

English Translation of a Punjabi Novel



**DRAWN OUT DEATH**

# Drawn Out Death

By

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(An English Translation of a Punjabi Novel)

MTS ePublishing  
Lahore

MTS

1st Punjabi (Shahmukhi) Edition : 2019

Original Punjabi title:

Addhi Mot,

ادھی موت

ਐਧੀ ਮੋਤ



Published by Sanjh Publications, Lahore.

1st English (ePublished) Edition: 2019

2<sup>nd</sup> English (ePublished) Edition: 2019

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# Chapter 1

## Right & Left

I first looked in from space, like a satellite. No human – and indeed no living thing – is visible from that distance. The world itself looked like a small ball in no way distinguished among innumerable balls big and small, dark and luminescent.

Then I returned earthside and took flight like a sparrow. It was a street of Lahore's Jauhar Town, lined on either side by rows of ten-marla, double-storey houses. Three or four of the houses had a tree standing guard out-front. One had chairs arrayed on the lawn, in the driveway, and outside the gate – chairs made of shiny metal frames clad in red Rexine. Parked in the

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street were a dozen cars and a few motorcycles. Inside the house were a couple of dozen people, some standing and some sitting in the red chairs.

I assumed the point of view of the gecko clinging to the porch ceiling. People arrived in twos, threes, and fours. Men would stay outside and women would go inside the house.

I entered the house as a mosquito – whining and buzzing around people's ears and noses, hands and feet, arms and legs.

Women sat on white sheets and children ran about. At the center of the scene was a cot holding a corpse covered in a white sheet. It was my corpse. And this was my house – or rather it used to be while I lived.

I circled my body for a while but soon tired of it and found a perch on the curtain rail to keep an eye on the proceedings.

I had been dead for four hours now. Death had come as I rode my motorcycle along a busy road. I had a flash of something rushing at me from the right, and then everything fell to the right. Next, I found myself flying like a sparrow. I saw

that a car had overrun my motorcycle, and I lay there on the roadside, my skull torn open against the footpath. There was blood everywhere. A crowd had gathered. As my house was nearby, a couple of bystanders recognized me and rang up my home. Then I – err my cadaver – was carried home.

It seemed all my emotions and feelings had died with my death. I was neither angry with the motorist who had crushed me against the pavement to death nor felt any sorrow on seeing myself dead. Nor did I even get misty-eyed on seeing my wife and children wailing.

Aimlessly droning like the two or three flies buzzing around my body, I got home. My life of a half century was in front of me. Nothing was obscure, nothing incomplete. I was roaming about pointlessly, now a satellite, now a sparrow, now a mosquito.

I could travel back in time at will – could even freeze time if I wanted. In fact, I had already taken a tour of my time in this world, taking in a birds' eye view of my life.

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Born to a clerk, I had gone to public school. My father had a cauldron of rice cooked to feed the poor when I matriculated placing in first division – and several cauldrons when I passed MA History. What was the point in all the revelry? It was not as if I had drunk deep of the Pierrian Spring. I had passed the exam by learning canned answers from cheap guidebooks by rote. What difference would it make if I had failed? It was not as if I could now eat sushi and summer in the Swiss Alps. I was still eating the same old vegetable ghee parathas with lentil gravy and would not take a day off from work for fear I would be transferred to a far off station. Things would have been scarcely different if I had failed. At worst, the annual pay raise would have been somewhat slimmer, and the relatives would have been a little less jealous. I would still die right here in a motorcycle crash.

It would have been different if my father and his father had been successful in bringing about Red Revolution – if they had not been cowed by batons and prison terms and hunger. That would have indeed



made a difference. For then, nobody would eat sushi if I could not, nobody would have a car if I could not.

What a life had been mine! Even wild beasts have it better. In that moment, I could see only one difference between my life and that of an ox yoked to a seed crusher. His burden was different from mine – and that was all. Or rather, there was one more difference: The ox is kept blinkered by the crusher operator, and I had been kept blinkered all my life by the society.

Idly floating in the air, I had wandered onto the porch when I heard a stern voice question me, “What are you doing here?”

The question was aimed at me – for all other voices sounded as if coming from the bottom of a deep well. It was then that I noticed two small beings accompanying every person, one perched on each shoulder. They were small but beautiful humanoids – tiny sprites of light. I glanced at my own shoulders and found no such being there.

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The question had come from the sprite sitting atop the right shoulder of a twenty-four or twenty-five year old man.

"I have died. My body is lying inside," said I, at a loss for anything better to say.

"I see – but why have you not gone Beyond?" asked he.

"I don't know – this was my first time dying," I blurted out, and then laughed as the comedy of the situation caught up with me. "I mean I am new to this."

"Okay then – ramble around. Delays do occur occasionally due to technical issues. These people cannot see you – just us, Right and Left, can," saying this, he extended his right hand which I shook, then also shook hands with the sprite perched on the left shoulder of the same young man.

"How long does it take to go Beyond?" I asked Right.

"No idea. Seconds, centuries," he said uninterestedly, glancing around.

The young man moved on and I floated along. "Who are you?" I asked Right.

“I don’t know,” said he, then conjured a small register and started scribbling something in it.

“Do you stay with this young man?” I had nothing else to do.

“Yes. We are born along with the person and go Beyond along with them,” he spoke as he continued to write.

“What is Beyond?” I asked.

“We don’t know. Will find out when we go there. We just do our duty.” He shut the register and put it away. I could not say where he had conjured it from and where he had put it away.

The young man strolled out the gate and lit a cigarette.

“He is at it again,” said Left as he conjured his own register and started writing in it. I saw a young woman dressed in light yellow wrapped in white chador disembark a blue car. The young man was ogling her.

I replayed the scene to get a better grip on what went on. When the young woman stepped out of the car and set her right

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foot on the ground, her trousers had been lifted, baring her ankle. Her milk-white lower leg was indeed a remarkable sight. Then, standing up, she undid her chador to wrap it around her body the more securely, her full breasts lit up the whole scene. This was what the young man, Amjad, had been gazing at.

I froze time. Left looked at me and put away the register.

“What is it you are doing?” I asked.

“This is our duty. We have to record everything about our human,” came the reply, this time from Left.

“That I can see, but who are you and why are you recording everything?”

“Ajjo dear,” said Left again, and I had a strange feeling to hear him say my name. “We know no better than you have come to know after dying. We found ourselves here from the beginning, and we knew this is our duty, so we are doing it. The rest we will find out when we go Beyond.”

I looked around in amazement. Everything appeared as in a movie.

Nothing seemed real. I looked at myself and saw a sprite of light. The hell you find out when you die, I thought to myself.

The mullah used to say you find out everything once you die. Reality will shine in front of your eyes like the sun. In my case things had grown murkier than ever. I could neither make sense of myself nor of the world – nor even of the Beyond.

I looked up at the sky – but that was perhaps beyond me. A jet-black void all around with neither heaven nor hell in sight. This would be the purgatory, I thought. But the mullah painted an altogether different picture. I was not as if he had died and found out first, I thought. He had had it all from hearsay, but had woven a yarn like a movie script.

“What has become of me,” I thought. “I am neither among dead nor the living. I am half dead because now I cannot die – but half alive because I still cannot tell if the mullah told the truth”. I found myself giggling. “Okay, leave it. I will know well enough when I go Beyond.”.

“But your job – what is it?” I asked Left.

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“We have to record the good and evil deeds of our human so there can be a reckoning once they are dead,” said he.

The mullah was not all that ignorant after all. He used to say God keeps an eye on everything you do, good or evil. You can fool people but never God. Sometimes I thought the mullah was not very educated. He knew neither history nor philosophy. He had studied neither literature nor psychology. He wove a mythology by interlacing allegories together with material reality – and embraced this hodgepodge as his dogma.

I felt the old-timers had called their conscience God – which is why it was said God is closer than the jugular vein. Putting your faith in God meant bringing your conscience to life so it could constantly goad you. What was God’s reckoning but that whoever committed an evil deed would never rest easy.

This was all faith was about. I used to think of death as a never-ending sleep. Dark emptiness. This was a rare, fleeting thought and I would always renew my faith

every time it occurred to me. Now it seemed mullah was the wise one. For the first time, I trembled at the thought of reckoning.

I let time go by but started quizzing the little sprites in detail how it was they recorded everything, and also how they divided the work between them. They told me they had a clear division of labor: Right chronicled his human's good deeds and Left his evil deeds. They had heard the reckoning for the human would be based on they recorded.

Presently my funeral procession began. By this time, marquees had been set up and lights installed. Mats had been spread everywhere and cauldrons of food ordered. They would have chicken curry with leavened flatbread, accompanied by raita and green salad. The guests were being asked to return after the burial and eat before leaving. Hearing about my own burial sounded strange. During the funeral prayer, the prayer leader announced my qul – the Muslim post-funeral prayer and worship session followed by a feast – was to be held between the afternoon and

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evening prayers the next day. My family members were already discussing what fruits will be offered to the guests at the feast.

I glanced over the funeral procession like a crow. There were plenty of people, there were cars. I was being sent off in style.

I had always cared for a stylish send-off. I had wished for there to be lots and lots of people and plenty of large cars at my funeral. I had wished for people to wail loudly, for women to sing elegies at the onset of the procession. I had wished for excellent food to be served to guests and my funeral to be a memorable affair.

Now I could see my wish being granted with my half alive eyes. It seemed pointless. Most people had shown up just to be counted because they knew if they failed to show up, those in attendance would not fail to ask on subsequent meetings, "Didn't you attend Ajo's funeral?"

The backbiters would whisper among themselves, "This person is totally selfish. Remember how they would not tire singing



'my brother, my brother' all around Ajjō when he was alive. But see, how they have turned away from him in no time after his death – didn't even attend his funeral." Many were the people who had shown up willy-nilly to avoid this kind of backbiting and whispering.

I, seeing this outsize crowd, was wondering what all these people had achieved by attending my funeral. Would it not be better if they had not come? At least it would have saved my survivors some expenditure. In any case, those who didn't care for me while I lived had absolutely no business attending my funeral.

Come to think of it, they did care about me. Some cared to ask me questions that irked me. Some would enquire after my wellbeing just to be able to tell everybody, "Hey I regularly enquire after Ajjō's wellbeing – go ask him!"

Others in my funeral were genuinely aggrieved, among them relations as well as acquaintances. These people would help my wife put her life – gone all askew

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because of my death – back on track. But how far would their help go? Nobody could put food on the table for you could they? They would help with some early hitches: Helping transfer my estate to my wife and children, helping release monies held in my bank accounts, legwork for legal formalities, legwork for processing my pension.

Not that dying was any easier than living in Lahore. Space for my grave had come at a fair expense even though it was in a remote cemetery. Which was why a motorized hearse waited at the end of the lane to carry my body. How else could they carry my dead body all this distance?

In less than twelve hours after my death, my family had gotten rid of my body. They cried and wailed but were not prepared to keep me with them for another couple of days. Was it because they knew I dwelled no more in that sack of bone and sinew?

No, how could they know it. I knew them well. They were keen to get rid of me for fear my body would rot. They wanted to see me safely under a ton of dirt before I

started to stink. What else could they do? Being treated as a human is strictly reserved for the lifetime – you deserve it neither before you are born nor after you are dead. Before and after life, we are subject to nature's whims, and nature has no room for decorum.

When the funeral reached the graveyard, I took a kite's-eye-view of the scene. Perhaps it was my desire to see my grave with my own eyes. Perhaps I was curious to see what kind of a spot my loving family had selected for my final resting place.

The grave was ready, but the graveyard was a veritable jungle. Never mind – that was how all Lahore's graveyards were except for the military cemeteries. Uneven ground, some graves built of bricks and mortar, others mounds of sod, the whole place overgrown with shrubs and wild grasses.

