took place in the family, Razia wanted to play drums and sing songs and dance with the girls, but she always refrained herself due to the strict disciplinary training she had from her parents.

At last, the day came when she herself fell sick. Due to the sickness, her body became increasingly frail each day. Eventually, she believed that death was imminent.

During her sickness one day, she expressed a strange desire to one of her sons. She asked him to go to the market and buy one wedding songs cassette. Her son went to the market and brought her one cassette. When he returned, she asked him to play that cassette in the cassette player. As soon as he turned the cassette player on, the wedding songs were echoing all over the house.

Listening to the wedding songs in the house, Razia's all sons, their wives, and their children gathered around her.

With these wedding songs, she got up from the bed, her lips were repeating the lines of songs and her feet were dancing with their tunes. As long as cassette was on, she continued singing and dancing.

Her family members were looking at her in astonishment. Her grandchildren were clapping around her with joy.

Before the cassette would end, Razia tumbled and fell on the floor. Her soul left her body. Eventually, Razia fulfilled her wish. She freed herself from the

strict religious discipline of her father Haji Rehmat Ali.

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# Roundtable Conference

The moderator of the conference refreshed the memories of the participants about the proceedings of the previous week's session.

"Last week, we all agreed that political freedom is more important than economic freedom," the moderator just said this much and the second participant interrupted him. "No, this is not true. Last week, we did not reach any conclusion. We were still discussing the issue when the conference time lapsed. We were still debating if preference should be given to political freedom over economic freedom or economic freedom over political freedom."

The third participant discarded both the moderator and the second participant, "The issue is not political freedom or economic freedom. The real issue is mental freedom." As soon as the third participant made these remarks, a heated debate started again.

The moderator asked him, "Now, you tell us what do you mean by mental freedom and why do you prefer it over political or economic freedom?"

"Listen, if you have freedom to have enough of food, or have the freedom to vote, but you do not have the freedom to think, and a thought control police is monitoring you all the time, what good is it to freedom to have enough of food or a freedom to vote?" The third participant explained his point.

"Now, where does the question of a thought control police come from in the discussion?" The second participant almost got irritated.

The moderator saw the discussion leading in a different direction. To put the discussion back on track he said, "Isn't it better that we first finish our

discussion about political and economic freedom? Then, we can discuss other freedoms.”

The third participant saw the moderator and the second participant coming on one page. He poked in, “So far, I have talked about mental freedom and you guys are already in the mood of wrapping up the discussion. What will happen if I start talking about women’s freedom? Perhaps you guys will leave the discussion inconclusive? But I won’t do that because I think the real freedom is mental freedom and all other freedoms are tied with it. If people become mentally free, then no power in the world can stop them from acquiring all other freedoms.”

The third participant was speaking and the moderator and the second participant surreptitiously looked at each other. Then, the second participant tried to give a new twist to the discussion. “Listen, my friend; all human beings are born free. They can think anything they like. No one in the world can stop them from thinking the thoughts of his or her choice. I don’t understand where you come from with the idea of a thought control police.

“No, no, you don’t understand where, when and how the journey of mental freedom started. This process started with the first dawn of time. God wanted to create a fearful man—a man who would bow before him all the time. The Devil did not like God’s idea. Instead, he wanted a man who should exercise free will. That’s when and how the first free thought came into existence. The Devil saw how innumerable doors started opening in all directions when he mentioned the words free will. The man standing close by saw so many doors opening one after another. He rejected God’s idea of total submission

and adopted the Devil's idea of free will. To show his defiance, he ate the prohibited fruit.

As soon as man ate the prohibited fruit, billions of lamps of possibilities lit up in all directions. Since then, many policemen of thought control come wearing various masks to curtail human freedoms. Sometimes, they come as fathers, sometimes as school teachers, sometimes as mullahs, and sometimes as state and state institutions.

However, the hidden energy inside man since the day of creation is still expanding. The thought control forces cannot control that ever expanding energy. Thought control forces close one door, someone opens another door—a much bigger and larger door. Thought control forces get scared and become more ferocious.”

The moderator and the second participant heard these thoughts and got worried. They looked at each other and then unanimously said, “We came here to discuss economic and political freedom. You are telling us stories of the day of creation. We fail to understand from where you picked up this bad habit of side tracking the issues.”

The moderator and the second participant were really upset with the third participant. The conference was already in the second week and they were still discussing the first item on the agenda. They did not want to spend that much time on this item. They wanted to resolve this issue as soon as possible and move on. One week had already passed in the chicken first or egg first debate.

To wrap up this session of the conference, the moderator and the second participant made one offer to the third participant: “If you agree to wrap up the issue of economic and political freedoms in this

session, we promise to put the mental freedom issue on the next session's agenda.”

The third participant was a peace loving person. He accepted their offer. The second session of the roundtable conference ended. They all agreed to meet the next week for the third session. While leaving the session, the third participant commented, “You don't want to move beyond political and economic slavery. You will take centuries to realize true mental freedom. The journey started on the day of creation and still continues. Human beings have to do a lot before they will enjoy true freedom. Roundtable conferences cannot do this for them.”

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# Walking in the Dark

Then, the whole town drowned in the dark—the kind of dark no one knew or heard about before. It would be difficult to describe it in words. So much so, that even if someone would utter a word, before reaching the ears of any listener, it would drown in the darkness. How many people resided in that town, no one really knew. The day last time the sun set in that town, many people did not return to their homes.

Who went where, nobody knew? Wherever someone could go, he went there. In fact, it would be better to say that anyone who found an opportunity to leave the town left. How many people could not leave the town, no one had an exact idea. Some guessed they were in the hundreds, others guessed they were in the thousands, yet some others guessed they were in the hundreds of thousands.

Those who left, some of them were born in this unlucky town. Their forefathers were born and died and buried in the same town. Those who decided to leave the town, some of them, hurriedly got some bones of their forefathers' remains and made necklaces out of them and put them around their necks.

Some of them were not born in that town. They just had migrated at some point of their lives in that town. They were already wearing necklaces made out of the bones of their forefathers around their necks. They stayed in this town for a short while and then sensing the upcoming darkness, left the town.

Therefore, it was almost impossible to estimate the exact number of people who remained in the town after the darkness took over. But did it make any difference how many people were there? The

important thing was that the people who were there had to help themselves to cope with the darkness. Nobody from the outside could help them because no means of any sorts of internal or external communication were available. Internally, if anyone uttered any words, his words drowned in the darkness. Moreover, before darkness took over their town, they had already destroyed all means of communication and means of turning on any kind of light. Therefore, they were all struggling in their own capacities.

That town's geographical location was also somewhat tedious. On three sides, there were very rough, tough and high hills. On the other side, it was a very small and narrow valley which ended at a deep ferocious sea. No one could dare to enter the sea by any means to leave the town. Those who could come to this town had already come. Those who could leave the town had already left. Those who were there were left with no option.

