



PIR-E-KAMIL

THE PERFECT RENDEZ

UMERA AHMED

Translation of the original Urdu text
and poem-writing novel by **Umera Ahmed**

Peer-e-Kamil (S.A.W)

By Umera Ahmad

[English version]

The Perfect Mentor (PBUH)

Foreword

Pir-e-Kamil, The Perfect Mentor, has been written for you. For that moment in your life when you need to decide between light and darkness. You may tread the path that leads to light or, if you wish, take the path that ends in darkness.

Even in the light one must watch one's step to avoid stumbling; once in the dark, it makes no difference whether one can or cannot see where one is going, for the gloom darkens with every step till darkness becomes one's destiny. But sometimes in the dark, before the first misstep, one regrets the path taken and may want to turn back to that fork in the road of life where the journey began. Then the only solace is that voice that guides and one has no choice but to listen and follow. Pir-e-Kamil is that voice that can guide one and can lead one from the dark towards the light, if one so wishes to take that path—_And indeed guidance is given to them who desire it.' Let us once again listen to that Perfect Mentor!

Umera Ahmed Email: - umerahmed@yahoo.com

Contents

Chapter 1.....	3
Chapter 2.....	47
Chapter 3.....	84
Chapter 4.....	119
Chapter 5.....	151
Chapter 6.....	210
Chapter 7.....	258
Chapter 8.....	306
Chapter 9.....	329
Chapter 10.....	361

Chapter 1

‘My life’s dearest desire?’ She fell into deep thought, the pen between her lips. Then drawing a deep breath, she gave a wan smile, ‘Hard to say...’

‘Why is it hard?’ Javeria asked her.

‘Because I desire so many things, and each one of them is so important for me,’ she replied, shaking her head.

They were both sitting at the farther end of the auditorium, their backs to the wall. It was their eighth day at the F.Sc. classes and they spent their free period there. Nibbling salted peanuts one by one, Javeria

repeated her question. ‘What’s your life’s dearest wish, Imama?’ Imama looked at her with some surprise and pondered over the question. Then parrying the question with a demand, she said, ‘You tell me first what you desire most.’

‘I asked you first, so you should reply first,’ retorted Javeria. ‘Very well...let me think,’ Imama conceded defeat. ‘My life’s dearest desire...’ she mumbled to herself.

‘Well, one wish is to live long...very long,’ she said.

‘Why?’ laughed Javeria.

‘Fifty or sixty years are too short for me. One should live to be at least a hundred. And then there is so much I wish to do. Should I die early, all my wishes would remain unfulfilled.’ She popped a peanut into her mouth.

‘What else?’ said Javeria.

‘I want to be the most outstanding doctor in the country—the best eye specialist, so that when the history of eye surgery in Pakistan is compiled, my name will be at the very top of the list.’ She looked up with a smile.

‘And what if you cannot become a doctor? After all, that depends both on merit and luck,’ Javeria stated.

‘That is out of the question. I am working so hard to make it to the merit list. Besides my parents can afford to send me abroad if I don’t get into a medical college here.’

‘But still, what if you cannot be a doctor?’

‘That’s impossible. It’s my life’s dearest desire: I can sacrifice everything for it. This has been my lifelong dream, and how can one just ignore or forget one’s dreams? Impossible!’ Imama shook her head decisively as she picked another peanut off her palm and nibbled on it.

__Nothing is impossible in life—anything can happen at any time.

Suppose your wish does not come true, how would you react?’

Imama fell into thought again. __To begin with, I’ll weep a lot...a great deal...for many days—and then I’ll die.’

Javeria burst out laughing. __You just said you wanted a very long life, and now you want to die.’

__Obviously. What’s the point of living then? All my plans are built around my career in medicine and if that is not to be a part of my life, then what remains?’

