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All the wrong subtractions

By

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Foreword-

Stories end where love begins. This story starts right where love ends. My wisdom, I have gained at the expense of my own tears. I did internalize that men shouldn't cry, but who talked about lovers? No one.

Bitter laughs and deep musing that I have succumbed to, for the true heart never forgets soon; never forgets the partings never unlooked for. He left too but he got his point across: if she left me, than I was merely the ladder, and not the summit.

Maybe tomorrow's gale will blow in new burrows; maybe it will heal the hurt, hurt realities. But today, I remain indebted to yesterday's silence: at the mercy of the one who has gone, or perhaps of nothing; at the shore of the ocean but surely not in the healing water.

1- New Beginnings

The flight from Jamaica landed in Karachi at six am, 2nd Jan 2005. Four sprinters heaved out with silver medals shining from their necks; the Jamaicans students had outclassed them, not for the last time. Not victors, but nonetheless proud. It mattered little that they had given all they had: what mattered more that back here, awaited them an erratic Dean, their Dean, at Tirah University, Karachi, Pakistan.

Grapevine said the Dean was drinking draughts of rapture. Well so were we, so was I. It had been a week and devoid of the face that mattered, the world had dried up. Maybe she would come to the airport, or maybe her light would shine brighter at the campus. Just a few more hours, I said to myself.

The waiting lounge instead, was replete with another existence, my parents. I embraced them, and the medal glinted proud. They were happy, very happy. They found their victories in my defeats knowing that I would rather die than give up on the track.

“Come son, home longs for you.” said my father, his proud eyes glued to my medal.

“Mr. Husseni, we need to report to the university first. The Dean longs him more.” said Tahir, smiling. Tahir was our relay captain. A senior sprinter himself, it was he that that put trust in a freshman like me. Everyone was against my inclusion: it mattered little to him. No one in Karachi had ever survived the Jamaican 4 x 400 m with a silver medal, we did it.

“Well child, rob Nadir for now. Allow me to present my compliments to you all at lunch today.” said my gentlemanly father, and with this invitation, he headed off arm in arm with my mother: in the distance I made out Ghulam Nabi, our chauffeur, igniting the Mercedes engine.

Half an hour later, we were on board Tirah University’s van as we headed off to campus. We knew we would walk tall today amid cheers and congratulations, both fake and heartfelt. January 2nd 2005, I would never forget this day.

The van driver directly led us to the Dean's office where the respective college deans had assembled. Handshakes, more medals, chocolates and news of a deferred ovation met us. By the looks of the grandeur and rapturous ambience, few would have believed that we had not won gold. Moreover, Tahir was generous enough to mention that I was a potential captain in his reckoning. I was not wholly in the room to acknowledge his praise as my soul wandered outside, seeking its better part, Linah Rafiki.

It was not long before I was unleashed on the campus ground and I ran. I ran not for the finish line but to find my own starting. People eyed me as I sprinted, some pointing fingers, others laughing. I thought that it was their way of acknowledging the silver that hit the air: I was wrong.

Even the sprinter ran out of breath in his search and he rested: one hand on the ground, eyes on the gravel mixed grass. As I gasped for breath, a hand rested on my back and I looked up. It was the thick haired university Lounger. His name was perfect, in accordance with his routine, in touch with his backyard (Tirah), in pattern with his amazing ability to mind everyone's life, but his own. (I guess all universities have one of these).

He looked stoned. Slowly he rambled "You should head off the admin block, you know. A sprinter on the ground never appeases the eye, you know. And you will, quite find what you looking for."

Slowly getting up, I stammered, "Thank you Loung." I walked towards the admin block, my mind racing. Sixty meters down the lane, the same rambling voice caught up from behind. It spoke prose "You must think of me at my best." I did not bother turning back, my heart focused on my trajectory. It won't be long, let the stoned man be, I whispered to myself.

Five minutes everything explained itself: Loung's sudden appearance, people's mockery (not laughter), hushed pointed fingers. I was the event today, the show. Yes, I went to the admin block; people crossed my path again and again. I was mistaken to believe that my medal spoke loud that day. It didn't, a broken heart did.

At the admin, more people milled about than usual. Finally, amidst the buzz followed her hallowed glimpse. I moved forward, the multitudes parted and silence grew loud. That was her silent knell, Linah looked up and our eyes met. Fifteen feet away, I looked at her, she looked at me and the world looked at us hungrily, waiting for some drama. Then she looked sideways at a freshman I knew nothing about. My eyes travelled down to their clasped hands, the medal looked at the world. Eyes grew wide as the silent climax realized, people waiting for the punches to fall.

Nothing happened. I was my Father's gentleman that day. I took one good look at her, in attempt to implant guilt at her seeming defection or perhaps to drink in what had taken place. It all ended there; I turned my back, started walking, and couldn't help thinking how beautiful she looked, even today. How those eyes shined even in that dark moment, how that expressionless face said it all, how those hands stood, in company of another. Boos erupted and the crowd launched its invidious banter, the Dean's Pride grounded to dust with their remarks. Surprisingly, my footsteps were light that day. It all mattered too much and I became something a man shouldn't be, weak.

Light started fragmenting and slowly conscious reality started fading too. Hell in itself broke loose, mind you a very cold one. My knees wavered and I started to crumble, slowly sliding into the oblivion of love. In truth, broken hearts make little sense, except perhaps to tarnish the love of lovers, the leaves of shelter gardens, the grass of abandoned shades and perhaps, the music of blues guitarists.

I wanted to rest against a wall but too many eyes followed me, hoping to descry wet eyes, a fumbling gait. That couldn't be allowed to happen. They say that the longest mile you tread begins at the dawn of tragedy. For me this convention didn't hold. I was too lost in my thoughts and to this date I have little idea how I made it to Ghulam Nabi at the parking lot. I have little idea what happened at dinner. I have little idea of the praises that were heaped on me. I do not even know whether my team came to lunch or not. It was a haze, one gigantic smoke screen, mind you clouding the life of a man who fell in true love.

The question that brimmed on the edges of my mind was that who was this dark haired, dark eyed, stocky freshman? I had never seen him before.

That was well, the end of 2nd January 2005, a day that became a bone of contention amongst contradictory emotions and betraying expectations.

2-

A Present Retrospect

I am Nadir Husseni, the second child of Mrs. Aimen Husseni and Mr. Zahid Husseni, a well known local millionaire. Wealth never meant much to me, I had simply too much of it floating around. Simple pacifist I would describe myself, very egotistical but not presumptuous, never contemptuous. I began sprinting from a very young age, my long legs conducive to a victor's reality. Sprinters and Coaches across the city knew my name and acknowledged my perseverance. The track remained pretty much the only place where I was not judged by the car I drove, the name I carried, but by my peak velocity at the 70th meter stretch.

As of Linah, I first met her in Grade College. It was a slow attachment and that why it turned out to be so poisonous, so hard to let go of. Never said anything. Didn't know whether to believe in relationships or not, didn't know whether there was an end or not, and didn't know what money could buy. Wish I did.

Well, we made it to Tirah together (August 2004) and the world seemed pretty clear. A month into Tirah, I asked my heart out, not wanting to breathe in a world that she wasn't part of, not wanting to acknowledge a reality that didn't acknowledge her, not wanting to see a rainbow that didn't end on her footsteps.

September 2004, her voice carved the symphony my ears wanted to hear.

From that day onwards, I saw only one face at the end of every finish line pushing me forward, encouraging me to leap all bounds to realize it, not for the last time. Linah, the girl who possessed that wondrous smile, precious beyond the worth of emeralds and sapphire, a face in my world, so rare. It became mine and I drunk in its love, only to woken from its stupor a bit too late, woken by the slap of reality. It did echo, echoed a bit hard and I realized that I didn't lose anything because, I actually never came to genuinely own it.

She loved not Nadir Husseni, but his two fragments of wealth. I would still not like to unobjectively vilify her; she was there many a time in these five months or so. Narcissitic though she was, Narcissitic though she is.

The morning of third January began in my room. Morning grew, my eyes opened and the first thing that I saw was the medal on my neck. It smirked back to greet me the day, not forgetting to remind the owner that he was second best, the chief honor lost to the victor, (in light of my lachrymose reality) to some conqueror, some immoral sociopath.

I opened my cell phone, messages flooded, some congratulating, some expressing sorrow at my loss, some talking of the ovation next week, others saying that my cowardice had failed them. Lounger also dropped a text

-Yo laddie yo. I was paid to do my part. He, Minavan Malik, synchronized it all, the crowd, the humiliation and your debasement. Why I tell you this is because, no one paid me to shut up. That shrew ain't worth it anyways. Grip Doug-

Again and again I roved through that text. Minavan Malik, the new man on the block, sadistic in his endeavors. Question was what was I to do? Fight? Throw some more money on the block? Retreat? It made no sense. Now that I thought about it, in the last ten years I had never so much as got into a fight, never so much as punched someone square on the face. Nonchalance was further ruled out by a broken heart. Some thing had to be done, but what?

I hit the breakfast table and greeted my parents. My elder sister Marium joined us too and they all cast queer looks at me. I do not remember what happened yesterday but this I can say, it, by all means, defied rational explanations. They didn't, however, verbalize their thoughts. Family always knows, always.

I headed off to college quite reluctantly, the man inside didn't, however, want to run away. Glances met me, looks turned away, looks turned towards, the Lounger even winked and then I found a refuge, or infact it found me. Tahir came up.

He spoke first-“Easy would do it. This new guy is not so kind, quite well resourced and gore loving. Tarnished pride would bring you conflict and it would be at some, if not great, expense. These people,” he said gesturing at the crowds, “they got a new scapegoat and that’s you. Retaliate if you want, but not at their incitation.”

“Against Minavan?”

“Yes against the Malik.”

“So how did it all happen?”

“We left in early December for Jamaica and that’s when the predator struck. It would hurt you to hear but he quite had it, all. Sources close to her say that it was your million dollar background that served as her springboard to Tirah’s elite. There he stood ready to embrace what you called the better part of your existence.”

A bit perturbed, I fumed, “Too well resourced aren’t you? Ever the wound scraper?”

Tahir stopped short and gripped my shoulder hard, “Never the wound scraper. Just looking out for a freshman who might just throw it all to gain nothing. I got your back. You want to fight, go. I have your back. I just point to the futility to your seemingly potential endeavors.”

“In a strange manner, you are right. Nothings on the cards right now but you will know in due time.”

“Catch you on the ovation. You still are the champ. You still are.” With that exclamation, he headed off, to the admin block.

“Wait. What happened at lunch yesterday?” I inquired in a morose manner.

He stopped and looked back. “The team knew better than to indulge with a lost individual. News spreads fast here.”

A small appraisal notified that Tirah changed in itself. People treated me as a walking-talking war field, ready to erupt anytime. Others who I called friends weren’t so keen to associate with a coward, pacifist being a term unheard of. Linah and Minavan crossed my paths too often, wittingly or unwittingly, I do not know. She always avoided my eyes while he was quite keen at glaring back, daring me to

make a move. I never avoided his eyes, but met it with my will, never wavering as I looked into his. It all quite stood for nothing for at the end of the day, she remained his.

I skipped the ovation ceremony. It seemed to matter zilch. I think I planned to win her back but I didn't know for sure. Neither did I know how. Tahir was furious when I bailed and said that I was conceding like a loser. The Lounger kept sending strange messages. I said nothing.

Two weeks down the road, after not having participated in a single training session, the coach and my captain dismissed me from the team. Guess what? I couldn't care less. I no longer had any motivation to run towards the finish line. It left with her, my emerald.

As for Tahir, we never talked again.

3- The Sinkings & Risings of a loser

Well, I had sunk but only with my heart and not my grades. I found the best way out, or maybe the worst: Transfer. Transfer out of this dratted place. Yes, I know that's retreatism but I became no more than a retreatist. A loser, a fool.

Whatever remaining resolve I had was quite forsaken to kingdom come. Father pulled a few strings and by June of 2005, my transfer stood complete. I was now shifted to Packard University. An ungraceful exit but necessary. I for one saw no point continuing along on this path; the heart could do with new beginnings.

The Lounger said he would miss me, I didn't believe him. As for Linah and Minavan, I never found out what sentiments they harbored. Infact I never gave much time for anyone to harbor anything; my withdrawal was swift and silent.

As for family, yes they questioned my decisions. There were many ways I could have steered out of this but I choose the truth. Mind you, not the complete one. When the damage is done, damage control by no means entails lies and spurious realities. I told them I fell, first in love, than partially out of it, than besides it and now it was time to break the ditch and explore horizons new. My capricious father liked how I put this, resplendent he called it and he acquiesced. Mother and Marium Husseni cared less of how broken I was or who broke me down: they couldn't embrace the idea of their sprinter retiring; champion they called me and champion I had to remain or the family honor would stand tarnished in my defection. Family honor was it, the intangible existence that now replaced the face that for long, stood at the end of the finish line.

July 2005 began with my part redemption; the sprinter came back and often was he seen covering 10 km stretches of the Arabian Sea coast that marked the southern boundary of the metropolis.

Strangely, my hiatus improved me and my best 100m time clocked down to 10.78 seconds, an improvement of .28seconds. Perhaps family honor served as a greater

impetus than some girl I threw my heart on. The past six months became less and less vivid and its memory faded a little. The heart, however, remained sorry for its plight. Time surrogated as a nurse but a rather slow one, healing whimsically, with my self nailed at its mercy.

During those stretches, even I gave up the idea of pacifism. There is a victor and there is a two pence worth loser, who may not pick up his arms and term his defeat as his victory, but the end reality remains the same. It was too late to muse now and that I knew only too well.

August 2005 began and so did Packard. It was a university whose academic culture emulated or far outrivaled that of Tirah's. It was a good place in itself, perfect respite to put myself together.

I must say I did quite well; my economics bachelors ambled along well too. Two weeks down the road, to the pride of the Husseni woman in my life, I had made it to the 4 x 100m relay, 4 x 200m relay in addition to being the top five sprinters in the university. Packard had taken a good start, well, counting social life out.

All the group amalgamation that had to take place had taken place in the first year. Fraternities were closed to new members and many a people were skeptical of the means by which I had enrolled in as a second year, that being not so common a phenomenon. I couldn't care less; they did not want me, I did not want them so what was the problem? I must add it could have been "better", if only I had agreed to being chauffeured by Ghulam Nabi in the delicacies that my Father had adorned our garage with. No, that wasn't happening. Friends of splendor, remain, only in splendor.

Instead, I brought this ragged down Ford truck to commute to the university. At that point in my life, Ghulam Nabi thought I had cracked badly. I laughed like anything, when he expressed such thoughts. To me, not being understood itself had

its ecstatic pleasure. Candid truth was that I was trying to be simple for a change; I was done being a “millionaire springboard”.

In this my new found simplicity, I realized that a man maybe lonesome, but he is never deserted by his thoughts, they are his, loyal his, loyal to death. People leave, people go, few remain worth running after, and few have the charm that can carve a space for itself inside you. I met such a man but let his memory rest for now.

4-

Marriage of Marium

In her two final years of her Masters degree, the elder Husseni had fallen in love with her compeer, Yasir. Two years were enough for them to realize that they wanted to tie the knot. No one had a problem with this arrangement. In fact, Father and Mother were quite appeased; they did not have to wait on prospective suitors with tables laden with heavenly food, as such was the Pakistani custom.

I had met Yasir a couple of times and a respectful gentleman he was, or so what seemed. I gave my approval at the Husseni house; it did not have much weight though. Father believed in equality amongst his children and bowed to the wishes of my sister as soon as she voiced out her plans. We were in for a marriage, on verge of a gloomy parting but one, marked with Husseni family's brilliance.

Yasir's family decided to pay us a visit in October and we opened our doors to them. Marium made it a point to make sure the garage was washed, everyone window cleaned, every painting adjusted, every carpet scoured, and the best bakery in town was booked with a ten grand order. Well, one can call that love.

On 5th of October 2005, the Hussenis stood outside waiting to welcome Yasir's family. I adorned myself in the whitest Shalwar Kameez I could find, checking the clock again and again, a mere slave of anxiety, attired in simplicity.

Then Marium screamed, "We forgot the drinks! We forgot the drinks! Nadir, go get them."

"Tell Ghulam Nabi." I replied not believing this.

"Last time I asked him for cola and he brought me lemonade. He's old. Have some mercy on him younger Husseni."

Defeated, I gave in. "Quantity?"

"Fifteen bottles would do. And you might as well go on the Porsche. If late, I want you to make one good entrance, for me." She said smirking at the Ford truck. I sulked back at her but agreed. It was her day and I couldn't say no. When I hit the

road on my Father's Porsche with only one thought on mind: the damage it could do at Packard, life could be set straight.

I fought my thoughts hard. I couldn't make this mistake again. Last time was costly enough. I was tired of "buying" things. Nonetheless in this moment, it felt great driving the Porsche again; it was quite a beast. People turned back and forth to look at the convertible and my spirits rose. All this attention; the car was a moving publicity stunt.

Fifteen bottles were bought in no time and I went to the Husseni home and then I realized why Mariam wanted me to take the Porsche. The 652bhp engine's hum in itself signaled my entry into the Husseni house and two men came out in the front to welcome me. One was my dear Father and another was a gentleman who I assumed to be Yasir's father. I stirred a bit as they came near for the stranger bore a striking resemblance to someone I knew; someone I never wanted to know.

"Rahat Malik." he spoke and handed out his hand to me in his ex cathedra manner. Clad in sartorial excellence, his dark eyes beheld me and I knew them. I had seen them before and now I was dreading to enter my own house. This wasn't happening. No, this wasn't all coming back to me. This suited gentleman clasped his arm around my shoulder and we crossed the lawns and inched near the silver door. I couldn't wait to enter and I couldn't wait to run away. The inevitable stood, in all its tangibility right across the hall.

Yes Minavan Malik stood there and for the first time he didn't raise his eyes to meet mine. My feet stood still and I looked, rooted, transfixed, skeptical of what I already knew, unbelieving of what I saw. Anger rose, so did incredulity, so did nothingness and all I had forgotten, surfaced back to hit me, all the more stronger, all the more bitterly.

It took me a while to realize that the every one was looking at me, trying to figure out the reality behind this intense concentration, at only a constant fraction of my ambience. I gained composure but not soon enough to stop my Father from asking, "You know Yasir's brother?"

"Yes, Tirah." I replied, taking my time.

Father was quick to gauge my pale tone and probed no more. He moved forward with Mr. Rahat and offered him a seat. I sat down next to my mother and gawked at the rest. Yes I acted like a child.

Right next to Minavan stood Yasir, who by no accident was smiling at my sister, conversing silently with his eyes. Adjacent to Yasir sat a lady in her mid fifties with her black hair curving gracefully down her neck. Looking at me she smiled and gave a small nod. I replied in kind and finally turned to the extreme right of the hall where in isolation stood their third son.

Amid all the chatter, amid all the cordiality we exchanged, I suddenly caught a strange glint of purple in his eyes. His thick black hair fell in the same graceful manner and curved down to his shoulder. He was a fine specie of a man; quite worthy to look at. Not for the last time, I wished I could interchange features with him, for I knew that Linah would never have left me, had I just been him. Soon, he grew conscious of my gaze and his fair face turned towards me. We both looked on at each other until he withdrew, and later I realized that it was an exhibition of his respectful conduct. I for one needed tremendous edification that day.

I turned my face back, to look at Minavan who like before was quite keen on avoiding my gaze; he seemed uncomfortable too, like a sailor in uncharted territory, not knowing what was in store. Had he not tugged at my soul, I might even have pitied him.

Now, however, he stood beyond it. I knew what was on his mind, why his dark eyes had narrowed and why his grim face was so unusually gaunt: his actions now stood to deprive Yasir of his true love, just as he had deprived me of Linah. He was right to assume that I would be vindictive but wrong in that my desire for revenge would exceed the respect and love I harbored for my Marium. No, I wouldn't interject though this marriage stood, now, in my jurisprudence. If only my parents got to hear of the details of my humiliation at Tirah, of the names behind it, of the drastic changes that had been inculcated in me, they would have highly disapproved of this marriage, of this bond with the Maliks.

I drank true poison that day at the gain of my Marium's dream and at the expense of prospective vengeance, on account of my sadistic about to be , far flung relative, Minavan Malik. An hour later, we bid the satisfied Maliks goodbye and moved

back in our abode. Everyone seemed to be happy with the arrangement, and to some extent, even I was. By no means could I judge Yasir in light of his brother and Marium deserved all she could ask for. We all piled in our final agreements and then Marium no stood, no longer ours.

5-

Wedding, Violins and a Stranger

It must have come as a surprise to Minavan, when my parents, oblivious to reality, agreed to pay the Maliks a visit. I won't call it a hasty decision but twenty eight days was all both the families had, to send off their firstborns in unprecedented pomp and splendor, and yet not forget to outclass each others preparations.

Thus began the endless visits around Karachi, nailing down the best tailors, bakers, wedding planners and gift shops. As a society, we have always been foolish to expend prodigiously on wedding justifying it in the name of honor. No wise man would uphold this tradition but neither would he dare to differ and ward off the society, just by himself. Society mutters loud when its expectations are not met and these sordid expectations tend to be higher when the marriage in case, is a bond between two wealthy families.

We bowed to these aforementioned expectations too, and fell down to the extent of not even keeping a budget. A small fraction of Father's hard earned wealth was so slowly transmuted to windfall gains on account of wedding card printers, traditional goldsmiths and not to forget, beauticians. Business contacts flew in form around the globe, but not with matters of financial concerns. Their luggage was instead, replete with Armani suits and Prada footwear, a large portion of which was to be generously dolled out to the Malik kinship as "Gifts".

Ghulam Nabi dropped sliver plated wedding invites at the residences of Karachi's elite and top political brass. In short, this was supposed to be the wedding of weddings, delivered with such brilliance so as to make people reminisce of its grandeur for years to come.

The bride to be herself forgot to be the encouraging sister she was, who had helped to bring out again, the sprinter in me. Half her day was spent bickering with planners, and bribing venal beauticians, while the other half was pleasantly allotted for coordinating her team servants and minions, led by yours truly.

Candidly speaking, Packard itself was reduced to the backfront and I had no time to even replenish my supply of intake supplements. Seldom was I seen at the university but it wasn't my fault, and for a change, failure in love wasn't a cause. This isn't to say that Linah had left my thoughts for good, but to point out to the last fourteen days of October when Hussenis from all around the Pakistan and the globe, checked in, to be looked after.

Though our abode was nothing short of a mansion, it was a painstaking task settling people, some of whom I had never seen before, into rooms with compatible others. With nothing short of pride and anger, I must add that Nadir Husseni became their answer to everything.

I became a mere servant, appeaser of whims, satisfier of fancies and my parents quite enjoyed my swift degeneration from a prince to a pawn. It annoyed me how these relatives would bluntly ask for luxuries that they would have thought thrice about consuming, had they still been living under their own roof. Our house could be likened to a free stint at a five star, where no hefty bills are dolled out for the dainties served. Father, played the generous host, and lovingly overlooked the exploitation undertaken by Marium's entourage. Well that's what Mother playfully referred to them, (behind closed doors ofcourse).

Scattered amongst memories of Marium's entourage, Marium's ordinances, and my servile existence, there still stood bitter realities of Tirah. I often thought how delightful life could be if the girl with braided black hair was still standing by my side, her thick eyelashes momentarily bowing as she smiled at me. How her fair looks would have done justice to Marium's entourage, but no. These remained musings, worthless musings.

Just five days left to the wedding, I walked on the lush green lawns in Packard, musing along parallel lines when my thoughts were interrupted by a text on my cell phone.

It was the Lounger and as before, the implicit tidings he brought, shook me.

- **Nadir Doug. Long yo, have you hid from me. But no, time draws us closer :)** -

It said it all. It said all that never got time to think of. It said what I should have thought of. Wedding day wouldn't be complete without Minavan's antics, not complete without Linah's presence, and certainly not complete with all the people like Loung who I had gladly left behind. I presume that, my sadist of a relative had plans of his own, knowing well that the marriage was on the cards and no one could change the cards now, if anyone at all in the first place, desired to.

I kept staring at my phone, than at the students that crowded the lawns, the corridors, the walkways. No one. Nah, there was pretty much no one to invite and my old acquaintances were surely, in for a field day.

Maybe it was then and there that wisdom touched me: it was time not to care what every third hilly billy had to say. Moving on required that and paradoxically I had already done so, without realizing this realization which could have long before, given me my own victory in my times of my great defeat.

If I stood with a few people to call mine, it still mattered little to me and I knew it. If it mattered more to the world, than let it, let them. As I moved to World History class, slow acknowledgment came upon me that now I was more than avidly looking forward to the wedding, quite ready to play a kindly host to Minavan's associates, those whose kindness had escaped my self. No, that's by no means signifies my greatness. I would term it as a defensive measure to smite down the forthcoming dose of contempt with a force stronger, ill meant and faked kindness.

Four days later on 8th of November 2005, he played his entry well. The Husseni house glimmered, lighted to perfection with flood lights covering the lawn. Two, hundred foot green oriental *Chaddars* fell from the sky at the each end of the gate, which were further reinforced by horsemen on either fronts. When the Maliks entered with their *Baraat* (wedding procession), the flood lights were closed and fireworks ignited the sky into different hues of a rainbow. Amid the noise, the horsemen charged forward to welcome them. The wedding planners had done a good job and the people stood awed, even those who had a vivid idea of the forthcoming deliverance.

When the *Baraat* finally killed their engines and slowly walked towards our residence, Marium's eclectic entourage rushed forward to shower the Baaratis with buckets of imported Thai roses, as a token of our love. My Father and I stood at the

gateway to welcome the on comers; first came Minavan and his eight close friends who looked at me with all the contempt they could muster, making an open point to ignore my outstretched hand. However, as they passed, one of them broke ranks and grasped my hand. As I looked closely, I realized that I knew him, or I thought I did. It was not the Lounger, it was Tahir. Having made his point, he moved forward without a word.

I smiled for I knew that my erratic behavior had hurt him; that was the only reason he was here. I would never go so far as to call myself a forgiving person but I didn't hold anything against him that night (for associating with my adversaries). It seemed a bit amusing too, his hypocrisy that is. Only a few months ago he was quite ready to take on Minavan, his fists at the mercy of my planned endeavors.

Second followed Yasir and Mr. Rahat Malik, flanked by our horsemen on each side. Both were clad in splendid suiting and their entrance could be termed nothing short of stately; arms clasped, they seemed happily determined, to take the Husseni jewel with them. After them followed Mrs. Malik and her handsome son who led the about three hundred other Maliks behind them.

Once Marium's entourage had the groom seated at the stage and all the Maliks were escorted in by our horsemen, the green *Chaddars* suddenly exploded into flame, and a loud trumpet issued from the house. The veiled bride entered the lawns and all eyes turned towards her, watching her delicate footsteps trace the ground. I, still standing at the entrance, however, stood distracted.

I have no memory of my sister's graceful steps for my eyes stood locked at entrance. Two people had walked in at that very moment, and all I could hear was nothing. It was Loung preceded by Linah. She passed by me, well knowing that I stood there, well knowing that I sought to meet her eyes. Her coldness, her ignorance, couldn't sting me for once; I was sure that Minavan too, was playing wedding planner that night.

Loung on the other hand embraced me like a long lost friend. I didn't return his embrace, for after all, then, there stood no place for his neutrality. In short, his passport could have only one stamp, either Soviet or American. Nonetheless, I did not forsake my duties of a kindly host and did ask the horsemen escort him to my old acquaintances.

Seeing this, he said “Yo laddie Doug. You run away. You still running away. I not wrong.” His broken English led me to presume that he was stoned that night too.

Replying in broken colloquial, I jested, “You follow me not. You lost me then.”

His arms dropped a little as he leaned closed to whisper,” He watches you. I watch you too. I friend you always.”

Robbed of my high spirits, I inquired, “How can you be sure of that?”

Now tugging at the horse, he whispered,” Loung knows, Loung always knows.” Saying that he headed off towards the lawns in his sloppy manner while the horsemen at his side cast back apprehensive looks at me.

The wedding went quite as I expected. Loung weirdness quite appealed to Marium’s whimsy entourage. Mr and Mrs. Rahat were pleased with the brilliance with which the night had taken off. The politicians had also slowly piled and canvassed support for their respective parties. Much to the excitement of those invited, two opposing politicians almost had a brawl at the far right of the lawn. The elite also climbed on board in their debaucheristic attire which clearly outstood, blatantly pitted against the Muslim customs. Father and Mother stood aloof, enjoying the magnanimity of the affair they had concocted.

Linah and Minavan crossed my paths several more times that night but I no longer raised my eyes to meet her. Little did I know then that someone from afar was more than observant of all that was taking place. It was this stranger, who altered the scope of my foreseeable reality, one which had solid aims but no existential means of deliverance.

At midnight the Yasir’s car finally lined up at the entrance, parked dead centre on the ashes of the green oriental *Chaddars*. Father and Mother held Marium’s hands and led them slowly across the lawns. We didn’t cry. Well at least not then. It was not long before the Marium and Yasir were seated in the car, and right before the doors closed, Mr. Rahat moved forward and tossed in a key.

Very surprised, my Father inquired, “You will not accompany them?”

Mr. Rahat smiled, “To their new house? No.”

“New house?” my mother echoed. None of us had any prior idea that Marium wasn’t moving in the Malik residency, as was the custom.

Still smiling, he wrapped his arms around Mrs. Malik and replied, “We both wanted to gift them a dream. The house is its mere realization. Mind you, even Yasir had no idea up till this very moment as to what the key was for. Our chauffeur will enlighten them of the merits of that key. And on this note let us part. I will expect you all, tomorrow at the Country Club.” With that the couple walked away and soon darkness encapsulated their frames.

The wedding car too, was now out of sight and I already missed my sister. Along with this new nothingness, grew exponentially, great respect for Mr. Rahat and his wife. Their act of generosity drastically altered my indifferent opinions.

Soon the guests also started taking leave: I did not see Minavan, Linah or any of their friends leaving. The third brother, however, came up to me right before he left. “Dadhey.” He spoke as he offered his right hand out to me.

“Nadir. I am afraid we have not properly, met before.” I replied, shaking his hand. As I did, my hand brushed against something soft but as I looked down at it, I saw nothing. It was too dark.

“Time wasn’t gracious enough. But let me welcome you tomorrow to the best of my abilities. As Marium’s brother, I hold you in high esteem and respect.”

I wish I could have said the same then; he was not just Yasir’s brother, he was Minavan’s too. Though I did concede, “I have held the sincerest pleasure in meeting you.” I meant it too. He respectfully bowed his eyes to take leave and its purple glint emanated as he opened them again. He was nothing like Minavan and nothing like Yasir either.

He was different, quite refined and while I was conversed with him, I realized that more people than usual were looking at me. I knew it wasn’t because I was Nadir Husseni. It was because I stood next to him. As he walked away, those eyes followed his elegant form to the entrance. There was this air of magnetism around him; beings stood attracted to him and he knew it very well. That was Dadhey.