The darkness was so thickly spread from the top of the hills to the waters of the sea that those who were struggling could neither go up on the hills, nor reach the waters of the sea. Since their words were not reaching each other, they tried to use their hands to communicate with each other. But as it always happens, bad-luck never comes alone. It always brings many other troubles along with it. The same thing happened to the prisoners of this darkness. As they were trying to communicate with each other with their hands, they started hurting each other. Instead of helping them, their hands started reaching each other's necks. In this struggle, the distinction of young, old, men, women, and children finished. Anyone whose hands reached the neck of the other just suffocated him to death. Those whose hands reached the women's

breasts, made their breasts bleed. Those whose hands reached the young boys, abused them and then killed them.

The darkness further thickened around them. While hurting each other, they went to the rough, tough and high hills. The hills refused to give them a walkway out of that darkness. Then, they went to the narrow valley to reach the sea. The waves of the sea looked to them like ferocious lions ready to eat them. They helplessly screamed, but the darkness killed their screams right in their throats.

Was it somehow possible to get out of this darkness? They were all thinking and walking in circles through the darkness. However, their hands were constantly wounding each other. If some hands tried to calm them down, they attacked those hands like hungry rats. They would chew those hands to the extent that those hands and the bodies behind those hands lost all their meat. Then, they would dance on their leftover bones until the bones would become plain mash.

Walking in the dark, these people forgot all about light. Their eyes started seeing in the dark like creatures of the dark. They could use this new strange ability to get out of the dark, but they remained there until their hands turned into the paws of wild animals.

Now, they looked at each other like prey. They had become each other's food stock. Thus, they started preying upon and eating each other like animals. Sometimes, many attacked one and ate him or her and sometimes, one attacked many and consumed them.

Those who had left with the necklaces of the bones of their forefathers in their necks were thinking about those who were left in the darkness, but they did not

know how they could reach them and set them free from the darkness.

Sometimes, they would try to throw away the necklaces made out of the bones of their forefathers, but they could not.

Whenever they tried to do so, they felt their words slipped from their lips and were absorbed into the dust. Then, they would look at their hands. They would feel their hands were turning into paws of wild animals.

A long line of thick darkness would enter in their eyes and from their eyes into their bones. They would feel that the darkness they left behind was eventually reaching them.

Their hands would immediately reach the necklaces made out of the bones of their forefathers in their necks and strongly hold on to them.

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# Richard

Nobody really knew his name. However, everyone agreed his name was Richard. Since everyone agreed, we will also call him Richard.

Who was Richard? Where did he come from? No one really knew, but there were many stories about this. However, everyone agreed on one thing—that he used to be a police officer in the neighboring town. Now, there was no police officer sort of thing in him. He was a pure and a simple beggar.

Although he was a beggar, he was a strange beggar—a beggar who no one had any complaints about. Unlike other beggars, he never asked anyone for spare change or anything else. Absorbed in his thoughts, he moved all day up and down on University Avenue. If he ever got tired, he sat somewhere for few minutes and then started walking again.

Winter or summer, rain or shine, this was his routine. At night, he slept under the trees in front of one of the UCB offices.

He wore a strange dress. In the summer, he wore a couple of chocolate color polyethylene garbage bags. In the winter, he increased the number of bags. Since air could not enter the bags, it helped him maintain his body temperature.

He never went to a barber shop to have his hair cut or beard trimmed. Consequently, his face remained almost invisible under his hair. Perhaps in winter, these hairs helped keep his head and face a little warm.

Richard lived on the streets of Berkeley, a small university town, on the other side of the bay across San Francisco. Berkeley is a fair weather city. Summers and winters are usually mild. Sometimes,

when Alaskan winds blow through the area, it does get cold in the winter; otherwise, the weather remains at tolerable levels.

This was the perfect weather for a homeless man like Richard. Perhaps that's why he lived a carefree life in Berkeley.

The people who knew Richard's story said it was an unpleasant incident in his professional life that morphed his life.

According to them, once, Richard was chasing few criminals. The criminals opened fire at Richard. He responded by firing back at the criminals. One of his bullets struck a passing by girl. She fell right there and died on the spot.

After this incident, Richard left his police job and instead of doing something else, he preferred to live as a homeless person. He started to remain silent, stopped wearing normal clothes, and gave up eating or drinking in a normal fashion.

According to the rules, being a police officer, he could easily get away with this accidental incident. Particularly, in the city that he worked as police officer, police encounters with criminals were a normal routine. In such incidents, casualties of police officers or criminals were considered usual matters. The police officers were allowed to fire in such kinds of encounters.

But Richard was a different kind of police officer. The human in his body was more powerful than the Richard who wore a police uniform. That's why as a result of this incident, he preferred to say goodbye to the police job and give up all the niceties of life.

A few years back, winter all of sudden became very harsh. The winds of Alaska started blowing in the direction of the Bay Area. Berkeley's always pleasant

weather became ruthlessly cold. A few kind business owners on University Avenue asked Richard to sleep at a hotel for the night but he refused. One of them even rented a room for him at a local hotel, but he preferred to sleep under the same flock of trees.

Before leaving for their homes at the end of a hard day, the business owners requested the hotel receptionist to bring Richard into the hotel and let him sleep there. He promised to do so, but Richard did not budge.

The next morning, the business owners returned to their businesses. They saw that an ambulance was taking Richard's dead body away. The hotel receptionist told the business owners he tried his utmost to make Richard sleep inside, but he did not pay any attention to him.

For many decades, Richard slept under the flock of trees, but this night was not that kind with him. The polyethylene bags on his body could not save him from the harsh Alaskan cold. Richard was a silent citizen of this community. Nobody ever saw him talking to anyone, asking for help from anyone, or eating and drinking anything.

Yet his death saddened many people. By the afternoon, there was a big pile of flowers where Richard used to sleep. For the next many days, people put so many flowers there that the city had to put a police line to stop the people from putting more flowers there.

A homeless man died on the street from the cold but he left a story behind—a story which may not have another example.

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# Heir

Before he was hanged, I went to see him in his death cell as his attorney. He put his head on my shoulder and started crying.

Still, there remained a few days to his hanging. His appeal and mercy petition was already rejected by the Supreme Court and the president. The judge had already signed his death warrants, which were waiting for implementation. I put my hands on his shoulder and tried to console him.

“No one can fight with the state. I tried my best to convert your death sentence to life imprisonment, but the prosecution’s case was so strong. The judge had no choice but to award you a death sentence,” I somberly told him.

“No sir, I am not afraid of death. One day, everyone faces death. Someone falls ill and dies, someone else dies in an accident, and someone like me dies with a rope on his neck by hanging. But my grief is somewhat different. This grief is not going to go away with my death. It will continue haunting my soul after my death.”