__So you mean this one dream of your life will wipe out all other dreams?’

__Yes, think of it that way.’

__Your most important desire is to be a doctor, not to live long?’

__You could say so.’

__Very well—so, if you can’t become a doctor, then how would you

choose to die? Would you choose: suicide or a natural death?’ __A natural death of course. I can’t kill myself,’ Imama replied casually. __And if you do not die naturally, then what? I mean, if you do not die soon, despite not being a doctor, you would go on living.’ __No. I know that I’ll die very soon if I can’t be a doctor. I will be so heart-broken that I will not survive,’ she replied decisively. __It is difficult to believe that a cheerful person like you can be so despairing as to cry yourself to death. And that too just because you were unable to pursue a medical career. Sounds funny,’ mocked Javeria.

__Stop talking about me. Tell me about yourself. What is your heart’s greatest desire?’ Imama changed the subject.

__Let it go...’

__Why let it go? Come on tell me...’

__You will be offended if I say it.’ Javeria spoke hesitatingly. Imama turned around in surprise to look at her. __Why would I be offended?’

Javeria was quiet.

__What is it that I will mind?’ Imama repeated her question.

__You will...’ Javeria murmured.

__Why should your life’s greatest wish so affect my life that I would get upset?’ Imama was quite irritated. __Is it your wish that I not become a doctor?’ Imama seemed to suddenly remember.

‘Oh, no!’ laughed Javeria. ‘There is more to life than being a doctor,’ she stated philosophically.

‘Stop talking in riddles and answer me,’ Imama said firmly. ‘I promise I will not mind anything you say.’ She held out her hand in a gesture of peace.

‘Regardless of your promise you are going to be very angry when you hear what I have to say. Let’s talk of something else,’ Javeria replied. ‘All right—let me guess. Your decision is linked to something of great

value to me, right?’ queried Imama after a thoughtful pause. Javeria nodded her head.

‘The question is: what is so important to me that I should...’ she stopped in mid-sentence. ‘But unless I know the nature of your wish, I cannot come to a conclusion. Javeria, tell me please. The suspense is too

much for me,’ she pleaded.

Javeria was lost in thought. Imama studied her face. Javeria looked up at her after a while.

‘Other than my career, there is only one thing I value most in my life,’ Imama addressed her, ‘and if you want to say something in that context, then say so. I won’t mind.’ Imama was serious.

Javeria was taken aback. Imama was looking at the ring on her hand. A smile crossed Javeria’s face.

‘My life’s dearest wish is that you...’ Javeria revealed her thoughts. Imama’s face went white with shock. Javeria could not guess the impact her words had on Imama, but the expression on her face showed that the reaction was much more intense than she had expected.

‘I did tell you that you would be offended,’ Javeria tried to redeem the situation, but Imama stared back without a word.

Moiz was howling with pain, doubled up and holding on to his stomach. The twelve-year-old boy facing him wiped the blood off his nose on the sleeve of his torn shirt, and swung the tennis racquet in his hand to hit Moiz on the leg.

Moiz let out another scream and straightened up. With disbelief he looked at his brother— younger by two years—who was hitting him with the same racquet that Moiz had brought there.

This was the third time they had fought this week, and every time it was his younger brother who started the fight. He and Moiz had never had a good relationship and had fought since

childhood. But their quarrels had been mostly verbal and included threats, but of late they had become physical.

This is what happened today. They had come back from school together. When they got down from the car, the younger brother roughly dragged his bag out of the boot as Moiz was picking up his school bag. In the process, he bruised Moiz's hand, making him wince with pain.

‘Have you gone blind?’ Moiz cried out as his brother walked off nonchalantly. He heard Moiz, turned round, looked at him, then opened the front door, and walked into the lounge. Incensed, Moiz followed on his heels. ‘The next time you do anything like that I'll break your hand!’ Moiz shouted.

The younger boy took his bag off his shoulder, put it down, and with hands on his hips, defiantly faced Moiz.

‘I will—so what will you do? Break my hand? Have you the guts?’

‘You'll find out if you repeat what you did today.’ Moiz headed toward his room.

But his brother stopped him, grabbing his bag with all his strength.