On the 9th of November 2005, for one last time Marium came to our house to dress up for the *Valima* (groom's dinner). By nine pm, we were all ready to go with our procession, to be received by the Maliks at the Country Club bordering the natural lagoon. It was one uphill task loading on Marium's entourage on our cars while making sure that all the Hussenis were packed with compatible others. Ghulam Nabi, having memorized the address from the Valima invite, headed the procession in our Mercedes, with my parents and sister safely laden in his car.

To my great surprise, in light of the fancies of our whimsical entourage, we arrived at the club on time. The Maliks stood on the grass threshold ready to welcome us. Much to my displeasure, there stood even more people from Tirah than last night which included my whole ex-relay team. I did not know exactly what point Minavan wanted to jut across but after seeing the team, I certainly wouldn't have been surprised if he had got the Dean there too.

Linah stood there, looking even more beautiful than usual but I couldn't spare more than a glance. That being only because I did not want too. Again, my bowed head didn't go unnoticed.

Dadhey stood again in an extreme corner, not for the last time, being admired by people from both sides of the engagement. He was indifferent to all this attention, and looked beyond everything, his nonchalance only adding to his exalted persona. His purple eyes met mine and he nodded his acknowledgement; following this exchange, quite a few eyes now locked on me.

Violins started sounding off from the right side of the lagoon as Yasir held my sister's hand and led her upfront to the stage: the world followed the couple. I did not and neither did he.

The crowds parted and the symphonies began. As before, he walked upto me and held out his hand "Once again sir, it is a pleasure meeting you."

"Sir? If I am not wrong, your age far exceeds mine. This title by all means, stands unwarranted." I replied shaking his hand. My hand brushed against something on

his finger and this time, celerity on my behalf, allowed me to glimpse a white ribbon lace tied to his forefinger.

“Respect is mine to give out to whom I wish. Would you mind a walk?”

I couldn't say no. I had just reached the venue but his charisma negated sensible conduct on my account. We walked towards the lagoon, questions racing our across our minds and these questions, once verbalized altered our mistaken presumptions.

He spoke first, “You knew my brother?”

Which brother was he talking about, I asked myself. I choose to be careful. “Yes since the last two years. I have met often Yasir, here and now again.”

Hearing this he smiled and spoke placidly, “I speak of my younger bother, Minavan.”

Being addressed so, I looked hard at him. For all the grace he seemingly possessed, it mattered little then, for his question seemed absurd, to say the least. Then, it would have been foolishness at its best, to put trust in him. Being Minavan's brother, he should at least have known, reality in its partial form. However, fragile and external as our bond was, I had no choice but to reply, “Yes I did. We studied at Tirah.”

“But you left?” The pitch of violins rose in the distance.

“Extenuating circumstances I would say.”

“None that you can voice out?” The pitch began falling.

At that my voice rose, “And what business of yours rests in decisions that I made in my past?”

He purples eyes rose to meet mine but he spoke as placidly as before. “I see things. Some that make no sense.”

“Things?”

“Yes things. For one, it surprises me as to why you lower you gaze when it comes to Linah Rafiki, upon whom rest my brother's affections. What do I miss?”

“You miss my modesty” I retorted, fighting back contempt as the violins started screeching again.

At this he smiled again,” And your modesty is limited to only a single lady in this city?”

“Respect and limited?” I stared back at him. How dare he tear my wounds, I thought. “Do you not regard the fragility of the bond that subsumes us all? Did he put you up to this? Just like all the others he has had standing day and yesterday, to remind me all of what I left. I held you in higher esteem than the puddle of low morality, you now swim in.”

His gaze met mine again and his smile disappeared. My words were as rash as rash as the violins, still screeching in the distance and I slowly became aware of the transgression I had undertaken. He however still echoed in his soft manner, “If not knowing is a crime, than indeed I have wronged you. And for that, I offer you the humblest of my apologies. The past, I am not cognizant of, and perhaps I will remain so.”

“So has your brother kept you in the dark?” I asked, having found my chance to question. My tone was now lowered to levels of decency.

“He indeed has.”

“And what would explain his silence?”

“Distance on our account. “ When he spoke this, his eyes shined. They remained no longer calm; roughness seized them and I grasped that Minavan Malik had overstepped in his own home too. That piece of vermin.

Throwing the ball back in my own court, I resumed, “I loved that girl. He took her away and with her a good many things a person needs to walk with his head high. I left. I quit; and that will quite explain.....my modesty. ”

Again, Dadhey raised his eyes to meet mine and this time he did not withdraw. He seemed to filter the reality I shoved at him and it did pass as convincing to him. Then, of all the things he could have asked, of all the condolences he could have offered, of all the bitterness he could have washed off with his charm, he went for

a completely inane question, ' Do you by any well gotten chance, have the Valima invite on you right now?'"

A bit shocked for words, I could barely utter, " No."

"Well meet me tomorrow at noon sharp, Café Le fazz. We have some sense to make."

That note called the conversation and we walked back to the Valima dinner together, looking everywhere but not at each other. In truth, that night, we began as in-laws and we ended as complementary accoutrements, our bond now internal.

People at the reception eyed us as we walked in again; I must add that I too, couldn't care less then. Matters much more important had left me in deep thoughts and little could I do to hide it that night. An hour into the night, I took leave from my parents and sister and asked Ghulam Nabi to drive me home. A strange feeling grew inside, or feelings I may add. It was something like digging in the wilderness but with certainty, utmost certainty that the spade would hit the treasure box, regardless of whether X marked the spot or not.

For all I stood to lose by believing in him, I still did.

6-

Café Le Fazz

At noon, I entered Cafe Le fazz, a restaurant located right at the edge of the Karachi coast. It was a different place; red plates hung from the ceiling, the floor wired with lights inside which led to a small dais, a guitarist and a singer encompassing it. Amid the blues they conjured, laughter still rose higher, from the tables complementing the life that rose inside.

Shrouded in a dark corner he waited, the valima invite placed on the table. Seeing me he got up from the table and offered his hand to me. For once I could afford to pay attention to the white lace that circled his forefinger. “Dadhey Siddiqui.” He pronounced.

“Siddiqui?” I uttered. I was too surprised to sit.

“Have a seat, Nadir.” He said, his radiant smile reinforcing his words.

“I m a bit muddled here.” I whispered, finally taking a seat.

“Siddiqui. Yes. Siddiqui.” he mused, his eyes focused on nothing. Sliding the invite across, the table he requested,” Read.”

I looked at it. There was nothing, blatant or latent, that I saw now that I had not seen before, when I first read it. “I see no difference.”

“Bottom right. The names under RSVP.” He pointed.

“Your name isn’t there.” I mouthed, speaking more to myself than to him.

“By no accident and by no grievance. It was asked and I gave my outright approval. Reality being,” he said, his purple eyes glimmering, “that Rahat Malik’s blood does not flow through my veins. Reality being that this family is a reconstituted one, commencing thirteen years ago when my mother married him.” Seeing the shock on my face, “Yes we hid that. Marium was quite aware, however, we all saw no point, at that point in time, in disclosing our past.”

“But you do so, now?”

“Extenuating circumstances,” he began, using my own words. “Minavan maybe my foster brother, but nothing binds this bond, not even words. Over the years we have been keen to disassociate ourselves, sitting far across tables, voicing conflicting thoughts, living an existence that exactly contrasts the others. Now, we merely share contempt, not conversations. You are not the first person he has showered injustice on. Too often have I heard of his fiendish endeavors, ruthless ventures but you, certainly are the first I have come across. He enjoys hurting people, and sadly knows....I presume that you have something to ask?”

“I have a scarce idea where to begin. Were you two always at daggers drawn? Has his nature always been so inherently harsh? And most importantly, why are we even here?” I fired, rapidly verbalizing all what burned my solace. He had read me well. Infact he always did; it was useless trying to hide anything from him. I began to see why Minavan despised him so much; even Dadhey’s modesty couldn’t shrug off this natural air of greatness that contained him.

“I have strong presumptions. It is not a concealed fact that his mother passed away while giving birth to him. I guess he never forgave himself and he did not forgive the world, either. And no, we ambled along fine when we first met. His brain turned laterally when he developed his concepts of property and lineage. Materialism gnawed hard at our weak ties and estranged us. Yasir still fared better with me. He remains a respectable individual, accommodating as well and your family should have no worries as to whom they bequeathed their treasure. Similar would I say of Mr. Rahat. His profound love for my mother, Yasmeen, made it all the easier for him to open his arms and welcome me. Unlike you, I wasn’t born with a silver spoon. Didn’t have mansions to get lost in, did not have more money than I could figure out what to do with. This changed when this marriage came to being but I never changed; perhaps in memory of my father.”

“Forgive my probing nature, but am I to assume he...”

“Yes, he passed quite away. So now, acquaint me of your plight.” he said cutting me short.

I told him of how I fell in love, how I liked a girl who would no longer look at me, (great thanks to the sadist in our lives), how broken dreams and broken realities forced me to withdraw, how it all would have been different had his foster brother

not existed. I further enlightened him of how Packard had momentarily done justice to me, how normality was almost restored until they all came back again in my life.

I also noticed that he smiled when I talked about Linah, his left hand fondly embracing the lace he was never seen without. “Why do you wear that?” I probed, staring hard at it.

“We all have our memoirs do not we? Would you like coffee?” he responded signaling to the waiter.

I was clear that he preferred to hand out extracts from his memory lane. Extracts that would suffice in explaining why were we here in the first place, that would suffice in gaining my trust. Things made a bit more sense but these snapshots still, only provided distorted perceptibility.

“Yes, fine grain please.” I added as the waiter came. Surveying around, I appraised that my partner still remained the object of the environment. A group of girls, three tables to the right, eyed him lasciviously. As usual he couldn’t care less, and neither did he look upon them.

“Are you aware, that people around seeking your company? Why do you shun them?” I resumed, my eyes still fixed on the girls.

He followed my gaze and finally looked across the table; the girls broke into smiles. “Shun?” he asked softly.” I prefer peace to politics, beautiful silence to cacophony. But don’t we all? I wish not to wrong these people by giving them importance I don’t intend. Learn, that after my Lord, the thing that I fear most is hypocrisy. I wish not to wrong them. I wish not.

“The wedding being no exception.” I juttred in.

“No exception. None at all. If life carved me that way, I apologize to this world. Acknowledge, that it is not my pride. It is...”

“Your indifference?” I interrupted.

He broke into a smile, his magnificent features accentuated. “ No, I wouldn’t quite put it that way. History would appease your concerns but we cannot dwell on that, now. As to answer your earlier question, I can help you.”

“Help? Pertaining to?”

“With measure and proportion, you can seek your reparation. I will help you.”

“Against your bother?” I mumbled, eyeing him with great concern.” What do you seek to gain?”

“I get to settle my own scores that I have accumulated. Deliverance quite depends on your decision.”

“With all due respect to you, Dadhey, why would I want to be your puppet? I can seek other means of redemption, but so doesn’t seem your case.”

“It quite is not. Truth being that Minavan and I are forced to live under the same roof. Hostilities kept latent would do justice to the peace at Malik residency. Will you not consider?”

“Tell me first, what score do you have to settle? I will consider but only when the actual nitty gritty lie on this table.”

“Fair enough. You are entitled to your fair share of history. But allow me to leave the uneven past in favor of the future; about eight months from now Mr. Malik will appropriate his property amongst his sons. After years of mediation, my mother has finally convinced him to devote an infinitesimal fraction to me. Our sadist grudges me of that: he will act out as a pressure group, quoting blood far stronger than fosterage and for that, I believe, he should recompense.”

“I would bet my life that you love not wealth. Your argument openly defies my clearest opinions.” I asserted, quite incredulous at hearing his words.

“Well met Nadir. I care not for wealth. I care that he has always sought to thwart all that comes my way. Does that satisfy your concerns?”

Another thing I learned about Dadhey that day at Le Fazz was that he had great mastery over his speech. In his frugal expression, he steered his way across

questions without conceding what he did not want to concede. “Partly,” I replied. “But what potion do you brew here?”

“Break his heart fair and square. No external humiliation needed. The girl pays. He pays too, connived into winds of deceit.”

“That’s wonderful prose. It is soothing to hear, but he won’t fall for that, Minavan ain’t a fool.”

“Oh yes he will. Not so kind though he remains, he is not immune to fatal attraction.”

“I savor your idea, but by what means will you deliver this fatal attraction? Attraction that will have to far surpass Linah’s charm?” Hearing his plans, I stood quite interested, I really was. Over the past eleven months, I had been too busy running away from my defeat to even think of redemption, or any other form of damage control. Revenge hadn’t escaped my mind, but neither had its desire surfaced powerfully enough to be realized. What I ignored to acknowledge was that I had not been weak, I had been consistently weak.

“There is a young lady, who has been for quite sometime, well known across circles in this city. Her occupation, put in simplest term is to steal hearts and injure them, in exchange for pecuniary emoluments. Cruel it sounds, cruel it is. Yet I deem it fit, for a cruel man.” He said, finally raising his coffee mug to his lips.

I did not reply. I did not need to. It was my turn to smile as we both sat, perfect understanding embracing each other. Those who forgive are great indeed, honorable beyond quantifiable measure. Those who do not, well, end up curing their impaired consciousness. So much for forgiveness, so much for mercy, so less for sublimity.

That was that, our agreement tacit, more limited to our irises than to our words. Finance being of little concern, we both sipped our warm coffees, pondering over what sketches, we would draw with the pastels of time. Potency felt great.

Just before we set off, he inquired, “What you should know is that I will be leaving for Lahore tomorrow. I have my final term to complete at Lahore Union Engineering University, after which I will gain temporal, or perhaps permanent

respite from education. Would it be too much to ask if we proceed with our project in June of 2006, when I am delivered?

“No it is not. We have all the time in the world, for no one is running away this time. I will wait on you.” I replied determinedly, exonerating him, as I signaled to the waiter, for the bill.

“I appreciate your ardor, Nadir. God be with you.” He spoke, offering his hand to me.

“God be with you too.” I replied, embracing his hand, my fingers, not for the last time, gently scraping against his white lace.

He got up to leave then, and my eyes followed his lone figure to the door. Sunlight came in as the cafe’s door opened, and slowly his shadow receded. His presence however remained, deeply entrenched in my memory, refusing to leave. The occupants of the third table to the right, also exited; little idea they own that they were in for a disappointment. That was Dadhey Siddiqui, enigmatically within the sphere of attraction, yet so, enigmatically out of reach.

7 -

The other Malik

The marriage done with, I bid farewell to Marium's entourage. Mother had now, however, abrogated this title. Half a decade down the lane, they would be my entourage. She did not say this though, but neither did she need to. We were all too apt at conversing with silence.

The Hussenis flew back to their homes and so left, with them their respective fancies. Our house quietened with amazing velocity and it hit us a bit hard. It was after all, difficult to share such a large house amongst just three individuals.

Life now simply equated education counting out, dwelling on past memories. Restlessness grew on me for I felt empty. I won't say reticence was tearing my soul but rather it was the lack of ability to find anything to say. Clocks ticked slow, time moved even slower. Dadhey crossed my mind often, but he seemed like a ghost. Months passed and I received no correspondence from him. At that point, I might even have believed that he may have recanted from his proposals, had I not collided head on with his verity. He was a man of his word, lost though he was.

As I returned to Packard, I found that our associations did not go unnoticed. A neat haired, mild faced junior came up and introduced herself. "Hey, aren't you the guy whose sister my second cousin, Yasir, married?"

"That was one revealing sentence. Yes, I am Nadir."

"I was there at the wedding. Lavish ceremony, commendable infact." She said, stretching out his hand. "Farah Malik."

Great, I thought, all the Maliks had to end up in my life. Nonetheless I retained propriety and met her hand with mine. "It was our pleasure."

"I hope you wouldn't mind the abruptness of my interjection. I, for one, don't uphold deviations when the point is clear. With all due respect to you, stay away from him." She continued, her hands trying to make her neat hair even neater.

"Are you always so abrupt? To answer your query, I do. Haven't you noticed?" I replied, not sure who she was talking about. I choose the fiend.

“I beg to differ Nadir, on basis of observed reality. Keep away from your new found association.”

“Dadhey? Has he wronged you, or anyone for that matter?” I asked, quite doubting her as Minavan’s blood tied minion. She was after all a Malik.

“No. However, you may grieve to learn that he has a morbid past. Death clings to close to him. It’s better to stay away.”

“So tell me who died?” I laughed at her, amused at her out of ordinary suggestion.

“His father for one, certain relationships in Lahore. Mind you, this is not something hidden. Well known facts.”

“Who put you up to this? I asked in a sharp manner, my laughter subsiding as I stifled the urge to directly implicate Minavan with this act.

“Minavan asked me too. He agrees that the past you share cannot be altered, the grievances cannot nullified, but he wouldn’t like if you lose more than necessary when it comes to a single family.”

“So you are his minion on my campus? Why does he not come forth to confabulate his crap?” I asked taking no pains to trim my contempt.

“Due to my respect for my cousin, I will overlook the scorn you bestow on me. No, I am not his minion. He would have done it himself, but he knew better: you would never talk to him.”

“No just existence would blame me for that. I hope he delivered you a dose of history, before he sent you here.”

“He did. However, let us not stand in the past. I hope you will heed our counsel.” She replied, her voice now urging.

“I hope you wouldn’t mind the abruptness of my interjection, but is it just respect you have for him?” I asked, repeating her words as I began to doubt her motifs too.

“We both believe that all stands fair in love. You can find peace in your far flung assumptions.” She concluded indifferently, stretching her hand out again.

I shook her hand silently and following that she left, a group of freshmen now encapsulating her. I wouldn’t believe in Minavan’s selflessness, he was not made for it.

My sadist surprised me, however. How audacious he was to probe in my relationships, to still try to warn me when he knew that I would take it up with his step brother. Maybe he was not probing, he was destroying them and that was perhaps, was all he lived for.

I saw Farah often. She choose to forge independent of that I had with her cousin. She would often nod at me as I walked to classes, and I would reply in kind. Wittingly or unwittingly, she did her damage; what ever cover, necessary or unnecessary, I had created, was blown. So much for the rugged Ford pickup, so much for being nobody, it turned out to be all for nothing.

By January of 2006, I was no longer a recluse, thanks to the Farah. I found friends, pretty much the same, as I had found at Tirah. Nice people but meaningless, loyal but to my sir name, and not to the person inside. I couldn’t rebuff them for I held it was wrong to deny my company to those who desire it. I wished it was time to acknowledge the reasons held, but it wasn’t.

It was mid-January, when I stood in the parking lot, ready to bound homewards when Farah came up again. “I have found you friends, you know.”

“People that I could do without. I don’t even have to ask now, as to who came up with this idea” I responded, trying very hard to find my key.

“If he had, than these people, whom you are hesitant to call your friends, would have also known of you sorry antics at Tirah. I don’t blame you and that is why is

kept quiet. I only conceded, around, only what you are really worth, a bit of family lineage and they flocked to you. You look grand, when surrounded by friends.” She smiled playfully as she said; she seemed to enjoy her potency.

“So it’s your turn to play God, now. A Malik in every playground. Well, yeah, that’s what my life is now. It has no grander purpose than to figure out what bitter dessert the Maliks our cooking against me”. For some reason, I smiled too, as I said this. At the height of my annoyance, paradoxically, I was smiling it off. Maybe I was becoming a bit mad, Ghulam Nabi didn’t seem so wrong now.

“Sweet dessert, Nadir. You are somebody now, a big somebody. So why don’t you bring some other car from your house. I saw many, too many, pretty monsters there at the day of the wedding, and you bring out this ugly wreck here everyday. Do justice to these people. You are merely baffling them now with that pickup truck of yours.”

“So now I am to be a thrall, to the wishes masses? You are a fool, you know that right?” I asked, chiding her softly.

“I do. The fact still remains that few can live this life. You can and here you are running away. Sad part is that is all you know best.” She snapped, slowly unfurling her diatribe. “You like running away from the track’s starting line, from your past, from your memories, from your university, from who you are meant to be, and from appreciation. When will you stop? When?” She didn’t wait for an answer and walked away to the bus stop: maybe my living had frustrated her.

What she said, for some reason, really touched me. It was one odd way to examine my life but I found her to be correct: I really was running away from everything. I fumbled for my key again, finally found it and gunned the engine.

Amidst the newfound appreciation for her, followed something unexpected. I offered to drop her home. A bit annoyed though she was, she accepted the ride and that was that. I drove and drove, took turns right, left and centre. When we had finally reached her home, we hadn’t spoken a word subtracting the directions we exchanged.

Getting out of the truck, she finally spoke in a wavering voice. “You know where I live. You can see that a person who lives here, in this locality, would certainly need some money. He did pay me but I did not lie. Death surrounds Dadhey, but this doesn’t change the reality, that no goodwill directed me to you. I apologize.” She walked away again. Then she came back and recanted, “I have no respect for my cousin.” Without waiting for my reply, she walked away again.

It was a sad affair. My act of kindness had drawn on her conscience and she looked torn. Her lack of affluence made me realize, how fortunate God had made me. Not that I had been thankless before, not that this was my first realization but it was just that it had never meant so much to me before. It was time to pray, it was time to change.

Minavan seemed to have capitalized on her poverty, but questions still grew in my mind. She had not lied which implied, that their certainly existed a morbid crisis, which hovered around Dadhey. It was only Dadhey who could answer these question, and I waited more eagerly than ever for his return, yet the winds of communication were silent, as silent as a graveyard, as uncertain as a graveyard, as foreboding as a graveyard . My gentleman was lost, and intrigue burned me now.

Next day I returned to my university, well not like before. I sought her out, to tell her it was all good and that I appreciated her candor but she was no where to be seen. The day passed, Packard filed out and then I finally saw her walking across the parking lot to the bus stop.

“Farah. Stop. It is fine. It is ok.”

“No Nadir, I am at fault here. It just happened in my ignorance of... I never knew that you were such a great guy. I am not like him, I really am not.” She remarked, her penitence apparent.

“Come. Let me drop you home, the bus is too vexatious. A new inception?”

“Yes, that would be preferred. But, where’s your ghetto truck?”

“There.” I pointed to black convertible Mercedes.

“I can’t see it.” She asked, giving me a bewildered look.

“You will, if you acknowledge that it has transmuted to a black convertible.”

“Oh my God! Oh my God! I thought you were a stubborn ass. You brought that, that beauty!” She shouted, her amazement verbalized.

I grinned. “New beginnings dictate that my friend drives.”

“Friend...Hmm. She never learned how to. Another day perhaps?”

“Another day.” I repeated as we climbed in the, as a new relationship formed, as a new transmutation began, as people turned around to admire the car, as it roared out the gates onto the streets.

“So how did you never learn?” I asked, as we headed towards her abode.

“My family had a car which our financial crisis ate up. So never had a car on which I could learn. It doesn’t matter though for I have a whole life to do so. The clouds will part someday, for sure.”

“They will, no doubt. Have faith in God and while you are at it, enlighten me, how did Dadhey’s father die? You said that you did not lie, so what’s the truth?”

“That’s one smooth way to ask a question, Nadir. To answer, if I just knew better. Things are a bit murky in this region. Minavan never told me what occurred, and I am not sure whether what he knows or and what he does not. You know Dadhey, he would never speak and he is a closed book. One can’t gain entrance to him; he is a very, very difficult person.”

“Have you known him for long?”

“More than a decade now, don’t even remember. We all sort of grew up together but choose our different paths, or maybe our paths were chosen beforehand. I used to converse with him before, but now we are perfect strangers. Time has changed him, and I have no answers as to why: I stopped caring a long time ago. Of greater concern to me were my family’s declining finances.”

We both grew silent, pondering the depths of our thoughts and before I knew it, the convertible stood outside her house. “Time to leave, madam.”

“Madam. I like that.” She laughed. “On a final note, now you tell me why Dadhey cling to you. What does he find in you that the world lacks?”

“Mutuality and common ground. There are some bonds that are meant to exist, and no level of endeavor on behalf of anyone, can intervene to disrupt their course.”

“Well that makes sense. Thank you for the ride, and a nice one it is. Post script, you seem a bit obsessed with him, you know.” Saying that, she exited the car and I left for home, thirsty for answers that seemed out of reach. Was I really obsessed? What had happened with his Father? Who died in Lahore? How did Minavan know so much? Marium had gifted me some very dark in-laws, and that was for sure.

8-

A Letter and some Change

Months passed and I grew to know her. I made sure she never had to see the bus stop again and she made sure I was the most known guy on campus. I used to banter and call her my publicist. She used to reply that every recluse has his day.

Minavan never came in our relation as we both choose to keep him out of our conversation, though for very different reasons. Thanks to Farah, there wasn't a party I wasn't invited to. Thanks to my subterranean craziness, I didn't go to any. Farah claimed that I was denying myself and on the insides I couldn't agree more. It wasn't hard to forget Linah, I just didn't want to, no matter what new invective Farah came up for her.

Months climbed on and Farah was acquainted with the best of my garage. My car preferences didn't go unnoticed at home. Every morning, when I used to pull out a different car, Ghulam Nabi and my Husseni life sources use to eye me, trying to look busy with their coffees yet having no problem standing in the vicinity of the garage. Maybe this was their way to ask question why I had abandoned my much cherished Ford truck. Well, their questions went unanswered and I suspect they laid blame on my raging hormones or our family lineage. If I was to answer, I would blame my wild friend who was fast changing me.

She successfully made my life a social circus. Crowds use to engulf me, competing fraternities silently battled for me (the same ones which had closed their doors when the year had begun). Sorry, not for me. For the guy with a millionaire background: she loved this mess. I guess she laughed at them too inside, their struggle for something so pointless. I will go so far as to call her my only true friend at Packard, for though she liked affluence, our friendship had nothing to do with. It was a paradox in itself: my sadist in law, in attempt to break a few more ties, incidentally handed me a friend.

Common sense would have dictated not to trust Farah but why let common sense have a say at all? We hardly talked of the past; infact the beauty of our existence was that it all stood and remained for the present, not even for what was to come.

Love? No. We were made for two different worlds and in the course of our journey together; we never gave thought to it. A pure relation it was, pure beyond words, playful beyond expression.

By the end of my second year, laughter became a norm, my past a single coherent memory. She was a walking talking catharsis, and I stopped living in the past. Yet some aspects of my past wouldn't leave me and just a few days before my term closure in May 2006, the wind of communication opened and my gentleman came through, much to my regalement.

- *Dearest Nadir,*

I have been gone but I haven't been far away, not in thought atleast. After successfully redeeming a few favors, pulling some thick strings, I have finally tracked down that lady. I have a number but I won't disclose it in this letter, lest this letter fall in wrong hands.

Expect me soon as I am about to graduate. It is time to edify the incorrigible. Pointless but needed.

I can only hope your respite is an embodiment of halcyon itself.

Yours,

Dadhey Siddiqui.

-

I read that letter again and again. Not only that, I carried it around everywhere. He could have emailed me, called me but he chose the post and that too without a return address. His care was genuine but it was so difficult for him to bring down his walls of seclusion. I could tend to be crazy, Dadhey was simply beyond comprehension. The worst part of it all was that it was so difficult to remain angry at him, he grace negated it instantly.

It was the last day of my second year, with all the exams done, that I stood with Farah outside her house.

“Thank you, Husseni boy for all your help and these magnificent rides.” She said, looking at my Father’s Porsche.

“Thank me, once we are all done with education. You offer pre-mature gratitude.”

She pulled at her neat hair. “I have something to say. A surprise infact.”

“Let us have it.”

Still fingering her neat hair, almost fearfully she continued, “I am leaving and there is little I can do about it. Infact, it is my choice.”

“Leaving where? I questioned, breathing nonchalance, not ready for what I was about to hear.

“France. I am getting married.”

“You are not.”

“Yes I am.”

“No, you are not.”

“No, yes I am.”

Now a bit convinced that this was no joke, I thrashed into verbal essays of common sense. “You cannot. You haven’t even graduated and you are barely twenty. Whoever he is, he needs a maid to look after his house, not a wife. You know how these Pakistanis abroad are. Reconsider, for this is your future you are talking about. ”

She bent down and laughed at my speech breathlessly. “Arranged though this marriage is, I have known this guy for sometime. He’s a nice person. It is an honesty opportunity for me. I will study there alongside. That is not an issue.”

“What if they go back on their promises? Who will save you than? When you leave from here, you leave with your ships burnt.”

“Stop scaring me. Why are you being so negatively skeptical of my future? Tell you what, I will have one last ship.”

“ Are you asking that or telling that?”

At this she smiled, “You pure villain. Moving on, I cannot give you a date, but the wedding is in the next two months and it will soon be over, and you will be exonerated.”

“So who is this sorry guy? Throw a name.”

“ There is a year-closure gathering tonight. Meet me there and you can ask to your hearts content.”

“You know that is not my party, certainly not my thing. Give me his name. ”

“You can ask to your hearts content, but tonight. Isolationism will burn your insides. Husseni boy, its time to embrace a wholesome existence.” Saying that, she headed to her house in her usual style, without waiting for my answer.

I may have attended that party for curiosity’s sake. I may have deviated from my conventions because my only friend was leaving me but fate felt like having its own laugh.

The Porsche rolled home and I exited, feeling a little emancipated. Reaching the main hall, I found my kindly mother and father seated right across the small fountain I stood there. As I moved towards them, my eyes spotted brick red suitcases waiting on the bottom of the stairs, for another journey.

“Someone is going somewhere?” I asked.

My father replied. “Yes. Your mother and I are heading towards Indonesia on a business trip that might just turn into a tour.”

“And since when have we have you started excluding me from your plans?” I asked, a little surprised at their inception.

“Dear son, have we ever done that?” You are going too.” My mother piped in. “But, not to Indonesia. To Sukkur, Pakistan.”

“Sukkur? Sukkur? Indonesia and Sukkur? They are worlds apart.” I argued, extremely incredulous.” We don’t even have relatives there. Why would I ever go there?”

Having anticipated my reaction my mother got up and took hold of my arms to placate me. “There was a friend of mine who attended Marium’s wedding. She was unwilling to come such a long way but acquiesced on the condition, that I would be there attend her daughter’s wedding too. Sadly, I have to be there with your father or I would met this condition, but you can more than make up for my absence. We go a long way back so she would understand, dear.”

“What’s her name?” I asked her, wondering why matrimony was falling about me with such intensity.

“My friend’s name is Ajmera. You must have seen her in November, however, she did not stay at our residence. Nonetheless, you will represent me there to the best of your servile abilities. Ghulam Nabi will have the car ready in a few hours and you will depart as of today, given that we also will leave tonight. This house of course, will be locked down so there is no question of you staying back.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes. No cell phones allowed. Ajmera’s husband is a retired army colonel, a very demanding gentleman who never came to accept young individuals indulging in such unnecessary fancies. I hope you can understand, it is just a couple of weeks.”

“Yes I understand, infact acknowledge an imprisonment when I come across it. Any more ordinances?” I replied sulking.

“Smile.” My father said, rejoining our exchanges, as a wink flashed across his eyes, “Smile. It might just help, you know. By the way, you just have an hour to pack.”

“No, Zahid. I have done that for him. Go son, rest a while and before leaving, come to take our leave. I will stay in touch darling, for they do have a telephone.” Saying that, my mother ushered me towards room. There I stood, just standing. When reality flies too fast, man can only stand still, hoping against hope to slow down a bit.