I looked at him with a surprise. Being his attorney, I was fully aware of the details of his case. There may have been hardly a thing that I did not know. After all, what was it that made him cry like a little baby?

It all happened twelve years ago. He and his brother inherited a large tract of land from their father after his death.

Both brothers decided that instead of dividing the land, they would continue tilling the land like they did when their father was alive.

For a few years, things went really well. The older brother found a nice girl and got married to her. Unfortunately, for many years, the couple did not have a baby.

Then, the younger brother found a nice girl. The older brother, being an elder in the family, made royal arrangements for his wedding. He invited all the family members and friends to celebrate the wedding. The wedding ceremonies continued for many days.

After the younger brother's marriage, their life's routine became all set. His wife, like a small agricultural town girl, would get up in the morning, run the domestic chores around the house, cook food, wash clothes and around noon time, take food for her husband and his elder brother to the fields. She considered it her duty to serve the entire family.

In the evening, when her husband and brother-in-law returned from fields, she would serve them dinner.

After dinner, the family friends would come to their house. She would prepare huqqa for them. If anyone wanted to drink tea, she would make tea for him.

After their father's death, both brothers' lives were moving ahead in such unison that everyone felt envious of them.

The younger brother's wife not only took care of the family matters, but she also treated her sister in law as her older sister. So much so, that she wouldn't let her do anything at the house. Her sister-in-law's words were like commands to her. Her obedience and passion to serve everyone in the family made her sister in law very happy.

After few months, she got pregnant. As her belly started to swell, the sister-in-law started seeing problems in her. Regardless of her obedience, the

sister-in-law would nitpick in everything. When her belly became a big balloon, the sister-in-law turned into a fireball because of jealousy.

So much so, that the day she started feeling pains, the sister-in-law put her clothes in a suitcase and left for her parents' house. Her husband tried to stop her as the younger brother's wife would need her help during delivery, but ignoring her husband's pleas, she left.

After she left, the younger brother's pregnant wife delivered a beautiful baby boy—a little boy, beautiful like a white cotton flower.

The little boy's arrival made everyone happy in the family. All the relatives and family friends brought so many toys and gifts that the whole room felt small for them.

If anyone asked about the sister-in-law, she made an excuse that her mother was sick and she had gone to look after her.

After the birth of the baby, the older brother waited for his wife to return. He even went to her house a few times to request her to come back, but she refused. She said she wanted to spend a few more days with her parents.

Then, the days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. Finally, she told her husband it was too difficult for her to see the younger one with a baby. She asked her husband to get a separate house for her if he wanted her to return.

Although his wife did not bear a baby, he still loved her. Therefore, he bought a separate house for her.

As soon as he bought a separate house, she returned. After returning, she did not even go once to see the little boy and congratulate her younger sister-

in-law. Her husband wanted her to go and congratulate his brother, but she flatly refused.

Life continued moving on. Every night, she talked to her husband about his brother. Every night, she reminded him that since they did not have a baby, the younger brother's son would become the heir of the entire tract of land.

Her husband tried to convince her otherwise, but she wouldn't budge. Once something sticks in ladies' minds, they do not rest until they make the same thing stick in their husbands' minds.

One day, after so much persuasion by his wife, the older brother went to his younger brother's house. His sister-in-law asked him for a drink, but he refused. The little baby started moving his arms and legs while lying in the bed, but he did not even bother to look at him.

His brother asked him what had brought him to his house. He told him it was no longer possible to remain together. He wanted to divide the land among both of them. The younger brother tried to talk him out of this, but the older brother had made up his mind. Without pause, he said he would keep the eastern part of the land and the younger one should take the western part of the land.

After listening to the older brother, the younger brother said that if he had made up his mind to divide the land, what was the rush? They could request the family elders to help them with this division process.

As soon as younger brother opened his mouth, the older brother burst into anger. He started hurling abuses on the younger brother. His sister-in-law tried to calm him down, but he abused her too.

When the elder brother abused the younger brother's wife, he got angry too. In response, the older



brother picked up a knife and stabbed him in his heart. The younger brother fell on the ground and died in a few minutes. Then, he turned to his sister-in-law and stabbed her too. Like her husband, she also died right on the spot.

After killing his brother and sister-in-law, he wanted to leave. His little nephew, who was just a couple of years old, was crying in the bed and extended his arms towards him as he was asking him to pick him up and pull him close to his chest.

Instead of picking up the baby, he once again picked up the knife and stabbed the baby in his heart. Then, he left from there.

In the small town, the news of this heinous crime spread like a jungle fire within no time. A few people had seen him going to and coming from his brother's house. They informed the police and the police immediately arrested him.

He appointed me as his defense attorney in this case. Although it was a heinous crime, being an attorney, it was my responsibility to help the law.

Now, a few days before his hanging, if he was crying, I wanted to know the reason. He said he was remorseful of killing his brother and sister-in-law. He wished he had not gone to his brother's house due to his wife's persuasion and wished he hadn't had a hot exchange with him.

He said he was the most remorseful for killing his innocent nephew. During the last ten, twelve years, every day, he felt he was getting hanged over and over again for killing the innocent baby.

"I killed his father and mother, but that little angel was still crying and extending his arms to me that I should pick him up and hold him against my chest.

Instead of picking him up, I stabbed the knife in his heart too.”

He told me this story and started crying. I told him goodbye for the last time and left his jail cell.

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# God and the Worshipper

Tewari Lal and Punwari Lal were two brothers. Both belonged to a religious family. Their father Jeona Lal believed in all gods. He worshipped each one of the gods. To pray to them, and to present them ritualistic offerings, he visited the temples all over India.

Jeona Lal always took both of his sons, Tewari Lal and Punwari Lal, along with him to all the temples he visited. All his friends felt envious of him because of the way he was bringing up his children according to the religious norms.

When Tewari Lal and Punwari Lal grew old, Jeona Lal knotted their marriage knots with great pomp and show. He spent so much money on their marriage ceremonies; the whole town rejoiced the events.

Tewari Lal and Punwari Lal were so lucky they found wives who loved to follow religion with their hearts and souls. They started their day by chanting ashlokas and presenting their offerings to the god standing in little temple carved for him in the corner of the house. Jeona Lal always had a very pleasant feeling when he saw his daughters-in-law performing their religious rituals in the morning. Deep in his heart, he always thanked god for bestowing him with those humble daughters in law. But it was not in his fate to enjoy the pleasure of the presence of his daughters-in-law for too long.

After few months of his sons' marriages, he fell ill and within a few days, he passed away. Both brothers took the ashes of their father to Haridevar. In the biggest temple of Haridevar, with the ashlokas of the most prominent pundit, they scattered the ashes of

their father in the sacred water of the river Ganges with teary eyes. Then, they took showers in the sacred waters of the Ganges, and presented their offerings in all of the temples of the town and returned home.