‘No—tell me now.’ He flung Moiz's bag down. Flushed with anger,

Moiz picked up his brother's bag and hurled it away. Without a pause, his brother landed a sharp blow on Moiz's leg. Moiz lunged at him, punching his face, and his nose began to bleed. Despite that, there was no sound from the younger boy. He grabbed Moiz's tie and tried to choke him. Moiz retaliated by grabbing his collar—there was a tearing sound as the shirt ripped. With all his force, Moiz hit his brother on his midriff so as to make him lose his grip on him.

‘Now I'll show you! I'll break your hand!’ Shouting and abusing, Moiz picked up the tennis racquet that was lying in corner of the lounge. The next thing he knew was that the racquet was in his brother's hand and was swung with such force that Moiz could not save himself. Blows rained down on him, on his back and legs.

Their older brother came into the lounge in a fit of rage.

‘What is your problem? You create an upheaval as soon as you get home!’ At the sound of his voice, the younger brother first lowered and then raised the racquet again.

‘And you—aren't you ashamed of yourself for raising your hand at your older brother?’ The eldest brother looked at the hand holding the racquet.

‘No,’ he retorted without any remorse. He threw the racquet down, picked up his bag and walked away.

‘You will have to pay for this,’ Moiz called out after him, rubbing his sore leg.

‘Sure, why not!’ He gave Moiz a weird smile. ‘Get a bat the next time. It was no fun hitting you with a tennis racquet—no bones are broken.’ ‘Check out your nose—it’s broken for sure.’ Furious, Moiz looked towards the staircase where his brother had been standing just a while ago.

For the fourth time, Mrs. Samantha Richards stared at the boy sitting on the first chair in the second row by the window. With complete disregard for the class, he was busy staring out of the window. From time to time he would look at Mrs. Richards, and then turn back to the view from the window.

This was her first day as biology teacher at one of the international schools in Islamabad. She was a diplomat’s wife and a teacher by profession. They had recently arrived in Islamabad. At all her husband’s postings, she had taken up teaching assignments in the schools attached to the embassy.

Continuing the syllabus and teaching schedule of her predecessor Ms. Mariam, after a brief introduction to the class Mrs Richards began explaining the function of the heart and the circulation system and drew a diagram on the board.

She looked at the student who was looking distractedly out of the window and, using a time-worn technique, she fixed her gaze on him and stopped speaking. A hush fell over the class. The boy turned back to the class. Meeting his gaze, Mrs. Richards smiled and resumed her lecture. For a while she continued to keep her gaze on the boy who was now busy writing in his notebook. Then she turned her attention to the class.

She believed the boy was embarrassed enough not to let his attention wander, but just a couple of minutes later she found him looking out of the window again. Once more, she stopped her lecture, and he turned to look at her. This time she did not smile. She continued addressing the class. As she turned to the writing board, the student again turned to the window. A look of annoyance crossed her face and as she fell silent again, the boy looked at her with a frown, and looked away—beyond the window.

His attitude was so insulting that Mrs. Samantha Richards’s face flushed. ‘Salar, what are you looking at?’ she asked sternly. ‘Nothing,’ came the one word reply. He gave her a piercing look.

‘Do you know what I am teaching?’

‘Hope so.’ His tone was so rude that Samantha Richards capped the marker she had in her hand and slapped it down on the table. ‘If that is so, then come up here and draw and label this diagram.’ She erased the figure on the board. The boy’s face changed a myriad colors. She

saw the students in the class exchange glances. The boy stared coldly at Samantha Richards. As she cleaned the last trace of her diagram from the board, he left his seat. Moving swiftly, he picked up the marker from the table and with lightning speed—in exactly two minutes and fifty-seven seconds—he had drawn and labeled the diagram. Replacing the cap on the marker, he slapped it down on the table just as Mrs. Richards had done, and, without looking at her, returned to his seat.

Mrs. Richards did not see him tossing down the marker or walking back to his seat. She was looking in disbelief at the diagram—which had taken her ten minutes to make—and which he had completed in less than three minutes. It was far better than her work: she could not find even a minor flaw in it. Somewhat embarrassed, she turned to look at the boy. Once again he was looking out of the window.

Waseem knocked on the door for the third time; this time he could hear Imama inside. ‘Who is it?’

‘Imama it’s me. Open the door,’ said Waseem standing back. There was silence on the other side.