It never worked for me though. I tried to call Farah, to tell her I won’t be there. She never picked up and I never got a verbal chance, to tell her I was leaving and not defecting, to ask her what his name was, whose imminent arrival would rob me of my catharsis, and to apologize for not being present at a closure party. All I could do was to drop texts and emails, and that I did, with horrifying postscripts that I would remain technologically isolated for the forthcoming weeks, at the mercy of the caprices of a retired army colonel.

Two hours later, all partings undertaken, Ghulam Nabi and I hit the Pakistan Super highway that led to Sukkur, a city that stood more than half a thousand kilometers away. Country passed, so did shepherds, their sheep, industrial areas, farms, hens, army training camps, steel mills, cement factories, deserted palaces and other multifarious existences that one could only deem of seeing. Now and then, dust trails would cloud on the high way road, adding to the already dry ambience. A bit further down into our journey, it seemed that we kept passing the same painting again, and again.

No matter how fast we travelled, life floated by so slow. Bored, I encouraged Ghulam Nabi, to break the speed limit. Loyal he was and in this act of loyalty the highway patrol pulled us over, our journey going back by half an hour. Acquitted after paying them a heavy fine, we now refrained from overtaking turtle trucks as well. Next time, such endeavors were sending us to jail and that was an ordeal we couldn't afford, especially Ghulam Nabi who was off to meet his family.

The sun started falling in no mans land, and the wilderness seemed ablaze. Trucks cut across its fading light, carrying their barns, haystack and feeds with them. Life became simpler and simpler, as we dusted off the last specks of urbanity from our memories. Rivers passed and sterile lands followed; it all seemed so difficult yet some people lived here. Only God knew why, we just knew how.

This journey started with regret too: I wished I had just had got across to Farah. For starters, I had never packed up to leave for nowhere in just two hours. The rocky terrain that grew on the last leg of my journey could only serve well to personify my mood. Strange as it seems, jagged it was, a big conflict of emotions of pleasant foreboding and a modicum of grief over how it all began. Fifty kilometers from Sukkur, seven hours into the drive, darkness eloping us, Ghulam Nabi drove into a broad lane that slanted from the highway and I looked at him with suspicion.

He himself answered my unspoken queries, "This family own vast farmlands stretching far from the outskirts of the city. You are not actually going to Sukkur, you are almost going to Sukkur. Your mother thought that truth might become a real ordeal so she filtered it."

"Blood deception hun? Tell me, have you been here before? The last time I checked, you were not using a GPS which precludes the possibility of such perfect residential knowledge. You have been there before, you have."

"Your shrewdness impressed me, Sir. Yes I have been here." He replied, the car screeching to a halt.

"When was this?"

“ A few months ago, that would be. I will say no more. The car is yours to keep, young sir. I will part on this note for activity stirs in the farmhouse as we converse.”

I couldn't just let him go like that, walking in complete darkness, but fearing what kind of a Colonel I had in store, neither could I afford to play host in a house that was not even mine so I came to quick decision. “ No, Ghulam Nabi. Years of service atleast guarantee you this. Take this car and head off in whatever nook of Pakistan you want, you will not be questioned. As for this unprecedented confinement, lets us make it a complete one. Who knows, God might just forgive a few sins here.”

“You amuse me sir. As for the car, I am deeply honored. My regards.”

The car rolled out of the farm gate and darkness engulfed it. I started walking towards the farmhouse which in itself turned to be an enormous wood cottage. There were no streets and they certainly were no street lights there. Pitch dark were the two words that did justice to my perception. As I neared the cottage lights, fear started growing inside. If this was the wrong house, (given the extreme shades of darkness, there remained a potential space for mistake) I was as good as dead, as worthless as a stranger in the wilderness, a hitchhiker on the highway road.

9-

Thirteen conversations and second love

I stood outside the cottage farmhouse feeling very strange, a bit flustered as people inside knew that someone had arrived, yet were not bothering to come out and welcome me. The welcome wasn't an unexpected one, infact it met the standards of my expectation.

“Turn around very slowly. Keep yours hands still if you love them.” These were the words that came from behind. I slowly, very slowly turned around to find an old man with a loaded shotgun pointed at my existence. He wore an army cap and had certainly not entered from the front door. I had no idea where he came from, except I found him to be every bit of a Colonel I had imagined him to be. I was at the right place.

“ Could you lower that please? I am Nadir Husseni.” I am sure I put in a very strong emphasis when voicing out my sir name, failing to cower in front of his weapon.

A second voice now came from the front door, and it was an angry one. “Enough! No more character determination. He's a guest, a guest!” I turned around to find an old woman walking, infact marching toward me. Her slender frame was now illuminated by the lights as she stopped a foot in front, her hand raised to my head, apologetically. “I am your mother's friend, Ajmera. This blood thirsty farmer behind you would be my husband. Welcome to Sukkur, Nadir.”

The Colonel now came up from behind, and I now vividly saw the scars that marked his right cheek. His wounds gave him a very hardened look and I was actually happy, that I wasn't an intruder on his farm. “Can't be too sure these days, lad.” He said as he stretched his hand to me, firmly gripping my hand. “Since you are now a certified guest, I apologize for my jumpiness. Come move in, be at peace.”

Aunty Ajmera gave him skeptical looks, knowing very well that he was upto his harmless mischief. Lovingly they rehabilitated me inside, the colonel insisting on carrying my only bag, perhaps in attempt to make up.

Over dinner, I came to endorse that my first impressions of that house were terribly wrong. First impressions are definitely never the last impressions and the last impressions are never quite the lasting impressions. As reactive as I had found them to be outside, the Colonel and his wife, Ajmera, deeply loved each other. The Colonel, liked his jokes but he was a very silent man. He appreciated my presence but he hardly spoke. He was a laconic man, or let me rephrase, a warrior of few words.

Ajmera Aunty was relatively glibber, and took deep interest in my life and the marriage that had taken place last November. While she spoke, I noticed that the table had four plate sets and four chairs. It was evident that someone was not here, it was evident that it was bride to be.

Speaking of brides and marriages, till this day, I thank God I did not voice fabrications that my parents had fed me at my home. In my ignorance, infact innocence, I was momentarily battered when Aunty Ajmera commented on my parent's trip. "It is a pleasure to be of service to your mother. These venal airline agents just look for some extra money. How wrong it was of them to deny you the ticket at the last moment. You can stay here for as long as you like, a Husseni can never breach on our hospitality, or be denied welcome here."

Taking the invisible cue, I replied. "I could have been stuck in a real mess, If not for your kindness . We wouldn't trouble you for long though as my parents are bound to return within a fortnight's proximity."

I was sure that my Mother hadn't been entirely honest with her, or Ajmera Aunty was a part of her agenda too. They definitely had not arranged for a ticket, there definitely was no marriage, there definitely was no bride to be and I was ready to bet my life on it; they were my parents after all and they seemed to have a very good reason for sending me in the middle of nowhere. As for her account, if they

had wanted to take me along, they would have paid ten times the price for the ticket.

Half an hour later, done with dinner, the Colonel escorted me to a guest room on the first floor of their cottage. It was a small room, but brilliantly furnished with white furniture, perhaps just to welcome me. He seemed a bit apprehensive as to what I would think of it, of what grudges I would entertain, given my affluent background. I gave my best at placating his concerns and thanked him at least four times for his hospitality and generosity. He was a content man when he went back down those flight of stairs: I made sure of that.

Left alone, I unpacked my only bag, in my sincerest attempt to make the farmhouse a peaceful respite. Just two hours were left to midnight when I had finally finished with making it feel, a bit like home. I would have been interrogating Farah, had I only been in Karachi but alas, here I stood a little stranded, but not unhappy. I was amongst kindly people and I appreciated that. I really did.

A knock on the door interrupted my thoughts, and pretty much everything that lay in store for years, hyperboles aside. “Come in please.”

The door opened and it brought in the purest of fragrances, the loveliest of faces, the rarest of brown eyes, the fairest of demeanors and her captivating calmness. “Hullo Nadir. Thought I should welcome our much awaited guest.”

“Hullo.” I answered, standing up to receive her, suddenly afraid that she would leave from the door. “Please come in, have a seat.”

“I am fine at the door, sir, for I just came here to see how our guest fares.”

“He can’t fare any better than in this existence, much regards to your parents.”

“Well than see you tomorrow. If you need anything, knock on the second door to your left. Goodnig...”

“If I do need anything,” I interrupted, “what am I to address your grace as?”

A hint of a smile dawned on her face before she closed the door. Through the closing gap came her strong voice, “Nida, would do.” I knew I had left an impression, a pleasant impression on my host’s daughter. She seemed no different from the Colonel, as reticent but her self reinforced by her sublime countenance. That was our first conversation and with it came cognizance of my mother’s intent, of her self revealing lies. She had never wanted to keep me in the dark for long; she had just wanted to make me leave to attain.

In barely a minute of exchange, her presence had spoken very loud, effacing every thing on my mind. It came as a grief that I had no reason to knock on her door, except to ask her of a few kind words, of just one devoted look and that, I couldn’t. I was falling in a deep infatuation, and I knew it would be crowned under the title of love, just with the break of dawn.

The next few hours were spent, uselessly contemplating how our conversation could have been protracted, of the things I could have said to deliver myself in an eloquent manner. The light in the passage way closed around midnight and I knew that Nida was off to sleep: useless contemplations. Before falling in my own deep slumber, I avowed that I wouldn’t leave the farmhouse without my feelings transposed, without conquering the jewel in the wilderness.

The penetrating sunrays woke me on the morning of the 2nd of July 2006. For a moment I had no idea where I was, the wooden roof seemed alien. I reached for my cell phone but there was no table to reach for and no cell phone to reach to. Then it came back to me, it was farmhouse.

Yawning, I stretched up from the bed and my eyes grew level with the window. It was fascinating: in broad daylight, the farmland stretched far beyond eyesight, sprawling in magnificence, now shining, than silent, yet speaking what the darkness hadn’t spoken last night. Farmers worked in the distance, busy harvesting the spring wheat crops, the farther ones ploughing the ground for the winter crop, ready to be sown next month. To the limit of what I could descry, I saw the outline

fruit orchards blazing in yellow bounties. Nature spoke so truly that day and never had I had a more dazzling start to the day.

I headed to the bathroom, ready to clean up immaculately, for a change not because routine required, for a change for someone. Once I had perfumed myself to perfection, tidied myself to the art of purity, I left the room.

It was still early morning and the sun was yet to reign in its severity and thus, I got my track shoes out, a sprint in mind. The bedroom two doors to my left was empty. I guess I had to face her in company of her father, the silent Colonel and that seemed no pleasant prospect to me. As I entered the kitchen downstairs, a voice from the hall hailed me.

It was Aunty Ajmera. “You are an early bird? We thought you wont wake up for another two hours. My husband left with my daughter for Sukkur, to get you some of your proper breakfast. They won’t be back for another hour.”

“Well, yes I am. I often sprint early morn.” I said, not entirely lying. “Tell me aunty, what is proper breakfast?”

“Something that you city kids devour every morning, beginning from cereal ending on co-co pops.”

I shouldn’t have but I couldn’t help laughing. “City kids? City kids? So that’s what I am to you. With all due respect, you should have asked me. I am fine with cow milk and farm eggs. So much for city breakfast.”

“I might have erred then, Nadir. You do not seem as spoilt as we deemed. However, I cannot contact them so you would have to wait an hour for breakfast, nonetheless.”

“That is the least of my problems. I am obliged by your concern, even by your presumptions and we can have a laugh over breakfast. For now, I am off to sprint and welcome your farmland. Do I have your permission?”

I did get the permission, infact it was not something to ask for, only courtesy dictated it. I began at a slow speed, along the gravel trail that began right adjacent to the hen-house. Moving into flow, I started running faster and watched the farm go by. Fresh morning air hit my face, something you couldn't find in the polluted depths of the metropolis; humble farmers wished me morning, and I returned their greeting, enjoying the slight shock on their face. I am sure no one, in the entire history of the farm had gone on a morning sprint. Life was already too tough here without initiating tiring campaigns of athletic exercise.

My legs broke into complete stretches on the gravel trail and only cows mooed into the distance to acknowledge my burst of speed. Three quarters of an hour into the farm, the adrenaline passed and my legs began to slow down. The cottage house was nowhere in sight, and if not for the trail, I would have been lost. However, I was still nowhere, the yellow orchards were still more than three kilometers off and time constraints forced me to retreat. I knew I would be late for breakfast and lack of punctuality was the perhaps the worst gift I could give out to a retired forces offer.

Now came real the challenge. I was pretty much out of breath, had to go the whole way back, meet a time limit and work on my first impressions. In my desire to meet Nida within the criteria of punctuality, I hurt myself. Half way back, my tendons started hurting. I knew well enough that if I ran now, I was in for a serious injury and could rule out the possibility of any further morning sprints. Running degenerated to ambulation and when the hour struck, the cottage was still no where to be seen. The good part was, counting the hurting tendon aside, I had an amazing start after a month's hiatus from sprinting, the bad part was I late and might have just have been booted from my host's good graces.

Well, that wasn't exactly so. Dirt blew on the trail in the distance as a red corolla pickup truck moved on my trajectory and stopped five yards in front. It was the Colonel; he was not in angry, infact apprehension dawned across his face. "I thought you just might have fallen in a ditch somewhere. By Lord's grace, you are alive. Climb in young man."

“Thank you, Sir. I apologize for the delay. Actually I bent a tendon as, at least that’s how my coaches put it.”

“I hope you are not hurt.”

“No sir, I am not. Not at all.” I was beginning to be a burden on the folks and I could feel it. He didn’t speak again and I was a bit afraid to add anything in either. However, he did not grimace or frown, and apprehension that had contained him, left his face. Calmly he parked the jeep next to the barn and walked with me to the cottage, yanking the door open for me, his courtesy intact.

The table was ready, not with coco puff and cereals, but with farm eggs and fresh milk. I could only meaningfully smile at the Colonel’s wife as she directed me to the chair. Unlike yesterday, all the four chairs were occupied. Yes, she sat across in tranquility and it was she that spoke first, “Morning, Nadir. Your absence left us a bit worried, so we sent father in your wake.”

“Morning. I apologize once again for this untimely delay.”

“We will tell the farmers to watch out for you tomorrow. Can’t just let you loose you like that.” Joined in Aunty Ajmera, loading my plate. “Your mother Aimen, will slaughter me.”

“Speaking of her, you never told me how you know my mother, and neither did she ever speak of you. Frankly, this trip came out of nowhere,”

Auntly smiled as she replied. “Our father’s worked as engineers at Chaklala base in Rawalpindi, Punjab province. We lived there for a decade and a half until Aimen Shafqat got married to Zahid Husseni, your father. But no matter how deep she fell in affluence, she never forgot her past and never forgot me. Our friendship lived in post mails and still does, apart from her sporadic visits. Last November, when we met, it was after a good twenty years. Hard to believe, but yes, that’s how far we have been. ”

“Did you ever meet again after the marriage?” I asked, remembering my conversation with Ghulam Nabi.

“Oh yes, I invited her over but she came, all the way here, just for just a few hours and than sent you, out of the blue.”

“And you are welcome son, stay as long as you want.” Put in the colonel, now getting up from the table. He seemed to be not bothered by me or my early morning stint.

“Any other questions, Nadir,” asked aunty, following her husband’s lead.

“They can wait but I have an assertion to proclaim.”

“Then proclaim, young man.”

“I am not just another city kid.” I said, my eyes locked on Nida.

She laughed her way out, shaking her head and I kept gloating at her daughter, wondering whether there was anything to say at all. My expressions didn’t leave any void in our communication. Nida was becoming more and more conscious of my blatant advances, but she met me with no encouragement. So began our second conversation.

“ You did not come to my sister’s wedding? It would have been a pleasure having you there, knowing you before.”

“ Well you have come to know me now. I did not, for I live in Rawalpindi, with my aunt. There is no university here within a two hundred kilometers radius so I shifted to Rawalpindi a few years back. Won’t find any suitors here, in this wilderness, in any case.”

“Suitors? Ay luck?” I shifted uncomfortably as she said this.

“I have loads to bargain for yet, education to mind, so we aren’t chasing the world with utmost ferocity.”

“What if you don’t have too? Life may turn out to be easier.”

“I believe that it’s better to strive for things in life. Golden platters never maketh a man or a woman.”

“Are you addressing me?” I was quite sure she was pointing towards my life.

“Last time I checked, we were talking to each other. And than again, no one else occupies this table.” She replied, voicing out in tones of innocuity.

“Well we are, we are. I hope you find the best there could be, one who can do justice to your grace, to who you are.”

“Do you know I am?”

At that point, I wanted to tell her that she was the most beautiful thing I had seen, the her brown eyes had no parallel, that her sharp countenance was fair beyond words and that her straight hair could suffice to invite any woman’s envy. I wanted to tell her that I knew who she was the moment I saw her: she was the last depth of my longing. However I did away with such sentiments in my speech for I had barely ploughed my ground, harvesting was out of theoretical reality. “No, but I will. That is my word, a word of a Husseni.”

“Sadly, you don’t have much time here, Mr. Husseni, to hold to your word.”

“Truly spoken. For some people you need eternities of the fourth dimension.”

“To understand?”

Here I saw my chance and dared to take, “To spend with, Nida.” She stared at me, keeping quiet as I finished my breakfast. It was painful to see a glowing conversation reduced to silence. I wanted to be cautious but there was no time left

for caution, let alone forget I just had fourteen days to win the heart of a person, who was just a stranger yesterday.

She finally spoke, “I have some sleep to catch onto, if my guest doesn’t disapprove of an early absolution on my behalf?”

“He doesn’t, by any means. Gladly absolved.”

She headed towards her room, slowly moving on the wooden flight of stairs, not bothering to look back. I wish I could call her back, but wishes remain wishes, as a honey tongue could speak of a glad absolution that the heart couldn’t render; it was its own master, brain and soul oft accompanied, more oft separated.

After having stared on my breakfast plate for an indefinite period, I headed towards my room wondering where my hosts had vanished. The door to my left was closed and in its closure, the passage way that led to it was lifeless uncolored, meaningless. All of a sudden, my own room seemed too silent: there was no one to talk to, there seemed nothing to except peruse the farmland, sifting crops from another, counting the cattle which cared about no one. It was a simple existence, monotonous but peaceful, silent but vibrant, consistent but truthful.

I lay my head on the window sill, drowsily counting the farmers, now thinking about Nida, sluggishly marking out the dead scarecrows, then believing in myself, distinguishing the unvisited orchards, after planning the distant future, forgetting that the harmonies of my life were at the mercy of the structure, individual yet communal. Maybe there stood a dire need to forget, to believe in my own will and efforts for nothing was to be achieved without them, without making a difference, without trying.

My eyes closed, I flaked out awareness of the dimensions around me, sleep encapsulated me and I fell into the fifth dimension of our existence, a dream. On second thoughts, I wouldn’t call it a dream for it was nothing short of nightmare. I stood on an empty road as two figures in black, walked away from me. I hailed to them yet they didn’t acknowledge my shouts and kept walking away. As I ran

away from them, they started running away too. I was breathless when I finally caught up with them.

When they turned around, I was shocked to find it was Minavan and Nida. In my anger I slapped him, but he just laughed and laughed at how terrible a loser I was, not being able to fend the people, who meant the most to me. I kept striking Minavan repeatedly until the Colonel came out of nowhere, his gun leveled to my head. There was no Aunty to save me this time, and I got ready to embrace a quick death with my eyes lamenting rivers of water, asking Nida why she had left me.

I didn't die however. Aunty Ajmera saved me again, this time by throwing beads of water on my sweat ridden face. "Are you okay, Nadir?"

The sun sparkled high in the sky as I stared back at her, extremely disoriented. "Where is Nida?"

"Nida? She is in her room....wait, why are you asking that?" She looked extremely confused.

"Bad dream aunty, a bad dream. Not that I mind, but why have you woken me up?"

"It is past noon and here that connotes lunch time. Can't starve you, can I? And you do have to do your running thing too. Three meals equate strength."

"Yes, my running thing. Give me five minutes to scrub my face and I will be seated right amongst you all. Just five minutes only."

A little less unsettled than me, she left the room, probably wondering what erraticness had seized me. I agree that I had lost it back then, but there was little I could do about it, it was a shaky start after all. Outside the window sill, there was not a single farmer to be seen. It was really was lunch time and I scurried to put shaken myself together within the granted time.

Not wanting to disappoint the Colonel again, with a profit of a minute, I treaded down the stairs, across the hall into the kitchen. Contrary to my high expectations, only my mother's friend sat on the table, waiting for me.

Taking I seat, I noticed that the table had only three sets of culinary. "Where is everybody, Aunty?"

"My husband is out looking after his farm hands, he is obsessed with them. Everything had to be right when it comes to them."

"And Nida?"

"She doesn't take lunch. We could never inculcate it in her system, therefore the next time you see would be at dinner." It was apparent now that Nida wasn't the only one picking hints now. She continued, "So what did you dream?"

"Saw her with someone who I don't think so highly of, someone who I had no reason to like, and there was nothing I could do about it. That was my dream in euphemistic terms."

"So what would justify your possessiveness? Hold. Let me take back my question. I naively ignore that a man has no control over his dreams. Who did you see her...." Aunty Ajmera suddenly stopped as the Colonel came in. "You are a little late?"

"We were in counsel. The farmers are apprehensive, they say that the monsoon is going to hit too soon, the fields are not ready yet. We can't afford to have a bad harvest this year too."

Curious, I asked, "What happened last year?"

Finally sitting down with a grimace, the Colonel replied, "Insect plague coupled with the tail end of a monsoon. Nature is playing games, now the monsoon is expected to arrive a bit early. Anyways, forget the farm, where is Nida?"

Aunty Ajmera cast warning glances at him as she responded. “Upto her usual behavior, and right now, probably asleep.”

Grimacing even more, he laid an arm on my shoulder. “She has changed adversely ever since she has shifted in with Ajmera’s sister. I apologize to you Nadir, for her worthless behavior. I think the city has got to her as with the passing of every day, she seems to forget who she is.”

“Just a phase sir, you owe me no apologies, and neither does she. She is good at heart and a bit of indifference to food doesn’t relegate her to my bad books, if I have any right to retreat to judgments in the first place.”

“Manners are manners, son, limits are limits, and propriety is propriety.” He didn’t speak again, his discontentment apparent on her face.

When he finished and left for the farm again, Aunty explained. “ We sent her off to Rawalpindi to my sister, for higher education. She is finding it hard to adjust back here, in this modern stone age. To make matters worse, she got involved with this Indian student settled there, in Rawalpindi. The Colonel, having fought in our two wars with India, would not hear of it. It was nothing short of desertion in his books and he forced Nida to abrogate her relationship. She complied, but after that, she has been distant, barely speaks to us. They are all putting a good show here, for you, but I can’t care less. Why hide the truth if it is the truth.”

I had to swallow the air vacuum that had built inside me, before I could converse again. My mother had not just sent me her to court a pretty face, she thought two broken hearts would do, mine and hers. “Broken hearts take time to mend but they do. She will heal, her wound will definitely heal. Just let her be and tell me one thing, when my mother came here, did you acquaint here with these latent tensions?”

“We hide nothing from each other. Aimen has read the book, of which you have just seen the cover. Any reason why you ask that?”

I smiled as I replied, leaving the table, with my first and final attempt to bring aunty toward the light of reality. “She usually tries to be a positive catalyst, but of course, you of all people, must know that. If you will, excuse me.”

By dinner, I had made the following realizations: the house had eight bedrooms divided equally between the two stratoms, there were a total of seventy four workers working on the five hundred and twenty six acre farmland. Also, there were sixty four cattle, over a hundred hen and most importantly the house was technologically isolated with no internet, no cell phones, no televisions, counting out a single telephone that never rang. I suspected the line to be dead but I never checked it: I wanted something to hope for, something to believe in, and that telephone stood as the last ray of sunlight in the stormy rain clouds.

Talking with the farm workers I had found that the Colonel was feared less and loved more, though he remained a strict man, exacting in expectations. Some claimed that he had been a valiant warrior and used to charge right into war skirmishes, leading from the front rather than from a distant telephone. Some even said he was held as a prisoner in a covert operation on the eastern front, which justified the scars on his face. However, no one had the temerity to directly ask him of what went on in those battlefields.

The farm had belonged to his family for five generations but now many questions floated around. Nida, his only off spring, unquestionably, would get married and abandon the farm, leaving no one to lay claim on it. The land of course could be sold but the farm workers detested the idea of a feudal landlord overpowering their lives, expulsing them from the ranks of workers to the rank of thralls. On second thoughts, life was simple but not without concerns, no one was free, no one was acquitted to endless mirth and joviality.

The sun had climbed down and the winds had picked up as I headed off to my room, aiming to shower and change into something, well, serious. The occasion called for it and I answered it. Nida was still nowhere to be seen; her and my corridor, still lifeless, colorless, meaningless.

Night struck and I sat with the Colonel, scented brilliantly, suited to the limits of what money could buy, the higher limits to be more unambiguous. Dinner was served and Nida was still nowhere to be seen. My anxiety (as to whether she would come down) did not go unnoticed by the Colonel; however, he just sat silently on the opposite end of the table, trying to discern my face. I kept fidgeting with the glasses, plates and forks as a fried chicken was laid out on the table by the aunt. A whole day had passed, and it was felt. Only God knew what the next thirteen day or so, had in store.

Half way through the course of the meal, footsteps sounded through the hallway and much expected they were, atleast on my account. In her usual serene manner she moved in and took a seat next to me. Greetings were exchanged but nothing more was said. The Colonel and his wife seemed exhausted while on the other end, my day had just begun. As closely watched as I was, I kept tried to keep my eyes fixed on my plate, yet terribly failing in my attempt to do so.

The colonel finally broke the silence which was now verging on awkwardness. "It's going to rain tomorrow, Nadir. You might not be able to run next morning."

"The rain doesn't detract me sir. I was always taught to use it to my advantage than to see it as a hindrance."

"Well said. You could do well with such an approach in the forces, if of course you possess inner intrepidity. However, that is something you can't learn."

I was not sure whether he was questioning or explaining. "Maybe sir, but my father wouldn't part with me as he has no one left."

At this the Colonel smiled reminiscingly. "Neither did mine. I had to run away and enlist when the 65' war broke out. I left a letter promising I would come back. Nida's grandfather never believed in it and it took him years to forgive me when I came back. Patriotism has its costs."

Plucking up my courage, I saw my opportunity to ask. “If you don’t mind me asking, these scars that you support, do they pertain to the war?” The two ladies at the table, simultaneously looked at the Colonel, than at me. I definitely had crossed some unseen limit and I was sure I would pay for it.

The Colonel got up from the table as my heart displaced to my lungs. Before leaving, he replied as a gleam came across his eyes, “ That remains another day’s story and I am sure you would need it later, in your marked anticipation. That remains Colonel Amjad’s word.”

I was not sure what he meant but it was a relief that the conversation had not scintillated. I continued with my food in silence, my forefinger shaking in light of the adrenaline that had seized my torso.

Aunty Ajmera also got up from the table, and before leaving she added. “ He like you Nadir. Don’t worry.”

“He really does,” put in Nida, finally parting with her silence to commence our third conversation. “ People don’t get answers and they don’t get away with such questions.”

“Lucky me. That’s all I can say,” With the table empty, I looked at her to my hearts content. I just couldn’t have enough of her existence yet she seemed to distance her self time and time repeatedly.

“Do you sprint professionally, Nadir?”

“Won’t call it professionally but yes, I have sprinted for the institutions that I have belonged to. It comes as a pleasure representing what you respect.”

“Ok.” That was her reply, such a conversation stopper, so awaited yet so meaningless. She played with her leftover food and it seemed that she had something more to add. I waited it out and a small eternity passed before she spoke again. “I was shortlisted for a crafts exhibition which takes place on the day after

tomorrow in Rawalpindi. I will leave tonight and would be absent for some days. It's a short stint but a career opportunity nonetheless. Pray for me."

"Don't.....don't go," I stammered, very frustrated at how things were turning out.

"Why do you ask me to give up something that means so much? Why should I not leave?" She really did not understand me.

"It barely a day since we first met, but believe me, believe in me, my existence here is meaningless without you."

"I think you are wasting your confused affections. I have no choice. You ask me of what I can't give."

"Do you speak of meaning or this opportunity I have asked you to forgo?"

"Both."

"I will pray for you." I said, getting up from the kitchen table. "That I will not deny you. Excuse me." Thus ended our third conversation, with a person who seemed far beyond reach, elusive I would term her. I was bitter but my father's last words came to my mind and I gave her a weak smile, before heading for my room.

Perhaps that smile did the job. A few moments later she knocked on my door but I didn't open it. A part of me had wanted to welcome her inside, but the egotistical existence inside got the better of me. So much for a fourth conversation.

As I prepared to put an end to my day and moved towards the bed, I noticed parchment lying through the slit beneath the door. I had no idea when it was shoved inside but undoubtedly, it was from her. I walked to it and picked it up, to find that it was blank. I looked again and finally found three small words written at the foot of the page closed with a signature.

-Wait for me

Nida-

I opened the door and rushed outside, sincere emotions overpowering the ego inside, but it was too late. Her room was empty and I had failed to part with her in a manner that could be termed graceful. Abject anger seized me and I smashed my fist against the wood, only to drive my knuckles into a nail. Blood started rushing out as I shrieked in anguish, than muffling my cries so as not to concern my hosts.

I ran to my room and tore my shirt into a small bandage, trying my best to control the blood. Half an hour later, the pain had subsided to an extent, but my bandage was bloody drenched. I changed it but to no effect: the second bandage became fluorescent red too. The nail had driven in deep. The third bandage did some justice and finally controlled the seeping wound, however the damage was done, both to the heart and to my anatomy.

My head spun and I collapsed onto my bed, now weak beyond measure. The night passed with strange dreams, the contents of which had eschewed my memory before dawn.

It was still a bit dark when I woke up. I removed my bandage and saw that red blotches covered the wounded hand. Bandage or not, this was not going passed unnoticed at any cost. Track Nike's were worn, laces were tied and I headed down the wooden flight of stairs, the darkness still not having fully subsided. No one was there, no one at all. My hosts were still in a deep slumber.

A quick drink and I was out, not sprinting but walking. I hit the gravel trail and again and the farmland became my ambience. Surprisingly, even at this time the workers were tilling the field. Later I found that this was their own measure to save daylight and avoid the scorching sun that could peak over forty three Celsius. I waved at them, initiating or returning their heartfelt greetings. It was a pleasant affair, a honest exchange of something more than just words. What exactly? Ineffability drives me to silence here.

Even the wind was silent, dead as I unconsciously headed towards the orchards. They were too far away and the weather was too stifling. It was not as I wouldn't get there, but I would be late for breakfast. The sad part was that I now supported a physical souvenir that again and again, reminded me of the Colonel's daughter, of the mistake I had undertaken in between torn emotions. Last night a perfect stranger had asked for too much, foolishly impartial to his status.

I however was not repenting at my advances, time more than warranted them. As said, my existence here, was meaningless without her. Last night's events truly explained what the Colonel meant by "marked anticipation". Marked anticipation at her return had long begun with little else to anticipate, subtracting the Colonel's answer and the haunted telephone coming to life. Even my mother was silent; if an existence could become more desolate. Or perhaps the telephone was dead, after all, or before beyond.