I saw the grave – found it dark, deep, and dank. I had heard grave was a dreadful place but I did not feel any fear. I could hardly believe this was my own

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grave. It felt more like seeing another person's grave.

Nor was it indeed my grave. It was my dead body's.

## Chapter 2

### Nature

That night, when Amjad went to sleep in his ten-marla Shadman house along with his parents and siblings, and his Right and Left came out and sat on the ledge, I joined them. I had nothing to do so I had asked to stay with them until I was called Beyond. They had no objection to the arrangement, so I was now the veritable Middle between Right and Left.

I had stuck to the middle path all my life. Neither too successful nor too much of a failure; neither too affluent nor too poor; neither good to a fault nor a scoundrel. I was a middling figure in whatever I did.

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Now that I was through with life, I found myself neither fully dead nor wholly alive but somewhere in the middle.

They opened up their registers as they arrived.

“Ok, Mr. Left. As he rose in the morning, he brushed his teeth and washed his hands before the breakfast. I have that,” said Right.

“All right. Then he reached the bank late and lied to his boss saying it was because of a punctured motorcycle tire. I have that,” said Left.

“Looks good,” said Right.

“I also have here how he was ogling the bared calf and breasts of the young woman getting out of a car at Ajjo's funeral,” said Left, moving on to the next page of his register.

“No buddy, that is not on. Our man is unmarried. He has been of age for more than a decade now. His body has needs. Why blame him? He never touches or bothers a woman. What would you have him do, die? Or become a jogi?”

“Never touches? Never bothers?” Left put his register aside.

“Look, brother. All I mean is he doesn't harass any woman. Has he angered any woman?” said Right, softening his tone a bit.

“What do you mean?” Left flared up. “How bad must the woman at the funeral have felt with him ogling like that? Is he an animal free to follow his whims? If he can't restrict himself, if all he can do is follow blind passion, would it not be better if he has been born a wolf? What is the good of him being a man?”

“You have a point but you should check about the young woman. If she was bothered, this belongs in your register even if he was under the influence of a flood of testosterone. But if she doesn't have a problem, you should let the poor soul be.”

“Makes sense!” Left threw down the towel and instantly, another pair of Right and Left appeared from thin air. They belonged to the woman.

“No, she wasn't bothered,” called out the woman's Right.

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“Wasn't bothered?” the woman's Left glowered at her Right. “I am writing her up for enjoying his sinful gaze. This girl is a pain in the ass. She is always indulging in the evil, and our prince (gesturing to the woman's Right) is always advocating her. Says she is nubile but not being married off, why don't they let her be.”

“Precisely my point!” said Amjad's Right. “What are you up to hassling young people like that? You won't let them cohabit, you won't let them marry. Then you insist they mustn't as much as look at or talk to one another. Would you rather everybody took to abstention?”

The proceedings annoyed me no end. What were the God's appointed chroniclers haggling about? A woman in full bloom was squandering her beauty like that and they were debating whether it was virtue or wickedness. Unbelievable, no?

“Right and Right, what are you on about?” I couldn't interjecting. “The mullah said it's a deadly sin – looking at or speaking to anybody not closely related”.



“Listen mate, it's not as if our workings are guided by your mullah's wishes – we follow God's directions,” Amjad's left exclaimed.” I had a feeling he would have spoken with exasperation if he were human.

“Not guided the mullah's wishes?” I was shocked. “If you do not follow the mullah, the Muslim holy man – does it mean you follow the pandit, the Hindu holy man?”

“Not at all,” replied Amjad's right. “We have no idea if your mullah is right or their pandit. As we told you, we will know for certain when we go Beyond. Our work is guided by the natural order.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I would have been greatly distressed if I were alive. “Do you mean you are guided by trees, birds, mountains, and oceans in keeping track of virtue and wickedness?”

“Hold a second bud. Who told you we are keeping accounts of virtue and wickedness?” it was the woman's left.

“What?” This time I was utterly amazed. “What are you doing if not keeping accounts of virtue and wickedness?”

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“Listen up, man. The accounts of virtue and wickedness will be settled once you reach Beyond. How and by whom, we don’t have an inkling. No do we profess any knowledge of what is piety and what is transgression. All we do is keep track of what a person does in line with the natural order and what they do contrary to it,” Amjad’s Right explained to me.

“But we are told to spend our lives following God’s commandments,” I was at the end of my wits.

“God’s commandments?” Said the woman’s Right. “So you think the natural order is based on the White Man’s commandments?”

“But ...,” I was totally at sea by this time. “But God’s commandments are in opposition to the natural order,” I made some effort to think of a way to explain to them they were wrong – following the natural order was not what God commanded.

“Look, how you people spend your lives is entirely up to you,” Amjad’s left tried to wind up the debate. “We have to do our

duty and our duty is to record what somebody does in line with God's natural order in the right register, and what they do in violation of it in the left register.”

“But this arrangement is certain to obliterate public morals,” I protested. I had a feeling this accounting by nature would lead to the few good deeds I have done in my life being discarded.

“Are you sure? How come?” All those tiny sprites of light sat facing me and I quailed under their collective scrutiny. Bizarre didn't begin to describe the situation I was in. ‘So this is what you go through when you are dead?’ I fell to contemplation.

Things were going according quite contrary to my expectations. I had always believed all the confusions plaguing my life would remain only until I lived – that death would dispel them all, sifting and cataloguing things as black and white; but confusion continued to grow.

“Look,” I tried to wax philosophical. “Killing is the nature of the wolf and killing is

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all he does, but killing is evil. How can you put it in the right register?"

Nobody spoke. For a moment, I thought they were convinced, but then it was clear they were weighing my sanity. There are no registers for wolves," said Amjad's Right. "Because they do everything in line with the natural order."

I was at a loss as to how to respond to this. Because I was unable to fathom if it agreed with my argument or opposed it. "But bloodletting is evil. There should be a register for this," I held forth, but then fell to wondering if I had said the right thing.

"We have debated the matter to death," the young woman's Left said in a contemplative tone. "See, you humans shed blood wholesale, and I would love to put it in my register."

"What!" I was stumped again. "You do not put human bloodletting in the left register? Shedding human blood is not evil according to you?"

"Oh no bud. I am not talking about human blood," said the young woman's Left, as if laughing.

“Not talking about human blood?” I was baffled. “What are you talking about then?”

“We are talking about animal blood”. I was so bewildered by this time I lost track of who was talking. “All the animals that you humans slaughter and gobble up.”

“Animals? You mean the chicken, egg, etc., that the children eat?” I was struggling to wrap my head around the argument again. “All right then. If a wolf kills a man, it is in line with the natural order. But if a man kills a chicken for food, you would rather put it in the left register?” I yelled.

For a brief while, there was silence. I felt they were wondering what an ignoramus I was. Finally, the young woman's Left spoke up. “It's not ‘a chicken’. You consume two-hundred-million kilograms of chicken meat every livelong day. That means you are slaughtering more than fifty-million chicken a day.”

Two-hundred-million kilograms, net, of chicken meat every day? Fifty million chicken a day? I fell silent. I was unable to

articulate my thoughts but remained unconvinced. God's vast kingdom was peopled by a great multitude of humans and it was inevitable they would eat one thing or another. I mustered my courage. "The human population is huge. Is it any wonder they eat so much?"

All four sprites heaved a deep breath in unison, then Amjad's Left spoke. "This population thing is another of your spectacles. I say any man or woman having more than two children should have it put in their left register."

"Having many children is wickedness – to be put in the left register?" I remembered the mullah again. "It is not as if we make babies as we please. A baby is born by God's will alone."

The interlude of silence was long this time but I did not delude myself with the thought they were convinced.

"Not sure though whose will babies are born," said Amjad's Left. "All we know is the human population has quadrupled over the last century while the numbers for lions have shrunk by twenty-five to one."

That is pretty much how all animals have fared, excepting the species you raise for food. This is bloodshed.”

This reminded me of a White professor who had visited our school and who had said other species dwindled as human population grew. That this was unprecedented through millennia, and that this was cruelty to the planet.

I had paid no attention to what he said at the time. Little did I know this stuff could go in the right or left register. He had also said the way we raised animals for food was cruel, but I had ignored him. How was I to know that these matters would be recorded?

I was finding this conversation deeply disturbing and wanted to end it. It occurred to me how could the accounting Beyond work when God's notaries were clueless as to how to categorize these matters?

“So how do you decide what to record where or if to record it at all?” I could not help asking.

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“These things are settled at audit time,” one replied.

“Audit?” my amazement had no end. “When is the audit conducted and by who?”

“We have a generational audit every hundred years,” it was one of the Rights. “Beyond. Then we know what to put where for this generation. Even we will know how much good or evil deeds you have scored once we are Beyond. For now, we are registering everything based on our understanding.”

Now this life after death was even stranger than life itself. It had confounded me to the point where I knew not what to do. I returned to the previous topic just to change the subject. “So what are you doing about Amjad’s girl?”

“I am firmly of the view she cannot be reformed. You always find her making eyes at some man,” said the young woman’s Left.

“Making eyes is all – she never goes beyond it,” said her Right. “She is more than twenty-five years old and still



unmarried. She is coquettish. Not every woman is like that. Most are naturally demure but she is not. That doesn't mean she is evil. She isn't seeing any man, doesn't indulge in depravity. What the poor soul has done at most is flash her curves a bit while wrapping her chador around her body for all of twelve seconds. How has this threatened the natural order?"

"Okay, let us bear with her coquetry at the funeral," said her Left. "We'll let her off the hook," and he put away the register.

"What do we do about Amjad," said his Left.

"There is precious little we can do about him. We will let him be. It was the young woman who bared her calf and unwrapped her chador. When she is being let off the hook, what can we book him for?" said Amjad's Right.

"But even though it was the young woman who bared, how was he obliged to see?" said Amjad's Left. "What compulsion did he have to ogle?"

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“This makes sense. This is what the mullah used to say. It is first binding upon women to cover their bodies. But if some woman transgresses, her men must restrain her, and other men must keep their gaze lowered.”

“Bud, you keep your mullah out of this,” said the young woman’s Right. “We go by nature, not by the mullah”.

“There is no point in reopening the debate from the standpoint of nature. Going by biology, they are bound to have mutual attraction, and they will both show and gaze. So what are you debating here? Going by nature, whenever a man and woman feel mutually attracted, they might as well mate then and there,” I was consumed by anger.

“What do you think,” said Amjad’s Right after a while. “Animals, mountains etc., are nature, and human are not?” I had never framed it like this.

“Right, so the human kind is also part of nature?” I asked meekly – because I was having problem seeing humanity as integral to nature. To me, nature indeed

comprised trees, animals, the earth, oceans, etc.

“Not just human body – the human mind and thought are also nature,” the young woman’s Left enlightened me.

I was taking it lying down up until humanity being integral to nature because the idea was new to me and I was finding it difficult to stomach – so what could I say? Now human thought being part of nature thoroughly flabbergasted me.

“Thought is nature?” said I, disconcerted. “How do you mean? Thought belongs to the human kind. How can it be nature?”

“You tend to think what humans create cannot be natural. You see yourselves like small gods. Whatever you dream up or create belongs to you and not to nature – as if you were apart from nature”.

I completely lost my bearings. The discussion was getting beyond me. I held my peace. Others too kept their silence. We all sat still in that silence. Then I remembered I had died. There was no hurry, nor the egoistic drive to be right on

every occasion. I sat there thinking at a leisurely pace and stayed at it for quite a while. How could human thought be part of the natural order?

“But nature cannot change anything at will. We can mold our thought however we wish,” I came with a point at length.