Life started moving forward in days, weeks, and months. Tewari Lal and Punwari Lal both fathered children. Like their father, they tried to train their children to respect all the gods. In their home temple, they had the statues of the goddess Kali and the gods Shiva and Ganesh.

Tewari Lal and Punwari Lal's wives started their days by offering prayers to gods and singing ashlokas in their honor, and later Tewari Lal, Punwari Lal and their children would join too. Then, all together, they would sprinkle sacred Ganga waters on those statues while singing ashlokas. The whole family repeated the same rituals every night before going to bed.

Apparently, the whole family, which was actually a collection of two families, started and ended their days together; the wives took care of the family matters whereas Tewari Lal and Punwari Lal dealt with ancestral family business affairs. Tiwari Lal mostly took care of the accounting matters. Punwari Lal watched the customer service issues. During the day, the Pundit from a close by temple, routinely showed up with saffron water and put a little blot on each brother's forehead. If any of the children were there, the Pundit would put the blot on his forehead too. Both brothers always paid ten or twenty rupees to the Pundit for his visit.

Their wives also performed domestic affairs in unison. If one did the cooking, the other would do the dishes. If one washed the clothes, the other would press them and put them away in closets. If one mopped the floors, the other would dust the windows

in the house and the furniture in the living room. Yet, they both had slight difference in their thinking.

In Tiwari Lal's wife's house, her family worshiped the goddess Kali and the god Shiva. In Punwari Lal's wife's house, her family worshiped the goddess of lions and the god Ganesh.

One day, the whole family was worshiping the gods and goddesses in their family temple. They all were sprinkling Ganga water on the statues and singing ashlokas. All of sudden, the plate from Punwari Lal's wife's hands slipped. The plate slipped straight onto the prayer items that was kept in the feet of the goddess Kali. Due to the oil and lamp in the slipping plate, the items in front of the goddess Kali caught fire. The fire immediately reached the goddess Kali's clothes and garlands in her neck. Tewari Lal and Punwari Lal somehow put the fire off with the help of their children, but the fire left some scars on the hearts of their wives. Usually, Tiwari Lal's wife addressed Punwari Lal's wife as sister, but after this event, she addressed her by her name and blamed her for throwing the burning lamp on her goddess Kali intentionally because she did not like the goddess Kali and the god Shiva in the temple. She just wanted to have the goddess of lions and the god Ganesh in the temple.

Punwari Lal's wife tried her utmost to explain to Tewari Lal's wife that she equally adored and revered all gods and goddesses, but she did not listen to her. Pissed off with her, she went in her chambers with her children and did not perform any domestic chores.

In the evening, both brothers came home from the business. Seeing quietness in the common area, they both went to their chambers. Each one's wife incited one against the other. In a few minutes, the house

became a battlefield. The children got scared. The street fellows heard them fighting and concluded that both brothers wouldn't settle now for less than dividing everything between the families. Jeona Lal's house stood divided because of the gods and goddesses.

For a few days, the tension continued at the house as well as at the business. At the house, Tewari Lal's wife and Punwari Lal's wife cooked their foods separately. Their children ate their breakfasts, lunches and dinners separately. At the business, both brothers stopped communicating with each other. So much so that even the customers sensed the tension between the two brothers. Some of them even tried to pour oil on the fire and incite one brother against the other.

For some time, tension between the two brothers continued both at the house and the business, but so far, both brothers did not have a fist fight.

As the proverb goes, if woods continue to smoke, sooner or later, they catch fire or they gradually turn into ashes.

One day, after a long day, both brothers returned from the business. As soon as they entered the house, Tewari Lal's wife started crying. While crying, she was hurling abuses on her sister-in-law. When Punwari Lal's wife heard her abuses, she tightened up her sari on her back and came out of her chambers. They both started fighting with each other. One had the other's hair in her hands and the other had her neck in her fists. When both brothers saw their wives fighting with each other, they also started throwing blows at each other. A few neighbors came there and calmed them down. Both brothers felt it was no longer possible to live together. The older brother picked up his stuff,

took his wife and children along with him and shifted to a friend's house.

After a few days, with the help of a few friends, both brothers divided their assets. The older brother disposed of his assets and moved to another city.

Punwari Lal's wife removed the statues of the goddess Kali and the god Shiva from the temple. Now, there were only statues of the goddess of lions and Ganesh in the temple. Punwari Lal and his wife sprinkled the sacred Ganga waters on both statues, offered them their prayers, and sang the ashlokas. This quadrupled the glory of the goddess of lions. God Ganesh's trumpet became higher and his trunks further stiffened. Now, there were no more statues of the goddess Kali and the god Shiva and no more Tewari Lal, his wife and children in the temple.

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# Feast

At last, the vultures called their meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to tear down the pieces of a close-by dying bull.

The vulture with a yellow beak, brown fur and a bold head chaired the meeting. All other vultures gathered around him one after the other. Most of them were still consuming the already dead animals. The vulture with a yellow beak, brown fur and a bold head had given them freehand to first consume the already dead animals, clean their beaks really well and get ready for the dying bull.

Before starting the meeting, they wanted to evaluate the scene around the dying bull. The vulture with a yellow beak, brown fur and a bold head was putting the scenario in perspective for the vultures gathered around him.

“Look, this dying bull is still moving his legs. Sometimes, even he picks up his leg. A few of you should keep an eye on his legs. If he tries to pick up his leg, use your sharpest beaks and force him to keep his leg down.”

“Yes, yes, we should keep an eye on his moving legs. His moving legs mean he can stand on his legs once again. We should make sure he does not stand on his legs again.”

“Have you deputed a few vultures there so that they closely monitor him?”

“Our few vultures are monitoring him. Before, we thought he would die within a few days and our feast would start, but this bull is taking quite a long time in dying. Perhaps he has become sagacious due to his

long life,” a few vultures commented while cleaning their paws with their beaks.

“But the other bull died within no time. He also lived for a long time. He was also sagacious like this one, but he could not last much longer. This one, however, has more strength in his legs. That’s why he is taking longer,” the vulture with a yellow beak, brown fur and a bold head made remarks.

All other vultures shook their heads and seconded his remarks.

“Sooner or later, he is going to die. The sooner he dies, the better it would be. Otherwise, we will have to take some steps to help him die quickly,” the bold headed vulture said in a deep voice.

All the other vultures laughed at his remarks. They looked at the dying bull with love. Then, they started mulling over finding some steps to make the dying easy for the bull.

“If you like, we can take you to the desert. It would be easier for you to die peacefully on the cold sands of the desert,” a few vultures made a generous offer to the dying bull.

The dying bull opened his eyes and looked at the vultures full of hate but he could not do much against them in this condition. However, he kept moving his ear so that the vultures knew he was still alive.