Time forced me to turn back again and I postponed the prospect of visiting the orchards till noon. I noticed that the cattle were nowhere to be seen, perhaps harbored somewhere in light of rain forecast. The morning sun angled at a good thirty degrees now and I was sure that they were wrong in their expectations.

An hour later I was back at the cottage and my entry from the front door surprised my hosts who had expected the staircase to clutter instead. "Ain't this house silent today."

Aunty Ajmera replied, "Speaking your heart out nadir? You are one early bird. Where have....."

The Colonel interrupted, "Son, what has happened to your hand? Come, show it to me."

I had done away with the bandage but the blotches didn't elude his sharp eyes. He had been brilliantly quick at discernment and no doubt remained as to how he had survived two wars as a foot soldier. "Tripped and fell onto a nail, sir, after dinner last night."

He did not buy my story and as usual, got his skepticism across in a subtle manner. “You seem to be getting a lot of injuries here. I hope I can see all of them. Come, let us have our breakfast.”

Farm eggs, bread and butter adorned our table as I acquainted the Colonel with my plans of visiting the orchard.

“You won’t be able to go today. It is going to rain like anything. I can take you there on the truck but once this downpour is done with.”

“I beg your pardon sir but the sun is blistering out there. There won’t be any rain.”

“Learn, is there any wind blowing today?”

“No breeze at all. It’s a *habas*, pure silence.”

“Exactly. Furthermore, if you venture towards the barns on the western joint , you would find all the ants retreating to their tiny dwellings underground. Welcome to the nature’s meteorological department.”

I took his assertion with a pinch of salt but soon nature spoke with him. It started drizzling and then came the real beating shower. The Colonel move outside with his gun and fired three shots in the air. Farm workers from all corners of the farm left their work and headed for the barns. That was the layout of his apparatus; farm like but with a military flair. No doubt, he was a good man, a gentle employer.

The rain contained me inside and in its hindsight, I realized that I would surely be sometime before I could visit the yellow orchards. By late afternoon, the Colonel sensed my lethargy and offered to take me out. “Come let us go for a ride, Nadir.”

“It’s raining, sir. You don’t mind?”

“Cannot care less, young man.” He said, picking up his gun.

As we headed outside, I queried, “Why are you carrying your firearm sir? Surely, we wouldn’t need it?”

“ We won’t, not unless you want to shoot a few scare crows.”

I just smiled. Now he was talking. We took the truck and after thirty minutes of driving down the gravel path, we finally stood at the patch in front of the orchards. The whole place was vacant, not a soul breathed there, except perhaps the temporal soul of the gushing rain.

The Colonel began, “That’s the best place you could have asked for, Nadir.”

“ I see no scare crows here sir.” I questioned getting out and admiring the yellow glow that emanated the orchards.

“Its not what’s in these yellow orchards, it is about what is beyond it, the land which is obscured by these orchards.”

I soon saw what he was talking about. The orchards spanned only three hundred meters and beyond it began grasslands of such inherent pulchritude, flanked by yellow trees on either side, quite similar to the quaking aspen that grew in the north. Even though it rained, the sun was still out in the sky and then I saw them, fifteen black scarecrows standing together in a line, the oddities of their extravagant atmosphere .

“This is my retreat,” he said shooting down a scarecrow. “Heaven in the country.”

“You don’t farm here? It is nothing short of an estate. How come you have hidden this from people.”

“People fear me. No one dares to breach my territory, it’s a marked land.” Another scarecrow went down.

“So sir, you owe me an answer. If you will?”

“These scars?” he said, throwing the gun at me. These are who I am.” He grew silent and I assumed he had answered. Pointing at the trigger, he resumed. “ In the 65’ war, there stood an abandoned garrison town, about a hundred kilometers from Lahore, right at the Indo-Pak border. Hostilities mounted at the border and intelligence reports brought in notice that the border would likely to be breached along that very perimeter. We barley had hours to react. My immediate commander was afraid to lead us into the very heart of war so he ordered a small airstrike around that town so as to caution the Indian forces. At that point, the Pak Air force was already in combat, fully deployed with planes crashing here there and everywhere, ours and the enemies. It was unlikely that the strike would be conducted in time, or at all as the first major enemy offence and our counter defense were being realized.”

He took a deep breath, and then resumed. “Reading the situation, I secretly insurrected, and led the small battalion under my command to occupy the garrison. By the time the Indians reached there, we had secured our posts and gave them a complete challenge for a whole three days. Since this was not an authorized mission, I knew I would be accountable for every soldier that would die. Luckily, they were few casualties except on the last day. The retreating enemy infantry sent one last mortar flying which caught the troops at unawares. Three of my best comrades died and metal shrapnel exhumed my face. When the war finally ended in September and I was partially restored to health, I was court martialed by my superiors on grounds of mutiny.” Seeing the look on my face, he shook his head. “Yes that happened. I was exonerated though, when they noted the strategic importance of that garrison, which would have been otherwise conquered, unfought, without resistance. “

“So did you become a hero?” I asked, awed by his valorous story. The rain still had not ceased.

“Quite far from that. Breakdown of command is breakdown of command, taken very seriously here. I did not even receive a single medal, even though every serving officer was dispensed with one. My conscience however, was clear. I had served my country to the best of what I was, and my actions were in the honest

interests of this nation. However, it still did not end there. When I finally came home, having enlisted without my father's consent, he wouldn't treat me as his son. I worked as a worker for two years, on this very farm until he finally came to acknowledge that his son, Amjad, had not died in the war."

"I am sorry to hear that sir."

"Don't be. I never was. I loved this country and I ran away again when the 71' war out broke. This time we were bested by the Indian forces, humiliated as well. I came back as a defeated man this time to find that my father had passed away during the war. He left a final letter, saying that if it ever reached me, I would be fortunate to hear that he finally understood what patriotism was and what I was fighting for. I sent my resignation to my superiors. They did not want to part with me and thus I was promoted to Colonel. I left nonetheless and over the years, in memory of those three dead comrades, I tended these grasslands and turned it into Elysia."

He finally sat on the ground and I followed. Silence surrounded us as we sat, I in his awe, and he in some distant grief. We were completely drenched by now accompanied by thirteen standing scarecrows. I took down a few more before we left for the farmhouse. The Colonel noted I wasn't a bad shot.

Night came, dinner passed, night absconded and another day began. It was another rain day with pretty much nothing left to do. I mentioned of thirteen conversations, yet by now only three had taken place. Obsessed as I was with her, another nine conversations took place in my head over the next two days: well one can call that love. I did.

Imagination after all became, was my last retreat. Even the Colonel became silent again, perhaps worried by the unfavorable weather.

On the sixth day of my stay at the cottage, I was astounded. While sitting in the hall way with the Colonel and his wife, our silence was disturbed by an ancient buzz echoing from a bedroom. It was the telephone. We all exchanged looks and I

concluded with certainty that very few beings on earth had the number to the telephone.

Aunty Ajmera walked to the receiver and picked it. Five minutes later she hailed me to the bedroom. It was my mother.

“Hello mother.”

“Hello Nadir, I hope you are doing well.”

“Yes mother I am amongst nice people. As u said, I have assisted them to the best of my abilities with all that concern their daughter’s wedding.”

Half a minutes silence followed before the phone cracked again. “What are you talking about, Nadir?”

“I am talking about the unnecessary lies that you fed me. Why have you sent me here?”

“Listen Nadir, we will talk but once I have come back. You have to listen to me clearly. Ghulam Nabi wasn’t available, so, as we speak, your father is on another phone with his associates in Lahore. Two days from now, a chauffeur will pick you up from the farmhouse, two hours before dawn and drop you off in Karachi at Marium’s place. Catastrophe remains that Mr. Rahat Malik’s wife has been diagnosed with lung cancer, and that is much too late. It’s a last stage cancer and she has just got a few days to live. Its time to part with my friend and her family and head off to Karachi.”

“When are you coming?”

“I am unable to secure any air line tickets at any bid. I hope this misfortune doesn’t last. I will be there as soon as possible. Just be there with them, you will.....” My mother couldn’t complete her words for the line dropped. She didn’t call again, perhaps unwilling to give me my answers. I was devastated regardless: Dadhey stood on the absolute verge of losing the only person he cared about and I was not

there to add some solace to his life. On a different scale of thoughts, Minavan had spoken truly.

On the seventh day, I woke up again before dawn. I proceeded down the dark flight of stairs and left a note in the hall, for my hosts, to not expect me for breakfast. I was to leave tomorrow and before I left, I wanted to savor the exquisite grasslands for one last time. If anything could cure my clouded mind, it was the Colonel's Elysia. With my shoes on, I hit the gravel path for one last time and ran towards the smokescreen orchards.

Above all, I was sad, once again. Yasmin Malik was breathing her last, and with these last breaths would pass away an epoch itself, for the Malik household. At both ends of the trip I stood to lose, two women who were important to me. So much for winning anything, Nida was still beyond grasp, beyond my perceptibility. I had no idea how Farah had been, only a few more days would tell.

Reaching the grassland, I found that the monsoon winds had knocked down the last of the standing scarecrows. The beautiful yellow trees, however, still remained and greeted me, in their silent tongue. It was so calm.

I walked the yellow grasslands for a measure of time. What measure? I don't know. It must have been hours when my attention was held by soft footsteps behind me. My heart took a small leap; it was Nida and with her came our thirteenth conversation.

"Hello Nadir," she began, in her soft prolonged manner.

"You have come back, hun? Out of some blue, or some red?"

"Let reality speak for itself. How have you been?" She sat as she spoke, gesturing me to sit on the grass.

"Pretty much the same as you left me. So how did your exhibition fare?"

“It was fine, tiresome to be frank.” This conversation was going no where, it was so commonplace, so awkward.

We both watched the sun ascend higher and at length I spoke again, something had to be said. “How did you know, I was here?”

“I came back with my father an hour ago and was the first to intercept your note, so I thought, why not find him.”

“You have found me indeed, but only to lose me. I am leaving tomorrow under commanding circumstances.”

If my words disturbed her, she did well to contain herself. After another awkward hiatus, a long one which was spent watching the young sun, she finally bent, “Don’t go.”

“Why do you ask me of something, a request that I cannot execute. It is not because I am running away, it I because I have adhere to a responsibility, a candle that would soon be extinguished. The feelings that I spoke of that day still hold, believe me.”

“Things can change here with time, Nadir. Stay for now. If you leave, there won’t be any foundations to cling to when you come back. I will be gone and I will leave without memories.”

“Foundations may erode but feelings do not, not if they are true. With all the verity you have ever acknowledged, ever known, tell me, do I mean anything to you?”

“I do not know. You are rushing head on a bit too fast. I really don’t know.” Her eyes refused to meet mine.

The last silence followed and than even this conversation breathed its last, in the words that she had once spoken to me. “Irrespective of what you hold or don’t

hold, I have obligations, some which remain at the mercy of time. You ask me of what I can't give.”

Eyes met and turned as we headed back to the farm in the red truck, confused, close but too far. Life was being unjust and I had no conduit to put across my silent outcry to it.

10-

Retreat at the fourteenth

Starting quite came to a halt as I packed my bag. It was late night when a knock on my door made me turn. It was not Nida, it was her mother. “So are you done with everything, Nadir? Packing? Good-byes?”

“Am on these tasks and will be definitely done before four am. Well atleast that’s what I hope.”

With a part smirk she spoke, “Well let us hope you leave nothing behind.”

I laughed back at her knowing that she knew. “I hope so too but some things, just get left behind. Memories, meanings, people. Feelings too.”

“You will manage, don’t worry.” She yawned, standing up. “I am off to bed now. Give my regards to your mother. And yes, Amjad will be up at that time to see u off. Love you, son.” She left with a pat on the back.

At this stage, Nida was nowhere to be seen, probably secluded in her room. The limits of decorum required one last parting and thus, with seeming propriety I knocked on her door, but it was her turn not to respond. I stood there but no one opened the door. I knocked again but there was still no response. Only God knew what was on her mind, the confused human could only return back to his tasks.

Night crawled by, clothes were tossed, strewn sock were pushed into the suitcase, the cupboard was scoured and even the bed was made. By four am I had successfully removed any signs of my stay in the guest room; it remained as unengaged as it was when I first entered it. I climbed down the stairs and there sat the Colonel on a chair reading a book in a very dim light. “Its time Nadir?” he asked, gently keeping his book aside.

“Well sir, it’s certainly two hours before dawn and these chauffeurs are rarely late. On our last note, I hope my stay here wasn’t that big a burden.”

“It was a pleasure Nadir, not a burden.”

A horn blared outside and car lights broke in through the window. “You are not a city man, but if ever a bell rings than remember that my house is open for you sir.”

“I don’t think it will. To add, all wars are not fought on the battlefield.” He smiled as he spoke and that was one of the only times I had seen him doing so. “Come back when you may.”

I was not quite sure what he was alluding to but I was touched by his hospitality. “Goodbye sir.”

He shook my outstretched hand and gave a small nod. I headed outside where a black car stood, a tall man silhouetted in front of it. As I walked towards him, a distance of fifty yards or so, I turned my head to look at the farmhouse for one last time. A light on the first floor was now open and a figure stood at the window.

I raised my hand to bid her one final goodbye. Nida did not raise her hand, she was bitter enough not to. Despondently, all the barriers to Nida were conquered but Nida just had to be the last barrier herself. I resumed my walk towards the car, a little broken, but with feelings no less profound, with love, far from any form of abatement. That was our fourteenth conversation, between which stood walls of rejection and despair. Agreed that a conversation is based on at least one reply, for me it was all about one acknowledgement, and that I got, I actually did.

The new chauffeur kept my bags in the car and without a word exchanged I was soon seated on the passenger seat, enroute to Karachi.

The chauffeur spoke first. “Good morning sir.” He was grey haired man, with a very tall frame, and his eyes were scarily bloodshot.

“Good morning? Oh yes, Good morning. So who do you work for?”

“Your father. I have met him time and time again when he heads north.”

“Strange isn’t it. Never even heard of you but thank you for coming all this way at this time.”

“I wish I could come sooner. Had other business obligations.”

Inside, I part wished he had never come. I had some unfinished business left here but choices had to be made, sacrifices had to be made. My grey haired driver looked very tired, but admiringly he never let his head droop.

“What your good name sir?” I asked.

“Ghani jaa.”

“Ghani jaa, does this car belong to my father?”

He gave me a very curious look. “Yes it is.”

“Well than stop the car and step out.” We were on the super highway and there wasn’t a street light to be seen anywhere for hundreds of miles. It was blank dark; nothing spoke for miles except the car headlights.

He more bewildered than ever but he complied. “Why would that be?”

Ignoring his question, I threw him another. “Tell me how long have you been driving?”

“Twenty one hours straight.”

“Twenty one hours??” I exclaimed. “Twenty one hours straight? Get some sleep Ghani jaa. I will drive.”

“Sir, duty is duty, I can’t....”

I broke him off. “In my world, rules are not rules. Get some sleep, sir.”

He moved to the back seat and I took the wheel. That tired man fell asleep within five minutes. Speaking personally, we were masters but we weren't cruel people. What could we do about such loyal employees? Nothing much.

Couple of hours later the sun broke the surface, with nothing to block its view. It was magnificently simple. It illuminated the same deserts, factories, station houses that I had seen on the way front. However intrinsically, there was nothing left to the ride except monotony. Eight hours down the road, without a patrol pullover, I was finally in Karachi. The vehicles bustled, people crawled the streets, motorcades stood jammed and urbanity came all back, but it seemed turbulent now, even a bit unwanted. Such were the momentary developments that had taken place at the farm.

The black ride rolled down Marium's driveway and I woke my acquaintance.
"Wake up, Ghani."

He woke up a bit surprised "We are there?"

"Yes sir, we are. Let me welcome you to Karachi and to this house. You can move to the chambers inside. You don't have to go back now." Even before, I completed my sentence, I knew he would decline my offer.

"No sir, I can't. Your father's business calls and so do my commitments. I am a man of my word."

I liked how he spoke that. I took out an address card and handed it to him before we parted. "I like that, you know. I really do. However, you don't have to drive across Pakistan in just one go, we own a business, not a rally." He laughed open heartedly at my joke. "Here take this card. We have rest houses in every major city a you are welcome to them. Just give me a call and let me talk to the manager, you just might be able to stay there forever. You are in my good graces sir."

He shook my hand twice before leaving. "We might not meet again but I will never forget that. Farewell." He left, a grateful man.

I reached out my hand to knock on my sister's front door but it opened before I could reach it. There stood Yasir and Marium who became transfixed when they saw me. They obviously weren't expecting me.

"You were in Indonesia?" they both asked at the same time. Mother, was well Mother.

"Long story. Welcome to the dark, I was in Sukkur. Stories aside, how is aunty?"

Yasir spoke first. "We are off to visit her, you can rest inside Nadir for you seem weary. Seriously, no one would be grieved if you are a few hours late."

"Time is what we all lack here. I came here back to meet her and I see no reason for a delay. I am coming with you."

"Well than come," asked Marium as we moved into their station wagon. "So where were you? Mother never said a word about Sukkur."

"It's been a long time since we last met. On your wedding, did you meet this lady that goes by the name of Ajmera?"

"I did young Husseni. Fine woman, now spill the beans."

I didn't spill the exact beans for much was still to be learnt. "Nothing much to it. Mother sent me on a fourteen day trip to get acquainted. Perhaps she thought I would get acquainted with the country or the country acquainted with me. Nothing much materialized and I had to cut the trip short when I heard of you mother, Yasir. Speaking of more pressing concerns, how is she."

He replied, his face becoming a bit grim. Little did I know than he was more afraid of what would happen to his father than a step mother he had known for more than eleven years? "Time is dissipating rapidly. She doesn't have more than a few days. Can hardly breathe, she's on machines, barely alive."

Death itself seemed to have plagued our car as we fell silent, in fearful anticipation of the future. The car rolled down the drive of Pakistan National Hospital which spanned over fifty acres of residential land. Black marble buildings spanned in all directions, their construction nothing short of a masterpiece. Ambulances, doctors, patients rushed here and there, no one could care less or more about the other. It was about money and lives, cure and alleviation, failure and transparent tears.

A fountain or two could be seen there, but the brilliance of the whole structure stood at the corner where an artificial lake rippled. Mourners, anticipators, children stood there, picking a pebble, making a wish and chucking it into the water. The smarter ones remained at the other end, engaged in the prayer mats asking one final favor from their lord, whom they had not forsaken, whom they hadn't forgotten.

We entered perhaps the gloomiest of all buildings there: the cancer ward. More patients went in than came out alive. This was the order, the existence, the grasped reality. We? We had no hope to begin with; it was a clear case. In the waiting room sat Minavan, trying to look important by reading the paper. He greeted us all and even nodded towards me. I could barely shake my head back. Mr. Rahat Malik and Dadhey were in the intensive care unit (ICU) which rarely entertained visitors.

An hour later, they both filed out of the ICU extreme jaded and dejected. They were both surprised to see me there and greeted me. Mr. Malik expressed his deep pleasure at my arrival. Dadhey on the other greeted me in a very reticent and cold manner. Once done with, he sat across on the other side of the room, and did not look at me again. If I had not known him better, I would have asked myself to reconsider our previous conversation as hallucinations. He, on the present hand, wanted our bond to be esoteric, quite meaningless to anyone else.

Three hours later Minavan filed out on an excuse that he was to leave for university. It was mid-summer and I knew him enough to mark out his lies. Even if he had a class, Tirah never scheduled classes on a Saturday anyways. This villain could never care.

An hour later my sister and her husband followed suit. They were surprised that I wasn't coming home, tired as I was. I told them that I was filling in for my parents. Everyone liked my reply. When Mr. Malik, finally headed back to the ICU, Dadhey finally looked at me and nodded to the outside.

Of all the places, we walked towards the lake. "It has been a long time Dadhey?"

"It has been my friend." His purple eyes wandered, anon moving, anon steady. He was still calm.

"You never gave me a chance to get through to you. There is so much to say."

"I am here for good now. I have wrapped up my last strings in Lahore. If apologies are due, than you can have them. I apologize."

"Shall I start?"

"If there is a need, than you are welcome."

I recounted. "I met Farah, who was paid by our sadist, just to tell me that I should seek to terminate any sort of relation with you. She claimed, for him, that there is a certain death crisis which surrounds you. There were certain references to you father and some people in Lahore, who no longer walk in this world. What am I to believe Dadhey?"

"You need to believe history. Do you speak of Farah Malik?"

"Yes, Farah Malik."

"For starters, Minavan hasn't fabricated anything but neither is he accurate. My father passed out at sea. He was a Captain on a merchant ship. Inclement weather took his life." His looked directly at me as he said this and shame instantly gnawed me. His calmness was replaced by some hidden ferocity. "No one died in Lahore, he has his facts wrong. Trust me on that."

“You have it.”

“Irrespective, did you tell Farah about anything we had talked of?”

“We became fast friends after Farah openly denounced him and conceded that she was paid by Minavan to say all this. I never discussed about anything we talked of but I neither did I deny that we are more than just in-laws.”

We were almost the lake when he shook his head. “That could come at a price. When she was young, she was very fond of Minavan, infatuation I would term it. Though time rinsed out such feelings on her account, they could still hold for something. Perhaps she could just be doing him a favor as a mole, blood can talk in this world, Nadir. Minavan here knows that his atrocities wouldn’t go unpunished for long and he is sure to doubt you, hawk on you. Ask me, if for him, he could even bribe your servants.”

I was appalled when I heard this. “She was fond of him?? My gracious.”

“Think broad. These are conjectures which objectivity would well negate. She’s leaving for Kashmir tomorrow before she heads off for France anyways. Why would she do him a favor when she has nothing to reap? I am just cautioning you, not poisoning you. Pay her a visit and tie up your ends.”

Anger blotches were slowly settling on my face. “No, some secrets come at a price. I cannot even trust her now. Let her leave and anyways she thinks I am in Sukkur.”

“Sukkur?”

I sighed deeply. “Yes. I went there for a fourteen day scheduled trip which was cut short because of your mother’s health. There was this girl there though, to whom I gave my heart out to.” Noticing the look on his face, “Nothing happened.”

For the first time, expressions bordering mirth lit his face, “Girl? You say girl?”

“Save the enthusiasm, it all ended for nothing. She wasn’t sure as to what she felt and I wouldn’t blame her. All people don’t fall in love in just a week. However, she did ask me to stay when I was leaving, but I had to be here, and my departure broke all the culinary of love.”

He picked a stone and tossed it in the lake. “Your sacrifice will matter before the end, atleast in my books. I am indebted.”

“What did you wish for?” I questioned, surprised that he had even picked one.

“There is nothing to wish for. I am just trying to amuse myself in this sad place.” His calmness was coming back.

“Is there no hope for her?”

“Never was. She will pass out by tomorrow, life is leaving her. Inching out slowly, mercilessly. Last week she seemed fine, today she has foot in the other world. That’s life.”

“You seem abnormally calm relative to the enormity of the crisis that engulfs you.”

“You see that lake? Can you count the stones beneath the surface?” My friend was back, his excessive mastery over speech untarnished. I did not reply. I just blinked in approval. We walked back to the cancer ward and became perfect strangers again.

Visitors came and went, some cried, some tried to cry, some said nothing, some didn’t want to be there. I fell asleep on the chairs in that waiting room and in those hours, the world went by, moving, halting, bending, weeping, desolate, exeunt.

It was an hour after midnight when Dadhey woke me up again. When I could finally focus, I saw that he sat next to me in the empty waiting room, his head aligned with the wall. A single tear left his eyes and gracefully rolled down his handsome face. When it finally touched the floor did I realize that the inevitable had been realized behind a few barred doors.

Nothing was said. Everything was understood. A few minutes later, an incontrollable Mr. Malik was escorted by the security personnel from the ICU to the lawns outside. Dadhey didn't even blink, he was silent, lost in the years that had passed, in the times that couldn't be recreated, oblivious to all what dissolved around us.

He finally lifted his head. "Just stopped breathing like her husband. My father couldn't breathe when he died. He drowned in the Gulf. No one jumped to save his life, nor could the ship be anchored in the midst of a wild storm. They said the waves took the captain beyond sight until he was no more. Worst part was that he was filling in for a sick linesman, his kindness repaid by his own life. This death, this death, is like frost droplets on the plants, comes and goes without leave, shining than dull, there than not."

Still sleepy, I didn't realize he was talking more to himself. He continued, "I am glad that you are here."

Remorse now started to fill my insides. There were no comforting words to add. I only spoke what I felt. "I am glad I am here." Silence prevailed again as the silent mourner broke, yet he wouldn't whimper, he wouldn't cry anymore than the single tear he let pass. He mourned in silence.

The silence was broken again when the head nurse came in from the care unit and held out a form to him, "Would you like the body to be shifted to you residence directly or would you first prefer the ablution services undertaken the nurse faculty?"

Dadhey did not reply. The nurse looked at him understandingly. She seemed accustomed to such reactions. When it dawned upon me that he wouldn't answer, I took the reigns. "We would prefer the latter. I will fill the discharge form. Thank you, sister."

“The body would be shifted by noon tomorrow. Plan the funeral accordingly. My condolences.” She headed of back to the unit and I just sat there noticing how the seams of one family had fallen, with one departure.

When he got the better of his composure, he rose and signaled towards to door. I followed him to the grounds where sat his step-father wailing, thudding the ground with his hands. Of the few who stood there to see this spectacle, none dared to step forward and console him.

His first word surprised me. “Sir, it is time to leave.” Mr. Rahat Malik didn’t register. He still kept thudding the ground, issuing loud sobs, control not within any quantifiable radius. Dadhey spoke again, “Sir, it was for a death that you found her, and you spent the happiest years of your life. It is for a death that you sit here wailing, years of rapture reciprocated against this deep moment of mournfulness, measure and proportion that you fail acknowledge. Give way and let go, sir.”

Mr. Malik finally mumbled. “Good child? Good child. Why do you ask me to forget? Did she mean nothing to you?”

The reply that came was swift, truculent but issued in a calm voice. “There was not a sorrow in her life that I wasn’t acquainted with. There was not a dream in her life that was beyond my knowledge. I could argue about meaning and greater love, but why should I, sir? Do all known things have to be voiced out, to be fought over? Certainly not, not in my world, not within my parameters.”

They looked at each other, strain enveloping them, understanding that they had surpassed each others limit. It was Dadhey who showed presence of mind by offering his hand to his stepfather. For a moment I thought, he wouldn’t take it but thankfully, my premonitions were wrong. The hand was met and a no longer wailing Mr. Malik raised himself from the ground. They walked away arm in arm and I certainly concluded, that they had never been so physically close and so mentally far in their time together.

I could have left with them but I didn't deem it human to bridge apart two broken men. They could offer much consolation in themselves and I had little to do with it. I walked back to Marium's home on the bright streets of Karachi that never faltered, in the city that never slept.

It had been hours to midnight, but Karachi lived, activity never ceasing to brim. Taxi drivers hailed me but I did not have two dimes to scrub together that night. Hardly any respectable woman was seen around; it certainly was a man's world at this time, in all aspects.

I walked the borders of Defence Cantonment, a more silent part of the city. A mendicant or two could be seen sleeping here. Few idlers smoked joints on the road side. They were gay men: they had nothing in life but were still happy. Laughing, they offered me to have a smoke. There were many crazy things I had done in life but this was certainly was the craziest of all indulgences. Because, death and gloom had been so close I was in a listless mood: things mattered a bit less. I took a couple of puffs and than I was lying on the street, coughing and sputtering. They laughed at the novitiate that had joined them. The novitiate laughed too and laughing he left them until he hit his temporal abode. Silent it stood, one relation down.

11-

The last of Yasmin Malik

Quarter to twelve noon, our station wagon halted outside the Malik residency. It was a magnificent mansion, gigantic in all proportions, from the flowery garden to the impeccable vintage architecture. Chairs, tents and coolers dotted the entire ambience, internal and external, waiting for the imminent guests.

After noon, people began piling in and went inside the house to pay one last visit to the deceased. Yasmin Malik lay in the centre, her frame covered by a white linen shroud. Her sweet face was tranquil and her hair still curved gracefully down to her shoulders. People stood all round her, weeping tears, other numb in pain. Small kids played in the hall, not knowing how hard the lightning had struck this abode. Others sat outside showing no signs of grief but instead caught up on old times, trying their best to stifle their open laughter. Across the garden sat a large group of incontrollable woman gossiping their hearts out, inconsiderate of the tragedy at hand.

Mr. Malik stood in the corner, shielded by dark sunglasses. He said little to those who came to console him, and his expressions were hard to decipher. Minavan sat in the middle of the garden with his usual entourage and of course, Linah sat next to him. They also, were heedless of what had passed, their presence a mere formality, not a heartfelt commiseration. Linah atleast couldn't burn anything now. I couldn't care less for her for my heart wandered far, at the mercy of someone, someone who I was forced to desert.

My roving eyes caught finally found the person to whom the sad day belonged. Dadhey Siddiqui stood on the Victorian styled balcony eyeing the aforementioned entourage distastefully. His face looked a bit livid yet he was silent too. When his purple eyes met mine, he gave his usual nod but did not descend. If not for propriety, I am sure he would have chucked the useless half of the guests out.

When he raised his hand, I again descried the white lace encircled on his forefinger. He called out for the funeral prayer and pointed to the vacant end of the garden. An Imam standing there furthered this announcement and all the male

members headed towards the prayer mats laid out. Mr. Malik and Dadhey, however, were delayed by two figures that had just entered to share their grief. They were my parents.

Like old friends, Mr. Malik and my father walked to the prayer congregation, their heads bowed in respect. A minute later, Dadhey followed with two servants who carried the Yasmin Malik's body and placed her on the raised platform in front of the congregation. The Imam led the congregation prayers and mercy was asked for on behalf on the deceased. When the prayer and supplication was done with, the body was lifted on an open casket by multitudes of shoulders towards the burial site.

It was a blistering summer day but that didn't stop the hardy family members from taking turns to carry the raised casket to the graveyard, which stood at distance of three kilometers. The wind refused to blow and much sweat was lost to the thirsty ground as the procession toiled.

On our arrival, Graveyard Avenue, had its large gates open, ready to welcome one more to its midst. Our procession passed inside, dodging graves of all sizes, sorts and engravings. Some stood there for a period extending over a century, some still had their cement fresh. Flowers lay hither and thither, some remembered even after their death, some forgotten like yester year's dream. It was all about what tales these humans are conjured when they had their chance with the world. It was nothing about what they had left to their off springs, ungrateful off springs. Indeed sacks of grain most had filled, forgetting that they wouldn't need more than two square yards to an end.

On the eastern perimeter, stood a small mound of fresh mud that had opened up the grave. Dadhey, Yasir and Mr. Malik surrounded the grave as the body was handed to them, for the eternal submission. Unsurprisingly, their youngest brother had stuck to the back, far out of sight. Yasmin Malik was finally lowered and with a few last cherished looks, Dadhey and Mr. Malik untied the corners of the shroud and lowered a green cloth over it.