“Rivers are nature. You change their courses, build dams to stop their flow. Mountains are nature. You cut through them to build roads. You cut down whole forests, plant new jungles. Just as plants cannot walk but animals are a level higher than trees and can walk,” the young woman’s Right explained to me. “Likewise, animals cannot change their thoughts at will, cannot control their needs and passions, but you humans are at a level higher than animals and can do all these things. How you do it is up to you. When to think, when to restrain your passions, it is all within the power of a human being. And for that, there is reckoning.”

The idea of reckoning for thought paralyzed me. What were these sprites up to, ragging me like this? How could there

be reckoning for thought? The Satan implanted thoughts in a human being's mind. It is the duty of the human to stifle thoughts and hold fast to their faith.

Hadn't the mullah explained everything about faith in ample detail? The worldly existence was all about deeds. Good deeds Here would lead to good consequences Beyond. The whole business of how to think and what to think was the satanic lore of White apostates I had protected my faith from my whole life. My head started spinning.

"There is reckoning for how you exercise thought?" at length I ventured timidly. "But the mullah used to say things to be reckoned are settled forever, like lowering your gaze on seeing a woman not closely related to you."

"Dear Ajjo," I could not say which it was of the sprites that spoke. "Nature has everlasting principles, not standards. If circumstances change, everything inevitably changes accordingly. Including standards. This is the natural course of things. If you change the standards without

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changing the circumstances, it would be deviance. Likewise, if you do not change standards after the circumstances have changed, it would be deviance.”

“You mean honor is a principle but its prevalent standards will decide what honor should mean,” I said, and continued almost involuntarily, “And in view of the prevailing circumstances, the centuries old standards of honor should change?”

They said nothing. The silence was broken at last by the muezzin's call for the morning prayer.

## Chapter 3

### Bank

It was a vast hall with two small wood-and-glass cabins built at one end, one for the records and the other for the manager. This was Amjad's bank. No, he didn't own it – he worked here. A minor officer. Because it was a private bank, he was called an officer so he would feel good. In a government office, he would be called a head clerk.

Amjad's desk was by the entrance. A small table with two chairs across his. This was his office, open on all sides, well-lit and airy. Near his chair sat a planter that had a

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silver vine propped up by a stick – just so it would make a good impression – not necessarily on him but on his customers. The bank's customers that is.

It was his duty to talk people into opening up their accounts with the bank, almost arm-twisting them into having their ATM and credit cards made, and prevailing upon them to take out loans from the bank.

His performance was audited every month. If he had not been able to open enough bank accounts in a given month, his personal file would be marked with a red stroke. A red stroke for two consecutive months could very well kill his job. Which was why he was constantly alert like a predator, always looking for his prey.

This month, he had achieved his target in the first two weeks and was therefore chilling. If a prey walked into his den and was taken down, fine. If not, what the hell.

I now discovered my ability to read people's thoughts and feelings. Of living people. I first knew it when Amjad's father woke him up with a volley of expletives,



saying, “Up, you son of a jackass, and go to work. You are late every day. You’d end up being sacked.”

Amjad started mocking his father in his heart. “‘You’d end up being sacked’, as if he has helped me into the job. Couldn’t afford me a foreign education. Foreign? Not enough money for a good domestic university – but on and on he must go. Who hires a graduate of a little-known university? And what do they even teach you? They neither teach you nor train you in anything. Money minting factories. Nor is there anybody to oversee them.”

By the time he got to the reference that had landed him the job, he was in the bathroom. “Are there any jobs to be had without a reference? Hah! ‘You’d end up being sacked’. Look at my guardian angel. I landed the job on my own and I will hold it down on my own. Licking the manger’s boots all the time like a lapdog, always afraid he would kick me out at the first opportunity. What job is a private job – it is slavery. If they kick me out, they would find a thousand queuing up for the same

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position – including many better qualified and many better bootlicks than I.”

By the time he was ready, his father had already left. His mother served him a pratha fried in cheap vegetable ghee sold in plastic bags with a serving of yogurt. Slurping tea with every mouthful, he saw his mother do the dishes. She knew he detested his father’s periodic lectures.

While she could do precious little to stop her husband, she now offered herself as a lightning-rod for her son’s pent-up anger. “Son, you should rise early. It is always good to arrive for work ahead of time.”

This was the opportunity Amjad needed. “Oh Mother, don’t you start now. Father has already done plenty to clear my head.” She remained insistent, “No, son, your father is right.” Amjad kept ranting about how his father had done nothing for him.

All the while, her Right kept writing in her register.

Like every morning, Amjad arrived for work at half past eight. While he hated his

father's lecturing, he inwardly agreed with the drift of it.

What Amjad didn't know was that his father was angry not with his son but with his own helplessness. He knew full well his son had the existence of an orphan. In today's world, a young man whose father could neither buy him expensive education nor arrange a reference to land him a job was an orphan.

Upon arrival, Amjad took a rag out of a drawer and dusted his table and chairs. While he was an officer to the customers, his colleagues knew better. Which is why the peon would dust his seat last of all – and sometimes not at all. Amjad was therefore used to cleaning up after himself, not least because he knew his own rank in the pecking order.

As he settled in his seat, he turned to Facebook on his cell phone, responding to posts in his feed now with a like, now with a love or anger emoji, now with a comment. At about nine, he put away the cell phone and started glancing through various files aimlessly. When the bank manager arrived,

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he stood up to greet him. Once through with this tricky part of his morning routine, he eased down.

The small room behind the thin wood and glass wall in which the manager sat drew my attention. I tried to read the manager's thoughts just to test my newfound power. He was taking stock of this month's performance of his branch. He too was subject to a monthly audit. He too had to meet his targets on the pain of a red stroke on his personal file – a red stroke drawn by his superiors.

With this at the back of his mind, he was crunching all the relevant numbers for the month: accounts opened, debit and credit cards issued, interest due, and so forth.

“Poor soul!” I exclaimed. Although I did not speak, my train of thought continued, “Such a good man having to sully his hands in usurious business! All his good deeds must be outweighed.”

“No, the bank's interest based business does not go to his left register. He is an upright man,” said Amjad's Left. I looked at him in amazement as I realized I could

read not only humans but also the sprites, who could in turn read me.

“But ...,” I checked myself saying the mullah said so and so but realized it did not make a difference either way because they could read me. “But dealing in usury is wickedness,” I could not help saying.

“Stop bringing up wickedness and goodness like that will you,” said Amjad’s Left. “We are not concerned with anything beyond the natural order. How the reckoning Beyond will be, we have no idea. But interest based business does not belong to the left register the way you think it should”.

“Oh, but usury is the rich man’s tool to fleece the poor”. I did not know much about economy, but having studied history, I had read about how the Jews wrought destruction through usury.

“There are innumerable ways of exploitation. The powerful can easily exploit the weak. The rich can exploit the poor and the clever can exploit the gullible. If a rich man is intent upon it, usury

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is indeed a way to exploit the poor and downtrodden,” said Left.

I was beginning to overcome my tendencies of the days when I was yet alive – I was beginning to listen patiently and try to grasp and consider what was being said. “But whoever borrows on interest is inevitably ruined. What else is interest if not exploitation?” said I.

“Interest is rent,” came the curt reply from Right.

“Rent?” I was clueless.

“If you were to give your house to somebody to live in, would you not charge them rent?” asked Right.

“Of course I will,” I was starting to sense where he was going with it.

“Why would you let somebody use your house like that rent free? Likewise, why should you not charge rent if you give your money to somebody to use? What is wrong with this?” Right concluded.

“But a house is property – immovable property,” I was not about to give in.

“What is the difference? You give the house for its utility – and you charge rent for that utility. Once the tenancy concludes - you get back the house – in one piece,” Right had me struggling again.

“That sounds about right, ”I could almost grasp it. “But compound interest cannot be right, no?” I almost begged, but they were not about to listen to me.

“Compound interest comes into play when interest due goes unpaid. For example, what would you do if your tenant fails to pay a month’s rent? A whole year’s rent? When you are finally paid rent a whole year later, would you expect just the rent or something above the rent as well?”

“Yes, I would expect something over and above. He has utilized my money for a whole year.” I was fully disarmed now.

“Compound interest is just like that, ”Right pressed the point home.

“Hmph,” I yielded somewhat gloomily.

“But this does not mean interest is all good,” Left spoke up, and I felt my passion welling up again. “The interest rate can be

exorbitant, making the repayment all but impossible. A borrower pressed for money will agree to practically any rate. In this way, interest will become a very efficient rip-off tool.”

“See!” I beamed. “Did I not say interest is bad?”

“No,” Left spoke this time. “It is neither good nor bad – it can be either. It has its uses and it has its abuses. If the interest rate is reasonable and the loan is not being offered to relieve the borrower off his belongings but to allow him the utility of the money involved, it will go to the lender’s right register. If the interest rate has been set too high to take advantage of the borrower’s situation, it will go to the lender’s left register. Virtue or wickedness comes not from things but how you use them, Ajjio dear”.

“What a conundrum,” I thought. “This world is beyond me”.

I diverted my attention back to Amjad. He was sitting with a colleague, a sheaf of files in front of each just so they could pretend to be working if the manager



chanced their way. Amjad had come to the colleague because his seat was close to the manager's room and half the window that overlooked this side was walled so the manger could not see them while he sat in his chair. He would have to rise and take two steps towards the window to be able to see them. This was the bank's safest table.

"Hasn't the manger become too much of a scoundrel these days?" the colleague remarked to Amjad.

"When was he not," Amjad whispered back to him. "Didn't you see how rude he was to me last week at the behest of that bulldog-faced pimp of a major account holder?"

"Man, he thoroughly insulted me first thing this morning," the colleague pressed on with his own grievance. "As if we are slaves to this swine".

"Easy, man," said Amjad to mollify him. "They are drunk with ill-gotten wealth. They will get their comeuppance Beyond".

"They are not going Beyond," it seemed the colleague had received a thorough

thumping. “We will go Beyond. This lot will abide here forever, making merry”.

He was set to go on but Amjad was called to attend to a customer and he trotted off.

I looked to the Left. He was not about to write anything.

“Don’t you tell me now backbiting is also natural,” I could not keep my mouth shut.

“This is beyond us,” said Amjad’s Left.

“Beyond you?” I was flabbergasted. “How do you mean?”

“Of things based on tangible aspects of the natural order, we can sift virtue from wickedness – but when it comes to human behavior, we are sometimes unable to decide this way or that. We leave such matters to the audit Beyond.”

I found the “tangible aspects of the natural order in natural order” bit elusive.

“What do you mean?” I enquired. “Backbiting is evil. What rocket science do you need to see that?”

“Backbiting is indeed evil,” said Right. “But if somebody has the existence of a bushel of potatoes sealed in a simmering pressure cooker, what should they do?”

“What should they do?” I was not sure I got it but I didn’t want to drop the ball. “They should simmer on – or else explode? What else is there to do?”

“This is exactly what is happening,” said Left. “The poor are sealed in a pressure cooker, simmering and exploding to smithereens. This backbiting is like the pressure cooker letting off the steam.”

As I looked at Right, the scene changed.

The manager stood in the lobby of a five-star hotel, poised like a runner waiting on the pistol shot to spring off the block. He stood there for a half hour, checking his phone every now and then but not daring to call.

Finally, the person he was waiting for arrived. The manager sprang into action. “Welcome sir, right this way, I have a table reserved.”

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“I had to come on your urging,” said the comer as he looked all around. “Had to leave an important meeting”.

“Thank you very much sir,” said the manger, taking a slight bow. “Actually the bank has a policy to socialize with our major customers. It is kind of you to accept my invitation to dinner. My regional manager often enquires after you.”

“Asghar is the regional manager, right?” said the customer as he sat on the table.

“Yes, yes sir,” the manager bent low again. “He tells me you were schoolmates”.

The customer did not answer, absorbed in the menu picking what to order. The manger, who sat on the edge of the chair like a bird perched on a parapet, quickly motioned the waiter. After ordering food, the customer took off his eyeglasses and put them on the table.