The vulture with a yellow beak, brown fur and a bold head asked the other vultures about the other near-death animals in the area.

All the bold headed vultures presented their reports about other near-death animals in or around the area.

All the vultures showed their satisfaction on the report. But, they were more concerned about the bull that was dying right in front of their eyes. Particularly, they wanted to know about his death, because he was

in a near-death condition for a while, but was not dying. The chair had taken his responsibility.

The vulture with a yellow beak, brown fur and a bold head looked at the vultures around him and then said, “Yes, this bull has shown quite a bit of resilience. I have deputed many vultures with stronger beaks, but he is taking forever to die. Unfortunately, his body is already getting rotten. I am afraid we may not have our feast.”

On his remarks, all the other vultures looked concerned. One of the vultures who looked more like a philosopher asked the chair, “I fail to understand why most of these bulls like to die on Fridays. The other bull died on a Friday. This one is also waiting for Friday to die.....this Friday.....next Friday or the next, next Friday.

The vulture with a yellow beak, brown fur and a bold head angrily looked at the philosopher vulture. The other vultures immediately exchanged their places with each other. Some of them even tried to attack the philosopher vulture. The philosopher vulture immediately jumped and sat on the dying bull and started cleaning his paws with his beak.

While the vultures were having their meeting, some hyenas gathered around the dying bull. A few vultures tried to attack the hyenas to make them run away, but the vulture in the chair stopped them. He said, “The dying bull still sometimes moves his legs and ears. Let the hyenas attack and kill him and then we will make the hyenas run away from here.”

The philosopher vulture again intervened, “Hyenas are very dangerous. It is very difficult to remove them from dead animals’ corpses.”

The other vultures agreed with the philosopher vulture. The vulture with a yellow beak, brown fur and

a bold head said, "Let them attack the dying bull. We are superior to them. We can fly, but they cannot. We will make them run away."

All of the other vultures jumped and appreciated his wisdom. The philosopher vulture also joined them. The vulture in the chair announced the termination of the meeting for now. After the termination of the meeting, all the vultures gathered around the dying bull.

Seeing so many vultures around him, the dying bull did a last ditch effort to stand up on his legs. He thought that by standing on his legs, he would scare the vultures. His effort did not scare the vultures, but they became a little bit uncertain about his death.

Since vultures, from day one, are in the habit of eating dead corpses, they encouraged the hyenas to attack the bull.

The hyenas attacked the bull's legs and badly wounded him. The bull's legs started bleeding, but he was still alive. The hyenas started tearing his meat apart.

The vulture with a yellow beak, brown fur and a bold head reminded the other vultures that it was Friday. Their feast was ready. They should make the hyenas run away and enjoy their feast.

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# Cockroach

Then, they all turned into cockroaches. For a while, after turning into cockroaches, the desire to become humans again kept burning in their hearts.

They all apparently started living in holes around underground sewage pipes. However, in their minds, the memories of the days when they used to be humans continued bothering them. They wanted to come back in human forms as soon as possible. But some of them who had compromised with their forms as cockroaches, tried to convince them to forget their days as humans and be content with their new reality.

Those who had turned them into cockroaches were not unaware of their hidden desire to re-gain human forms. They knew well that when humans are turned into any inhuman form, they want to return to their human forms as soon as possible.

Before they turned them into cockroaches, they invented many machines to resist their desire to become humans again. They spent billions of dollars inventing these machines. After all, turning humans into cockroaches and then constantly keeping them in that form was not an easy task. After inventing those machines, they kept them in warehouses for several years. After a while, the sensors of those machines became blind.

Those who had turned humans into cockroaches made them walk through those machines time and time again to check the performance of their machines as well as to keep an eye on the desires of the newly formed cockroaches.

While passing through the machines, many cockroaches momentarily turned into humans and then

back into cockroaches, but the buzzers of those machines remained silent. In such cases, the operators of those machines would try to manually turn the buzzers on, but the buzzers wouldn't respond. The machine operators would feel bad for their employers who had invested billions of dollars inventing those machines. They would inform their employers about the dismal performance of those machines, but the employers had to worry about many other things.

On far off hill stations, those who planted red roses noticed that their roses started to die. The fields of roses became barren. Rose plants did not grow in those fields any longer. The rose growers left their barren fields and migrated to far off lands. They settled wherever they could.

Those who turned humans into cockroaches were already unhappy about the performance of their machines. The migration of rose growers and the unavailability of red roses made things more complicated for them. Their factories reduced production since nobody wanted to buy their products any longer.

Under these circumstances, they all decided to get together in a resort located on the snow covered peaks of the Alps. Wearing dark black glasses on their eyes and long black coats on their bodies, they all reached the Alps. Their bodies were shivering under their long black coats because of the wind blowing through the snowcapped peaks. They were throwing smiles at each other, but the questions remained: "Now, what? They have stopped growing red roses. How will we turn people in cockroaches around the globe and if we do, what are we going to do with them?"

“Okay, they have stopped growing red roses, but we can still shed as much red blood as we like. If there are not red roses, let there be red blood.”

“Bloodshed.....?” They whispered in each other’s ears, “So much red blood that the skyscrapers will drown in it.”

The thought of shedding blood widened the spread of the artificial smiles on their faces. Their jaws scratched against each other. They took off their dark black glasses and stood on the peak of the Alps in a line for a photo op for international media. The international media spread the news of their meeting along with their glittering photo in all small and large towns across Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Even the people who were riding on their donkeys in small towns heard the news of their meeting.

The cockroaches in sewer holes also heard this news. The news created a commotion among them. They started replicating as fast as possible. They knew their survival depended on their numbers. They were sensing the danger of growth in the transformation of humans into cockroaches as a result of the meeting at the peaks of the Alps.

The participants of the meeting, before returning to their homes, called their agents and asked them to immediately increase the production of machines that turned humans into cockroaches and then kept them in that form. The smell of new dollar bills was already reaching their nostrils on the Alps.

In a few days, according to the wish of the participants of the meeting, the skyscrapers around the globe were drowned in red blood. The humans around the globe turned into cockroaches. They were not very

happy with their transformation, but they knew they could only survive as cockroaches.

Those who turned them into cockroaches were still not happy with them. Their agents picked them up and put them on the palms of their hands and thoroughly examined them from their heads to their tails. They moved their legs back and forth and checked their private body parts. After getting examined, those cockroaches had strange feelings, but they would immediately mix with other cockroaches.

Those cockroaches, in order to get rid of that strange feeling, would read Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* in group sittings. While reading *The Metamorphosis*, their eyes would become wet.

They would feel bad about their own helplessness. Then, they would start dreaming about the days when they would again become human beings.

They were angry with the participants of the Alps meeting. They thought about moving beyond the long collars of their black coats and entering into their brains through their nostrils. Again, being cockroaches, their helplessness took them over. They started running along with underground sewer pipelines.