As the graveyard workers restored the mound of mud back to the grave, silent tears began falling from underneath Mr. Malik's sunglasses. Slowly, the green cloth disappeared out of sight. Some last prayers were called for by the Imam and then the procession began to disperse in all directions. The funeral was over, the dead had departed but not without a few loved ones ere it was all ended.

I met him on the way back to the Malik Residency and in his composure he seemed quite committed to his fate. He just looked on, his purple eyes marking out the distance in acceptance. He had dealt so well, only conceding a single tear, to a loss that surpassed the meaning of the entire world to him. People passed him, expressing their last sorrows, some just sizing him up from the distance. At length he broke his silence, "Three days of mourning I will have, the fourth will be of redemption."

I nodded my agreement. It certainly was time for pay-day, love could wait, but devil couldn't. We had tarried long enough, now it was time to shower harmony back to its owner, for all that was lost, for all that was stolen, for all that was meant to be, for all that never became.

With one last embrace, at the door of the Malik Residency, I left my fair friend and reconciled with my parents. It had been a little over a week since I last saw them, but a lifetime of memory was now enshrined between us: pleasant yet silent, broken yet outstanding, gloomy yet remarkable.

As we head to the Husseni house, across another part of the city, Farah cast one last look at her old life, before heading off to Azad Kashmir to get married. It was a happy day for her, yet at the back of her mind, one question throbbing remained, where was Nadir Husseni?

Nadir Husseni would have liked nothing else but to meet her, had she only been candid in the meaningful quarters of their relation or of all that mattered.

It was another day of another morning when the three of us sat on the breakfast table, swapping the happenings that had subsumed us.

Holding my mother's hand I asked, "How was Indonesia?"

It was my father who replied, "Cut short." He then looked at my mother before he spoke. "How was Sukkur?"

"Cut short too," I replied, staring at my mother. "So why did you send me there? Of all the places I could have...."

I was interrupted by her. "Is my son so naïve as not to understand the implications we entertained when we made our decision?"

I retorted back, "You sent me there to court a broken hearted girl, so as to free her of the cares of the world?"

"No," she replied, now trying to catch my father's eye, who wouldn't look at any of us. "I sent there a broken hearted gentleman, or a supposed gentleman, to try to understand, to try to accept the fairest girl I have laid my eyes on. By chance, she happens to be my friend's daughter. I presume you have failed, Nadir."

I withdrew my hand from hers. Inside, I was pleased that they talked about someone who mattered so much to me, but it was not heartening to be branded a failure so soon. "Materialize is the word I use. Nothing materialized because you called me back! You expect me to pillage love within a week and on top of it, ignore the blatant reality which by no wrong chance, pertains to her sub-continental affections."

Grasping hold of my hand, she now smiled. "Those affections are long done with, Nadir, done with. I didn't send you to rob anything. I sent you to win. Did anything happen at all?"

"No sparks on her account, Mother. When I enlightened her of my departure, she asked me to stay. I couldn't, I didn't and that ended everything. To quote her, there

won't be any foundations to cling to when I come back. What can I say except that this demise came at a generous cost."

"Foundations can be built again. Nothing is lost yet."

"I need some respite mother, from everything. Can't even remember the last time I slept to my mind's content, allow me to excuse myself. Also father, give Ghani jaa a sizeable increment. That man deserves it."

He gestured towards me, "If that's your call. It is done."

I headed back to my room, a place where my thought processes could be linked, understood. Cloudy mundane thoughts conflicted, but today nothing was about why, it was about how. So many dots on the map of history had changed so rapidly. I did not care about Linah any longer. A part of me wanted to go back and sort things out with Nida. The other victorious part chose to stay with Dadhey and end the beginning of our affairs. Farah had left a few e-mails, the last one read as follows-

Dearest of friends,

Some mirrors lied. Some things foundered and my plans changed. I am happy for myself, well for a change.

I really wish I could have met you before I left Karachi. Pecuniary difficulties as usual, stand at the heart of everything. My parents cannot afford this marriage so my about to be husband, Amir offered to take me to France and wed in the city of love, Paris. He isn't as hopeless as you got him out to be!

I am enroute to Azad Kashmir to meet Amir's family before we leave for France. If you get this e-mail in time than try to give me a call, a verbal parting, I am sure we can afford.

Best,

Farah Malik.

P.S I will come back, Nadir, for I deem all my ships aren't burnt-

Farah Malik had successfully left Karachi and would soon, be out of reach. The only thing she got from me was silence. Trust right now was something I couldn't afford and she had more than violated the limits of acceptability. Loving someone was not wrong, even betrayals could be discounted, but not right now, when the cards were on the table and the players had their sleeves pulled up. I left her to be tomorrow's story, deliberations could be made in the future. I was definitely being a bit paranoid but who in her right mind could like Minavan? Well, counting Linah Rafiki out. But then again, who could gauge the verity behind Linah's exhibited emotions? She had loved me too, or I thought she had.

July stood on the verge of departure and August meant my return to Packard for yet another academic year. Life was not stopping for my plans, everything seem to be hung, one balance at the mercy of another, one relationship at the anvil of another, one love at the sacrifice of another. If anything stood solid, it was my Devil.

12-

The Beautiful Mastermind

“Russia remained impregnable for its winter was merciless, making up for the shortcoming of its soldiers. Napoleon faltered, Hitler withered, but Russia stood because the same mistake was made twice. So Nadir, why was this mistake made?”

I looked back at my World History professor, clueless. This question had no answer. Regardless, I had no idea what was going on at Packard. All I could salvage was some respect in front of my class mates. “Because they had no Neanderthal cavemen to deploy?” The class roared with laughter. The job was done.

“Stand up, young man!” shouted the professor. At that moment the last bell rang and the class started filing out. I was shaken of with a voluminous assignment. Down, I headed out the class towards the parking. Farah was missed, and also beyond recall.

However, next to my car stood a gentleman playing with a white lace in his hand. He captured attention from multifarious fronts, yet he looked only at the ground, wittingly oblivious. He wouldn't raise his purple eyes to look at the gag of ladies that deliberately filed about, that rejectionist.

“Why do you play with that immaterial piece of nothing, my friend?” I shouted, from a great distance.

He didn't need to shout, people near hushed up as he sought to reply. “It is material to me.” He walked towards me and we embraced. Before anyone of us could speak, a girl tapped me from behind.

“Hello Nadir, I study history with you. Nice pun you know.” My class had more than three fifty students and as for her; I had never seen her in my life.

Dadhey took a calm step back, and looked at me questioningly. She didn't wait for me to reply and directed her next question straight at him. "Do you study here? I have never seen you around."

He looked at me again, this time with an answer in his eyes, "No lady, I don't."

Now completely ignoring me, she handed him a contact card. "If you ever decide to, than give a call. You won't be disappointed." She walked away and left with the same girls that had earlier filed around him.

"Last time I checked, this was a Muslim country, Nadir?" he asked, crumpling the card in his hand.

"Last time I checked, you had your own fair share of externalities. I have no idea who she is."

He raised his hands for the car keys. "We are going to the beach. It is time to get to work."

He was a good driver: he knew how to swing between traffic, knew where to break the speed limit, knew which signal could be tested, recognized which law could be challenged and which challenge had to be rested. But above all, he seemed to love the sea. Every rendezvous had to be harbored there. It was this sea which took it father, yet too often he ran towards to it, rather than hold fear of. We climbed the steps to the unkempt shore, to the point where the oncoming waves receded. Time and time, a large water wave would break rank and cross that point, wading to our feet, and rushing past. Then it was no more than a withdrawing existence.

I spoke in the wind. "So what is your game plan?"

He looked me right in the eye. "You are my game plan."

"Me? I am the game plan? Your protégé?" I was amused. I looked here and there, but no, he was serious.

“Yes and no. As I spoke before, I have found her. There is no name, just a number. This link will be amongst us tomorrow and for that, we must collude the end points together. But first let me reaffirm, why are you in this?”

“Take a short story. Something was snatched, someone must pay. My turn, why are you in this?”

“Some obstructions will never stand forgiven.”

I solicited more. “That is fair with me. On the same scale, if you don’t object, the property that you spoke of, is it appropriated yet?”

“It will be very soon. Servants call that not a day had passed after my mother’s death that Minavan hasn’t bitten in Mr. Malik’s ear. His pleas would not go unheeded either. After my mother’s death, Minavan has become his mere weakness.” He picked a stone again. He seemed to be fond of throwing them too. “He wouldn’t dare to disappoint his last fount of blood. With respect, Yasir is too lost in your sister’s love to remember more than once in four weeks that he has a father. Detached and regardless.”

The stone flew high, and cut cross the sun before thrashing a wave. “So master, reasons aside, what is the real plan?”

“The plan is a lady. They say she is beautiful enough to concern anybody. Success rate hovers around unity, expensive but our money will talk. What maybe a bit objectionable to you is that you will conduct all our negotiations, I am but a ghost, I wouldn’t exist at her end. Any reluctance, Nadir?”

“None. We have discussed this before. I can discern how costly it can become for you if this lady speaks. I will spearhead this. I wouldn’t disregard that this reprisal has a few personal perks of its own.”

“I won’t be too far tomorrow,” Dadhey continued. “There would be a person on the table besides wearing a bowler hat. If he will have anything to add, it will come in the bill with the waiter. Do not look at me, do not acknowledge me for it could

come as expensive. She gets suspicious, she is out. Also, you don't say no to anything she wants. All the stones are at disposal here, for she has no parallel."

"Affirmative. Where do we meet her?" Pleasant excitement was now diluting in my veins.

"Rendezvous is China Town restaurant in main city. Time is sharp seven pm, but we will be there an hour before to position ourselves. The clients will call the shots tomorrow, not the professional."

I smirked at him. "You are too incisive to live you know."

His expressions remained stolid. "What is a strike before a plan, what is war without stratagem? Futile, my friend. I head now to pay a visit to my mother, allow me to depart."

"What if I accompany you?"

He broke into a bare smile. "Few prospects could be more welcome. Let us go."

Next day, call it the fifth day of redemption, I was seated at the China Town restaurant. There was one word that could describe it, red. The décor was all red, from furnishing to the tiles to the roof. Even the bellboys and waiters wore red. The fishes in the aquarium were all red. I still retain doubts on the gory theme prevalent there; it certainly didn't speak as the color of love. By the end of my sojourn there, red itself became nauseating. I could take no more of it.

Seated on the table besides mine, in a purple bowler hat, was Dadhey Siddiqui. We had come in at a fifteen minutes lag so as to disassociate ourselves and hadn't turned to look at another. To get in his act, he had already ordered food and was talking infinitesimal bites at his Chow Mein.

I was covered in completely black attire on the request of my virtuoso. A white bouquet was further placed in front so that she could single out her client. The meeting was to take off at seven pm but the much awaited guest arrived quarter of an hour early, positively to greet rather than be greeted by her client. To her dismay, Dadhey had been brilliant on the uptake and with his decisions.

A soft soothing voice rose. "This would be Nadir?" With all the respect that I had entertained for women in my life, I never went so far as to use this word but for clarity's sake, I would now. I rose to lay my eyes on this unnamed lady in her mid twenties who supported, a voluptuously toned body and a tall elegant frame. Her exotic face was positively not without a perfect tan. As for her eyes, black to their core, just like my devil. We really stood a chance, this cutting featured beauty stood a chance against anything on the strength of her sheer looks. If not for my profound feelings for Nida, I would have been a fallen man too.

"Attentively met, correctly met. Please take a seat." I replied gesturing toward the only seat on my table.

"I suppose these flowers are for me?" she asked tenderly. I could see how deftly she worked her charm.

I handed the white bouquet to her and spoke in a staid manner (professionalism had to be maintained). "For no other, lady."

She took them and laid them on her braced frame. "Before we waste time, let us start with the price tag. Two thousand dollars in any currency. No negotiations."

"Take three thousand dollars, I need results." I had almost slipped here, for I was about to say "we". It could all have been over but we were lucky.

Her hands flew on all directions as she sought to explain, "Ah, revenge is talking. Before I work, I always need to understand, lovingly comprehend the person who you call as my victim. Who is he?"

Dadhey took a glance at us, tucking at his bowler hat. “His name is Minavan Malik. Assertive, bumptious, and wrongly charming in the fact that he somehow gets what he seeks to attain. He is a sadistic son of a wealthy merchant turned industrialist, and has been courting a lady for a more than eighteen months to this date. Oddly, associations relate that none of his previous relations were more than flings that lasted beyond the scope of a few months. Common sense would nail his latest relation as true love, and perhaps so would I. What more would you like to hear?”

“When did they start courting?” she asked as she dictated her order to the waiter.

“It was around the closing months of the 2004. Seems distant but to me it’s like yesterday, perfumed with humiliation.”

“Relationships of time are hard to lay siege on.” For some mystical reason she smiled as she said this. She was in for the strike now. “ So where do you come in all this mayhem?”

“That girl he courts today, Linah Rafiki, was someone I cherished, deeply loved. Once upon a time, though. I loved her, she loved my money and when she came upon Minavan, she left me. I cannot offer facts as to why, only assumptions. Nonetheless, it was a silent disposal and an open one. I was much talked about, my pacifism misunderstood as cowardice. Not being able to do much, I retreated, but not without lasting determination, that I would avenge them both one day. It is not all about respect, ego or a broken heart only, you know, some people just deserve it. Pause here, for I did not catch your name?”

“You never will. It’s a risky profession after all, this business of breaking hearts. I can change looks, I can’t change reality. So you are of my favorite kind, a jilted lover?”

“What other kinds do you have as clients?” I queried, realizing that I had confined the nature of her profession.

She laughed at me in her coquettishly refined manner before she spoke. “Indolent old men playing games, affluent businessmen seeking each other’s wives, sordid policemen charming their sullen seniors and housewife seeking justifiable grounds of divorce. It a cruel world.” Seeing the look on my face, she adjusted. “Learn my rule here Nadir, I have never slept with a client. My profession is to break hearts, not mend a desperate soul. Have no such expectations, for I seek a measure of purity in this venal work. ”

“Did you ever fail?” I asked, with increased respect. She really had no parallel.

“Never. If I fail, there is a money back guarantee but never in my life, never in thirty-eight broken hearts did I have to return a cent back. Failure is beyond me for I have reduced men to chattel. You have nothing to fear.”

“So why do you do this?”

She munched on her chop suey before she replied. I thought she had booted the question. “Why does anybody do anything? You can’t even buy respect in this damned capitalist world without money. So you have my answer, do I have your contract?”

“You will but acquaint me with your future actions. Precisely, what do you plan to do?”

She smiled again. I was sure she enjoyed her work, no matter to what extent she vilified it. “It can take weeks, months or even a year. I have never promised and never will promise a time limit. But within the timeline, there are clearly marked initiations. First is approach, second is acquaintance, third stand advances and so on. This girl will of course, like all other, will offer resistance and seek to pull Minavan away, but this is exactly why you are paying me. Half way down the lane, he will worship me enough to leave her. The whole way down, he will be like a caged sparrow who just notices that her only master has fallen to the ground, dead.”

“I barely follow you lady.”

“In other words, I will leave him when he loves me most, when his love is beyond recall. You get two broken hearts, I earn my crumbs. Do we have a contract?”

I offered my hand to her. “We have a contract. Any more stipulations you would like to add?” She didn’t shake it, but instead brought out an official bond paper.

She looked down at it. “An undertaking that you will sign . Name and signature if you please.” I did not want to but given instructions were given instructions, and I outstretched my hand out for it. Before, I could get hold of it, Dadhey, stirred and left the table that stood next to us. Something was wrong.

While I stared at the bond, a waiter rushed to our table with a red bill book, dodged her receiving hands and gave me the hard case booklet. “You haven’t ordered anything, the bill is mine.” She spoke in a soft manner, yet commandingly. I couldn’t care less at to who paid the bill but that booklet was my only conduit.

“It’s on the house, Lady. Money is the least of any gentleman’s concerns.” To conceal, I opened the booklet on my lap. It contained a hurriedly scribbled note

-Have the deal, but do not, I repeat, do not go for a written contract. We can’t leave loose any loose ends floating around-

I paid the bill as she looked on, perhaps a bit charmed by my generous approach. I then stared at her in a grim manner. “ I cannot sign this Lady for, there is no need for an undertaking. I am paying you, let my money speak. Most importantly, in our agreement, arrangement, if anyone is aligned to lose anything, it is me. I cannot sign this.” Dadhey didn’t come back and things started falling apart.

She got up from the table. “There is no deal. A very good day to you.”

She was walking away towards the exit before I cried. “Five thousand dollars, in any currency.” She still did not stop. I gave one last try. “Eight thousand dollars, keep it verbal.” The footsteps stopped, heels turned and the beautiful heartbreaker walked back to my table and sat down. Money was her first language.

“We have a deal,” she said, now offering her hand. I shook it and clasped the future gently. “I will break his heart with a rod of gold, eight thousand dollars. The money will be paid in form of a cheque and the ephemeral postal address will be handed out to you by email. One, you will never see me again. Two, all our correspondence will be through phone or email. Three, accessories will be needed for you desire to bring down a rich tiger, not a poor cub. You will account for those accessories which will range from clothes to cars to rented villas. Fourthly, you will have to provide me a complete access to his schedule, the places he visits, the people he meets, in short the very air he breathes. It is an act but it is also a con show, I being the confidence woman. Any objections?”

The confidence woman, really had her stage set. “None at all. Money as I said, was never a matter of concern.”

“Well than that’s great. Your contact card, if you will.”

I handed it to her. “Will you really get him?”

She gave one last smile before bustling out. “I have never failed. I wish you a very good evening, sir.”

A few minutes after she had left, I trod out, sick of the red interior. There on the restaurant steps sat Dadhey Siddiqui, pitted against the red china exterior, quite busy with his purple hat. He had this knack of keeping himself busy with what he wore. I sat next to him and he placed that hat on my head. “Did you blow it, Nadir?”

I tugged at his shirt. “Far from that. Good thinking saved us today. However, you should explain your rash withdrawal.”

“If I came back, my cover could have been blown. The nature of this profession, and our affairs, repels trust. A written contract can jeopardize your safety, you never know these people thus the intervention. So what followed after my departure?” He probed, now taking the bowler hat of my head.

I snatched the hat back and placed it back again on my head. “The three thousand dollar written contract transmuted to an eight thousand dollar verbal one. She was leaving so I had to chuck in more bills to save the day. But it’s worth it, Dadhey, if of course, we succeed.”

“I will not hold that against you for I would have done the same. What else did she say?” He was almost whispering now.

I took a sigh. “We need to go shopping. Perhaps the only thing she didn’t ask of us was to visit the lingerie stores. She wants names, timelines, places, schedules, and maybe even invites. Clothes have to be delivered. Price tags must be taken in consideration, from the top of course. It could even go to rent-a-villa story so that she passes as convincing. Oh yah, we need a car for her too. This confidence woman is just not eight thousand dollars.”

Still in his whispery mode, he replied. “That’s brain teasing. We aren’t exactly the best of friends with this fiend. Keeping tabs will hard, giving fraternity dates will be painstaking. Servants can provide help, but limited help. Do you know anyone back at Tirah?”

It was hard not to think of him. As unreliable as he was, he was the only one who had sought my company after my silent departure. “There is this guy, though completely untrustworthy. Money will keep him quiet, but till what hour, that I cannot promise. He had his hands and feet dug deep in every fraternity, group, and society that adds up to Tirah. Just name it. What would you prefer to dish out to him? Truth? Partial truth? Lies?”

Dadhey’s eyes glimmered. “What is his name?”

“They call him The Lounger alias Loung.” I replied.

“Tell Loung, that you would like to transfer back to Tirah for your last year. Tell him, that you would like to join the social spheres first to gauge whether the adverse sentiments held in the past, have subsided or not. He will buy that.”

His plan seemed fair but doubts still plagued me. “What if he doesn’t?”

Dadhey got up and parted with his final graceful touch. “Than we will buy him, Nadir.” He didn’t ask for his hat, perhaps with intention, perhaps with acknowledged desire. I really didn’t know what drove him but he had that fire, this intelligent passion, which completed his charisma. Never in my life did I ever meet someone like him.

A few days later, I sat at dusk, contemplating the actions of Hitler and Napoleon, as to why they were so intent on attacking the Russians. Assignment or not, history was written by the victors, or rather the winter in my case. I was declining when it came to studies, I could hardly write a word that could meet the required notch. My attendance was falling and my whole life revolved around Devil and Dadhey. Professors thought I was a spoilt brat, just binding my time at Packard. Was I? Or was I just too busy with creating the real substantiality, in a reprisal worth looking back at, in the sober years to come? Yes, real substantiality.

They were days when this costly drama did not seem to be about me at all while at others it was all about me. I was confused, what was I doing again? Wasn’t it time to reach Nida Amjad, leave the past behind and not sacrifice a future that could be truly blissful? Every day of silence was like another closed door on my bleak hope, another death of something that could have lived. As afraid as I was to acknowledge, I had too many of such days. I had no means to reach her, apart from the ancient telephone, at whose end could just possibly remain two parents, their silent third far away in the north of the country. Should I call? Should I not? Well these questions were asked without disposing flower petals.

My worthy time in class was spent compiling lists of things that would be needed by the confidence woman. Female counterparts helped in mapping out the best buys in the city: Tariq road, the Designer alley at Zamzama, front end malls,

secluded clothing joints at the outskirts of the city. There was a lot to be done and it did not revolve around history assignments at all.

The only place I had always remained consistent was the track. Across two competitions in the city, I had grabbed silver and gold in the 4 x 100m and 4 x 400m. I remember that my friend sat in the stands with my parents as they urged me towards the finish line. There was no room for loss when such nobility had come to spectate.

My thoughts were disturbed when Ghulam Nabi came in. “Sir there is this inappropriate gentle man at the gate. He says you are expecting him?”

“Yes I am. Send him in.” Loung had come.

Minutes later he strode in to my lunch table, his hair all over the place, his face a little less stony than it normally was. “Yo, Doug, where have you been?”

I got up to receive him and shook his ring ridden hand. “I have been busy. So you tell me, how have you been?”

He looked around for food. I signaled an attendant. “I have been in rehab Doug. Drugs are killing me. I have taken a lull from Tirah so as to clean my soul. I eat more now days.”

I signaled the attendant again and finally the platter hit the table. It was better to ask favors from a contented man. Only when he had finished, did I request. “Listen Loung, I gave it a long thought. I think I will move back in at Tirah for my last year. Packard just lacks that glamour. You think people will accept me back after a two year disappearance?”

“They never have trouble accepting anything. Just throw a few parties, give a few generous gifts to the fraternity you prefer and they will crown you. You weren’t that hated by the way, when you sought to leave. You just misunderstood us.”

“Regardless. Before I hit a decision, I would like to get back and gauge their reactions you know, have a look around. Are you still the main man with your rehab thing going on?” Loung seemed dreamy, even in his soberness. I wasn’t even sure if he was following me.

“I have been away but not that far enough. I get my invites but I abstain. If your man ends up there, that’s the kingdom come of his rehab. You want them, right Doug?”

“Yes Doug wants them.” I smiled at him. We were one step closer, venues were in our hand. “Can’t just leap in back like this. I need to be accepted first.”

“Do you miss her?” he asked, drooping in his plate. I was surprised. His question came out of nowhere. “If you are coming back to win her, than you will find no acceptance at all. If people at Tirah believe in any relation, it is theirs. They were voted the best couple at the ball last year, Doug.”

“I am over her. Surely, such are not the intentions I entertain. I am sober too.”

He laughed and then I started laughing too although at completely different outlooks. Tirah would definitely have a revised list next year, new winners too. It was a much sought end, change after all became necessary. In life I had seen people, met people, forgiven people. Mercy and compassion had been instilled in me but I really saw no point wasting such noble sentiments on a lowlife like Minavan. He was not the beginning of a loophole: he was just the end of hole, one that was in for a lot of trash.

Confused though I sometimes was, I did not forget the words of an old coach. He claimed that after defeat, the only way of redemption in life was vindiction. Vindiction for your self vindication: revenge so that you could forgive yourself. It was supposed to be applied on the track, now I was applying it to life circumstances, my life circumstances.

Life circumstances that had to be shaped like a blended photograph: the perfect contrast, the vividest fusion, the impeccable background and above all, the right

moment of deliverance. If the battery runs down and the camera doesn't speak, than God has the final say. You accept it then, whether you call it the structure, or fate, or what I term as God's wish.

On a not so dissimilar note, a mystic once asked me, what is the individuality of a being in front his master? I could never answer that, him, never. I preferred to be silent, than to be mistaken, in the domain where I had not bought any significance to myself.

13-

The Rolling Stones

“The stones are finally rolling.” I gasped to Dadhey as we heaved fifteen shopping bags to the car. We had decided to go shopping once and for all rather than go berserk with every email.

Earlier, an email had come through which contained her “ephemeral postal address”. We parceled a bank pay order and Loung’s forwarded invitation to her. Another email came through or rather it was a requisition slip. Then followed our hectic shopping spree, another small stone that would help trigger the landslide we desired.

Dadhey Siddiqui wanted to hire the services of an investigator to stake out that postal address but I wasn’t willing to risk it. We were become a bit too obsessed with all this and were on the veritable verge of over doing ourselves. It had to work, we just had to believe.

The Olympic party came and went. A Julius Caesar email followed

- I went, I observed and then nothing-

Over the next month two more parties followed, two more dresses were forwarded, two more invitations were sent, two chauffer driven cars were sent and the two same forwards came back. It was frustrating: I actually broke a few glass pieces. After all these efforts, she was hanging about enjoying herself and sending back replica mails of a medieval conqueror.

Dadhey fared better, he only did nothing. Perhaps he had a bit more belief instilled or perhaps that was an exhibition of his patience. After all, he was a tested being and I always stood in his mere shadow when it came to life circumstances.

So much was happening in life right now, its hard to piece every together. Mother and Father were travelling too often, and I was quite alone. Dadhey would drop by

now and then, but Packard's assignments remained Packard's assignment. I was now even more behind. Failure on submitting my report on European history to my History professor led to my expulsion from the course (I wasn't passing anyways). At this stage, Farah's memory came back.

Life by her was a rainbow. All the people, associations I had come across, when with her, now retreated back to their holes. It seemed that they had come and left with Farah. I might alter my opinions now and concede that it was all about her, her efforts in tossing a few friends across the table. Perhaps she might have had complete knowledge regarding her departure so she sought to choose to leave a few vestiges behind, some that I could use: none that I used, none that remained.

On an even more meaningful note, when my mother was abroad, I picked up her contact book and traced out Auntie Ajmera's number. It was a small scribble, almost incomprehensible.

Yes I called the number, but no, I couldn't speak through. It was the Colonel who picked up, and I became dazed. After a few unanswered greetings, he kept the phone down and I didn't dare to call again. What was I supposed to say? I love your daughter and though she is inconsiderate, can I still speak to her? That's would never work. All the impressions, admirations earned would be put at stake, or too simply gutted down the drain. What I could do to soothe myself was to convince my own self that Nida was busy in Rawalpindi with her crafts. Did she remember me? I was sure that even the real devil did not know.

It was finally November of 2006, when the much anticipated mail came through. Capitalizing on some difference in our target market, the Confidence woman finally broke her way through at a term closure dinner. Minavan became a friend, and soon her advances initiated. I cannot offer details as to what happened, as to how she clawed her way in but reality remained that she successfully pulled Minavan away from Linah. So followed her mail

-A small difference became a new acquaintance, a small difference became a small spark, a small spark will now turn into a small fire, and a small fire will have

large ashes. I am invited for lunch to the Malik residency. Cherish the bills you have spent-

Once he read this, Dadhey did not eat lunch at his home for three weeks. He feared that he would be recognized and indeed this occurrence stood a good chance . A day came when, servants, who loved him, reported that a new lady had been amongst them. That was our proof, the stones were finally rolling. And yes, we did cherish the money we spent, at the coast.

“We are almost half way through,” said Dadhey, tossing coin stones into the sea. “Ms. Rafiki really loves him and he’s going to part with her. He won’t get another like her. Who knows, she might come back to you.”

“If she does, she will have little left to claim except invidious remarks that never passed my mouth. I belong to another dream. By the way sir, you jest well.” I remarked, picking up a few stones my self.

“I have met Ms. Rafiki, even talked to her. No offence but she really liked him, perhaps more than she ever liked you, if she liked you in the first place. Tomorrow when she becomes collateral damage, and has no idea as to what has happened, she may just run back to you. Gold diggers don’t forget exploited mines. Learn my friend.”

“Regardless.” I replied. “It is more about him, always was. Collateral damage is welcome but what of a forsaker.”

He threw his last stone and we watched is disappeared beneath the surface. The red sun was reflected dim in his purple eyes. “A lawyer visited us yesterday and read out Mr. Rahat Maliks drafted will to each of us. I received an abandoned town-house up north, much to the pleasure of my younger brother. Much of his property is bequeathed to his true sons. Why I tell you this is that I am free now, emancipated.”

“You term rejection as emancipation? I asked, immediately noticing how gratuitous he was with his speech. For a change. I spoke again. “All I see is your vengeance earning one more means of justifiability.”

He seemed to be in a light mood, his speech had a touch of mirth. “It was never all about revenge. It is also about reciprocity. Life has to be made fair, Mr. Nadir.”

“Fair? Emancipation? Reciprocity?? “I echoed. “ What prose are you reading out? If some asks me tomorrow, who is Dadhey Siddiqui, I will have little to tell. Who knows you? No one. I don’t, I hardly do. Enlighten me, what do you want to do with your life?”

“You seek my measure?” he asked with almost smiling.

I looked at him straight in the eye, something he often resorted to. “I certainly do.”

He raised his right hand and pointed to the white ribbon lace. “This is my measure.”

It was my turn to smile. “This is not a measure, this is a fashion fad in morph of a white ribbon lace. I might wear one tomorrow too, if only I knew you better.”

He smiled now. “If you say so, sir. If only you say so. I am Dadhey Siddiqui, a qualified engineer from the finest engineering college in this country. Very soon, I will be employed in a suitable occupation but that will be after some strings are tied.”

“Which strings?” I sighed. He was one difficult human.

“Our sadistic Minavan for a significant instance. You are a little versed in history so put a hold on your questions. Trade me your measure.” He started collecting stones again, softly swishing at the white doves that pecked in the ocean sand.

“My measure? I am an open self encyclopedia, a person soliciting redemption coupled with higher self esteem. Have no plans for life except to seek out one last love before I join my father to rake millions into billions as...

Dadhey interrupted, sympathy dotted his face. He spoke in a raised voice and it was the only time he ever did that. “Than what are you waiting for? Go get her before it is too late and you end up repenting every moment of your now damned existence, writing epitaphs about what COULD have been. You will land under that “could” for your whole life, if this is love, true love. Feelings happen but they do not wait, love doesn’t wait except for three hours in a romantic chick flick. I repeat, in a romantic chick flick and your life is far from that my friend.”

His words pinched me to aggravation, and in my frustration of being, standing unable to attain her, I raised my voice too. “ What do you know about love?? Stop being a saucy know-it-all. It reflects nothing short of impudence when you haven’t risen to that higher level of attainment, a feeling we called love. Things don’t happen just like that. You are right. Life is not a three hour romantic chick flick. You don’t just end up at the lady’s door and nothingness doesn’t just go to kingdom come. And just for qualifications sake, when was the last time you had someone in your life?”