A little later, the lock clicked and Waseem turned the door knob to enter. Imama moved towards her bed, with her back to Waseem.

‘What brings you here at this time?’

‘Why did you turn in so early? It’s only ten now,’ replied Waseem as he walked in.

‘I was sleepy.’ She sat down on the bed. Waseem was alarmed to see her.

‘Have you been crying?’ It was a spontaneous remark. Imama’s eyes were red and swollen and she was trying to look away.

‘No—no, I wasn’t crying. Just a bad headache.’ She tried to smile. Waseem, sitting down beside her, held her hand, trying to check her temperature. ‘Any fever?’ he asked with some concern. Then he let go of her hand. ‘You don’t have fever. Perhaps you should take a tablet for your headache.’

‘I have.’

‘Good. Go to sleep then. I had come to talk to you but you’re in no state...’ Waseem turned to leave the room. Imama made no effort to stop him. She followed him to the door and shut it

behind him. Flinging herself on the bed, she buried her face in the pillow—she was sobbing again.

The thirteen-year-old boy was engrossed in a music show on TV when Tyyaba peeped in. She looked at her son somewhat uncertainly, and entered the room, irritated.

‘What’s going on?’

‘I’m watching TV,’ he replied without looking at her.

‘Watching TV. For God’s sake! Are you aware that your exams have started?’ Tyyaba asked, standing in front of him.

‘So what?’ he said, annoyed.

‘So what? You should be in your room with your books, not sitting here watching this vulgar show,’ Tyyaba scolded him.

‘I have studied as much as I need to. Now please move out of my way.’ His tone reflected his irritation. ‘All the same go in and study.’ Tyyaba stood her ground. ‘No. I will not get up, nor will I go in and study. My studies and my papers are my concern, not yours.’

‘If you were concerned about your studies, would you be sitting here?’ ‘Step aside.’ He ignored Tyyaba’s comment and rudely shooed her away. ‘I’m going to talk to your father today.’ Tyyaba tried a threat. ‘You can talk to him for all I care. What will happen? What is he going to do? I’ve told you that I’ve already prepared for my exams, so then what’s your problem?’

‘This is your final examination. You should be concerned about it.’ Tyyaba softened her tone.

‘I am not a four-year-old who you need to nag. I have a better understanding of my responsibilities than you so don’t pester me with your silly advice.’

‘Your exams are on. Pay attention to your studies. You should be in your room. I will have a word with your father!’

‘What rubbish!’ Standing up, he flung the remote control at the wall and stomping his feet, left the room. Tyyaba, helpless and humiliated, watched him go.

It was New Year’s Eve: thirty minutes to go before the New Year began. A group of ten or so teenagers were roaring around the city streets on their motorbikes, doing all kinds of stunts.

Some of them wore shiny headbands to celebrate the coming year. An hour ago they were in one of the uptown supermarkets, teasing girls with whistles. They had firecrackers too which they let off to celebrate. At a quarter to twelve they reached the parking lot of the Gymkhana Club where a New Year's party was in full swing. The boys also had invitations to the party and their parents were already there.

When they got in, it was five to midnight. In a few moments, the lights in the hall and the dance floor would be switched off and then with a display of fireworks on the lawns, the New Year would be heralded in. The partying would be on all night—dancing, drinking—all the festivities especially organized for the occasion by the Gymkhana management. 'Lights off' meant a display of complete abandon—that was what the crowds came for.

One of the teenagers who had joined the party was on the dance floor, rocking to the beat and impressing all with his performance. At ten seconds to twelve the lights went off. Voices and laughter filled the hall as people counted the seconds to the New Year, and this rose to a pitch as the clock struck midnight and the hall lit up again. The teenagers were now out in the parking lot, their car horns blaring away. Beer can in hand, the youth who was on the dance floor got on the roof of a car. He pulled out another beer can from his jacket and pitched it at the windscreen of a parked car, which shattered with an explosion as the full can hit it. He stood on the car, calmly drinking from the can of beer in his hand.