“Yes, we were in the same school although in different classes – but our friendship was renewed when we met after all these years. You can trust old friends to stick up for one another.”

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“Yes, yes sir,” said the manager reverently. “You are exactly right.”

They engaged in small talk for a while. Then the customer came to the point.

“My son has returned from abroad after studying Marketing. I would like to see if he can get a job at your bank,” he spoke, a glass of water in hand.

“Yes sir,” said the manger, troubled at the prospect. He was holding on to his own job by the skin of his teeth. How was he to get the customer's son a job?

The customer sensed his quandary. “My son graduated from a top US university – and I have already talked to the regional manager. He will endorse my son's application for employment. I am letting you in on it just so you will have no objection and promptly send the case on its way. Otherwise, the matter is settled.”

The manger breathed a sigh of relief. “Yes, yes sir, don't you worry sir. I will forward the case with a strong recommendation.”

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When they were done eating, the manager escorted the customer to his car, closed the car door after him, and stood there waiting until after his car had gone out the hotel gate.

I took a peep into the manager's mind. Twice over the last ten months, he had missed the monthly target and his file was about to be marked with a red stroke. Panicked, he had requested this customer for help on each occasion, and he had obliged by transferring deposits from elsewhere to his branch. This customer was the manager's guardian angel with whose blessing the he was able to hold down his job.

The manager's father had been a doctor at a public hospital. He had sent his son to good university, but had been unable to afford a foreign qualification. His was a middle class family, caught in a middle class set. Nobody in his social circle had enough funds to deposit in his branch and save his job. He was indebted to this customer.

He returned to the table and gestured to the waiter for the bill. On his way out after paying the bill, a restroom sign caught his eye and he stepped in to wash his hands. Not that his hands were stained with food – the question of touching food did not arise in a five-star environment teeming with cutlery. It was a childhood habit cultivated by his mother, who would insist he always wash his hands before and after a meal.

The restroom was empty. He stood there in front of the mirror after washing his hands and looked at his face. Tears welled up in his eyes – tears he could not allow himself to shed. Images of the unseen son of the customer danced in his head. A fair, handsome lad rocking branded clothes, driving a brand new car. Given to mixing up with the scions of the high and mighty. Had a foreign qualification, came from a well off family – his job was money in the bank. He would have major deposits at his beck and call. Within two years, he would be the manager's boss. He had already seen this happen thrice over his sixteen-year career.

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I couldn't say what it was that filled the manager's mind – bitterness, anger, or pain. I think it was a mixture of all three – simmering in a sealed pressure cooker.

The scene changed. I was back in the bank. Left had me skewered with a deep stare. His eyes were askance. "Shall I show you what is going on inside Amjad's head – the contents of his pressure cooker?"



## Chapter 4

### WhatsApp

Amjad was at his seat at the bank. Customers came and went but it was not too crowded. Amjad did not have any customer with him. He was sitting over four files so everybody including his manager would think he was quite busy. He was looking at his Facebook feed. Most of the posts were jokes and he was having a hard time keeping himself from giggling. Every now and then, he came across lewd picture of a woman or a religious post. He would take his time inspecting the pictures but would quickly like the religious post and pass on – as though he feared being held

for blasphemy for studying religious posts while looking at lewd pictures.

Presently a WhatsApp notification chimed in. He instantly switched from Facebook to WhatsApp. The lewdness that arrived through WhatsApp was the real deal. Facebook stuff was demure in comparison. Sure enough, it was a lewd video. A twenty-second clip in which a 95-kilogram heroine sang and gamboled all around a 150-kilogram hero brandishing a *gandasa*. She caressed her breasts and rubbed her lower belly as she blared the Punjabi lyrics, "I ate fish, I put myself in a tight spot".

He viewed the clip several times –firstly because it was so lewd, and secondly because it had come from his friend Kiran. In response, he sent just an emoticon expressing extreme amazement.

He always responded to Kiran's lewd messages with emoticons. He wanted to send a few lewd sentences in response to this one, but he knew he could never send such messages to Kiran. Kiran, who was her college mate, was the daughter of a well-

heeled and well-connected father. If she took offense and complained to her father, Amjad would not only lose his job but also face prison term in multiple fabricated cases. Kiran could send him lewd messages because she came from a powerful family, but Amjad could not. Because when the rich engage in this kind of behavior, it is for fun but a lewd message from a poor man would be seen reflecting criminal intent.

Another message arrived, also from Kiran. A lewd picture. It was a poster for a Pakistani horror movie from the sixties or seventies. The movie was titled Living Corpse, and the poster showed a woman with her breasts bared. He giggled silently and sent emoticons in response.

“What are you up to?” Kiran’s message arrived.

“Work. Bank.” He never used complete sentences chatting with Kiran for fear of exposing his less than perfect command of English. Whenever he made a mistake, Kiran would mock and taunt him no end.

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Not that she spoke perfect English – he knew his former college mate well enough. But she came from a higher social station and had picked up a few words, phrases, and sentences of everyday idiomatic English, which she would flaunt all the time.

If Amjad made a mistake, she would mock him for days on end. If Kiran erred, Amjad would say nothing. For one thing, he would not dare taunt a daughter of the upper crust; for another, he was never sure if an error was indeed an error.

In the beginning, when he tried to correct her English on one or two occasions, a supremely confident Kiran casually gestured with her hand as if swatting a fly. “That’s how the English use it. Don’t you know? Ever been to the States?”

Ever since, Amjad had never tried to correct her errors or defend his own usage. The solution he had found was to make do with as little English as possible when talking to her over WhatsApp. She found it funny when he responded to her English-language messages in Urdu – and resorting to using Punjabi would be tantamount to

inviting mockery. The final solution for Amjad, then, was to speak English but use words not sentences.

“Humph, work. Don’t I know how hardworking you are,” she said, and sent an angry emoticon to boot. There was no emoticon for bashful laughter in the app, so Amjad sent a laughing face.

“I have to buy a new phone. You have a Saturday off tomorrow. Take me to shop for it.” This message from Kiran gave Amjad the shivers. They had gone out twice or thrice before. A scene started to play in his head. He is driving a bike and she, rocking a pair of jeans and t-shirt, is riding pillion, her body tightly clinging to his, her chestnut hair fluttering in the air.

Presently she started caressing his chest and belly – and I sensed something was amiss. A little effort made it clear: It was not a local or Chinese bike of the kind common in these parts – it was an American muscle bike. Amjad was donning a fur jacket of the kind seen on American action heroes. The road was deserted – it was just them gliding along. It

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was all a reverie – a figment of his imagination, and man, was it delicious! He almost had me hooked.

I tried to sneak a look at the reality of his memories – and a peek was all I could manage after a fair amount of exertion; he was so drunk with the daydream he was not letting reality enter his head. The peek I was able to take was quite adequate for me to take in the reality. The reality was no different from the reality of our society. She sat sidesaddle, clad in a typical Pakistani shalwar suit, demurely wrapped in a scarf. There was no clinging, no chestnut hair fluttering, no nothing. It was a rather desi affair. But Amjad's daydreaming went on and on.

“Yes, I have a day off tomorrow. What time would you go?” Amjad would rather be done with everything and set off for her place right away.

Time and place to pick her up was settled. She would be at a girlfriend's place. Amjad knew where it was – he had picked her up from there once before.

The rendezvous was settled, but the lustful reverie born of it had set Amjad's whole being on fire – a fire that threatened to consume him. He felt as if it had made him forget everything at the bank – the tasks completed and to be completed. His head was full of images. Images of nude women, among whom was Kiran – along with women from his neighborhood and women in the movies.

He had not masturbated for two days. An epic arousal now threatened to burst him open. He looked around. There was never a lunch break at the bank but it was a Friday and the Friday prayer break was approaching. Every member of the workforce was eager to quickly sort out the customer at hand with a view to eating their lunch before the prayer break began. Everybody was busy.

Amjad double-checked to be sure the volume on his phone was turned off, and started watching pornographic video clips. He had been at it for all of twenty seconds before he felt it was too much, and closed the video app. He was afraid if somebody called him away from his seat, he would

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not be able to stand up without showing his erection. If it was winter, he could pull his coat or jersey downwards to hide the bulge.

It took him several minutes of herculean mental effort to get things under control. He sat there idly for a while, but he had become weary of the place. The prayer break had arrived. He asked permission of his reporting boss and left to eat at a nearby lunchroom.

When he returned after lunch, the going was slow. The prayer break was over but there were hardly any customers. This was the normal state of affairs on a Friday after the prayer break.

He returned to his table, fiddled with the files. Rang up a couple customers to nag them about their promise to refer their relatives to open up accounts with his bank. A couple others he telephoned to confirm if their debit or credit cards had been delivered.

He had not been particularly keen on work since morning, but after settling the rendezvous with Kiran, he had completely



lost interest. Watching pornography on the phone was a risk he did not want to take right now, but boredom was eating at him.

At the back of the hall sat Parvin. He had initiated processing of a couple credit card cases. Parvin was the supervisor of credit cards, so this was a valid excuse for him to go talk to her – although there was no issue with the cases. He would use this ruse whenever he felt like chatting her up. I was amazed how I could read people's minds like watching a movie.

Parvin was senior to Amjad, so she had been assigned a computer. She was also idling, pecking at the keyboard aimlessly to look busy. Dressed in a deep green shalwar suit, demurely covered in a black chador head and all, wearing a light makeup. She was around thirty-five, an MBA who had been in the employ of the bank for three years. She smiled faintly to see Amjad approach. She was the coy type, a woman of few words. She had never made Amjad feel he was imposing – although Amjad did impose now and then, as he was about to now.

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“I have initiated these credit card cases. Will you take a look to see if I have done anything wrong?” He settled in the chair opposite her.

“Let us see,” Parvin shoved the mouse aside without switching off the screen, and took the files from Amjad. He started to eye up her upper body visible above the tabletop. Her chador covered her head and bust, but he could still make out her breasts – they were huge.

“I have to buy a chador for my mother. Your chador is so beautiful”. What he meant to say was Parvin was killing it. Parvin was no dupe to miss his veiled compliment.

Amjad was always careful to mention his mother or sister whenever teasing Parvin. This way, if she went off handle or somebody overhearing him objected, he could always defend both his honor and job by holding forth on how everybody's mothers and sisters deserved respect equally.

“All right,” Parvin smiled as she righted her chador. She righted it by pulling its top

edge to her forehead, but the part covering her bust opened up. She was bent over the file before. Now she sat up, leaning against the chair's back, her breasts jutting forward through the opening of the chador. Framed by her black chador and deep green shirt, Parvin's comely face, neck and cleavage glistened like the moon.

Amjad had always been careful to eye her furtively, for if she took offense, his job would be on the line. But right now he had no power over his eyes. The fantasies involving Kiran and the pornographic video clips had together done him up. His eyes clung to Parvin's breasts.

"The green of your shirt is so charming. My sister too looks good dressed in this color." His eyes now fondled her breasts, now smacked her lips. I was sure plenty of material would be added to Amjad's left register. Then I noticed Amjad was not saying anything and he had fixed his gaze on Parvin. When I looked towards Parvin, I found her immersed in the files, not looking at Amjad at all.

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It occurred to me Parvin had not righted her chador rafter Amjad's compliments. I started to get the drift of it. Amjad used references to his mother and sister to camouflage the intent of the conversation from anybody overhearing, not from Parvin. They could not talk much for fear of arousing suspicions. Somebody would inevitably overhear something as there were several colleagues sitting nearby.

The meeting continued for about ten minutes, after which Amjad left. I should have expected this, because the longer they stayed together, the more likely they were to attract attention in this hall brimful with people.