Minutes ago we were trading smiles and respectable annotations. What had passed in a moment of folly? We both stared at each other in silence, livid beyond any measure, beyond recall. Neither would I wont declare that he walked away first, nor would I assert that I moved away. We sort of shifted at the same moment and headed off in the opposite direction.

That day, whatever true relationship we had got smashed head face in a brick wall. Anger tore at the seams of our built camaraderie, contact ceased to remain and my old ego set in.

Like a small child, I refused to contact him or even mention him. Every single day, his purple bowler hat smiled at me in my room but I never touched it. It was off limits now. At that point I never realized that he was just trying to caution me,

voicing out what he thought was in my candid interest and I just insulted him, questioned his morality, his right judgements and most of all, his past.

Days passed and he remained silent. I sensed that he was slowly moving away into the land of memories, land of the past. It seemed that our good moments had come to an end, slowly vanished into unwritten diaries, the words of which would also fade away in the future. The closest assumption I made was that he waited for me to break the silence. Dadhey expected an egotistical fool to break the silence, what could have been worse.

I held him wrong, in my faulty deliberation. I wish I could have deliberated better. In life there are some relationships whose essence is formed only once. Once this relationship withers, momentarily breaks, temporarily tears apart, the bond maybe reconcilable but the essence is never restored, never ever restored. Knowing Dadhey Siddiqui enough, it wasn't too difficult to foresee and nail this predicament.

Words had caused grievous injury, but bandied words remain bandied. The only benefit that came from this withdrawal was that I had more time to concentrate on my studies and save my failing grade point average from settling on a humiliating number.

Now, I gave significant thought to myself. Maybe there was something inherently wrong with me. Linah, Tahir, Nida, Dadhey, my ex sprint team and my History professor had cast me aside within the course of two years and what was worse was that they all had different reasons. Maybe I held a multiple flaw in my character and outlook. Maybe I wasn't worth it. I wished again Farah was by my side, oh I just wished she was there to sort everything out. Ironically, my silence had played a major role in pulling her away, even her mails had stopped.

Days passed, a few more months passed but torn relations remained torn relations. As for the Confidence woman, it was a tacit responsibility that automatically fell on my shoulders: I was the recipient of Loung's invites and I was the front man on the circuit, forwarding clothes, cars and other complements. Sometimes I just

wanted to quit because I didn't like the one man show: the pleasure was in company, in dual mutuality.

I started to hang around at Marium's house more often, hoping that he would come and things would turn to normal with nothing said and no apologies exchanged. I was wrong for he never came. Having met him so often, having stood so near, I had forgotten the Dadhey Siddiqui who had stood alone at the wedding. He was still the same indifferent guy and it was only my perspective which had erred, which was fogged. He was still as far from the world, secluded in his own walls of deliberate isolation. He would never come, he just wouldn't. The only person who came there often was Minavan, whose company I couldn't tolerate. It was pleasing though, to see him stuck to his cell phone.

When Minavan's visits became more frequent, I stopped visiting my Marium and Yasir for than they remained no chance of Dadhey dropping by. I often wondered how they lived under the same roof, with such utmost dislike and ill will. Till when would this last, this whole drama? Would they bend their necks and reconcile? Would I reconcile?

If one asks me about hate, I would shy away. I did not hate Dadhey, I felt that I deserved an apology. A proud gesture that shouldn't have existed, but did. I was making the biggest mistake of life and it seemed fine, just fine.

If was the third of February, 2007. An email had come. It was supposed to mean everything, but it just meant something.

- **Dear Nadir, you are at the mean of your journey. The fish is out of the pond, isolated and alone. The tiger shark belongs to me now, in love and in substance. The day you wish to press the red button, mail me back. The heart is mine to take, the heart is mine to break-**

The Confidence woman had broken in. Linah Rafiki was single and perhaps possessing a bit less affection for her love than she did in the yesteryears when Minavan actually belonged to her. Today was the part day of celebration we had so waited for, the day of guarantee. However, we did not talk, we weren't together. I was hardly happy for it was not supposed to be this way. Co- conspirators as we were, I forwarded this email to Dadhey.

It was a cold manner in which I delivered it. Unlike past times, I added no caption, no greeting, no regards, no comments and no further rendezvous. He replied with just one word -*Ok*-

I couldn't expect more and I couldn't act worse. This was one opportunity to thaw the ice, to break the lag but I did not avail it, I did not reply. Another mistake which marred the bleak hope of reconciliation.

Like a fool I kept on hoping that he would return with his brilliance but that's all I did, hope in my foolish egotistical pride. In some other corner of the city, sat Minavan courting a Con-woman who he thought he was loved by. It felt great finally nailing him, reducing him to my mercy, without him, having the vaguest idea of what was going on, what in store. Strangely, the man in control, Nadir Husseni even did not.

In some other part of the world, Loung now was stationed battling with drugs that sought to take his life. His domestics rehab therapy had failed and even he sought leave from me, saying that it would be a long time before we would ever meet on this soil, but if we did, it would be a meeting of two intelligent individuals. The use of the word intelligent came as a surprise, I guess he meant sober. For further clarity, I talk about myself.

He apologized for not being able to send more batch invites but I shrugged him off. He had more than done his job and things might not have been possible without him. I might not be the best of human beings but before his departure, I felt the true lacerating guilt of cheating him, lying to him. An indulging man was capable of doing good and Loung showed that to me. He had always cared for me but he had been close to Minavan too.

Now that he had left, everything seemed good about him. I feel as if I write his obituary but what true is that he was everybody's guy. He never like offending anyone, was frank, perhaps could do anything for money, but he never forgot, unlike me, what friendship meant. I told him I would visit him abroad if it was possible but all that I thought at that time was, one more friend down, none left to go.

Verse aside, the chorus of my life sang that I was changing and I could feel it. I rose to a caprice, a reasonless caprice, and I sold my Ford truck. Maybe on the core, there were too many reasons so as to have no significance eternally. Perhaps that was one way of deleting unwanted memories, trashing the chosen shafts of yesterday. The past seemed all about self pity, but the present was no better: concentrated organic degeneration.

I didn't feel pure from inside; it was as if my blood was tarnished by some incongruous infusion. It all had to with a relation that was at it death throws or in other words the cost of my pride.

Pride. Histories could be written on it but to no avail. Lives could be spent on it but to no use. Where did it come from? I doubt if anyone ever had an idea. How did it leave? Life did teach me that.

14-

The Failure of Fortuity

March came, along with beautiful flowers on its trees. My grade point rose by a few decimals, given the lack of distractions that had earlier interspersed my life. I now had no doubts that it was all over, only one last deed was left, pulling the plug on the sadist or in words of the confidence woman, pushing the red button.

On the seventh of March, I sat in the gardens at my home when Ghulam Nabi walked in, he seemed happy. “I have news and I have a letter. What would you like first?”

I could sense his excitement now. “I would prefer news first, Ghulam Nabi. I want to please my ears first.”

He stretched his hand to me. “Your sister is going to have a child. I just drove her back from the hospital.”

I did not shake his hand, I embraced him. Finally, there was something to be happy about. I was dangerously ebullient. “Then we wait nine months. Have my parents come across these tidings?”

“No sir.” He exclaimed, handing out the phone to me. He had the answer to and anticipation for everything today. I called my parents, who were busy abroad with some business deal. This was there way to eschew an empty house. A lot had changed here also, since Marium left.

What followed was a very short conversation which ended with shouts and laughter. Knowing them, I knew they would be returning back very soon, to actually feel like a grandparent.

I decided to wish the elder Husseni personally, a call would not do, not for this occasion. “Ghulam Nabi, get the car ready. I wish to pay her a visit.”

He stood still. "In your jubilation, you forget the letter. Should we leave it for later date?"

"Whose is it from?" I didn't desire to read it as my thoughts were pressed on Marium's forthcoming child.

He handed a red envelope to me. "It was delivered personally by a poor old man. It has your name on the front, accompanied with nothing else."

I opened the red envelope which had my name struck on top. There really was nothing else. I opened it to find a cheque instead of a written letter. The amount read six hundred and forty thousand rupees. I asked myself again and again as to who would send me this large amount. Father gave generous gifts, monetary and non-liquid but this was not his style, not so simple.

No one owed me money, and if anyone owed my father, the cheque would certainly not have been directed to me. I turned the envelope inside out and my eyes finally marked out a dot. As I peered closely at it, it was a dollar sign, barely visible.

"Ghulam Nabi," I slowly began, "do you by any ill fated chance know the exchange rate of the rupee vs. the dollar?"

He seemed surprised and watched my face with intent. "I do, sir. It is eighty rupees to a dollar." In junior school a child is taught his tables, mathematical tables. Unquestionably, the easiest multiplications to learn are the square ones, i.e. the number multiplied by its own self. Eight square was sixty four and I knew that since the time I used to revise my tables with my mother, enroute to junior school every morning.

As I slowly began to realize whose cheque was fluttering in my hand, I began to tremble, my face fell and my voice slurred. Converted across to dollars, it was a net return of eight thousand dollars and left no question as to who it was from. Something had horribly gone wrong after having journeyed so far. The Confidence woman had quit on her thirty-ninth victim. Why?

In my worried sense and sensibility, I cast away all forms and appearances of pride and egotism. It was time to finally call Dadhey and depart the knowledge he deserved. It certainly was time to slaughter some belief.

“Ghulam Nabi, call up Malik residency and ask whether you could speak to their second son. Don’t give your name or state who you are?” I was afraid Dadhey would not answer if he heard of my name.

Ghulam Nabi’s intent look had magnified. “Is everything all right sir? You are stricken.”

“It might not be. Please hurry up for haste is the need of this hour.” The phone was dialed and after two minutes Dadhey was on the other line.

His voice clattered in the phone receiver. “Dadhey here. Who wishes to speak to me?”

I took onto the receiver. “Listen Dadhey, we have had our differences but do not put the receiver down. I received a correspondence in....

Hi soft voice interrupted. “Listen Nadir. I am glad you called but I am in a situational conundrum. For a last change, meet me at the residency in half an hour and bring purple flowers with you. You will understand soon enough. Bring your correspondence along. See you there.”

His put down the phone, and I signaled Ghulam Nabi to get the car ready. “Change of plans, we are off for Floral Fiesta. After that we head to Malik Residency, you have five minutes to get everything ready. I would meet you in the drive.”

I was glad he asked no further questions but he couldn’t do away with his quizzical looks. After five absolute minutes, our car strolled down the garage drive as I clutched the red envelop in my hand. My beating heart was up my sleeve and I was extremely tensed. My fingers gripped the Porsche dashboard as I stared into a void,

a shocking void. It seemed like the same day, 2nd January 2005, a good start to a terrible day. Why was everything becoming an incontrollable haze like before?

Ghulam Nabi undertook the courtesy of buying the purple bouquet from Floral Fiesta and it was not long before he dropped me at the residency gate and taken my leave. I moved up the lawns and knocked on the door of the Victorian house. An attendant opened up and nodded at me. Perhaps he knew me, or perhaps he did not.

In all our previous meetings, Dadhey had refused to acknowledge as much in front of his family, or at this vast residency and today, when things were going wrong, taking the wrong turns, he had called me home. No doubt, Minavan was not home.

Minavan actually wasn't home and it was Mr. Malik who greeted me and my flowers. "So son, why have you brought these flowers for me? Is it because it is my birthday or is it because my daughter in law prepares for her journey to parenthood?"

I looked around helplessly. These flowers were not for him, and now he had his arms outstretched to receive them. Not giving them was out of question. However, giving them was the answer. Dadhey leaned against a wood pillar, watching us, his expressions indifferent. He closed his eyes and shook his head up and down and with that came the realization that these flowers were actually for his father, step-father.

Mr. Malik stroked the flowers, admiring them. He gave me a pat on the back too. "How did you know I liked purple? Must be Marium of course, what a dear girl."

I took an ambiguous stance, with truth ofcourse. "Yes sir, she is a dear girl. She will never let you down. Happy birthday, by the way. I almost forgot."

Mr. Rahat Malik led me to the drawing. He seemed old, very weary and it seemed quite clear why his youngest son was his weakness. "Am obliged, Nadir. Come sit down while Dadhey finishes his packing. What name have you sought for the

small angel that is on its way? I think we can all do with a granddaughter, with all this excess of virility.”

His words were distant, they sounded from so far away, that my ears could barely take them in. I forgot all about my correspondence, all about the pregnancy, about names or of anything else. One word swung through my head: packing. He was leaving, oh I had been a fool. Why had I not seen that? Had I expected him to live his whole life with a dratted person he couldn't stand, in a house with a step father who he called “sir” and who in turn him “child”? Was this beautiful prince a child?

Untamable curiosity burned me again. “Forgive my diversion, sir. Where is he packing for?”

Mr. Malik replied in a very causal manner that got me even more conscious of what was going to take place. “He his heading to the United Emirates for an interview, they need engineers to foster their already booming economy.” Why was he even saying this? He owned a vast number of factories and had been voted the industrialist of the decade by the Pak developing commission a few years back. The top industrialist of the country couldn't give a job to his surrogate son. It was pathetic, totally pathetic. It was indeed, pitiable that he recently lost a wife but atleast he could honor her memory, the love he had for her or lastly the tears he cried at her demise.

People are never taught what to shed a tear for, and never give thought to the implication of the droplet that slide down their faces. What would it mean in the future? I stared down at the hand bruise I had incurred from the nail in Sukkur, when Nida had left. In retrospect a loved one departing was worth a tear, worth a teary commitment. I had only howled and shrieked in anguish that night, my additions to my subtractions. I took up his casual manner, and finally uttered. “I think Raheela would do sir, it suits the occasion.”

Mr. Malik seemed interested. “Is there any reason why you suggested that name, Nadir?” He fell silent in his knowledge of what I meant, what I was trying to get across to him, of what I was asking of him. What a meeting it was, everything was known, but not spoken of. It was a big day in his life, certainly not because he was

born today, but because the hour of decision was at hand, something he had long known would blanket his future. The bow was stretched with the last arrow and the quiver now stood empty. It was me who had been idling around in the dark and had still not stopped doing so.

Suited like a gentleman, Dadhey now gracefully climbed down the stairs carrying a small bag. It seemed that he wasn't going away for long time, well that's what I wanted to hope. He spoke to me as if he barely knew me, "Mr. Nadir, would you like to see me off at the airport?"

He spoke more with his eyes and I understood. "Why not? I have nothing better to do." Sarcasm aside, I really did not.

We moved outside, down the lawns to drive where car stood with its doors opened. Mr. Malik and Dadhey sat at the back and I joined the driver at the passenger seat. We had no chance to talk about anything, we had not got a moment of privacy yet. Privacy aside, I had forgotten about the red letter, and all my thoughts were marshaled in trying to grasp what was happening. What was?

It was an hour drive to the airport and a very silent hour it was. The driver drove, Mr. Malik stared at the dashboard, I looked in the rearview and Dadhey looked outside at the window. Silence pushed anticipation to its climax, it did not feel so good. Hotels passed, cars passed, cars got left behind, traffic signals ordered, beggars knocked, and I saw a man who looked like the Colonel. On a closer, look he was much younger. Did I perceive wrongly too, now? The city grew to a halt and on the bordering suburb, the airport enclosure began.

We crossed in and I finally met his eye. He stared in the rearview mirror which angled back at me, seated on the passenger. He was silent, atleast did not seem angry. It was likely that past things were forgotten, as if we had never fought. On a lifted outlook, he looked extremely handsome today, to no wonder why people had always sought his attention. To much wonder he had always eluded it.

Much to my surprise, he gave a small wink. Things certainly were improving now, I could feel it. At that point, I let go of all the created hostilities and gave a nod

back, the border of a smile on my face. Its not that I did not want to acknowledge him, I wouldn't have felt so great smiling about nothing at the military barrack where soldiers searched and scanned the car.

They cleared us and we headed to the main airport: the Jinnah International Airport departure terminal. There was a large car waiting line on the departure terminal and I had no doubt it was a jumbo flight. When we exited, and the driver left in search for parking, I saw about fifty other cars standing in the line after us. Many had *jubba* attired Arabs seated in them with *burqa* clad ladies.

At the terminal, airport officials were busy ushering the passengers inside. It seemed more like a school assembly exodus. Observing their flustered ex-cathedra gestures, there was no doubt left that there wasn't much time to exchange a proper farewell.

With his back turned to the departure zone, he purple eyes now beheld Mr. Malik and me. Who would he choose first?

He took a step towards me and stretched his hand. "I part with you now, Nadir. Take care of yourself." I shook his hand, he didn't embrace me. As my hand met his, it frictionized with the soft white lace on his finger that now seemed like a norm, his measure he called it. That wasn't all though. In that handshake, his palm met mine and left something. I stared at him with wide eyes wondering what had he given to me? Whatever, it was, it was not something I could ask about for his gripped my hand very hard now. I understood and slid it into my pocket without looking at it.

His hand withdrew and his fair face turned towards Mr. Malik.. "Wish me well, sir."

Mr. Malik had a very strange look on his face as if he had never seen him before, lost, as if he was descreying him for the first time. "I always have, child." I had almost hoped he would say son, it was time.

Dadhey stretched his hand to him. It was apparent that both wanted to part with an embrace, but they were men, men who aren't allowed to show emotion. I looked at them very surprised, both of them did not even know how too. Their strange relation had never taught them how or given reason as to why. "Any last advice, sir?"

He didn't have to go. He didn't but he was. Mr. Malik hand met his and didn't withdraw. " Be yourself, the world deserves that."

Dadhey Siddiqui gave him a small smile. The appropriate duration of a handshake was now over, and Dadhey looked down at their clasped hands. Mr. Malik finally woke up, realized this fact and withdrew.

Graceful is the word that I have always used for him. He slowly walked away with a duffel bag in one hand, the other raised to hail the boarding officer at the entrance. His hair curved to his shoulders like his mother, adding to his charismatic persona. Mr. Malik raised his hand, his palm pointing towards my friend's back. When he realized that I was observing him, he further raised his palm to his hair. He couldn't bring himself to ask Dadhey to stop, he couldn't just utter the words. Only his dark eyes could talk, but of what use were the speechless eyes? None at all. Minavan had won, again.

Arabs now moved in front, obscuring our departee. His head would appear now and then over the multitudes and then disappear. One last hand came up in the air and I knew it was his, I knew that hand. Then, I saw him no more and he was gone, ready to board the flight to the Arab emirates. They were so many things left unsaid, perhaps left for a better day, the day he would come back.

The question was if he would. As we walked to the parking Mr. Malik muttered in a soft voice. " He would come back soon. Even if he doesn't , he will be back here for my grand child. No worries."

I didn't catch all what he said so I asked again. "What was that sir?"

He stopped walking and looked at me again, in a very casual manner. “ Did I say something?”

He didn't know that he had been voicing his thoughts, or on second thoughts, consoling himself out loud. “ You said something about coming back?”

He soon realized his misdemeanor and than started walking towards the car. “ I was talking about going back to the parking.” He faked a smile too, but he forgot in his haste, that we hadn't been to the parking as yet. All I could do was assume but I had nothing much to start with. The red envelop and the cursed checque lay in my pocket, far beyond conscious recall. I had lost parts of my consciousness, or perhaps had stowed them in deeper vaults.

We began our journey back to the main city, a city which was now a citizen short, a gentleman short, my last friend short. He had given me something but I dared not to seek more cognizance with Mr. Malik a few inches nigh. It was another silent journey, another silent return. Even people on the same boat have differences, even the wise lacked foresight.

The car finally rolled outside my house. “ Thank you for the flowers, son.” He called me “son.” I stared at him, it was hard to even believe he called me that when he had sternly refused Dadhey of that title.

I could not take it any more.“ Dadhey asked me to bring them. Marium had no say in or knowledge of my visit today.”

His face grew grim. “Dadhey you say? Dadhey?”

I could only nod and watch, watch his hidden horror, watch his painful acknowledgement. He had always put blood first, now even he had his doubts. He must have been consoling himself at that very moment, as I just gave him another significantly mighty reason to do so. Departures, fleeting or permanent, always left a hollow. We both had hollows, accentuated abysmal voids when his car finally rolled away. He couldn't speak any more, he didn't bid me farewell. He only tapped at his driver's seat and that was it.

I was severely eager to find out more about what rested in my pocket. I sat on the footpath outside on my house. Not willing to wait any longer for my thirst to be quenched, I did not enter my house. A hour had been enough, much enough.

It was another letter, a white envelope this time. It read in black, but it's word were red. They were red to me.

-Dear Nadir,

It was my father who taught me how to write a letter. He said that every word had to be meant, written with cherishment. I never forgot that, it was something I couldn't afford to forget.

Before Feroz Siddiqui went on his last voyage, he disciplined me to look after people who I could term as close. Well, I couldn't look after him, God beat me to it. Nonetheless, I never forgot him or his last lesson and I kept past realities, past memories close to my heart, as close as memories could be kept.

Implementation, however, was where the dichotomy began. In life, they were many I couldn't look after no matter how much I perfected myself. You, my friend, you mistook my counsel, and we also, left each other in vain. I gave up on you for I thought you were gone for good.

Today, when your voice sounded on the phone, I was surprised beyond quantifiable capacity. Then I sat down to write this final dialogue, a closing act in attempt to put things straight, to make beliefs strong, to make memories memorable, to put history on the back course.

I must ask you to forgive me for vacating you from my scope, from my agendas. Forgive me if I have wronged you, forgive me. However, my apology doesn't extend to my counsel.

Nadir, in life you have to stretch yourself to grasp out what you deem worthy. Of all thing created , love and compassion gain ascendancy because they fill and furnish the abraded soul. If you want her, than seek her, seek her before it is too late , before your love is beyond the calm harbors that contrast with the troubled seas, turbulent seas.

You asked me who I was. All I was, all I am is a personification of morbidity. You were a good point in my life, another summit, a needed repose, an existence outreaching expectations. These past years I have spent, gently rebuffing people, pushing everyone away, everyone who could benefit me, who I could benefit. No one would call this healthy behavior but I don't own a healthy past either. I have become bitter, too bitter.

My life was spent splintering with people, fighting setbacks a young man never gets to face. History was what I never recounted properly. O Nadir, they were so many things left unsaid, left for tomorrow every single day. No doubt, you were far within the outskirts of trust, but you were far without in the world where everything was as it should be, I guess normal is the word my hands are fumbling from.

It was a good chance, well met observation that I found you, a well met future that we built, in trust and hope. These words may sound a bit useless, when, infact not when; now. Now that you learn that I have left for good, with no intention of returning, you may hold me as a deserter.

If you do than, I ask you to reconsider, if any cherishment exists, any at all. After the property appropriations, I had no choice left. I got almost nothing. I didn't want anything either, but this would not defeat this living paradox, which in all its subtlety implied that I was not wanted any longer.

Self respect is what has always driven my existence, my ability to look at my own self in the mirror with no ill will, no created regrets. When

Mother left, the residency became a mere guest house, when the will came, I began to outstay my welcome.

The man who stood next to you knew that I was leaving, life doesn't need some things to be said. If he chose not to hold me back, than I would not hold it against him. We were both wrong: he never knew how to be a father unto me, and I never knew how to be a son unto him. We owned the strangest relationship on earth, one that we did not know what to do with. When you are not taught how to deal with something, more often than not it becomes an absurdity. I need not say more.

As for Minavan and our Con-woman, we have done well. If the fish is out of the pond, than the tiger-shark will be lonely soon enough. It is amusingly strange how oft she speaks with animals.

You can make the best decision as to when to release our finale. I entrust you with that, in this silent departure. I must add we were a good team.

For Minavan, for only him only, have no second thoughts, have no mercy for he will strike back even more potently if not bound with a leash. Even if you despise me, donot forget that these words come from a man who has known him like no other, him who will never be known any better, never will be understood to a greater depth.

I would like to end this letter on a brighter note, on brighter visions and on a brighter being. A lawyer will contact you soon, you will know as to why. It is a small gift you can accept, which can certainly be acquired. Fear not for me, for I am financially equipped with some lasting paternal inheritance. Yasmin Malik, infact Yasmin Siddiqui did not just die like that.

I donot know if another meeting is written, I donot know if a bridge is constructed in tomorrow but 'if we do meet again, why, we'll smile indeed; if not, why, then, this parting was well made'.

Grand words nadir, grand indeed these are. If only you knew me better, if only I had the strength to go through it all over again, I might have had fewer sentiments to add, less forgiveness to ask for, less meaning to get across and less doubts about whether I have said all I wanted to say.

If you do decide to forgive me, than do me a last favor, which is to continue visiting my mother's grave and offer Fateha prayers on my behalf (when time grants).

Farewell my brother, farewell is all this letter may speak. I may not be absolved, but I know, I wont be forgotten either.

That is what Dadhey Siddiqui will cling to.

The sincerest of my regards. -

His beautiful words crumpled my heart. They were red words, red with emotion, red with sorrow, red with departure. In these words I read the epitome of our journey, a journey that was now almost over. Forgiven, I repeated to myself, forgiven I repeated to myself, again and again while I read.

My pride now bit me, I had failed to make the most of my time with him. If only had he asked, if only had he once said it, my rich father would have got him employed anywhere, even in our own enterprise. Perhaps he might have if I had not fought. Perhaps he might have.

I mourned as to why he hadn't spoken, as to why he hadn't voiced it out. A brother he called me and our bond stood clear, but it was all too late. Late, a word I wish that should never existed, never meant anything, a phenomena, precluded from the realities of this world. It was even too late.

I was like a brother to him, a brother who had idled too long, in the deserts of shadows. I felt as if all was lost, I wanted to cry but I was a man now, men aren't allowed to cry. It is against their jumbled up socialization. Men are supposed to take everything in, nothing out. I couldn't even cry.

Sitting on the footpath, I burned in anger, sparked in rage. There was no one like him and there would never be anyone like him. Grace flowed in his manner, his gait, even his written letter. O my forgiven brother, what was there to forgive? If there were any apologies to sound, they were mine. I never got the chance, he had left silently.

My pride was obliterated at the greatest cost I could deem, the greatest cost I could bear. Money had nothing to do with it, it was the economics of bargain, a bargain that would never be wittingly made, never would be sought. Why had I been proud? I cursed myself. Why had I? It was a hard learned lesson, never be proud, never be proud, never run away from an apology, a well deserved apology.

I folded his letter and put it in my pocket. My hand met something, and then I was struck. Dadhey never got to know what had transpired this morning. I never got a chance to tell him, I had never got a moment of privacy. He left me with a responsibility, one that had no longer any means of further deliverance.

I sat there broken outside my house, just staring, left alone. After a while, the gate opened, a servant came out and shouted something at a man across the street. He then pulled out a cigarette and lit it up. While he was looking here and there foolishly, his eyes met mine at footpath, looking straight back at him, in a spaced out manner. The cigarette in his hand fell down: he was flabbergasted. "Sir, what are you doing here?"

I just kept looking at him, trying to look a little less angry. It was very difficult to keep him from my wrath and I barely managed to do that. I did not reply. Seeing this he continued. "Sir, there is a guest inside. He has been waiting in your room for more than an hour."

I finally rose, and as I passed him, I stooped down to pick his cigarette and handed it to him. My face was still steaming. “Why thank you sir.” He said, showing his manners but still remaining perplexed. I am sure the sky fell for him that day.

Who ever was waiting was surely in for a very bad time, a very bad time. Today was just one of those days, of those days. I took all the time in the world to walk through the lawn, I snailed through the hall and cater pillared on the five set of stairs. I took all the time I could to reach my room, in hope that my anger would subside, and someone could just get lucky.

There however was no need for me to placate myself. In my room sat no other than my devil, almost as angry as I was, watching my television. How audacious of him.

It had been two years now, thinking about how I would ruin him, two years musing about all he had robbed me of. Now he was finally here, in my empty house, with no one in between to moderate, with no one to mitigate our confrontation.

Seeing me, he got up, shoved his stark black eyes centimeters from mine and growled. “How dare you?”

I came even closer and asked him back. “How dare I what?”

He growled again. “How dare you send a whore after me?”

I shouted back at him. “I did not send a whore after you.” I was not even lying, for all she did, for all she was, she did not sell her soul and she did not sell her body.

“LAIR!” Saying this he slapped me. I looked at him in shocked, even surprised at how he had dared to do that in my own house. A mad rage seized me, I swung my hand back and punched him in the face with all the might I could muster. That was for Dadhey, that was for sending him away.

On impact, he fell to the floor and raised his hand to ask me to stop. He had his it with violence; he was a coward after all, just a bloated playground bully, nothing

without his friends. I wanted take a few more swings at him for I was not done, but it was my home, and by some great mistake, he was a guest. I had to obey.

He was still sitting on the floor when he spoke again, in a triumphant manner. “You both paid her to break my heart, you fools.” These words cleared up everything, the Con-woman had not run away, she had changed sides on the battlefield and spilt our beans. It was just her demented sense of fairness that made her return the payment.

Dadhey had saved me again: there was no written contract. Email accounts could be hacked, voice recordings could be dubbed. I knew well that he had no uncounterable proof except the word of a nobody, a nobody who did not even dare concede her name. “You have no proof to back your allegations.”

He got up from the floor, moved to the right corner of the room and picked up Dadhey’s purple bowler hat. He came back and shoved it in my face. “Do I need more proof? Do I need anymore proof? Do you think I never followed him? You were such a wimp, you had a whole year to do what you wanted but you ran away. You didn’t have it in you, neither the guts nor the brains to conceive anything that could be even termed close to revenge.”

I was caught but my anger made me intrepid. I snatched that hat back and placed it on my head. “You think your words will change anything? You think I am afraid of you? You think you can rob me of my affections and luxuriate in blithe while I mourn my losses? You never had to barge, poke and prod in my life, that was a big mistake you made.”

He laughed at me with scorn. “Mistake? No darling, all is fair in this game of love.”

I fought down the irresistible down to punch him again. “Then all is fair in war too. You must have learned that today.”

He still continued laughing, a bit of blood now trickled down his nose. Over the now blaring television, he attempted to belittle me. “How carefully you speak, you

don't even mention your master. He has well taught you the art of words. Did he teach you how to make friends too?"

I ignored his question and struck back at him. "How difficult was it being out shadowed by him your whole life? Did it hurt when even your own Maliks loved him more than you? Less appreciation must have torn your mind frame to pieces. You could never stand his charisma, could you?"

"Appreciation and Charisma?" he scoffed. "Look at him, he just ran away. Yes he has out shadowed me, in all the insignificant terrains of this world. What a worthless loser. He tried to play me but all he did was hand me a lady even more beautiful than the one you did. No wonder you guys got along, dumb met dumber. O my graciousness." He even made a inane face gesture.

He hit me hard with his tongue. Indeed, both of us had precluded the possibility of the con-woman actually falling in love with him? How did this vermin do it every time? For all the hatred I had stowed inside, I could not deny his knack with woman: he could make them stay.