For the last half hour Salar had been watching Kamran trying to master the video game: the score remained the same, probably because Kamran was trying to maneuver a difficult track. Salar was also in the lounge, busy writing notes. From time to time, he would look at the TV screen as Kamran struggled to win more points.

Half an hour later, Salar put his notebook away, stifled a yawn, stretched his legs out on the table and crossing his hands behind his head, looked at the TV screen as Kamran started a new game, having lost the previous round. 'What's the problem, Kamran?'

'Nothing...I got this new game but it is really tough to score,' Kamran said in a tired tone. 'Let me see.' Salar got up from the sofa and took the remote control. Kamran watched silently: in the opening seconds Salar was racing at a speed that Kamran had never reached. The track that had challenged Kamran was like child's play for Salar—it was hard for Kamran to keep his eyes on the car that was racing at a fantastic speed in the first minute, and yet Salar had complete control over it.

Three minutes later, Kamran saw the car swerve, go off the track and explode into smithereens. Kamran turned to Salar with a smile—he realized why the car had been destroyed: Laying the

remote control down on the table Salar picked up his notebook. _It's a very boring game,' he remarked as he jumped over Kamran's legs and went out.

Kamran clenched his teeth as he saw the seven digit score on the screen. He looked at the door as Salar left.

They were both quiet once again. Asjad was beginning to worry: Imama had not always been as withdrawn as she was now. One could have counted the words she had spoken in the last half hour. He had known her since childhood; she was a lively girl. In the first year after their engagement, Asjad had felt happy in her company—she was so quickwitted and vivacious. But in the last few years, she had changed, the transformation having become more pronounced since she started medical school. Asjad felt that she had something on her mind. At times, she would appear to be worried and sometimes she was distinctly cold and distant as though she wanted to end their meeting and leave as soon as possible. This time too he had the same feeling.

_I often think that it is I who insists on our meeting—perhaps it makes little difference to you whether we meet or not,' he said despondently. She was sitting on a garden chair across from him, looking at the creepers on the boundary wall. At Asjad's remark, she fixed her gaze on him. He cast an inquiring glance, but she was silent, so he rephrased his words.

_My coming here makes no difference to you. Imama...am I right?'

_What can I say?'

_At least you can say —No, you're mistaken , that ...'

_No, you're mistaken,' Imama cut him short. Her tone was as cold and her expression as indifferent as before. Asjad sighed in despair.

_Yes, I wish and pray that it may be so, that I may indeed be mistaken. However, talking to you I feel you do not care.'

_What makes you think so?'

Asjad detected a note of annoyance in her tone.

_Many things—for one you never respond properly to anything I say.'

_I do make every effort to reply properly to whatever you say. What can

I do if you do not like what I have to say?' Asjad felt that she was more annoyed.

—I did not mean that I did not like what you say: it's that you only say

—yes or —no in response. Sometimes, I feel as if I'm talking to myself.'

—When you ask me if I am well, I say —yes or —no —what else can I say? If you want to hear a spiel in response to a simple question then tell me what you would like to hear and I'll say it.'

She was serious. —You could add something to that —yes or —no . If nothing else, ask me how I am.'

—Ask you how are you are? You are sitting here across me, talking to me—obviously you are quite well. Otherwise, you'd be at home, in bed, sick.'

—Imama, these are formalities...'

—And you know very well that I do not believe in formalities. There's no need for you to ask me how I am; I will not mind it at all.' Asjad was speechless. —Fine. Formalities aside, one can talk of other things, discuss something. Talk to each other about what interests us, what keeps us busy.'

—Asjad, what can I discuss with you? You're a businessman, I am a medical student, What should I ask you? About the stock market position? Was the trend bullish or bearish? By how many points did the index rise? Or where you are sending the next consignment? How much rebate did the government give you this time?' she went on coldly. —Or shall I discuss anatomy with you? What affects the function of the liver?

What new techniques have been used for bypass surgery this year? What should be the voltage of electric shocks given to restore a failing heart? These are our spheres of work, so what points of discussion can we have about these that will help us to achieve love and familiarity? I fail to understand.'