They thought that they were somehow connected with the skyscrapers drowned in red blood. Their small cockroach heads could not think of any connection with them.

Again, they would get together and continue brainstorming for days without eating or drinking anything. No matter how much brainstorming they did, they did not find any connection with the skyscrapers drowned in red blood.

The men in black coats, in their offices, enjoyed the frustration of the cockroaches. They partied and



drank red wine and congratulated each other for billions of dollars in profits in the upcoming days.

Then, they smelled the conspiracies in the cockroaches' underground movements and brainstorming meetings.

"It is not enough to examine these cockroaches just by putting them on the palms of hands. They need to be examined inside out. Even their intestines should be searched," some would advise others.

"We have turned them into cockroaches, but they still continue doing undesirable things," the others would respond.

Then, their minds would turn to the red rose growers, to their factories running at full capacity, and to trailers and trucks running on roads throughout the world and big ships carrying their goods in the seven seas. They repented about the days when they decided to destroy the fields of red roses and established factories to turn humans into cockroaches. They felt cockroaches had entered in their brains. They dreamt about cockroaches in their sleep. During the day, anytime they stood in front of a mirror, they felt a cockroach was ready to jump out of their brains through their foreheads.

The real cockroaches and the humans who had transformed into cockroaches held meetings together. They wanted to set the rules for peaceful coexistence. But the real cockroaches refused saying, "We smell human odor in their bodies."

At last, one day, the men in black coats were very happy as they heard from their engineers that they had succeeded in developing a machine that would permanently transform humans into cockroaches. Humans would completely lose their human odors.

New machines would turn their inner systems into real cockroaches.

The cockroaches also heard this news in their underground hangouts. First, they got worried. They did not want to lose the little bit of human sense left in them. Then, they all gathered at one place. They thought survival was more important. Therefore, they decided to compromise with their present condition.

For the last time, they thought about the days they used to be humans. They told each other the stories of the red rose growers. Then, they congratulated each other for becoming real cockroaches.

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# Madhouse

When I reluctantly entered the madhouse, the outgoing psychologist warmly welcomed me. She was retiring after serving thirty years in this madhouse. I was going to replace her. She seemed relieved that she wouldn't have to work in this madhouse any longer.

"Have you worked in any madhouse before?" Mrs. Noori asked me with a big welcoming smile on her face.

"No. I've just finished my internship at a clinic. This is my first employment," I nervously answered.

I was feeling nervous due to so many mad people around Mrs. Noori's office. "These crazies are not that dangerous. The cell of dangerous crazies is on the right hand. To access that cell, you have to go through a narrow corridor," she tried to relax me.

The mention of dangerous crazies made my forehead wet with drops of perspiration due to fear. Mrs. Noori looked at my wet forehead and said, "Dangerous crazies are less dangerous for others. They are more dangerous for themselves. They have to be monitored all the time so that they don't hurt themselves." Continuing her statement she said, "Those who are dangerous for others hardly come to the madhouse. They reach a level in life where no one can suspect their madness."

I smiled at Mrs. Noori's statement. I knew exactly what she was talking about. Instead of responding to her, I continued looking at her with a smiling face.

Then, Mrs. Noori gave me a round trip in the madhouse. She related to me the brief history of each crazy. She told me about the habits of each crazy and the type of care he or she needed. She explained the

difference of old and new crazies. Many old crazies were not left in the madhouse. Most of the crazies were new comers. Most of the old crazies were suffering from various types of suppressed fears. Some of them were afraid of their fathers, some from mullahs, some from their teachers, and some from ghosts and witches. Some of them saw ghosts in their fathers and witches in their mothers. Due to these suppressed fears, their personalities were permanently impaired.

New crazies' situations were slightly different. Most of them had lost the ability to differentiate between normal and abnormal.

Mrs. Noori was explaining the difference between old and new crazies and my mind was wandering in different related issues. If some crazies had lost the ability to differentiate between normal and abnormal, they must also have lost the ability to differentiate between good and bad, right and wrong, legal and illegal, and moral and immoral—I was thinking.

From the shadows of my thoughts on my face, Mrs. Noori grasped what was going through my mind. She had worked in the madhouse for thirty years. After thirty years of service in a madhouse, anyone would develop the ability to know the various layers of the human personality which usually stays hidden from the eyes of the common folks.

After reading my thoughts, Mrs. Noori said, "Your thought process is on the right track. This country has become a big madhouse. Most of the people in this country have lost their mental balance and they have become crazy. They have lost touch with objective reality. They are living in an imaginary world."

Listening to Mrs. Noori, I inhaled a deep breath and requested her to give me a trip of the dangerous crazies.

“Yes, indeed,” said Mrs. Noori and she asked me to follow her. Before going to the wing of the dangerous crazies, she pulled a red register out of her table drawer. She told me she had entered the detailed traits of each dangerous crazy in that register. In case of emergency, she consulted this register to deal with the danger.

Mrs. Noori was leading me, holding the red register under her arm. I was treading behind her. After walking through various corridors, we reached the wing of the dangerous crazies. The scene in this wing was quite different.

In this wing, each crazy had his or her own cell. The very first scene in this wing shook me. A middle aged man was constantly hitting his head against the wall. His whole face was covered with blood. Due to this habit, the walls in his cell were covered with foam, but he had torn down the foam and scattered it all over his cell. Now, he was hitting his head with the solid walls which made him bleed.

Mrs. Noori immediately controlled him with the help of a few assistants and injected tranquilizer in his body. After receiving the injection, first, he sat against the wall. Then, he lied on the floor, closed his eyes, and dozed off. Mrs. Noori shifted him to another cell with the help of her assistants.

The way Mrs. Noori handled this grave situation in a short amount of time showed her expertise. I appreciatively looked at her.

She responded to my appreciation with a sweet smile. Then she said, “Don’t lose heart with this incident. With the passage of time, you will learn to

deal with such situations with the same skill and expertise.”

After dealing with this emergency, we moved to the next section of the madhouse. A crazy was delivering a meaningless speech there. It looked like he was delivering a speech to a big imaginary crowd like a politician.

Mrs. Noori told me his name was Mr. Rashid. He behaved like he was a big politician. He addressed big imaginary crowds all the time. When he would get tired, he would sit down with his head in his knees. Then, he would start hitting his head on the floor. Sometimes, he dangerously injured himself and became unconscious.

I was surprised how Mrs. Noori had maintained her mental balance after spending thirty years with such crazies. She had maintained her mellowness and smile. She looked quite comfortable at her job.

With Mrs. Noori, I visited every cell in the mad house, learned the necessary details about each crazy, and checked the entries about them in the red register. When we finished the round, I acquiesced with Mrs. Noori to take over the charge. I showed my desire to throw a splendid party in Mrs. Noori's honor to send her off with proper decorum after thirty years of her dedicated and meritorious service.