All I could was bluff, to gain the better of his psychological stronghold. If reality couldn't, than atleast thinking could be twisted. "For all the lordliness you shower upon me now, we both know that you will send her off in your unprecedented impertinence. Linah Rafiki was the real deal, you lost a true love. It will hit hard tomorrow, when you are no longer blind. This woman you cannot accept, she is a mere disgrace, and the latter that you disgraced won't take you back. Think again, Minavan Malik. Have you won? Have you really, darling?"

It bit him and I squirmed in pleasure, how absorbing it was, how engaging it was to gnaw at him. I gained a sadistic pleasure in wiping a sadist's pleasure. I continued for the fun wasn't over. "The truth is that you will look in the mirror your whole life, and think about him. No matter how much you abhor him, it would never change the truth. Truth is immune to sentiments, and the truth is, or infact, always was that he took care of you when you were young but all you cared about was wealth and the two coins that your pocket would be robbed of if he continued

living with you. Minavan, you detestable Malik, you bit the hand which had the noblest of fingers. Do you think...”

He interrupted me, “Don’t you even.....

I interrupted him back, now shouting again. “Do you think your father will ever forgive you for sending him away?? It was because of you he couldn’t say it, it was because of you he couldn’t stop him. And now, he has gone for good, gone beyond any believable recall. Will you ever be able to look yourself in the mirror and not think of him? You can never let go Minavan, you will never be able to let go of Dadhey Siddiqui, you can never let go of my brother.” He stared at me as I said this. “Why? Cause some scars, no matter how unwanted they are, still represent who you are.”

The television blacked out all of a sudden. He was not laughing anymore but tried to look unmoved. “So is your sublime composition over? You think I can care for him? He was never my brother and it comes as a surprise that he wept at your ragged doorstep. So what tale did he part with? Does he still cry for that lahori girl?

What was he talking about? “You thatched brigand, the only tear he wept was for his mother.”

He started laughing at me again. “So he never even told you. O my great graciousness! Your brother never even told you about her. Face it, he just used you and when you look in the mirror, that’s all you will see. His deception, his honey coated lies. Oh I forgot. Charisma is the word you use for these beautiful adjectives.” He was still laughing in his assumed ‘graciousness’.

Either I could ask him who he was talking about, bend my neck and make a fool of myself, or I could just get it going. Choosing the latter, I picked up a vase as my restrain weakened to nothing. It was finally time for a good deliverance, host apart, guest aside. I was sure that even Mr. Malik would be intrinsically happy that I roughed him up for the injustices he had done to us all, his unnecessary hand and feet sticking in every where, meddling mischief and conjuring torment. Right when

I was about to chuck the vase in his filthy face, the blacked out television came back to life, saved him and took another. Breaking news snapped: the jumbo plane enroute to the Arab Emirates had crashed in the Persian Gulf. There were no survivors. Only charred remains floated around in the water. It was not hard to remember that probability of being involved in an airplane accident was only one in an eleven million. That was the failure of fortuity, the true failure of our fortuity.

15- The breakdown of the already broken

The vase fell to the floor and cracked as my hands fell limp to my sides. Minavan moved closer and stared at the young news anchor. He did not believe it, he did not. He changed the channel, but they all said the same thing, they all voiced the same calamity. Only the faces were different.

The fight was over. He looked at me and I looked at him and he knew what I was trying to say. He was responsible, he was responsible for all this. It was only for him that Dadhey left to meet his death. A death that shouldn't have been met, a death that was never supposed to be written.

I sat on the ground and the broken vase shards cut my foot. It did not hurt; it was the heart that fell, that kept falling to a depth that did not exist, in a hole that had no end. He sat down too staring at the screen, he was incredulous. To him, perhaps the media was playing a joke. When did the media ever joke? When?

Tears flowed from my eyes, he was just there and then he was there not. Minavan was motionless and still kept looking at the television. The worst of enemies sat next to each other, all enmity forgotten in the hysteria that seized them. I knew one thing; I knew what he would see when he looked in the mirror.

Once again time had no significance. We sat there quiet, staring at the television for, what must have been an eternity in itself, I donot know. There is this thing about me: I forget the meaning, or discard the knowledge of time when a turbulent calamity strikes. The phone rang and rang and rang.

It was painful enough hearing it once, seeing the ships peruse the sea in search of wreckage or survivors. We did not want to hear it again and we certainly did not want to hear another man's cry. It was shearing enough watching it live, the metal parts simmering in flames in the middle of oceanic nowhere.

Minavan got up now, the bloody shards stuck in his palm and toe. He started walking away, some drops of blood outlining his trail, but with what sentiments I don't know. He was quiet and it would not be clichéd to add that none of us had ever deemed this, even in our wildest dreams, to happen.

I could bitterly live with the knowledge that he had left for good, because there remained a hope, of a much desired re-union. However, it was too hard to live with the harsh knowledge that he was no longer existential. Would I ever recuperate? Would time heal this wound? Would it be the surrogate nurse or a pathetic witch doctor? Only God knew.

After Minavan's departure, I did not pick up any phones. I was teary, would lugubrious be an adjective in excess? There was only one thing to do to push it all back, to part with the seventh of March 2007, and that was to go to sleep. That only way left to gain momentary control of the reigns of this situation, just fade out of consciousness.

I had strange dreams at night and they all started with the airport but concluded with different ends. Perhaps the mind was trying to mollify the heart by creating illusions, the heart that was broken. Maybe even in pure consciousness, I was on the verge of ending up as a delusional.

When I woke up, it was with knowledge and it was as if I had not slept. It was all there, not a moment of recall needed. However, the past was certainly pushed back into deeper valves, now existing, as ever without the possibility of not resurfacing. Seconds, minutes or hours, it had to hit back. I would add that I was a little ready this time.

My consummated grief was not all about Dadhey; it was also about those faces I had seen the day before, those families which had stitches in them now. None had

survived, only conspiracy theories left in their wake. Disaster is small word: ineffability could consume anybody even remotely linked to this, this.

The media, however, did not share our grief and voiced outrageous conspiracy theories, ranging from engine fire commanding the whole plane, to a terrorist attack, not to forget the passenger who violated the smoking regulations and inadvertently conflagrated the fire which seized the whole plane. Were they insensitive enough so as to not imagine what we were going through? Yes they were. They couldn't joke, but they could distort without regard, to sell their stories.

No chauffeurs needed, no instructions needed, I wore his purple hat (which I wasn't ready to look at till yesterday) and headed off to his funeral. I didn't need to be told that it would be held at noon. Marium had jammed my cell phone with enough texts messages when I refused to pick her call. No doubt she was with her-in-laws accepting condolences.

I had been in great doubt about whether I should go or not. Did not he leave them all? His last words had made it clear that there was no one significant enough to make him stay. The only man who could, didn't. And I, had gladly run away fallen to my ineffaceable follies. Now that I thought, weren't we all responsible for sending him? Even I had a role, for I knew that I could have stopped him, he would have listened. Alternatives could have been found, life could have been continued, oxygen could have been dissipated and the flown soul would still have been stationed.

Could, would and should was all that was left now, anon an "If" joining there ranks as a chief complement. These are the words of regrets, words of retrospective mourning.

Doubts however remained doubts, not motivators. My rash emotions couldn't deny the fact that I was once again, a family representative. It was an eerie coincidence that again my parents were abroad and another death had taken place, in succession. Why forget that it had been less than a year since the last person in this very household had left.

Outside the residency, there was a long line of cars parked for a whole four hundred yards. People loved him and that made me smile. It had always been so, since God knows when.

I walked those four hundred yards, every single step on the cobblestone praying to God for mercy on behalf on my brilliant compatriot. He was still quite close: I wore his purple bowler hat. I was ready to bet it was all pre planned, his last souvenir left as a token of our times together. I vowed to myself to fulfill his last directives, there was no saying no to a dead man.

I was inside the residency now. There was no shrouded body this time, just a present memory. Unlike last time, there, people were not catching up on old times, not trying to stifle their laughter. Even the intractable gossiping ladies did not twitter and tweak. Silent groups sat here and there, it was a very silent affair. Unquestionably, public sentiment was thin when it came to such an unusual death. Only children played, running inside and out, again, having no idea, again, how hard lightning had struck the house again. If it was a bit less metaphorical, perhaps even the wood would have been shining red, torched to completion. However, metaphors speak of the damage done inside, that which is hidden to the eye. Atleast they spoke something.

The arrangement was all the same and even Mr. Malik wore his same black sunglasses, saying nothing at all. What was he going through today? Yesterday was painful enough, he had left without speaking. I walked upto him, and gave him my hand. He did not take it, instead he embraced me and did not let go. His tears rolled down on my shoulder, and I kept still. I was a brick comfort and I knew that to him, I was the only guest who could possibly come close enough to understand what turmoil his brain was undergoing.

He looked older now. Where was the indomitable man who I had first met in the lawns at my house? Where was the omnipotent manner that he once spoke in? Times changes people. That's what you read in books and see in life. That's what I saw, felt as he cried on my shoulders. Without a word, he than walked away, and I sought my sister.

The elder Husseni was crying too. I presume she found the real worth of all that was lost not. As much I would hate to add, too late are the two words, which I have avoided. I kept my arm on her shoulder. It was pretty ironic, that the man who was broken most was disseminating all the solace today. “I am sorry that your forthcoming happiness is marred by this demise. Can you tell God that we did not want this?”

Her lips frowned into a weak smile. “I think He knows.”

“May your child be the catharsis we need, Marium. We need one, for death is all this house has seen.” Truly it was all I could hope for.

“I miss him, Nadir.”

“He was different, wasn’t he?” My presumption was right.

“Different beyond anything. I am hurt brother, console me.”

“It will pass, just wait it out. What else can we do?” I was offering rhetorical consolations that I myself didn’t believe in. In another world, in another time it could be called hypocrisy, but it was all just now, saying things that you yourself did not know, whether or not to believe in.

Our conversation was cut short by the funeral prayer call by the same Imam. The male members headed to the prayer mats set out in the lawns. There was no body to bring out and lay in front this time, no one to look at it, no one to say goodbye to and no last minute entrance by my parents this time. I wondered if they even knew.

Minavan was no where to be seen. What had happened to him? He was certainly not here and neither did anyone wait for him. The funeral prayer was done with, and still there was no sign. Mr. Malik asked the Imam to prolong the final supplication and left the prayer mat. Perhaps he had realized this too.

Yasir rose to take charge and sat with the Imam in front. When the Imam had finished with his proceedings, they still had not come back. The prayer mats were

then rolled and right at that spot, Yasir and a few committed attendants cemented a tombstone in his memory. It read-

**- In the loving memory of Dadhey Siddiqui
(1984-2007) -**

Woman and small children came forward and put flowers. Some stroked the tombstone, some kept their distance. Those that had no flowers took their time in the garden and came with the freshest of roses, lilies and orchids. They were broken no more than a minute ago.

I tucked my purple bowler hat at the tombstone and left the residency knowing that it would be a long time before I came back again. I did not head towards the car but took the opposite direction and headed towards the Graveyard Avenue. I had a request to fulfill, a commitment to bind myself to. Yasmin Malik deserved a visit, it was time to fill in for her son.

The winds started to pick up, and pushed me back as I walked. When I reached there, it was not so difficult to locate her grave amongst the thousands that were planted there. There were two reasons for that. The first was that I had often been here with Dadhey.

The second reason was that a man in black sunglasses wept at the sought out grave, seeking atonement, from his departed beloved. He was so lost that he did not even notice that I was there until I kept a hand on his shoulder. "It is okay. Give way and let go, sir." These were Dadhey's words.

He kept staring at the grave in penitence. "That possibility doesn't exist. Our love that grew by inches, has now died by the yard. There is no even left to utter the cry of forgiveness to."

"Sir, the departed left, but he held nothing against you till the very end. He understood the choices you had to make, he held nothing against you."

Mr. Malik sobbed even more. “These are just appeasing conjectures. Please do not start with them, son.”

The fact, the letter was still in my pocket and I could have handed it to him as a terminating consolation. However, if the past could be jeopardized, relations could have withered, this act would have done it. I restrained.

He collected the pink rose petals at his wife’s beloved grave and started to walk away. “This conversation never took place, son.”

“It never did,” I replied. “But why do you take these flowers with you?”

He did not turn back now but kept walking. “They are just a day old.” Now he was out of sight, but I still did not get grasp the meaning of his answer. I placed his hat on the grave and recited Fateha for Yasmin Malik. Dadhey’s death had made metamorphosed his request into an decree. There was no saying no to a dead man.

The blowing wind had picked up into a gale. As I got up to leave, a rose petal came and settled on my feet. As I bent to reach out for it, it blew away. I got my answer, picked up the hat and continued on my path home.

16-

The last history that was left to be written

Months passed, the grief did not subside but transposed to the inner dungeons. Religion just gave us three days of mourning, I needed more. Guilty men need more.

I read his last letter everyday, hoping that it would cure me. A time came when I stopped doing that. Not that I felt better, but because every line, every word became imprinted in my head. Only thoughts were needed now. Nonetheless, I carried it everywhere, and was rarely seen without his purple bowler hat. These had now become priceless souvenirs, their worth magnified posthumously.

Two weeks later, when Father and Mother returned and learnt of funeral, their shock was only preceded by the rage appertaining to why I had not told them. I could not reply, I just remained silent. They immediately paid Mr. Malik a visit but that did not change anything back home. I had committed a capital crime, an unparallel felony. My dismal third year at Packard ended and holidays began. However, they were far from holidays.

In July, when I returned home with my terrible Grade point average, a volcano erupted. My parents were at a loss of words and failed to comprehend why I had let them down again, and continuously failed to communicate both at Packard and at home. I was kept under a house siege without any finances, and no one was allowed to visit me. Now, their rage was only furthered by their apprehension. It was evident that they thought I had fallen to drugs. If my own child was acting in such a strange manner, I would have done the same. Irrespective, life became still and I started parting with my esteem too.

It was true. I was just a rich loser. Money wasn't everything, it couldn't buy true respect, well atleast not for me. I had no friends, no grades, only two parents at home and a sister, all of whom had become even more consumed in light of the expected delivery. Mother and Father spent much time buying stuff they thought their unborn grandchild would need. I was never taken on such incursions and

sometimes I no longer felt that I was their child. A few deaths had rampaged relations at home too.

It was the 16th of July when the monsoon rain showered upon us as if it was no man's business. My Parents and Ghulam Nabi accompanied Marium to the doctor, all affections notwithstanding. It rained and rained as I stared outside the window, the letter in my hand. The sun fell and darkness began to take over, greeting the rain which had no mind to part with anyone.

A knock rang on my door and grudgingly I rose to answer. I opened the door to find the same smoking attendant at the door, who had notified me of Minavan's visit. Today, like all other days, he was terrified of me. He always baffled me for I had never done anything to him.

When he opened his mouth, he breathed like smoke. "Sir, I have orders from your Father but sympathy begs me to diverge now. For the past three hours, a lady has been sitting outside in the rain at the footpath and has refused to leave without meeting you. She keeps on mumbling "enough is enough". It's dark now sir, and she is a lady. It is your decision from here, sir. Just don't tell you father. I am just being a human, not a servant." Saying that he ran away, and I took on a shawl and headed down the flight of stairs.

Finally, there was someone to talk to. Finally, some one who desired my company. It seemed like ages when relationships stood for something. I walked across the lawns and outside the gate, to a very wet footpath. She still had not budged and still had not done away with her unfaltering enthusiasm. Farah Malik had not given up on me.

I sat next to her, quite near to the spot where I had first read Dadhey's letter. Only memories were left now. I shattered the silence. "What can I say now, Farah?"

She did not look at me. Her expressions reminded me of a cross child. "I feel slighted, Nadir. A whole year spent, not a single reply, not a single email. Here I come, to see if I have one last ship here and you make me wait three hours to see descry your royal anatomy. If there is nothing left to return for than ask me to leave

and I will. I just wanted to hear you say it, and that is exactly why I am soaked. Tell me, is that how rich people treat poor people at their doorstep?"

I wish she had shouted, it would have atleast made me feel better. The soft manner in which she conversed only magnified my guilt. "If I speak now, would you believe me, Farah? I don't have a justification, I am too damned to be even allowed an apology, but I have an answer. Will you believe me?"

She replied in her soft voice. "I would believe the Nadir Husseni I once knew."

Farah had still not met my eye. "That guy is dead, Farah. I have no idea how life changed so suddenly but it did. Your cousin and my brother of a friend, departed friend, took my past self with him. As of the starting of this month, I have been under a house arrest thanks to ubiquity of drugs. My parents are angry, at my failures and my abrupt silence. That's why I couldn't come out here today. I did not even know you were here. It is just the mercy of an attendant that I sit here, basking in this storm."

"You speak only of today. What of the past year?"

I was hesitant to answer but falsehood and loneliness were notions that I was tired of. "I left for Sukkur that day, a fourteen day trip which was reduced to eight days when Yasmin Malik became bed-ridden. I fell in love with my host's daughter but time was merciless enough to not allow anything to substantiate. I came back received your letters and mails but not before I had met a fragment of your past." She finally looked at me, very solidly I must say. "You never told me that once you harbored feelings for Minavan. It was indeed in your childhood, but I couldn't stand that, could not trust that and in light of all I planned to achieve, thus ended all forms of communication. Please donot look at me in such a discerning way for the manner in which you first found cannot be underscored as candid."

She nodded, and I breathed relief. "Fairly said. I had been wrong too and I understand that I couldn't withhold your mistrust. But speak out, who acquainted you with this fragment? Dadhey?"

It was my turn to nod. “Donot hold anything against a dead man. He did not want me to isolate you, but take my steps, with measure and proportion. It made complete sense to shun you when we connived to get back at Minavan. The Oxford would call you collateral damage.”

She closed an eye and started matting her neat yet soaked hair. “What did you conspire?”

I looked at her now and shook my head. “Let the past rest. It is too painful anyway. I beg you to understand and exhibit empathy.”

She smiled concedingly and my spirits rose. Finally some was there who understood me, someone who could compromise. “What of the girl, Nadir?”

“I donot know. Dadhey always wanted me to hunt down what I sought, not to wait it out. She maybe in Rawalpindi now, or perhaps in Sukkur. I have no idea. I donot even know whether there is anything left to go back for. It has been a long year, and a mistaken one too. But what about you, Farah? Where is your bonjour monsieur husband?”

She struck me on the neck. “My dear Aamir is in Azad Kashmir. I flew here, he flew there but its not that I am not catching a train at three past noon tomorrow. I just wanted to meet you before I left. For all I knew, you could have been dead like Dadhey.”

Silence fell and she realized her mistake. Only the rain did not stop. It was now her turn to rationalize. “I recant. That was not meant, Nadir. One of the reasons I did not leave for Azad Kashmir directly is that I wanted to meet the Maliks and offer my sorrow. We had not been close over the past few years but it is not that we were always strangers. A time was, when we talked to each other.”

I spoke again or the words came out from inside on their own. “Any friend of Dadhey Siddiqui is my friend.”

“Undoubtedly Nadir, undoubtedly.” Farah now stood up a parting smile, and shook my hand. She headed off in the dark and the footsteps receded until I couldn’t hear them or couldn’t differentiate them from the clattering raindrops. I acknowledged that it was time to head back to the siege.

Life again, however, had different plans. The sound of footsteps struck the air again and her returning outline appeared in the distance. She shouted as she walked towards me. “Come with me, Nadir. Let us find her. It is time to put an end to your question marks.”

“You haven’t noticed have you,” I shouted back. “I am under house arrest. I have no money.”

She was almost face to face now, but she still screamed. “Break it, violate it and loot a bank. Since when did you become a dogmatic conformist? What is there to wait for?”

This crazy woman had a point. I shouted again, in her face. “What if she says no?”

“If your skeptic bell rings, than meet me at the Cantt Railway station before three pm tomorrow. I will buy two tickets and stand at platform sixteen. Shhh, no more.” In her usual style, she left without waiting for my answer and in that, my insurrection began.

What was I waiting for? I had to grasp out: that was what the letter said. Mother had put me in this fix and well, it was the hour for her to pay the bills. I rushed up to my room, charged with some strange courage and dialed for the haunted landline.

It was the Colonel who picked the phone again. “Amjad speaking.”

I knew I couldn’t afford to falter this time. “Hullo sir, this is Nadir Husseni.”

His voice gained strength. “Son, where have you been? It seemed that we became beyond your recall.”

It was time to get to the point. “No sir, it is just that life ate me up. How does your farm and family fare?”

His voice cackled on the receiver. “They are both fine young man.”

I met a dead end. I had to find another way soon and I did. It then finally struck me. “Sir, I remember the words of an old army man. He alluded that all wars are not fought on the battlefield. I must confess that I have always been a bit afraid of you, but in this desperate hour, I need to ask you of your daughter. Need I say more about what I have felt and about what I still feel?”

Then followed a long silence. I thought the line had dropped or that I had transgressed his limits. Minutes passed and the line cackled again: my arm nerves now began to strain. “I have the address book in hand now. 29/2, 34rth street, Pine Avenue, Rawalpindi. Would that suffice, son?”

My heart took a leap. I had improvised the correct sonata. “Suffice is word, insubstantial to the scale of my gratitude, sir. I will never forget this.”

Before putting down the receiver, he had his last word. “No matter what happens there, you will hold your place in my house and that is of a welcome guest. I need not say that I will expect your recount. Godspeed, son.”

As soon as the conversation concluded, I broke another vase, this time out of sheer excitement. Everything was in place. My parents would not let me go, they wouldn't finance this trip but in happier times I had made my fair share of mistakes. I recollected that the six hundred and forty thousand rupee scarlet cheque was still with me and so was Ghani Jaa's appreciation. I knew that this man would heartily travel across the whole country just for one final ride.

With last pieces of the puzzle were in hand, it was only time to pull them together and abscond.

On the 17th of July, at noon, without a warning, without a letter I threw a small duffel bag and Dadhey's bowler hat over my back wall into an empty plot. A quick scan and there I was, over the house wall, into the last history.

Local bank regulations stipulated that a cheque could only be redeemed within the six months that followed after the date of issue. This plan fortunately was within that allotted time frame. Amid small fears that the scarlet cheque would bounce, I was told by the Bank Al-Habib cashier that the cheque was genuine and I could withdraw my payment. I left the bank, with my pockets, my bag and my suit, significantly weighty.

Quarter to three, I met my Farah at the Cantt train station and from her countenance, it seemed rather clear that she expected me. Thus began our journey, through fields, forests, tunnels and old train stations of Pakistan. The stations had a British outlook to them, even majority of the train tracks were colonial remains. Much had not changed in the countryside, neither ideology nor tangible remains. Poverty was the highlighted theme and my love seemed a mere luxury, friendship a mere oddity when you could see people sleeping on the floor in their lack of ability to buy a genuine ticket.

Of course that was not the convention but a result of venal police officers and conniving conductors generating revenues that had nothing to do with the central train authorities. Night dawned and light dimmed, for the train was sparsely lighted. I must care to mention I was not travelling first class: Farah was kind enough to buy the tickets. However, I would have rather died than complain for she was pursuing my dream for me. The simple fact that she always helped me out and I could never return in kind, now bothered me. I had not been a worthy friend, certainly not one that could be appreciated. Yet her face bore a pleasant look, contentment arched all over. For all she did not have, she was still better off and the greatest part was that she knew it. That was Farah Malik.

I gave Ghani Jaa a ring and he agreed to drive all across the Punjab province to pick me from the Pindi Railway Exchange. His dedication was always

commendable and I made a mental note to reward it, when my affairs took a prospective turn. That would be a good way to put it. Musing along these tracks, I rested my head on a seat and it was not long before this tumultuous journey passed out of my consciousness.

When we finally reached our station, Farah woke me up. “Are we there?”

“No. The night has passed, it’s an hour before noon and the train is derailed.” She spoke, throwing bananas outside the window.

My eyes fully opened when I heard this. When I realized that she was joking, I began to breathe and reclined my head. On a digression, it was worth a look though, to admire how well dressed I was for this momentous occasion. My shirt was creased, my shoes were polished with cake, and there were some lasting blotches of food on my suit. What choice did I have, we couldn’t pit stop as Farah was already behind schedule.

Turning my gaze outside, Rawalpindi Exchange stumbled upon us, one listless station. A few passengers idled on the benches while others strutted up and down the station. On the corner sat a few farmers, knots of haystack lying next to them. It was an eye catching as there were no bell boys around. The busiest man, the station master, was playing chess with his secretary in the front.

We exchanged luggage and I carried her heavy bags onto the only platform cemented. Outside, in parking across the main entrance, sat a tall grey haired man. What caught our eyes was the he was standing next to a green bus. Seeing us, he took brisk steps to us and took off his crap to greet us. “My pleasure.”

“Regards.” We both replied and in unison continued. “What happened to the car?”

“It gave way on the motorway. This was the only thing I could find. I am sorry if I have let you down.”

“It is perfect.” Farah replied with a glee. She was in a strangely happy mood. “Fact is that we have nothing to lose. Do we, Nadir?”

We as a whole did not, but I did. However, there was nothing wrong with joining the bandwagon once in a while, so I agreed. “We have nothing to lose, a gigantic under populated bus with three people will do.” I handed Ghani Jaa, the address. “How long?”

He smiled and ushered us towards the bus. It could be inferred that Pine Avenue was not that far. “Ghani jaa,” Farah began. “Do you know why the purpose of this Husseni boy’s visit.”

“No madam, I donot.” He said. “Though it seems that I will.”

“Nadir is on mission Cupid.” She rolled on the back seats with hysteric laughter. Ghani Jaa gave me a confused look, asking about the oddity I had brought along. Little did he know that I planned to send this enthusiastic oddity with him to Azad Kashmir. He was a safe haven, the safest I could find for Farah.

A large residential board passed which had ‘Pine Avenue’ smudged it. It was a cold northern retreat where large pines grew on the road sides. Residential domiciles, unlike those in Karachi, were not separated by walls in between. It was peacefully green area, even the birds kept to themselves. All the residential structures, though not the very large, were beautifully built with a red bricks slanting down the roof. This was definitely a well chosen place to breathe in.

When we had crossed the first five streets, I was still calm. When we crossed the thirtieth, I was still calm. When the green bus turned on the thirty-fourth, I was still calm. Maybe my heart had jammed up: it could be.

It was only just twenty minutes, forgetting the twenty hour train ride, when the bus finally halted outside the 29th house on the left side. Five cars were parked outside, and the lawn was streaked with moulded figures, sculpted to Nida’s perfection. She was indeed a good craftswoman.

Loud chatter sounded from inside the house. It had to be a lunch gathering. I put on the bowler hat and in my appreciably stained clothes strode down the two bus steps: Farah and Ghani Jaa did not leave the bus. It was implied that the final steps were to be taken alone. I breezed through the lawn, dodged a few sculptures and there I was, knocking on the front door.

A small child opened the door and looked at me innocently. I spoke to his curious eyes. "Nida Amjad, if you may small sir." I took my hat off and bowed low.

He stared at me with his mouth wide open, as if I had come right out of the television. Then he ran off with door ajar, and shouted. "Nida Api, Nida Api. There is Barney at the door. He wants to speak to you." I looked down at my suit and indeed it had a purplish hue. I stepped back, feeling a bit less confident in the manner the small child had announced my visit.

"Coming." That was the voice that came from inside, the voice I knew so well. A she moved near to the door, her pure fragrance took over the ambience, sparkling it with her essence. I took a few steps back from the door and turned my back around, looking at the two anxious inhabitants of the green bus. They were even more anxious than I was.

Her soft voice rang. "Yes, sir?" She did not know who I was. Just a stranger with his back turned.

I turned around, in what people call an element of surprise. Brown eyes, these were the first thing I saw. Her sharp countenance came in view: it very unwillingly absorbing what it saw. She raised her hands, then put them down and then raised them again to clasp them, not forgetting to close her eyes twice as she beheld me. Was that a welcome or an expression of displeasure?

"You?" she said pointing her finger at me. The small child seemed like her relative now.

I looked back at the bus, hoping they would tell me what to say. I had no speeches planned and even if I had planned any, I am sure I would have forgotten them seeing her eye-opening reaction.

When she got no response, discounting my furtive glances at my back, the beautiful child, lowered her finger and reiterated. "You?"

I looked down at my clothes, at the sculptures and then at her. "Yes it is me. Thought I should pay you a visit."

She took a small step back and seeing that felt as if my insides had caved in. "A year has passed."

I did not know whether that was an assertion or a question. Narcissistically favoring myself, I choose the latter. "Yes it has."

She replied softly, her arms now folded at her waist. "I know that."

I replied in a foolish manner. "I know that too." We then looked awkwardly at each other, Nida on the offence and I on the defense. Paradoxically, she was the one taking the steps back.

If the situation could be written in unwanted words, it could be summed up as, what business do you have here? If love was a business.

She spoke again, "What brings you here?"

"You." I spoke on in a quiet manner. Behind me, someone banged the bus metal as I had gained a game point. Without question, Ghani Jaa was beyond such antics.

"I did not call you." Where was her softness? Why had she become so cold?

"Did you never remember me?" I asked, a manner far beyond earnest.

Her fair face looked at me. “No I did not.” When I finally drank what she had said, I started to retreat back to the bus. Seeing the dismal faces of my entourage, I retreated from the retreat and moved forward towards her.

Inches from here now, I now grasped her thin hand. “I came here in belief that something existed. Something that couldn’t be fostered, couldn’t be raised. But would this notion deny that my love stood a chance?” She was extremely uncomfortable now. Where was the girl in Sukkur who had asked me to stay back?

“It is not a year that stands between us, it is two deaths. I have met the avalanches of life but I have come. Beyond the barriers of time, but not incorrectly. Would you not even give me chance? In this moment, do I not stand for anything?” I could see faces in the window now and I let her hand go.

The front door opened and a bald gentleman in his mid twenties, supporting a french beard now came out and took her to the other end of the garden. He did not acknowledge me. Infact he did, for the only word from their conversation that I overheard was “beggar”. I scoffed at him inside.

The battle now uneven. Farah finally abandoned the bus and rose to my help. She began to walk towards me, and than suddenly she turned course and entered the main garden. Of all the unneeded things, she started stroking the craft sculptures.

The two whispering companions came back and she began to speak. “I cannot help you. You seek to write chapters that have already been written.” The bald gentleman inched closer to her as she said this. He still did not introduce himself.

The whole house was now stationed at the different windows, looking below. I was thinking of departing with a farewell call, but my thoughts were interrupted by Farah’s hysteric laughter. I excused myself and walked to her, wondering why she was looking at a sculpture as if it was the Mona Lisa of the craft world.

When I stood next to her, I found that it really was the Mona Lisa of the art world. I started laughing too. Lies, lies and lies. What was in front was my own replica,

my own face pictured to exquisiteness. Oh, there was once something. Once she had thought of me. Once but late, early late.

As Nida grew red, people inside started exiting from the front door: events at the widows must have given a faded picture. I raised my hand to bid Nida farewell. Farah did not follow suit but did something, well lunatic. She lifted my grey sculpture, with great difficulty, and smashed the head to the ground. The men at 29/2 started to take angry step towards the daring vandal in their garden. I came in between and so did Nida. Ghani Jaa had now left the bus too.

With our intervention, the situation diffused a bit but that did not stop Farah. Like a brute she picked my sculpted head and walked towards the bus with her with a final wave to the angry household members. Even I had no idea what she had in mind but it did not matter. What had to be lost was already lost and Farah had no part to play in it.