Parvin was a mature, educated desi woman. Her lose-fitting clothes, the chador, and her coy demeanor would suggest she was the very embodiment of eastern values. What I just saw, however, did not go along with that image. I peered into her mind.

TOUCH WHITE. A ten-marla house. Parvin's mother does her hair in a tight braid in the morning before school. Her

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father goes to his shop on a motorbike, but otherwise they are quite well off.

TOUCH WHITE. Parvin wears a burqa to college. Her father drops her in the morning, while she returns by bus on her own.

TOUCH WHITE. She is married off to a cousin – a son of her father's sister.

TOUCH WHITE. It is three years since her marriage and she already has two children.

TOUCH WHITE. Her husband dies in a bus crash.

TOUCH WHITE. Parvin seldom leaves home. Upset by people's stinging remarks on her lot, she cries in private, her head on her knees.

TOUCH WHITE. Her children start school.

TOUCH WHITE. Her father asks her to find a job. He never mentions it to Parvin but people keep enquiring him how his daughter and grandchildren are doing. They commiserate with him over how the old-timer - poor soul – has to shoulder the

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burden of his widowed daughter and her children.

The ecstatic joy that fills his heart when he sees his grandchildren play and run about disappears when he hears remarks in this vein, leaving behind a jet-black emptiness weighing down on his heart.

He remembers that his daughter has stopped attending wedding parties because people thought a widow in attendance could bring them bad luck.

TOUCH WHITE. Parvin broods over the question for weeks, wondering if she will ever have the courage to spend her whole day in the middle of strange men.

TOUCH WHITE. Parvin's mother counsels her. It is not like the old times, she says. Now women work, and she too should work. Not that she is a burden to her parents, but she has education and she should make the most of her life. Parvin sits still, her head bowed. Her mother sheds tears. She starts cursing the society. What kind of a country is this where everybody chants the name of Islam but nobody is prepared to countenance a widowed woman getting

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married, says she. They would sooner bury such women along with their dead husbands.

TOUCH WHITE. Parvin is tossing and turning in her bed, unable to sleep. She has been in this job at the bank for several months now. She has become used to working at the bank and spending her day amid men. The environment is safe and everybody is nice to him but her carnal needs are reawakening after years of hibernation.

She had believed her libido had died along with her husband. She had been wrong. She is spending her days in the midst of men, feeling the presence of several young, healthy, good-looking males around her. This has brought her long dead libido back to life. Now pangs of desire give her the shivers. She craves to be with somebody. She remembers having heard as a child people say, "May not even a tree be alone." Now she knows why.

TOUCH WHITE. Parvin has been in the job at the bank for more than three years, and

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she is well set in the job. Her life is improving. She is reserved but has good working relationships all around. She loves her work. Every morning, she leaves for work when her children leave for school. She spends her day seeing new people, filling out new forms, grappling with new files. She has a good grip of her work and is respected for it. She is making money. Her confidence is back. In the evening, she returns home tired to death and spends the evening playing and chatting with his children. The nights are different – and she blames the society for her nights not being what they ought to be.

The Right and Left of Amjad and Parvin were engrossed in a conversation. I thought they would be sifting things for right and left registers but when I paid attention, I discovered they were on an unrelated subject. For a while, I waited for them to return to their job, but they did neither open up a register nor say anything about this meeting. Finally, I could not restrain myself any longer.

“This is clearly licentious behavior,” I said rather pertly. “He was gazing at her body



and she was baring all she could for him to gaze at instead of covering up. Why don't you write it up?"

They stared at me in silence. At length, Amjad's Left spoke, "What should we write?"

I was bamboozled by this unexpected question. "Write down that Amjad was being wicked," I asserted.

"With who?" asked Parvin's Left.

"With Parvin, who else?" said I.

"But she doesn't seem to have a problem," said Parvin's Left.

"So what?" I felt like banging my head against a wall. "He was spreading lecherousness, polluting the society."

"How come?" Parvin's Right asked.

The same exercise in futility again! I firmly resolved to floor them with my answer. Not putting this lechery, this lewdness in the left register was an outrage against my intelligence. Now that shouting or cursing did not look like an option, I began to formulate my answer in my mind.

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If Amjad kept gawking at women like that, the public order was sure to break down. Women would find it difficult to venture out of their homes. They would always have to be accompanied by a male of their kin. This would hamper their ability to work. This would be bad – or would it?

I found this line of argument rather disconcerting. I considered again: Would this be good or bad? The mullah used to say women must never step out of their homes on their own; and that they should not venture outdoors for work because it gives rise to lewdness.

Now if Amjad's gawking discouraged women from venturing out of doors, was he not waging a holy war on lewdness? Was this not a good deed on his part, which was why his Left was not willing to register it? Strange though the conclusion seemed, by my line of argument inevitably led to it.

I was not about to give inn. Okay, it did not go against Amjad but Parvin was still guilty of lewdness. I began to frame the

argument for her Left. She was spreading immoral behavior. She was fully dressed, but she not covered enough to disguise her form – the way people carry a pack of condoms in an unmarked, shapeless paper sack to conceal the nature of the contents.

No, this was not it. She had wrapped her body pretty much like this, but her face remained bare, and she had left the chador front open to feast Amjad's eyes. Nor had the opening of the chador exposed any skin – her bosom remained covered by her shirt – which was quite loose fitting.

Her curves were still apparent, but that was something nature had fashioned – so why must she be bashful about it? All mothers had bodies like hers. She was taking pleasure in Amjad gawking at her bosom through the opening of the chador. How bad could this be –taking pleasure in being pleasant to look at?

I remembered how heads would turn when I went to a wedding, groomed and all – and how good it felt! There would be

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men as well as women among the onlookers, and women's attentions would not always induce lust – they were innocent gazes more often than not.

Once, on the wedding of my maternal cousin, I took particular care with my grooming and dressing, but nobody paid me any attention. How sad it had made me! It felt as if everybody had rejected me, and it had bothered me for days on end.

How was it okay for men to dandy up to please both men and women, but not okay for women? Why did they have this compulsion to stay hidden – as if their being or their form was something to be ashamed of?

What are women to do if they have to venture outdoors and work? Should they tar their faces black? I glanced at the four of them - Right and Left. They were staring at me. They had read my thoughts.

## Chapter 5

### Disease

Amjad was zooming along on his motorbike. He had several close shaves but continued like a leading man in a movie. I remembered my own death. I had died because I did not have a helmet on. In any case, there was nothing I could do about it anymore.

Amjad was snaking his way through traffic like a bat navigating through a jungle. One time, I was about to call out to him to be careful, but I remembered in time it was no use. The living cannot hear the dead – or else great men would forever be stalked by the wailing of the small, inconsequential, powerless men

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killed fighting their wars. Would they not howl from that muted, half-dead world on seeing their mothers, wives and children bemoan their departure? Lucky are those who quickly go Beyond, saved the trouble of witnessing the sorry state of their survivors. This ordeal of the survivors was aptly summed up by the saw, "People bemoan the dead sitting down, but they lament the lost gravy train on their feet."

As I went streaking alongside Amjad's motorbike, time suddenly froze. A pair of Right and Left appeared. They had come to consult the sprites accompanying Amjad. Their human was a doctor – a good man. His problem was that he had a patient dying a painful death. A case of blood cancer, he had been under treatment for two years, dying a long and slow death.

When the doctors said they could do nothing more and his family were about to take him home, he begged the doctor to help him die a painless death. Taking pity on the man, the doctor had obliged. The problem at hand was how to classify the doctor's act. Should it go to the left or the

right register? I could not help jutting in again.

“What are you up to?” I exclaimed bitterly. “What kind of a discussion is this? A doctor is supposed to be a messiah. His job is to save lives. A doctor puts a man to death and you want to put it in his right register? How can you do that?”

“The patient was in extreme pain,” said the doctor’s Right. “The doctors could neither keep him alive nor cure him. He would die anyway – of his disease if not of the doctor’s device, tomorrow if not today.”

“But it was not up to the doctor,” the doctor’s Left sided with me.

“Exactly,” I said. “This is against the natural order of things. If the natural order says a man should die of a disease, he should be allowed to die of the disease. Meddling with the workings of nature is a no-no. This surely belongs to the left register.”

All of a sudden, the scene changed and I found myself in the operation theater of a hospital. The doctors had cut out a man’s

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heart and were now busy repairing it. Then I was with Amjad again. This scene had been flashed to me by Amjad's Right.

"Human thought is also part of the natural order," Amjad's Right stated to speak. "Just as flooding, volcanic activity, bushfires, and droughts wreak all kinds of havoc on nature but remain inseparable from nature, human thought is also integral to nature even if it upends the preexisting order - whether it is a man killing another man out of greed, or a powerful man killing tens of thousands in a war. Or a man finds a treatment for a blocked aorta, which is a natural condition, and saves the life of a man dying of that condition. You insist killing a man is bad – but is it not fair to put a murderer to death? And is it not fair to kill your enemy in battle?"

I was mildly surprised. I had read little history apart from what was included in the curriculum, but I had read the biographies of a few well-known philosophers and the rudiments of their thoughts. Now this discourse here was quite philosophical to me.



“But the medical science exists to save lives. How can it be used to kill?” There was no way I could stomach this.

“As of now, medical science exists not to make humans immortal but to ease suffering,” said the doctor’s right. “Preventing polio, keeping heart and kidneys in good shape, relieving fever and pain, and so forth”.

“But to kill somebody knowingly is murder – it is!” I could say no more.

The scene changed again. It was a replay of the life of the doctor’s patient. It was his last day at the hospital. The next day, his family would take him home. The doctor came to check on him and told his eldest son and his daughter’s son to wait outside the room.

“You look better than yesterday,” he said, glancing over his reports.

“Yes, doctor. This hellish disease keeps slaughtering me day and night, and yesterday, it was using a dull knife,” the patient’s sinews were erupting with pain even as he spoke.

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“Don’t say that. You will get better,” said the doctor, his eyes scanning the reports.

“Doctor, you are a good man. You have always reassured me. But you too have lost hope now, which is why you are sending me home,” the patient was visibly in pain.

“No, it’s not like that. Don’t worry. Pray to God and spend time with your family. I will prescribe injectable painkiller. We will send somebody to your place every day to administer the injection,” the doctor was still not meeting the patient’s eyes.

“Doctor, I have to say something,” said the patient. “Please send your staff away for a moment”.

The doctor motioned the two nurses in the room, who promptly left. He shut the door behind them and returned to the patient’s bedside.

“Doctor, you know what ails me and how bad it is. Still, I am certain you have no idea how painful my condition is”. The doctor said nothing.

“Doctor, I feel as though it is not blood but red hot lava coursing through my veins.

I feel as though I have received a thorough pummeling. Every tissue of my body is drowning in a constant deluge of pain every moment of the day,” saying this, patient paused for breath. The doctor stared at him blankly.

The patient continued. “When I breathe, I feel as if fiery hot smoke is searing my lungs. I can neither eat nor drink. All these tubes attached to my body torment me twenty-four hours a day like so many skewers. I can neither walk nor sit. Nor can I go to the restroom on my own,” saying this, the patient looked at the doctor again. The doctor held his peace.

“Doctor, I am not a living corpse, I am a corpse tossing and turning in agony. I am not dying a slow death – I am a violently painful death. I beg at your feet, please rid me of this hellish life.”The doctor remained still.

“Doctor, my family has also suffered these two years. Poor souls, they are drowning in debt paying for my treatment. One or the other of them has to stay at my bedside round the clock, turning their back

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on life. My hellish affliction is killing my whole family.”

The doctor pulled a chair and sat down. He took the patient's hand and lowered his head. When he raised his head moment later, his eyes were moist with tears. He looked at the patient and saw his saw tears welling up in his eyes as well. He gently pressed the patient's hand, who mustered a weak smile in response.

The scene changed again.