All the workers at the madhouse enthusiastically welcomed my idea. A few of them immediately made a crown with colorful papers and put it on Mrs. Noori's head. She tried to remove the crown from her head, but they failed her every effort to do so. Any time she raised her hand to remove the crown from her head, one of the workers would bring her hand down.

I saw that in her struggling to remove the crown from her head, she started losing her mellowness.

Then, she practically started shouting at the madhouse workers. I felt she was also an integral part of the madhouse.

As I was thinking this, a few workers grabbed Mrs. Noori from both her arms and locked her in a cell. The other crazies in the cell welcomed Mrs. Noori with open arms.

I asked the workers why they had locked Mrs. Noori in the cell and who were the people in there before her.

As soon as the workers heard my questions, they started laughing. Their laughter became louder and louder. Then, they said they also used to work in this madhouse.

After listening to their answer, I wanted to run away from the madhouse but I saw all the exit doors were locked shut.

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# Ibrahim

As soon as I entered in the city limits of Hebron, an elderly man welcomed me. He was wearing a dhoti and a long shirt. He had one sheet of cloth on his shoulders. He had a long stick in his right hand. He had a wide face and a reddish white complexion. His big and shiny eyes and grey hair gave him a strong manly look. He looked exceptionally graceful.

I looked at him in amazement. From my looks, he knew that I was interested in knowing more about him. With a wide and affectionate smile on his wide face, he told me his name was Ibrahim and the people of town called him Al-Khalil.

“Ibrahim.....” I repeated his name in a way as if I was not sure if I was meeting Ibrahim.

“Yes, I am Ibrahim.....the father of Isaac and Jacob.” As soon as I heard him, I bent so much in respect towards him that my hands almost touched his knees. Before I could touch his knees, he stopped me from doing so.

“This is not right. The love you have in your heart for me and my family is enough for me. In fact, I have come all the way out here to welcome you just because of the love you have in your heart for me and my family.”

His words melted my heart. I started crying. I kept crying for a while. As long as I was crying, Ibrahim kept his left hand on my right shoulder. When I got over crying, Ibrahim invited me to come into the city.

I said I had come to pay my respects to him. Since I had met him, I would go back to Jerusalem. Ibrahim stopped me with the gesture of his hand and said, “Would you leave without meeting Isaac and Jacob?”

As soon I heard the names of Isaac and Jacob, I got excited. I thought since I had come all the way to Hebron, why not see Isaac and Jacob too.

Then I said to Ibrahim, “Why only Isaac and Jacob? Why not Sara too? As soon as I uttered Sara’s name, Ibrahim’s face enlightened. The stick from his hand fell down. His white hair again turned black. His eyes became full of a shine. Now, an Ibrahim who was full of youth was standing in front of me.

Ibrahim asked me if I had brought any gifts for Sara. I smirked about this unexpected question. I knew I did not bring any gifts for anybody. I never even thought in my dreams that I would ever go to Hebron and meet Ibrahim this way and hold a conversation with him.

I said that while leaving Jerusalem, I wanted to buy gifts for everyone but then I changed my mind. I thought I would buy gifts from Hebron.

Hearing my answer, Ibrahim smiled. He knew I had just made up this excuse and there was no truth in it. However, Ibrahim refrained from putting me on the defense by not pointing out my excuse. Instead, he pointed to a big stone and said, “Let us sit on that stone before walking back in the city.”

Then, Ibrahim took a few steps and sat on that stone. He held his stick with his two hands and leaned a little on the stick. I sat on the ground right in front of Ibrahim. Then, he held the stick in his left hand and with his right hand he pointed in all four directions and said, “Once, my children lived in this whole area in peace. I always felt happy about their peaceful lives. For thanking God, I used to look towards the sky. In response, God used to say, “Ibrahim, your children won’t live here in peace all the time. A time will come

when they will even divide your family graves with walls.

“If you visit my place and see that dividing wall, don’t get surprised.” I heard Ibrahim’s words and I thought about divided Jerusalem. Then, I thought about the wall between Gaza and Israel. I thought about the wars which Christians and Muslims and Arabs and Israelites had fought on this land. How much blood was shed on Ibrahim’s land just in the name of entitlement? I was thinking all these things with my eyes, constantly gazing at Ibrahim’s feet. Ibrahim continued his discourse, “I always instructed my children to pray to one God. I thought by praying to one God, they would remain united. Unfortunately, they created divisions among themselves. They fought wars against each other. They shed so much blood that this land became red with their blood. They are still fighting.” He said this much and then became silent. I saw shadows of grief on his face. I felt he was very sad on this state of affairs.

I saw Ibrahim wanted to get up from the stone and go back to the city. I invited his attention to the pyre Nimrod had lit to burn him alive.

He looked all around as a conqueror and then thankfully looked towards sky. Then said, “The fire my children have lit today is worse than the pyre set by Nimrod. Nimrod wanted to kill one Ibrahim with his fire. Today’s Nimrod kills millions with his fire balls. Even God feels helpless in front of the fire of today’s Nimrods. Then, Nimrod’s fire was not that painful. Today’s Nimrods’ fires give more pain to humans before it kills.”

After saying this, Ibrahim got up from the stone. He looked once towards Jerusalem and then he started walking towards Hebron.

I was still hearing his voice, “Now, if you have come, make sure you meet Isaac and Jacob before you go back. If they find out that you left without meeting them, they will feel bad.”

After listening to this, I started walking towards Hebron at a fast pace. I could not go back to Jerusalem without meeting Isaac and Jacob. How could I?

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# Lamp

It was dark in the room. For the last many hours, there was no electricity in the house. He did not know when the electricity would be restored. The people in the country had lost hope for the restoration of the broken electricity supply for a while. However, within a few minutes of the return of power, people believed that the power system in the country was still intact.

Like many other people, he had also bought a lantern to light up his room. However, he did not get used to buying oil for the lantern on a regular basis. Whenever he forgot to buy oil, he used to sit in the room and wait for the return of power.

The same thing happened today. When the power supply broke at night, he turned on the lantern but it turned off as there was no oil in it.

Today, when the lantern turned off, the darkness started talking to him. Before today, the darkness had never talked to him. He did not know the language of the darkness. The electricity never gave him and darkness a chance to sit with each other face to face. An up and down push of a button eliminated the darkness within a flash of an eye like it never existed. But today, the darkness wanted to take revenge from him for his overlook. The darkness wanted him to know it did exist. It was real like light.

When the lantern turned off because of the lack of oil, he lied on his bed. As soon as he lied on the bed, he felt someone was touching him under his toes with his tongue. First, he thought it was his imagination. But when someone's tongue continued touching him under his toes, he started shivering with fear.

With fear, his eye lids started contracting and widening. He asked in a fearful voice, "Who is there?"