We climbed on board much to the appeasement of the angry household and left without a further glance. I requested Ghani Jaa to drive me to the airport and then turned to her. "Are you raving mad?"

She tossed my head to me. "You love her, don't you?"

I puffed some air out. "I am rebuffed by but yes I do."

"Thank me than. I just saved her engagement. The bald twerp and the lady had rings on the fourth fingers of their left hand. Not your fault though, it is only married people who notice such stuff." She raised her ring finger to me. "It was only a matter of time before the sculpture would have got her in trouble. She will be thankful to us both. You shouldn't wonder why she came to my defense."

I opened my mouth wide. "You don't say?"

"I do. Forget her. It is time to think who sent you on this wild goose chase."

It really was time to think. "A very respectable man. It makes no sense at all."

“It truly really doesn’t. As a friend I should share your sorrows but Nadir, this has been the best trip of my life.”

I could have said the same had I not lost my last hope. “You sure had your fun but it comes to an end now. You will head off to Azad Kashmir, much to the courtesy of Mr. Ghani Jaa and I have to call upon an old man who expects me. Take this, a souvenir.” I threw the sculpted head back at her as Ghani Jaa gulped in my announcement.

“ Thank you, Nadir.” She replied, toying with the sculpture.

The green bus dropped me at the airport and I bid them farewell. Too often this word came to my mouth. Everyone had to pack up and leave: perhaps their genome imprints held my existence in ambivalence. I vowed to keep in touch with them both and I meant it. They had both gone out of the spheres of their life to bring my heart to fulfillment. If I had failed again, but it was because of my wrong subtractions. These feeling souls had nothing to do with. As for Farah’s last ship, it had perished and given birth to a thousand others. I was indebted

17-

Sense and Sensibility

I waited at the Rawalpindi terminal, was treated like luggage, like a sheep and than finally as a passenger. I rolled out on Karachi airport at eight pm. It was the 18th of July, approximately, thirty two hours since I had run away from home.

Losing Linah, losing Dadhey, losing Nida; all these big days had something to with an airport. It wouldn't be unwarranted to add that I hated them, hated every single thing that had got anything to do with an airport. A departure and an arrival always had its consequences; things just couldn't stay the same. I contemplated that if I hadn't left for Jamaica, Linah wouldn't have been lost and Dadhey would have been a stranger. Perhaps if Dadhey had not left on that accursed flight, he wouldn't have died, and I wouldn't be wearing his hat and carrying his letter everywhere. Maybe if Nida had not left for that craft exhibition, I wouldn't be standing here at all. To what avail were event permutations now?

I hailed a cab and tossed a duffel bag at the rear seats. More than half of the scarlet cheque sum was still left so I overpaid the cabbie, hoping my pockets would weigh less. They did not.

When I reached my home, I gulped in some polluted air. Two police mobiles were standing outside. I wonder what my parents had been cooking this time, what fate had they assumed to have befallen me.

As I moved towards the gate, two police constables held me back. When they asked who I was, I told them I was an accountant. They sized up my dirty clothes but concluded that I was "safe". When I rang at the main gate, my smoking attendant came out. Seeing me, he dropped his cigarette again, ran inside and I just stood there. As expected, hell broke loose and a barrage of people, from servants to police constables to police chiefs to attendants to the cook to my leading parents climbed onto the lawn. The lights opened as if some great beginning had to take place.

My mother began screaming. “Where have you been Nadir Husseni? Why is your room torn apart??”

I hazily smiled at her: I was just so tired and it was so nice to be at a place like no other, home. I could only smile. My father took me by the arm and shook me.

“I went to meet the drug barons up north.”

I cannot remember what the police constable piped in for as he spoke, my mother gave me a stinging slap. She repeated. “Where have you been?”

A little less hazy now in my embarrassment, I dished out my cell phone, dialed a number and gestured at all of them to wait. The smoking loving attendant started shying away and left the gathering. For me, I thought it was time for everyone to get things straight. It was time to recount.

The Colonel finally picked up. “I have been waiting for your call, Nadir. My daughter called me earlier today and said that you put up quite a show in her front yard.”

“I must ask you sir, why did you not tell me?” Everyone was staring at me and not a single soul had any idea what was going on. I continued on my cell phone. “You sent me to a battlefield where the war was already lost. Why, sir?” A constable flinched when he heard the word ‘battlefield’.

He issued a deep laugh (something that he was quite not accustomed to). “Justice, dear child. I did not send you late son, you just, well, were beyond life’s decisions. Nida waited for a greater part of the last year for you but you never came back. When this bald suitor came, she took her time to decide and with great resolution finally conceded to this engagement. At one vertex, she did not expect you to return. At the other vertex, I did not know the reasons behind her unexpected agreement and on the last vertex, you came back. I did not want my child to go wrong on such a distinguished turn and I certainly did not want you to have regrets. I guess we all deserved a chance, did not we not son?”

“We all did, sir, we all...” I was not able to complete my sentence as my mother snatched the phone from me. I won’t say that this was not according to my plan. It was the only way out. The Colonel was my only alibi to acceptance back home.

Words were exchanged, so was surprise. I was wrong, but not wrong enough. It was Mother who started this and it was Mother who became nonchalant. Nothing was what we got, but at least attaining was the target, closing the chapters of history that had already been written. But I was late, just a reader now, not a writer.

The Colonel defended me, he was kind enough to. Now that I think, the fact that I run away to seize destiny, must have appealed to him and his past. I could now catch sight of neighbors prying in our domain to catch sight of our colorful lawn assembly. Mother dispersed them, gave her regards to the police constables and the party stood over. My parents then left for their room to take counsel of what was to be done with me. Marium Husseni was sure to join us soon. Not that I would be disposed off, I couldn’t hope to run free without a punishment.

I headed to my room admiring how silent it was. Even silence could become bliss. Inside, the same smoker of an attendant stood by my bed: he was the one who had started this all. He shakingly handed me an envelope. “It was hard to save anything when they tore this house apart. I saved this mail for you sir. Please donot tell you parents.” I think I got it. He feared my parents, not me, and after today’s spectacle, he had every right too.

I handed him a portion of the left over money. He refused to take it. “Take it, for your cigarettes.” He still refused to take it. I gave up on him and opened the mail. It was a letter from Dadhey’s lawyer and it contained a deed of transfer for the old town house up north. The only thing he had been given, the only thing he had not asked for. Was he so bitter at them inside, that he left me this house?

A gift he called it. A gift it was with no one to return back to. I asked the smoker for the pen and a modicum of Mr. Malik’s wealth became mine. What difference did it make to me? Truthfully, none at all. My mentor was gone, a damned reality that was, sinking down inside but not seeping out. Some people can not be forgotten no matter how momentary they are. Farah’s bestowed laughter was also,

now sleeping, and life resumed its normal pace in its normal place. I removed the bowler hat from my hat, kindly dismissed the loyal smoker and again, soon faded out of consciousness. What a drama, what a loss.

18-

The Child and the Sage

Time started to fly and my final year at Packard began. As a sanction for my rash decisions, I was forced to give ten hours a week as a clerical employee at my father's office in Karachi. Without doubt, it was an unpaid job and my monthly finances were also broken down to a modest figure which barely bought a student's crumbs for a week. What my parents did not was that I still had cash stashed up my closet: the Confidence woman's loot.

For my last two semesters at Packard, I worked very hard. Life became all about being a student and a clerk, a clerk and a student disregarding regular mail exchanges with Farah. I forget to add that my car privileges were also withdrawn and as a final taste of their stringent medicine, my parents managed to track down my rugged Ford truck, just so that I could commute around. We never quite talked about what happened because they knew they had an all too crucial part in initiating the proceedings. They however did not undergo any such trials.

The sun rose and the sun fell immaterial times until 19th December, 2007 smiled down upon us. We were all waiting, in the Gynecology ward at the Pakistan National Hospital, for the new boy that would light upon our families after roller coasters of death and uncertainty. Ultra sound tests, conducted eighteen weeks to pregnancy, came as a small disappointment to Mr. Malik because he was brought to the acknowledgement that a family of males will have one more to their midst.

Nonetheless, everyone's happiness was palpable. My Father and Mr. Malik sat in the corner of the ward failing to agree upon a name that would satisfy their tastes and thoughts. Today, after an extremely long time, Minavan was seated in the same room as I was.

Now, we both refused to look at the other. I was unforgiving, and he was unheeding: both beings invisible to each other. Our ambivalence had toned down the bit but the friction was ever more pronounced. It was tacit that we wouldn't

harm each other anymore, for now, things could get beyond grave serious. But who could discard the eternal hatred? When enmity travels so far, it is never about who started it, it all about who had the last say. Well did I?

His cell no longer ran off the hook. Time was gracious enough to prove my sentiments correct: he would dance to the flute of egotism. That she had cheated him and that she was a mere employee, he could gladly disregard how beautiful she was or that she loved him. He sent her back to where she came from. Where exactly? I donot even know for I only saw her once, as planned. Did we break his heart? Well we sure robed him off a few cherished sweethearts.

Minavan did meet his match, some one who could circumvent him in any sphere of existence or terrain as he himself termed it. I donot talk of myself, I talk about the one who left us, the one who Minavan now, gave more thought to, than he did to anything else. How can I say that?

Our fathers still had not reached a mutual decision. Mother and Yasir hopelessly sat on the other end, knowing that they would have no say when it came to the child's name. The delivery in operation, Minavan now walked up to them and whispered in their ears. Our fathers looked at each other in founded enlightenment and surprise. One of the richest grandchild in the country was to be named Dadhey Malik.

Malik. I repeat Malik. Once more, Malik. The name they He had never got, the name that never acknowledged him. Minavan's gesture shook my base. Of all the people, the man who had made him walk away. Was this Minavan's act of atonement? Did he expect to be pardoned? Mr. Maliks face did light up, the moon would be an insignificant comparison. This name had a solemn history etched in our families and even if anyone had any objections, no one dared to voice it out. Dadhey Malik got a unanimous approval sincerely because no one objected.

The child came in our lives like welcome gratification. He was my nephew, a loved nephew but I found it difficult to address him by his name. For me there would be only one Dadhey forever. In my own thinking, I wronged that child. I let Minavan grow closer to him, I let Minavan take car of him when Marium and

Yasir had enough with their sleepless nights. By this measure, I actually enhanced the possibility of him, growing up like Minavan.

It wouldn't come as a surprise that as emotionally close as Minavan came to him, I withdrew further like a useless uncle, a relation by name, not by heart. He was dear to me but he could either be mine or Minavan's and that calendar had well settled. January of the New Year, 2008, brought back Packard with its last semester and I resumed my clerical responsibilities and worked harder than ever to attain a respectable cumulative grade point average. Letting Father down this time was out of question and because of this, being a true uncle to the Malik Jr. became impossible.

I don't think there is much need to enunciate how pampered he was. Even at the age of four months, if he would point his finger towards anything, his grandfathers would regard it as a caprice and 'attained' would be the stamp that was intangibly used. Perhaps this was a friendly skirmish that grew between the two men, as to who would please the child more. Sometimes I just feared what kind of a man Malik Jr. would grow up to be. They were all spoiling him. Had I hated Minavan less and had the clocks at my mercy, hypocritically I might have done the same.

Some more suns passed and I finally became a thrall to my books and the inapplicable economic diagrams. Days became nights and night became afternoons. I became known as the purple hat man because there was hardly a day or a moment when I did not carry that bowler hat on my head and there was hardly a class in which I did not sit near the front aisle. I rejoined my old history course and the haughty professor went as far as to change his opinions about me: I was now well versed in the sadistically satanic ideology of European conquerors.

I used to stay exhausted beyond measure and would often doze off in class right in the front row. The teachers were easy on me this time for they knew how my nights were spent. Occasionally they would wake me up and throw questions at me. Even at my disoriented best, I never failed to answer, cave men aside. Nerd, anyone?

To gain extra credits in my courses, I began organizing and attending seminars at Packard, the negotiations of which were not even slightly related to my Economics bachelors. There one such seminar in February 2008 (appertaining to a university affiliation), that I decided to a part of.

I was tired as I had undertaken two hours of clerical work and had spent the whole night at the mercy of my books. I sat in the second row of the auditorium, now and then giving way to a quick mental closedown. News spread around that the guest speaker was late, clogged in traffic. This was the last thing heard before I kept my hat on my eyes and welcomed a deep slumber.

It must have been an hour or so when a class mate noticed my dropping head and threw something pointed at my head. I woke up, rubbing my eyes to find a small pepper white haired man on the podium. In a sluggish manner, he talked about synergizing education and disparate concepts to find the golden mean in a scholar. I just listened, I couldn't absorb more.

A few more gibberish thoughts were transferred to the crowd before he gave a final hand wave and headed off for the staffrooms. Those that understood him, stood there and praised his concepts. Those that did not, the silent majority, filed out. I took a start and joined the exiting line. I could see the warm sun light penetrating through the dark doors and it spoke of respite.

I inched near the door but an office worker grasped my shoulder and asked me to follow him. He offered that Jamarat Jomezai wanted to meet me. When I asked him who was he talking about, he pointed to the podium. I bit my tongue; oh I was in trouble.

I followed him to the empty staff room where Jamarat Jomezai sat, quenching his thirst, sporadically raising his glass to his mouth and than slamming it on the table. Some drops of water fell on the staff table as he continued his act. He seemed angry.

When he saw me, he gestured at me to sit down in the seat next to him. "Who are you?"

I replied, taking a seat. “I am a student here.”

“Do you know who I am?”

I offered. “Jamarat Jomezai?”

He fired another question. “Do you know where I am from?”

I did not know the answer so I kept silent as he raised the glass to his face, and slammed it on the desk again. This time some drops landed on my face, he saw them but he did not apologize. He then answered his own question. “I teach at the finest engineering university in Pakistan, Lahore Union Engineering University.” Recognition now clouded my face for I had heard these exact words before. “Where did you get this hat from? Did you steal it?”

I stared at him, as my now growing excitement languished. I had never stolen anything in my whole life. “It was given to me by friend.”

“Name please?”

“No. Tell me first why do you accuse me?”

He looked at me surprised. “This hat is given to the three unparalleled students of the graduating class. It is the most prized possession a student can possess and not even a fool would part with it. You have to outclass at least four hundred and ninety seven students to win this. This is not a gift so tell me who did you steal this from?”

I now got up from my seat. I could not stand this indignity. “I did not steal it. It was given to me by Dadhey Siddiqui. Did he win this?”

The professor grabbed my hand and pulled me back to my chair. “He did not win this. He deserved this. He outclassed his whole batch. How is Dadhey?”

I took an equivocal stance. “He is in peace professor. Since I have answered your questions, would you mind telling me something?”

He raised his glass to his mouth, and I took that as an approving gesture. “Someone he knew died in Lahore. Who died in his four years at Lahore?”

The professor flushed out some water back in his glass and slammed the glass again. “No one died in Lahore. As for Dadhey, he was just a student to me. I donot favor the bright, and neither do I ignore the stupid.”

Well, that was that. I raised my hand to part and headed towards the door, the purple bower hat on my head. The professor, called out at my back. “Give my regards to him. I do like my students.”

I turned around to see him drinking his final drops of water. It was time to gauge his verity. “I would have, had he not been resting in eternal peace. The dead man does not hear or does he?”

The glass in his hand broke under Jamarat Jogezei’s brute grip and his hand started to bleed. The treasure box was open, and it was time to look inside.

19-

The man I never knew

“He was just a student to you. Are you sure?” I asked, taking small steps towards him.

“Positive and negative,” he said grimacing, as small red drops leaked from his palm onto his sleeve.

I picked up a paper scissor and cut the sleeve of my formal shirt. I had self-learnt the required bandaging skills at the farm house. I did a rough job but at the end of the day, it always sufficed.

As I tied up his hand, I probed again. “Who died in Lahore?”

He shook his head. “No one died in Lahore but someone died nonetheless. If only you can tell me who you are, only then will our negotiations proceed. There is no one in this world, who can tell you the whats and why’s of this story, except ofcourse, my brother, Imarat. How did you know him?”

There was a simple way to cut the stories short. I handed him Dadhey’s last letter. He looked in surprise as he recognized the script. He had obviously seen it before. As he read, his mouth opened and closed and his brute grip on the letter gentled down. He wiped his tearless eye with his bloody bandage and in doing so, smeared his skin red.

“No doubt you were close to him. This hat and this letter jolts my heart. Did you get back at Minavan?” he asked, folding the letter.

“You seem to know him. How did that closed book speak to you?”

Jamarat Jomezai looked at me and it seemed that he had come to a decision, a much weighed decision. “How about an untold story?”

“I am all ears, professor.”

He took the hat from my head and placed it on his bloody fingers. “Some years back, I chaired the admission enrollment committee and accepted an application of a young lad. He was one of those people who you can bet on. Bet that they would pass of with a 3.95 cumulative grade point average and change things around them. This child was also the head of his prefect council back in his secondary school days. Consistency and perseverance marked his school reports. Without a second thought I enrolled him on a full scholarship, something I rarely do. Something our university could hardly afford with all these abusive governmental regulations that pull the expenditures beyond revenue redemption. Had a fight with my brother too, but he was in the wrong ministry. Even today, Lahore Union Engineering is fighting the fight for donation and charity appeals. The students get everything but the university is ragged down to inappr....”

I interrupted. “Is this digression a part of your story, Professor Jomezai?”

He put the hat on his head and appreciated my challenge. “It is not. What I was rambling about was that this lad was those who you could expect to excel, of the blue ribbon kind of students, rare breed. Continuing on, when this particular freshman came and joined my Electrical systems engineering course, he instantly corroborated my expectations. I did not give him any preference or favor him, but what was undeniable was that he had this charm about him, this latent aggression about him.” I reminiscingly smiled as I heard this definition. “Colleagues surrounded him, on the way in and on the way out. A mannered being that he was, he acknowledged their appreciation and reciprocated it.”

“But where does Minavan come in this story?”

The random Professor seized my shoulder aggressively. “Wait! Impatient men like you find these young busty females attractive that can gratify you over the weekend and can be forgotten over the next.” I sparked in anger but I was a slave to his words now. I could do nothing. He continued, “However, this lad, Dadhey, no he was different. In his first year, he grew close to this student from Bukhara, Uzbekistan. I mean emotionally close to this girl, who went by the name of Midhaa Bukhari. A very mild looking and mild natured girl, she had travelled all the way

from Bukhara to study in Lahore. Love was not part of her deal back home. Dadhey told me that she even found it hard to convince her parents to even impart her higher education.”

I sat numb. “They fell in love you mean?”

“If that’s the way you want to jot it down. They fell in love, much to the envy of other girls running after my chosen freshmen. These girls could do nothing though. Midhaa’s parents, however, kept track on their daughter and set snoop agents at her tail, to keep a sure track on her. The relationship she shared was not esoteric, it was a commonplace fact for at the end of the day, who did not know Dadhey. First year ended and everybody left home for vacations. Three months later, Lahore Union flowed back to life, Dadhey returned but she did not. He received a very desperate call from a friend of Midhaa’s a month after, saying that she was not coming back. That was not all. This loyal friend risked her skin to tell him that Midhaa’s was getting married within the scope of a few weeks and that he should come to Bukhara so as to alter what was in store for both of them.”

“So this was when he came to you?”

“Not exactly. He made calls back home but found that his step father and mother were on a vacation abroad. Malik was his name?” I nodded my approval. “He caught up with them eventually and asked them to arrange for his visa and file his application to the Uzbeki consulate in Islamabad. Dadhey would have done that by himself, but all his travel, identification and wealth documents were back at Karachi. Malik took some convincing but he finally obliged under his mother’s pressure and committed the need of urgency to his office staff. The office staff handled the case swiftly, compiled what was required and removed the chances of any discrepancy. However, fate was pre-written and his antagonistic step brother intercepted the documents. Things are a bit vague here but when Minavan was brought to knowledge of the meaning these documents had to his brother, he volunteered to courier them and instead held them back.”

The Professor waited for my question but this time I had none to ask. He went on, “A week had now passed and there was still no correspondence from the Uzbeki

embassy. Dadhey called this Malik who called his office staff who called this rascal. The link was traced and Minavan was forced to post these visa documents but it was too late. Time was almost out of grasp and in his desperation he came to me. I was perhaps the only person on the planet who could help him now. Why me? I belong to a feudal family, one that could canvass votes in the political arena. It was a well known fact at Lahore Union that my brother, Imarat Jomezai was the serving Foreign minister of Pakistan. He had links and ties stretching into the power pockets of this country. Dadhey Siddiqui came to me and communicated his plight asking for help. At one end, there was this bitter sweet relation I had with my brother and the other, there was a student who had aced my course with a 4.0 grade point and had this thing about him which could not be denied. A student who searched for something that would soon be lost. For the sake of his love, I dialed that difficult call and my brother agreed to call the Uzbeki consulate and ask them to speed his visa. Imarat asked us for a three day deadline.”

I realized the end in horror. “ But she died?”

“At the dawn of the second day of our waiting, a call came through. It was the same informant who now brought news, that Midhaa had given up at the eve of her marriage. She jumped from the roof and hit her head on the cement below. A egoistic suicide for love, for the handsome lover she would never attain. When her family found her lifeless self, with blood all around, they saw that her hands gripped something very tightly. Even in death. It was a white ribbon lace, the significance of which was known only to them.”

I gasped in horror as our final beach conversation rewound through my head. My foolish words must have clawed at his heart yet it was he that left with apologies. Forgiven my brother, forgiven with the meaning of eternities. It was all clear, spring clear, autumn clear as to why he never looked upon another girl, as to why he always had that lace tied on his finger. Tears rolled down my eyes now, as I realized it was Midhaa all along.

Jamarat Jomezai ignored my tears. “Dadhey was broken but he never showed it. He curbed his hostilities but shunned everyone in the process. He thanked me and my brother personally but I felt invalid. I had failed in helping him succeed and I could

only see his bitterness now. The story still did not end here. It was the October of his second year, when Midhaa's father and her two angry brothers paid him a visit at our campus. Dadhey was sitting on the central campus lawn when three strangers approached him, two of them armed with pistols. They leveled the guns at his head but he did not even budge. He just sat there with all the indifference in the world, encouraging them to move. Luckily, the father was weak or had a change of mind. With one fair look at Dadhey, he realized the terrible injustice he had done to his daughter and to the young man in front. Instead of killing him, he asked for forgiveness, kneeling down off forgiveness. It seemed that the man had enough of bloodshed. What was also true that Dadhey won his heart too."

Still weeping, I murmured back at him. "He did not forgive right?"

Jamarat Jomezai tossed the bowler hat back at me. He did. They talked, repented and by the time Midhaa's father left, Dadhey had been thrice issued an invitation to visit them in Bukara. In his forgiveness he agreed and as a last token, the father parted with that white lace. The only person that was never forgiven was Minavan and that is where your story starts. How did my freshman die?"

I made a weak effort to control my omnipotent emotions and started all the way back to 2nd January 2005, the day it had all started. I sat for hours going through my failures, my partings, how I met him, how we planned our respective revenge, how I never knew history and how it all transpired into a seeming defeat for us that still lived to be a victory. A victory he never got a taste of because he was long before gone, long before boarded an accursed flight. It might have been written, I added, for he had his affairs settled. The Lord seemed to have held on just long enough.

However a discrepancy remained: Minavan. "How did he know, professor?"

The professor just shrugged, now and then fiddling his red bandage. "When his parents asked him why he did not end up in Uzbekistan, he told them outright that they did not deserve an answer. A point in time came that he conceded a partial account to his mother, Yasmin Malik your letter says, but only to his mother. The Malik never got to find out. As for his mother giving way to her true son's secrets, it is more possible for the oceans to vanish. Minavan must have tapped some

source in Lahore, at my university. If only I could find who.” Jamarat Jogezi now had his fists clenched and knuckles locked together.

“Was he close to you?”

“Close?? I never gave much thought to it but than again, I never had a child. When I agreed to help him, he never kept me in the dark. When it ended, he slowly moved away but I let him, he deserved peace. Though, he came to meet me when he finally left for Karachi. Do you know what the last thing he said to me was?”

I shook my head. How was I supposed to know?

“Every pharaoh has his Moses.” The professor now looked at me. “That’s what he said and you my bandage lad, you were Egypt.”

I was indeed. I was the sacred play ground where the battle began, a biased playground, I must say. With nothing left to add, I kept my arm on his shoulder. “You have done me justice to my solace, but strangely, I cannot even say that it is a pleasure meeting you. Why is life like that, sir?”

The short man quite prone to anger, smiled at last. “It surely is never a pleasure meeting someone who carries the winds of death. We both did, so it is okay to cast the pleasure aside. You can leave now.”

I picked up my hat and my letter and left for the sunlit corridors. So much for clerical work, so much for friendships, I walked to a life which was now vividly clear yet underlined with regrets. Did we all plan this or was it meant to be? Life had thrown a strange man at me, just like that.

20-

A bisector in time

I must head on now. It is six years to my graduation date, and I am twenty eight now. Yes, it is a long sojourn since then. The constants around me have become variables. I sprint more than ever now, for it is a curative relaxant. The professional competition days are over but worth looking back to. My clerical days are also over and now, Father has crowned me as the Managing Director of the people, to whom I was once subordinate to. It won't be wrong to assert in, that, it is a big leap for a small man.

My professional attire aside, I still wear the purple bowler hat everywhere. When business counterparts ask me why, I tell them it is my measure. They smile at me and pretend that they understand, I bitterly mock them inside. Business has been better than ever, though we had our slumps and recessions. God helped us find our way out and we rose again, strongly fighting the oddities of capitalism.

I never went for my Masters degree, it certainly is not my thing. I am a bit unlettered for the elite tastes but neither am I dying to be included in the power circles of my metropolis. Unlike Minavan, I had enough of power struggles. I hear that he socializes with such mundane brats and I scorn him all the more.

I am a man of God now. I go to the mosque five times now, and these visits are interspersed between home and work. I found Allah, my Lord, in the darkest point in my life when everything crumbled. It was had become hard for me to accept but inside, I kept mourning all the people who had left. At times I would feel proud of my loneliness, but on the true days of cognizance, my loneliness was my true punishment. There was no one to talk to, no one to acquaint with: the thoughts that tortured the mind. Allah had always been there and I just never came close to acknowledge that the gap that seemed large was a mere hand's stretch. I had always called him God, now he was Allah.

Over the past years, Mother has tried very hard to find a bride but there has not been a single day that I have let my heart cave out. Nida is a grey area now: I do

not know how I felt about her. The bald guy, (her husband now) turned out to be an Ivy League graduate, a smart man I must comment. I can never forget that he mistook me as a beggar on the door. Pride shakes me here, family pride to be exact. More of Nida Amjad, Mother deliberately tells me that she is in bliss so that I move on. I pray for her, that she remain so, for that is all I can do. The books of time will be my witness that I have made every attempt possible to avoid her, except ofcourse, at her wedding. I owed that to the Colonel, and I couldn't disregard his favors no matter how heavy my heart was. It was a tough endeavor seeing her depart but I did that for her father.

Speaking of that father, the retired Colonel, I have visited him often and our tours aren't confined to the outskirts of his farm anymore. He has been more than willing to take me to old war fields, memorial sites, court martial quarters and his garrison town on the eastern front. He also claims that his daughter was lost in a hostile take over by Auntie Ajmera's sister in Rawalpindi. A pretty child like his could be any parent's envy and I have no doubts. As ever, he is still as good at predicting the rain. As ever, he detests technology.

Farah, my friend, has been kind to visit several times over the past few years though her French husband, Aamir, is as grouchy as I expected him to be. He treats her well and that is all I can ask for. Our mis-founded friendship has prospered to greater heights and my broken sculpture is they key highlight of her urban cottage in Paris, France. I will visit her as soon as the opportunity strikes and perhaps the city of love may do me some foreign justice.

Speaking of foreign justice, Loung met some and returned back to Pakistan. He was hard pressed for a job and I was hard pressed to return his favor. He is now a diligent employee at the Husseni enterprises and it is matter of years before he finds the rung ladder and spearheads into the upper hierarchy. He has been sober for four years and counting. A good friend, he still addresses me as 'doug'.

Malik Jr. lately has been showing more respect to Minavan than to anyone else. As before, as again, I have failed him as an Uncle. I can only hope that this inclement fortune twists for the better and he finds his way skewed from his fiend of an uncle, Minavan Malik. I still find it near to impossible to call him Dadhey.

As of today, Mr. Malik tries his best to hide his regrets and shelter behind the future, but the past remains, as blatant a nemesis as could be, one that cannot be effaced. He is quite old now and I must say, that I cannot expect him to live long. I believe, that to this date, he possesses the now withered flowers from his beloved's grave. After all, we all have our memoirs, donot we? It saddens me that he will part this world, with a wish unfulfilled.

More often than not, people leave with wishes that remain unfulfilled, wholesome wishes that are never meant to be. The pitiable heart's desire should not be mistaken as a caprice. It is a logic. Go for what you can't have. More often than not, misery is all we find. Our misery is further pronounced when our own actions deprive us of the best things in life. Silence then has the last word, always.

Of people again, Ghulam Nabi has left us after more than forty years of service to dedicate more time to his family. He visits us bi-annually and is always greeted as a family member, something he greatly deserves. Like Mother, he desires me to get married in splendor. A day will come, but it definitely doesn't lie in the foreseeable future. I have no plans at the moment except to find myself. Some people never do and I hope I am not of them. On the broken note, he is replaced by no loyal an employee who was transferred to Karachi on my personal request. Ghani jaa, the tall chauffeur is held in generous esteem at the Husseni house. The smoker of an attendant had found a good companion.

Life has a passion for fragmenting into manholes and ditches. I falter knee-deep in the portion of blogged realities but that's me, ever two meaningful steps behind everything that's matters. There is a quote that I came up with and I have no idea as to why I feel the need to shove it across.

“ The morning died, noon came but the evening withered, what of the night, what of the night.”

Last word-

There is a large business dinner at our large house today. Associates are flying from all corners of the world in attempt to merge our existing manufacturing operations and venture in to a new product.

I am not yet cognizant of what the surreptitious product but this does not obstruct the facts that tonight is a big night, and as host, I deserve to be nervous. I am not because I have little to lose. Zahid Husseni, my boss, wants me to be the bridge the void between his hard earned contacts. A speech would do.

The evening had now begun. The smoker of an attendant has handed me an abnormally large Manila envelop as I walk to the dais, for a small speech. I am wearing my purple bowler hat, as I look at the envelop, which has my name printed on it. On the top right is a stamp which reads, "Central Asia Air Mail". I am now climbing the short steps of the dais as my eyes catch nothing inside it. There is no paper, there is no cheque.

I now stand on the stage as black, brown, white and yellow people look at me, prompting me to begin. I am still shoveling inside this monstrous envelop and my hands finally meet something at the bottom.

I am laughing now. I laugh like a cold lunatic. I bang the small podium as Zahid Husseni looks on, not the least surprised, not the most happy. My laughter still does not subside as I glimmer in eternity, every weary memory defeating itself out of existence as the small white ribbon circles my finger.

Some never boarded that plane. Some one sent me what meant everything to him. There is hope.

The end

For Feedback-

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