It is the doctor's chamber. He is sitting alone. There is a knock at the door. It is the patient's oldest son. He joins the doctor and says he is here to put in a word for his father. “I dared not bring it up for fear you would think badly of me. Today, father told me he has spoken to you.”

He stops and fixes the doctor with a piercing gaze. He is afraid that if his father has not spoken to the doctor on the subject, or if the doctor has failed to understand, he would think the son is out to murder his father.

“He has asked me to be rid of this pain,” noticing that the young man is too timid to

say more, the doctor moves the story forward.

“You have said yourself there is no cure,” the son picks up courage. “To see him suffer like this is beyond endurance. If death is how this ends – and if he has to suffer like this as long as he lives, then...,” he abruptly stops as his courage fails him again, and then continues after a pause. “Do whatever you think is best, doctor. We just cannot see him suffer like this anymore”.

Having said what he has to say, the son looks up at the doctor, whose face is expressionless. The son stands up and leaves.

A little later, a nurse walks in. She is retiring next month. She has come to pick up an injectable. The doctor motions her to stay. “I have to discuss something with you”.

The nurse calls out a junior nurse, hands him the injectable with instructions, and takes the seat facing the doctor.

“My father was diagnosed with cancer three years after I graduated from medical

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school. Three more years later he died. It was a slow, painful death. I saw it all". The doctor takes off without any context.

"I am sorry to hear that, doctor," the nurse interjects, taken aback by the suddenness of it all.

"In the last days, when he was writhing in pain as he inched toward his death, it occurred to me many times I should put him to rest. I could not bear to see his suffer, but I was young and inexperienced back then. I dared not. My father tossed and turned in my arms, begging for death. Giving him life or health was beyond me but I failed to give him a painless death," he falls silent again.

"People cannot fathom, "ventures the nurse, "How awful a thing painful death is. Nobody wants to be responsible for a death. Everybody fears getting caught on the wrong side of the line. Because of our inability to shoulder the responsibility, we have to abandon people in the clutches of violently painful death".

"The patient in room number five is being discharged tomorrow," the doctor

continues after a while. "He does not want to toss and turn anymore. His son came to me. He agrees with his father."

The nurse nods gently, without saying anything. The doctor fishes a small bunch of keys from his drawer and puts it on the table. The nurse picks it up, opens the cabinet in the room and prepares an injection. She locks the cabinet, puts the syringe and the bunch of keys on the table, and leaves the room.

The doctor stares at the key bunch and the syringe for a long while.

The scene changed again. I was back in Amjad's timeline, his motorbike swooping and plunging sightlessly like a bat. The doctor's Right and Left had left. The four of them had decided the matter while I was away. I was about to ask them how they had classified the killing – or rather the mercy killing – of the patient, but then thought better of it.

I was feeling weird since my death. Things had started to seem somewhat different from how they used to be when I was alive. Back then, I could see in black

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and white. The divide was not all that clear anymore. Black and white now existed on the margins, with shades of gray taking up most of the field.

It was difficult to say if a shade of gray had more of black or white to it, but both were always present. The certitude about anything being right or wrong was getting shakier and shakier.

Now that I had the ability to read people's minds and know their intentions, some things that appeared clearly wrong when I was alive seemed right. Other things that were decidedly right before, seemed to be wrong now, again because of my newfound access to people's inner workings.

I had spent my whole life with a closed mind and now I trembled at the thought of having to account for it Beyond. I had never bothered to exert my own mind, always going with the flow, always staying with the multitude and always taking pride in it too. How would I answer God if he asked me how different my life had been from that of a mouse?



A lawyer had once put me this question in exactly these terms. It had sounded strange but I had paid little attention to it at the time. I went to deliver some papers to the lawyer in a matter involving my office. He came across as an educated person. Truth be told, I had seen him as a heretic.

In any case, there were some people sitting with him and on the course of the conversation, the question came up: Should a person exercise their own understanding or go along with what is customary in the society? The reference was the society, not religion, but I blurted out one should always go by what the mullah says.

On hearing this, the lawyer turned to face me. We had been through the introductions so he knew I was a teacher who had a university degree in history. He fixed me with his gaze for a long minute before saying, "If God asks why you did this or that, will you answer you did it because the mullah said so?"

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“Of course,” said I, brimming with confidence. “The mullah has read many books written by pious men. I fully trust his knowledge and competence.”

He again gave me the gaze for a long moment before saying, “Suppose I file a case with a Magistrate’s court. The presiding judge asks me as to the merits of the case. I cite statutes and case law that I think underpin my case. What will he do if what I say does not satisfy him? He will throw out my case – and that will be the end of it!”

He gave me a penetrating stare. I kept my silence. I had been unable to grasp the drift of it all.

He continued again, “Now, suppose, instead of citing statute and case law, I tell the judge I had consulted some big-shot lawyers who say the case has merits. What will the judge do then?” I started to have an inkling of where he was going with it, but I held my peace.

The lawyer spoke again. “If I took this position, the judge will not only throw out my case, he will also cancel my license to

practice law. Because presenting other lawyers' arguments verbatim does not make me a lawyer. I must use my own head."

He again looked at me but I remained tight-lipped.

He continued, "If I cannot stand before a Magistrate Third Class without using my own head, how can I stand before God? Will he not say, 'Even a mouse can mimic other mice around him. Would it not be good if I had made you a mouse? I made you the most intelligent of my beings, gave you a high-performing brain. How have you used it?' What will I tell God then?"

The lawyer turned his gaze to me and stayed at it without saying a word. Nor did I have anything to say. I was examining his argument – it was watertight. But how could I stake heaven on my lowly intellect? To err is human – and to err upon error. To follow the counsel of wise men is the best thing to do. They are forever the lighthouse. Why must then I depend my own intellect and risk hell? I trembled to

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argue with the lawyer, but his was a matter of faith. I couldn't stay silent.

Nervously, I ventured. "But Mr. Counsel, see, to err is human. If I err, God will be angry".

The lawyer smiled, "Now imagine you are playing hide and seek with your two small children. One of them is not making any real effort to seek you, but is coincidentally headed to where you are hiding. The other child is trying his best to seek you, but being a child, is headed in the opposite direction. Tell me, whose attitude will you find more endearing?"

I did not say anything to him at the time – just handed him the papers and left. Now as I remembered it, it occurred to me I had lived a mouse's life. Even lower! Because I had spent my life following the fads of the society without even realizing it while I lived. I had understood neither life nor the society – nor even my mother.

My mother had cried like a child when my grandmother had died. A schoolchild back then, I had been shocked by her

crying like that even more than by my grandmother's death.

I had thought mother would be very happy to see grandmother die, because she was always complaining to her. Now I realized that through all the squabbling, mother had never failed to attend to her mother-in-law's needs like a clockwork. Grandmother was an invalid, bed-ridden. Mother personally attended to all her needs. She never asked us to care for her. I had never noted this.

Nor had I realized that while grandmother lived, mother would always eat with her and never with us. Grandmother would never be bitter to mother even as she bickered – always wishing her daughter-in-law well.

I realized only after dying that more than half my father's modest earnings went to grandmother's treatment, and mother would never say a word about it.

Mother's badmouthing was not targeted at grandmother – it was targeted at her lot – or she thought it was targeted at her lot. In fact, she was not up against

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her lot. She was up against the web woven all around her because of the fear of the greed of her elders.

And so she cursed her ancestors – not her parents or grandparents but the past generations. Do people think their deeds will vanish the moment they die? Or that only their direct descendants are humans and those coming afterwards mere worms?

The reasons for mother's wailing over grandmother's death had been twofold: Grandmother's death, and how she had taken all her pent up anger out on the invalid. Grievances against generations past must be voiced. Bottled up, they murder you. Locked in this unwinnable struggle, mother finally lost. She too died.

I wondered if my mother's exertions for my grandmother's comfort had gone to her right register or left.

## Chapter 6

### Class

On Saturday, Amjad rose early, cheerful as a bird. He had a date with Kiran today. He selected his newest dress. His mother had already ironed it but he carefully ironed it again. Took his time to wash and scrub his motorbike squeaky clean. Buffed his blood red helmet. It would serve two purposes: One, it would make him look like the protagonist of a Hollywood movie and two, it would mask his identity from onlookers.

He had told his mother he had planned an outing with friends. He had to go early because Kiran said she had to return home

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before lunch. She had insisted on the morning because on a holiday, people seldom venture out of homes so early, minimizing the chance of being seen with a male friend in the street.

He sent Kiran a message over WhatsApp. She had arrived at her friend's place. He set out zooming along the deserted Saturday morning streets. He pulled up close to her friend's place and messaged Kiran. "Okeydokey baby!" came her reply. This 'Okeydokey' instead of 'okay' and 'baby' as a form of address electrified him.

In about five minutes, Kiran stepped out the door. Rocking a kurta and jeans, she had a chador on that covered half her face. Striding in his direction, she motioned him to hurry up. Amjad hastily began to kickstart the motorbike and his foot slipped.

He was nervous because he knew the meeting was to be secret. Also, he worried about the bike failing to start up. Not only would the date be cancelled, he would be embarrassed no end in front of Kiran.



He succeeded in starting the bike on the third attempt and thanked God for it.

Kiran's jeans was skinny and her kurta more of a tight fitting tunic. The chador she had thrown on to mask her identity. She climbed behind Amjad, sitting sidesaddle, and Amjad took off like a rocket. They sighed relief only once they had left the street. Amjad eased down on the throttle, settling into a jolly pace.

A little further, he took a turn and Kiran asked where he was headed. He couldn't get it and motioned her to go again.

"Where are you headed?" This time she put her mouth to his helmet and yelled. He gestured with his hand. She couldn't make anything of it but held her peace. In a little while, they arrived the parking lot of a small public park. Kiran hopped off as soon as Amjad pulled up. Amjad leaned the bike against the side stand and dismounted, taking off his helmet.

"You haven't oiled your hair again have you?" she laughed.

"No, no! Freshly shampooed," Amjad quickly ran his fingers through his hair.

“Which one? Cow brand?” she teased him again.

“No, no! A sachet of Sunsilk,” he said rather insecurely, and felt like hitting his face with the helmet for having let slip the word ‘sachet’. And right on cue, Kiran mocked him, “Hahaha! So did you splurge the whole sachet or save some for later?”

I had been with Amajd in the shower, and he had indeed saved some for later. Now, in the face of Kiran's mocking enquiry, he didn't know what to say, so kept his mouth shut. Kiran giggled on.

Finally, she asked him, “Why have we come to this park?”

“No mobile phone shop will be open this early. They open around eleven,” he half dreaded she would mock him for saying this— and his dread was well founded. “Hahaha! You have brought me here for a date?” Kiran taunted him.

What else, Amjad thought, but couldn't muster the courage to say so. Kiran wound her chador like a rope and let it hang around her neck like a muffler.

They walked for a while before she stopped. "Have you brought me here for a walk? I go to a gym every evening and need no walking. Take me somewhere I can sit. This heel isn't much good for walking either."

Amjad looked around. There was a bench nearby. They went and sat there. Kiran took off her high-heeled sandals and started to caress her bare feet.

Seeing her glistening white feet, Amjad felt like caressing and kissing them. He felt the fly of his pants bulge, the zipper unpleasantly pressing against his organ. He quickly looked away from her feet, instead focusing on the trees in the park.

A couple of minutes later, the bulging eased. He stole a look at her feet again. He felt an urge to eye up her bust but that would require him to turn his head toward Kiran, which he didn't dare.

Kiran lifted her feet up and rested them on the edge of the bench. "A little space, man, you are crowding me in". Red-faced, Amjad moved away in the bench. Kiran started to fiddle with her cell phone.

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“This phone is broken,” asked Amjad.

“No. Acts up now and then,” she continued to fiddle.