"Darkness." The darkness whispered. He saw someone was standing next to his feet gazing at him with glittering eyes.

He tried to close his eyes, but he could not. Two glittering eyes were still gazing at him. His heart jumped in his throat because of fear.

"Who.....who.....who are you?" He again asked in a shivering voice.

"Darkness." Now, he saw two lips moving under two glittering eyes.

"Was the tongue touching underneath my toes real? Are two moving lips under two glittering eyes real? Are the words coming out of those two moving lips real?"

He was alone in his room. He wished someone else was there with him. He thought if someone else would have been there, he could talk to him and get rid of his fear. Talking to someone helps overcoming fear. A human feels he is not alone. A total confusion took over his thoughts.

"I am here....." The two lips under the two glittering eyes again uttered a sentence. Now, he almost lost his wits. His body became wet with perspiration. The heart stuck in his throat jumped out of his body. Before his heart could run away, he picked it up with his shivering hands and again put it in his throat. The darkness tried to put its steps on his heart, but he picked it before darkness could do it. He succeeded in putting it back in his throat.

"It is a strange quagmire. We constantly live in darkness, but we never let the love of light die in our hearts. I wish we could get rid of light and learn to

accept the reality of permanent darkness. It would have made our lives easier.”

The two lips under the two glittering eyes broke into a laughter.....a heart piercing laughter.

“Good.....It’s good.....that’s what precisely I am trying to make you understand. Light is nothing but an illusion. Forget light.....darkness is eternal.....but your eyes keep wandering in search of light.”

He sobbed after listening to this announcement from the two moving lips under the two glittering eyes. His heart was still stuck in his throat.

Due to his heart stuck in his throat, his sobs remained buried under his chest. He felt like his chest was going to burst.

The two eyes near his toes saw the cracks in his chest and started wildly dancing. This wild dance gave birth to so many new eyes: two, four, eight, sixteen and hundreds of eyes wildly dancing in the room.....lips under the eyes and tongues moving out of lips. First, he felt only one tongue was touching him under his toes, now thousands of tongues were moving towards him.

The darkness still had the total control in the room. Because there was no oil in the lantern, it was still not possible to light it.

When he saw thousands of eyes and tongues moving towards him, he picked up a knife from the table next to his bed and cut his finger. Then, he lit his finger with a match. His finger was burning like a lamp.

The thousands of eyes, lips and tongues turned into smoke and disappeared in the thin air.

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# Mound of Sand

He was wandering in the desert for the last many days. Gradually, thirst and hunger was taking a toll on his body. So far, he had kept himself alive by eating insects and the roots of desert plants but now it was getting difficult. So far, he found no way to get out of the desert. To get out of desert, sometimes, he looked at stars at night to determine a direction for him and sometimes, he stood on mounds of sand to find the signs of life somewhere but to no avail. His hopes broke after every effort.

After standing on different mounds of sand, he learned the desert looked the same in all directions no matter whichever mound he stood on.

Climbing on mounds and coming down raised many questions in his mind about the mounds and the desert. Although all the mounds and the desert looked the same, he could not understand why he was climbing on mounds one after the other.

Particularly, if there was nothing else other than a wide spread desert all around, why was he consuming his energy to climb on the mounds? He felt since he was a human being, he was only reacting according to the situation. This idea refreshed his energy. He ran as fast as he could and climbed on another mound.

Standing on the mound, he looked at the wide spread desert. It looked the same to him in all directions. Then, he looked to the blue sky over his head. The blue sky also looked the same in all directions. He raised his face towards the blue sky and called God in the loudest possible voice. His voice first spread all over in the space and then scattered all over in the desert sand.

He got a little disappointed after he heard no response from the heavens. "If there is any God why is he not answering my call? After eating desert insects and roots of the plants for so many days, I am losing my energy but God is not responding. What good is such a God who does not respond in the moment of a need? Even if he exists, his existence is meaningless if I have no access to him."

With fatigued shoulders, a bent neck and tired legs, he slowly came down from the mound. He looked at lines on the sand to find more insects to kill his hunger but he did not find any insects. A little farther, he saw a dry yellow cactus plant standing in the sand. He hardly dragged his fatigued body to the cactus. He dug the roots of the dry cactus and then tried to suck some damp out of them. He felt some moisture in his mouth which was absorbed in the muscle of his mouth. Some light came back in his eyes. His hopelessness vanished and he felt a little hopeful.

He sat there for a while. While sitting there, he kept sucking juice from the roots of the cactus and thinking about possible ways out of the desert. But now, it seemed to him the whole earth had turned into a desert and it was no longer possible for him to get out of it. He also felt he was the only living being in this desert. Therefore, there was no one to help him. For him, the desert was the only reality with no beginning and with no end. It did not start anywhere and did not end anywhere. It was infinite. That's where he had to live and die. The feeling of death gave him a little consolation. He inhaled a deep breath. Then, the direction of his thought process changed.

"I will live or die. I am part of this desert. It is all around my outside and it is all around my inside. Won't it be better if I forget about leaving this desert

and start living here forever?” With this thought, a light smile spread on his yellow face from ear to ear.

Across from this light smile, he saw a shadow a little farther from him. It was a shadow of a human sitting next to a mound under a tree. His dry skin was wrapped around his bones like a piece of cloth. The skin of his belly had shrunk so much it was almost touching his back. He could clearly see and count his ribs. Who was he and what was he doing in this desert? He slowly started walking towards that shadow.

But in a few moments, the shadow disappeared in the rays of the sun striking against the desert sand. A human, no matter where and in whichever condition he is in has a relation with another human being. The nature of this relationship may vary.

Thinking this, he climbed on the mound and sat there just like the shadow. While sitting there, he closed his eyes. As soon as he closed his eyes, he felt his thirst and hunger had disappeared. The entire universe around him had transformed into light and this light was slowly entering in his body. He felt the desert was the Milky Way in which billions of stars were circling around. He felt he was one of the stars and he had to circle around along with them in this Milky Way forever. But there he was, the only star. The other stars were far off from him. However, he could touch any star he liked. The distance, far and near, became meaningless for him. He felt he was sitting on that mound for centuries. His skin had completely dried and turned into leather. His belly's dried skin was almost touching his back.

His eyes were still closed. He had totally lost his desire to eat or drink. With the expiration of his desire to eat and drink, his needs of nature also ended.

In this state, he heard a voice. He felt the voice was stemming from the vastness of the heavens. It was the voice of a waterfall that was flowing from the heights of the heavens and slowly seeping in his soul. His whole body was showering in the waterfall. He slowly opened his eyes. He looked down the mound. A black camel was waiting there for him. The camel invited him to sit on his back by wiping his long tongue on his nostrils, but he continued sitting on the mound. Then, he extended both his arms towards the desert.

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