Amjad tried in vain to sneak a peek between her legs. The way she was sitting, hugging her knees, her breasts shielded behind them, and the chador covering her neck, he couldn't see a thing. His glance returned to her lips and cheeks. Now and again, he turned his gaze to the trees, but then turned his eyes sideways to look at her.

Ten or fifteen minutes passed like this. Kiran was absorbed in her cell phone and Amjad didn't have the courage to strike a conversation.

Suddenly Kiran started to put on her heels. “Come, let us go!”

“Where?” Amjad was baffled. “The market won't be open yet.”

“Let go somewhere and have coffee,” she quickly strapped her sandals on and shouldered her vanity case. They were on their way.

Amjad was now crunching numbers in his head. He had all of seven hundred rupees in his pocket. He was not sure this would be adequate, especially because he had no idea which coffee shop she had in mind.

They reached the parking lot. Amjad put on his helmet and kick-started the bike. Kiran shouted the address of their destination in his helmeted ear. It was a prohibitively expensive coffee joint in Gulberg. How much would coffee cost there? And if she orders something on the side?

They reached the coffee shop. She hopped off, quickly balled her chador and tucked it inside her vanity case, conjured a vanity mirror and patted her into shape. Meanwhile, Amjad also took off the helmet righted his hair.

“Let’s go!” Kiran took her arm and tugged. She abruptly stopped two steps later.

“What is this?” she pointed to Amjad’s other hand.

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“This? Helmet!” Amjad was a bit perplexed.

“Leave it here!” she yanked at the helmet.

“Here? Somebody will steal it,” he mildly protested.

“So be it. I will buy you a new one,” she tugged at him. Amjad reluctantly snagged with helmet with the motorcycle helmet.

Kiran held his arm and almost dragged him inside. A young woman in black pants, white shirt and black vest darted towards them. Amjad was nervous. Kiran faced her, “Table for two”.

“Yes, Ma'am,” mumbled the woman and pointed them to a table. Amjad was about to stride towards it when Kiran tugged at his arm again. Her eyes were set on a table in the other corner. He followed her gaze and saw a young couple sitting there. Kiran took Amjad's arm and headed in that direction. They took the table right next to the couple.

“Why have you brought me here so early?” said Kiran, slightly blushing.

“Ugh, you said the phone ...,” he took off, somewhat startled.

“You keep badgering me over the pone round the clock, don’t even let me sleep!” she said quite romantically.

The order taker arrived before Amjad had occasion to say anything. Amjad’s heart sank as soon as he opened the menu. The seven hundred rupees he had would not be enough to pay for two cups of coffee. As they scanned the menu, the server brought the bill to the next table.

“I don’t like this coffee shop,” Kiran blurted out suddenly. “Let us go where we went the last time”.

Before Amjad could ask which last time, Kiran rose to leave. Amjad rose willy-nilly. Kiran again too his arm and they stepped out. Amjad’s glance darted to his motorbike, and he started breathing again when he found the helmet where he had left it.

Kiran was not tugging at him anymore. Walking gently, they got where the bike was parked. He took it off the parking spot, sat astride it, kick-started it, the engine

roared to life. Kiran did not take the chador out of her vanity case.

“Where to now?” he asked.

“Wait, I’ll tell you,” she said as she stood there. Then she moved and stood behind Amjad. He waited for her to climb behind him but she remained planted where she was. Five or six minutes had passed before she hopped on, sitting astride, and tightly clung to Amjad.

As they left the parking lot, Amjad saw the couple from the table next to theirs at the door of the coffee shop.

Amjad’s heart was galloping like a horse. Kiran was clinging to him, maintaining full-body contact. For the first time, he had a feeling he was on a date. He wished his friends were here. How jealous they would be seeing the girl clinging to him like this.

A little further, Kiran tapped on his shoulder. He looked back to see her motioning him to stop. He pulled up. She hopped off and started to take the chador out of her vanity case.



“Okay, where to now?” Amjad asked.

“Nowhere,” she said. “I have received a message over WhatsApp. I have to go. You can go now.”

“What?” Amjad was distressed. “Are you not going to change your phone?”

“No – I will go with my driver,” she said wrapping on the chador. “I will message you.”

He was still trying to make sense of the situation when Kiran flagged down a passing rickshaw and left. Dumbfounded, Amjad stood there for a while, then headed to a cabin [khokha] to buy loose cigarettes.

I froze time. What just happened had left me flabbergasted, even more so than Amjad. I rewound time and got where Kiran was a day before.

She was on phone with a girlfriend. “What? Kami is going out with Amtal?”

“Yes, Madam,” her friend intoned. “I had told you he just can't help.”

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“I will sort out this girl afterwards. First, let me see about Kami. He is slipping through my hands like a fish”.

“What will you do?” said the friend. “They are going on a date tomorrow.”

“Don’t you worry,” she Kiran. “I am not losing Kami, not at least to Amtal. Just find out for me where they are going.”

As she hung up, she sent Amjad lewd messages and asked him to take her out on the pretext of buying a phone. Fast forwarded to when they were sitting in the park, she received a message from her friend saying Kami and Amtal were going to the Gulberg coffee shop.

I let time go by.

“What was all this?” I asked Amjad's Right.

“Just as you can’t go Beyond without dying,” said Right, “you can’t be friends with the rich without piling money.”

“What do you mean?” I struggled to grasp the meaning of what he said.

“Kiran come from money,” said Left. “She will have friends from her own social set. Amjad is to her more like her servants. She uses him as and when the need arises, then lets him be.”

“But Amjad is deluded,” Right continued. “He believes in human equality, and thinks Kiran is a friend to him.”

I got it, and I felt sorry for Amjad. I didn't feel like saying anything. Still, I asked, “This is how she thinks. She hasn't harmed anyone. There is no need for her going out with Amjad to go to her left register, right?”

“Everything she did today goes to her left register,” said Amjad's Left.

“In the Left register?” I asked, astonished. “I have seen you overlook major misdeeds by some and now you put Kiran's deviant way of thinking in the left register?”

“Thinking is the biggest issue with humans,” said Amjad's Right.

I was about to say what has action to do with thinking? You can think anything, but never get around to actually doing most of

it. Then it occurred to me intention is also thinking, and deeds are judged based on intentions.

Presently Kiran's Right and Left arrived.

"Intentions matter," said her Left. He had read my thought. "But this is different."

"Different?" I was perplexed. "Something different again?"

"Nothing new," said Kiran's Left. "This is the real deal with humans".

"Thinking is the real deal with humans?" I was unable to stomach it. "If thinking is the real deal with humans, what about deeds? A thinking person is a useless person. That's why they say thinker, goner. The real deal is deed, action! The doer of deeds is the only useful person. Mere thinking bookworms are a burden on the planet. And you say deeds count for nothing?" Provoked, I went on and on.

I see no use for the dreaming types. And those who talk and talk, they just waste time. Inefficacious good for nothings. They can neither accomplish anything nor help anybody on the way to great deeds.

It took me a good two minutes to stop my train of thought even after I had stopped talking. The sprites waited patiently until I was ready for their response.

“Ajjo, the human kind is a great, great work of God,” said Amjad’s Left. “A human being is bigger than his or her mind, way bigger...”

“What?” I cut in. “A while ago you said the human mind is the greatest creation of the universe.”

“Not the human mind,” said Kiran’s Right. “The human kind.”

“But what is a human being without the human mind?” I was perplexed.

“A human being is way bigger than his or her mind,” Kiran’s Left began. “He can direct his mind to whatever he wishes. But if he is lazy and does not constructively employ his mind, the mind takes flight on its own and those thoughts are useless daydreams that eventually render the human good for nothing.”

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“The mind takes flight on its own?” I asked in amazement.

“Yes,” said Amjad’s Right. “A mind is like a wild horse. It will take you places if you succeed in taming it. If not, it will destroy you.”

“Well?” I still could not quite wrap my head around it but at least I could see great humans spent most of their time thinking. Carrying a carload of bricks did not make one a great human being.

Having read my thought, Kiran’s Right continued, “Yes, carrying huge loads does not may anyone a great human being. Not that carrying loads or other physical labor is bad – it is dishonorable. All honest work is honorable. But both animals and machines can carry loads. Exerting one’s mind is what makes a human being great.”

This mental exertion again confused me, but Kiran’s Right read my mind and continued without giving me the opportunity to interject.

“Mental exertion is the noblest, highest, and hardest labor of all. This is what makes humans human. Look around you and tell

me: the dresses that you wear, the skyscrapers you build, the cars you drive around, the aircraft you fly about in – are not all these the fruits of mental exertion?”

I exerted my mind – there was little else I could do – and I stayed at it for quite a while. It made sense. Physical labor but meant little beyond translating thoughts into physical form.

They again read my thought. “Not that manual work has no value,” said Amjad’s Left. “Without manual work, no thought would ever be realized. But the thing is, animals and machines can contribute to physical labor but not to mental labor. This is the quintessentially human endeavor, and this is the hardest work of all.”

I got it all now, but the mental effort it took had tired me out.

“Okay, okay,” I conceded. “I get it that the human kind has progressed by thinking. But what has Kiran’s thinking achieved?”

“Just as human thinking can build material constructs, it can likewise create ideological constructs. Blood relations, friendships and rivalries, social classes,

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good and evil – everything grows out of human thought. Consider how you think little of the thinking man, but the West prizes the thinking man above all else. This is how your thinking differs from theirs.”

I could read their train of thought beyond these words: That malicious, evil, mean, and decadent thinking – like Kiran’s thinking about humans from Amjad’s class – always went to the left register.



## Chapter 7

### Whore

Amjad couldn't quite make out how Kiran had used him, but he knew well enough he had been used. He felt like hurling abuse at her over WhatsApp but he thought better of it. For one thing, he couldn't afford to rub the wrong way that daughter of a powerful family and for another, he couldn't pull the plug on friendship with a rich and beautiful young woman. It was a big deal among his friends that he had the affairs with a rich girl.

Swallowing his pride helped Amjad keep the façade of normalcy but sent waves of bitterness coursing through his system. He

reached the [khokha], bought a loose cigarette, and lit it. He felt like a loser. Kiran had ill-used him. She should have kept the appearances of having coffee together. What if it was expensive and he couldn't buy two cups – he would have loved to buy her a cup and see her sip it.

He remembered Kiran's bare feet – and his mind wandered to the legs attached to those glistening white feet. They would be even whiter. His again felt the zipper of his fly dig into him. He sat astride on his standing motorbike. He had half a mind to jerk off then and there thinking about Kiran but that was not possible.

The increasing pressure on the fly convinced him to take his mind off Kiran. But the matter could not rest anymore. He thought of going home and utilizing the leftover shampoo in the sachet – but then he remembered Shani. He sent her a message over WhatsApp. "Hey beautiful, what are you up to?"

Two minutes later, her response arrived, "What time?"

“Right now my love. I can't wait to be with you,” he responded right away.

“Okay, an hour from now,” Shani replied.

“Just in case, I have only seven hundred rupees,” he told her. Shani responded with a winking emoticon. Amjad's bitterness evaporated instantaneously. He felt electrified.

“What is this communion of man and woman but a celebration of life!” remarked Shani as she and Amjad lay side by side on the grimy mattress in her room.

“A celebration? You call this dirty union a celebration? Of life no less?” said Amjad pawing her bare belly.

“Why do something you find unclean?” His prudery irritated her.

“Can't help. Just as we poop and pee,” he said biting her shoulder.

“What if you are unable to poop and pee?” Shani pushed his head off her shoulder.

“We die. But that doesn’t make it any less disgusting,” now Amjad’s temper was rising.

Shani said nothing. Amjad thought he had annoyed her. The muscles of his thighs were throbbing. If he went off the rail now, everything would be ruined. He kissed her hand.

“I said dirty because you have to shower afterwards,” he tried to laugh it off. “This is the life’s most beautiful act. Without it, life loses all charm”.

Shani held her peace. She had an urge to kick him off her bed, spit on his face, go to the bath and scrub her body clean of his touch. But she remembered how happy the new toys had made her kids, and she knew there was no way she could act on this impulse of hers.

“Man appears from the mother’s vagina and suckles at her breasts. He stays at it all his life – in and out of the vagina, suckling at the breasts. This is a ritual of life and it gives rise to new life,” she said.

Amjad didn’t much understand her drift, but it irked him nonetheless. What rubbish,

he thought. Human life is God's supreme creation – what could it have to do with this filthy romp?

A whore will be a whore, he told himself. Is it any wonder she glorifies the fucking business? The throbbing muscles of his thighs meant he could afford to annoy her. He wanted to keep his mouth shut but he couldn't help.

"In and out of the vagina is true of man. What about woman?" he blurted out.

"Woman does her part in bringing forth life," she said looking at the ceiling. "The fading life enters her and the new life emerges. The facing life suckles and enters; the new life emerges and suckles. What is the difference? The cycle of life goes on forever".

Amjad went silent. He still did not quite comprehend it but his heart was sinking.

"Why did you become a whore, Shani?" he spoke as if in a dream. "You say strange things. A teacher I had used to say things like these."

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“He who made you a whore’s client made me a whore,” she went along with the charade, speaking as if hypnotized.

“What?” Amjad cried out. “Farhad?”

Farhad, Amjad’s neighbor, was a hashish dealer. He was Amjad’s trusted source of hashish, and it was he who had put Amjad in touch with Shani as a whore.

Shani stayed silent for a second, then laughed uncontrollably. “You are silly!”

Amjad took this opportunity and got on top of her, kissing her lips.

“Easy on the goods, man,” she shoved him aside. “You are smothering me.”

Amjad was somewhat miffed by her power play but his arousal kept him from getting up and leaving. All he could do to express his annoyance was to lay still. Shani took no notice of his ruse.

“The society, not Farhad,” she continued in a while. “The society neither lets you marry nor sleep with a woman in any other way. Your only recourse is to come to a whore. Likewise, the society forces women like me into becoming whore. The husband

can't find work and I know no work. What are we to do then – strangle our children to death?”

Amjad said nothing. Her shoving had spoiled his mood. His silence told Shani he was angry.

“Oh, my handsome client,” she said, holding his chin and kissing his cheek. “Come, satiate me – or would you rather keep me on a simmer?”

I froze time.

Amjad left the cabin [khokha] and arrived in a neighborhood behind Shalimar Garden. The streets were narrow and dirty. He stopped at a street corner and sent a text message over WhatsApp in English, “I am here”.

Quick came the reply, “Five minutes”.

Ten more minutes and a second message came, “Come in”.

Amjad replied, again in English, “Me is coming”.

He kick-started the motorbike and took off. Shani's home was in another street

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after taking a right turn from the street he was in. He knew the place and that the door would be open for him. He parked his bike in front of the house next to Shani's next-door neighbors', and darted in. She was standing right next to the door, waiting for him.

Shani was thirty, her skin a light ebony, her body firm, her features sharp. Her husband drove a rickshaw for pittance these days. Shani had two children, both of them sons, one eight and the other nine-and-a-half years old.

After Amjad's message, she had talked to her husband to ascertain what time he was returning. He was returning late in the night. Shani had had a word with the woman next door and sent the boys to her place.

The neighbors knew she was a whore. Wife, mother, and whore! You can't have secrets in poor neighborhoods. The poor can't survive without leaning against one another in any case. How can a whorehouse run in a shanty without the



whole neighborhood joining in the conspiracy?

She took Amjad straight to her bed and started taking off his shirt. She hoped to be through with him and see him off within an hour. She had told her sons she was having some people around who had some work for her. She would receive payment for the work and buy them toys from Baba Seeti, she had said.

The children had no inkling of what services their mother was about to render to buy him toys. Nor were the neighbors about to taunt them about it. What was there to taunt about anyways? The poor have no pretensions of honor.

Amjad had hugged her tight and said she pulled him as death pulled the living. Shani had said death ended all and that the pull had to do with the blood-drinking like. This has led her to wax lyrical about communion of man and woman being a celebration of life, which had piqued Amjad.

I rewind a little. Shani was sitting in her bed and Amjad was crying, his head

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resting on her lap. Shani was trying to placate him.

“Come on, man. Don't be such a crybaby. Up, up!”

Amjad did not move.

“Chin up,” she moved her fingers through his hair. “These cops are such bastards.”

“They beat me up so bad Shani,” he sobbed.

“What of it,” Shani held his face in both her hands and lifted it up. “Be a man. It can't be all that bad – they roughed you up in the street. Thanks god they did not take you to the police station. You have no idea how bad the beating gets there.”

“I wouldn't mind if they had taken me to the police station and killed me there. They slapped me in public and hurled profanities at my mother and sisters.”

“Take heart,” she continued her efforts to lift his spirits. “You are a lion. It is not as if their slapping would hurt you.”

Amjad was inconsolable. "He abused me in public, called me a pimp, called my mother and sisters whores".

These last words had a silencing effect on Shani. She kept stroking his head, kept caressing and patting him wordlessly.

After a while, Amjad felt better and stopped crying. He got up and went to wash his face.

I rewound time a little more. Shani was making tea and Amjad was sitting by her at a low stool.

"Hey, you have stopped coming," Shani said. "What is the matter? Made a new connection?"

"No, no Shani," Amjad said, somewhat embarrassed. "It's just that I was busy".

"Oh yes, you are a big shot now. Why would you make time for a whore like me?"

Beat. "Hey, don't you keep calling yourself a whore. I don't like it."

"Why?" About to pour tea in dilapidated cups, Shani froze.

“Well, I don’t like it,” said Amjad, bad-temperedly

Shani pinned him with a piercing gaze. Her eyes glistened for a fleeting moment.

She wanted to see where it would go. She had half a mind to ask Amjad why he did not like her calling herself a whore when she was a whore and he met her because she was a whore. Amjad’s bad temper scared her into silence. She kept her silence because she dared not anger him.

Ok, scratch that,” said Shani, handing him a cup of tea. “Tell me, where have you been all these days?”

“I was ... was about,” said Amjad as he took a sip.

“Incredible times! The whore has to ring up You Highness for a rendezvous,” said Shani. “Damn, I said whore again. Old habit!”

Amjad sipped at his tea in silence.

“What is it?” Shani asked, a bit seriously this time. “Hope all is well?”

“This job I had ... I have lost it,” Amjad said weepily.

“Oh so it was this!” Shani’s voice was muffled. I peeked at her thoughts.

TOUCH WHITE. Shani was a twelfth-grader when her father died. Her older brother was a drug addict. They fell on hard times. Her father had been a clerk at a government office. Shani’s mother was convinced she could get by on the meagre widow’s pension from that office. The drug addict son was unlikely to find gainful employment but could depend on the shrine of Data Sahab for free meals. Afraid the society will turn her daughter into a whore in return for daily bread, she was in a hurry to marry her off.

TOUCH WHITE. Shani was young and beautiful, had some education, but nobody was eager to ask for her hand in marriage because her father was dead and her brother a drug addict. Those who did show any interest demanded dowry in the form of a motorcycle or such. Finally, a vegetable market porter fell to her lot.

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TOUCH WHITE. Shani's firstborn was three months old. She had kept him covered up until now by repurposing her disused scarves. Now he needed clothes as well as supplementary food. Her husband's daily earnings barely sufficed to keep him fed for the daily grind and her to breastfeed the infant.

TOUCH WHITE. The woman from next door is sitting with Shani. Says she, "Sis, our men cannot make enough money to keep our households afloat".

Shani concurs. "I badger Akbar to do better but what can the poor soul do? He lugs heavy loads all day at the market. What else can he do? No dough for us to start a shop or buy a rickshaw."

"I know this man," the woman said scanning Shani with a penetrating gaze. "He comes to me once in a while. He is no king, but he pays me what little he can."

Shani kept her head low, scratching the earthen floor. She knew what the woman meant. Everybody in the neighborhood knew who of the women welcomed clients or went to them. She felt like wailing loudly.

Before she could act on this thought or think better of it, her infant son cried – loudly.

TOUCH WHITE. Her husband has not been paid his wages for two days now. She rings up two clients. One dies not pick up. The other fulfils himself by passing lewd remarks about her various body parts. She has two other clients she would rather not call up. One is a masochist who is given to pinching her all over so hard in bed her eyes tear up. The other one is so mean he pays up half what he agrees. One time, he left only a fifty-rupee note. She rings up Amjad and finds him hesitant. Amjad is the only one of his clients who is younger than she was. She thinks he is unenthusiastic because of the spending involved. She is able to draw him out by waxing romantic and also telling Amjad she has a private matter to discuss with him. Now he tells him he is jobless. He reminds her of her younger brother.

“Don’t you worry,” she tells Amjad. “You’ll find a job. A good worker is always in demand. Now hurry up and be done before it is time for my children to return”.

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“But Shani, I have no money on me right now,” says Amjad embarrassedly.

“Never mind that,” she laughs. “You always pay me. Don’t pay me this time. You can pay me at double the rate next time.”

“But why would you let me have you without the payment?” Amjad hates himself.

“Man, you are so handsome,” she kisses him on the forehead. “I didn’t call you up for money – I did it because I wanted you so bad”.

Amjad feels like the most important person under the son. His depression instantly evaporates. He is happy.

As she bears the brunt of Amjad pounding away on top of her, Shani decides to call up the sadist.

I let time go again.

Amjad had left Shani’s place and is gliding along on his motorbike – not zooming at a Godspeed but at a leisurely pace.



All the rest of that day I agonized over whether this episode will go to Shani's right or left register. Come evening, I saw a great press of Right and Left all over the place. I was amazed.

"What is this multitude of Right and Left here for?" I asked Amjad's Right.

"They are the whole society's Right and Left," came the reply.

"The whole society's?" I was concerned. "What happened?"

"Nothing," said Amjad's Left. "They are here about registering Shani's encounter."

"Okay, right," I said fixing me gaze at Shani's Right and Left. "But why are whole society's Right and Left here?"

"Because this encounter will be registered for the whole society," said Shani's Left.

"For the whole society?" I was befuddled. "Why for the whole society? Whoever sows should reap. Why the society?"

Nobody said anything.

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The scene changed. Akbar has Shani by her braid, pummeling her with a show. "You fucking whore!"

Shani responds, "Whore? Your mother is a whore. You eunuch! Why don't you try and make some money if you don't like what I do?"

Akbar gave her a thorough thrashing. Tired out, he pushed her to the floor and sat on the grimy bed.

Shani lay there crying for a while, then it was as if she had a visitation by the powerful goddess Kali. "Why does everybody hate a whore? Because she is a woman? What does she do? Because she charges for the utility of her body, right? What does the laborer who lugs bricks do? Does he not carry those loads on his bare body? Does not charge for the utility of his body? Why is his calling noble? Why isn't my hard work honorable? Is this not bone-crushing labor? If you think it is pleasurable work, why don't you try it yourself? You cannot say no to any filthy stinking foulmouthed wolfish sonovabitch! Whoever throws you a coin, like a bone to a dog,

you have to wag your tail and open your legs to him. He may bite you, pinch you, salivate all over you, rub his body covered in pimples and pustules against yours – you have to lay back and welcome him and be thankful for it. You cannot turn away a client – a client is a god. A whore endures all this and gets a bad name for it.”

Before I could say anything, I felt myself rising higher and higher like a cyclone, my head ascending towards the space. I knew then the technical issue had been resolved and my death was reaching completion.

I was thankful the dark void of death was finally ridding my of the suffering that was life.