The color of Asjad's face deepened. He was cursing the moment that he had complained to Imama. —There are other interests too in a person's life,' he said weakly. —No, besides my studies there's no other interest in my life,' Imama said decisively, shaking her head for emphasis. —After all, we shared interests earlier on.'

—Forget about what happened earlier,' Imama interjected. —I cannot afford to waste time now. What surprises me is that despite being a businessman you are so immature and emotional; you should be more practical.' Asjad was silent.

—We know our relationship. If you think my practical approach to our relationship shows a lack of interest or indifference then I cannot do much about it. That I am here with you means that I value this relationship, otherwise I would not be sitting here having tea with a stranger.' She paused a moment, then continued, —And whether you coming here or not makes any difference to me, the answer is that we are both very busy people. We are the products of a modern age. I am no Heer who waits upon you with delicacies while you play the flute, nor are you Ranjha

who will indulge me for hours. The truth is that it really makes no difference whether or not we meet or talk. Our relationship,

as it is today, will continue. Or do you feel it will change?’

If Asjad’s brow did not sweat, it was simply because it was the month of December. There was a difference of eight years in their ages, but for the first time Asjad felt it was not eight but eighteen—and she was the older one. Just two weeks ago, she had turned nineteen, but to him it seemed as if she had raced overnight from teenage to middle age and he had regressed to his pre-teens! She sat across him, legs crossed and eyes fixed on his face, impassively waiting for his response. Asjad looked at the engagement ring on her finger and cleared his throat.

‘You’re right...I just thought we should chat more because it would help develop some understanding between us.’

‘Asjad, I know and understand you very well. I am disappointed to learn that you think we still need to develop an understanding between us. I thought there already was a good deal of understanding.’ Asjad had to accept that it wasn’t his day.

‘And if you think that talking about business and anatomy will improve the situation, then very well—we’ll do that in the future.’ There was an element of disinterest in Imama’s tone.

‘You’re not happy with what I said?’

‘Why should I be unhappy?’ This embarrassed him further. ‘Perhaps I said the wrong thing...not perhaps, but certainly I said the wrong thing.’ He repeated the last phrase with emphasis. ‘You know how important this relationship is for me. I have many dreams for the future...’

He took a deep breath. She continued to stare, expressionless, at the creeper along the wall.

‘Perhaps that is why I am so sensitive about it. I have no fears about us. This engagement took place with our consent.’ His gaze was fixed on her and he spoke with emotion, but suddenly, he felt once more that she was not there, that he was talking to himself.

.....

The music from the annex behind the huge bungalow could be heard on the lawn in front of the house. Anyone would have been amazed at the level of endurance of those inside. But one look inside, and one would know the reason behind this level of endurance.

The room was full of swirling smoke and a strange smell. Empty cartons of food from a popular restaurant, disposable plates and spoons, bottles of soft drinks, and scraps of leftovers were strewn all over the carpet which was stained by ketchup. The seven boys in the room were sprawled on the carpet; empty beer cans were scattered around. This was not all—they had been entertaining themselves with drugs too. This was the third time in the last two months that the boys had gathered here for an adventure of this kind. So far they had experimented

with four different drugs. The first time it was a drug that one of them had found in his father's closet. The next time it was a drug which a schoolmate had bought from a club in Islamabad. Then it was something acquired from an Afghan in a Rawalpindi market. Every time they had combined drugs with alcohol, procuring which was no problem. Each time this happened six of the seven boys ended up completely stoned.

Even now it was only the seventh boy who was in his senses. His face was covered with acne, and he was dressed in a dark blue shirt with its collar turned up Elvis Presley style, and hideous grey jeans which had Madonna's face adorning each knee. He opened his eyes to glance at the others around him. His eyes were red but not because he was in a stupor like them. A little later he straightened up and shaking the remaining drug from the little container out into a cone, he pulled out a straw and began sniffing it. Then he threw away the straw and taking some of the drug on a fingertip, tasted it very cautiously. Almost instantly, he spat it out. The stuff was of excellent quality, but his expression showed that he had not enjoyed the experience. He swallowed some beer as if to clear the taste of the drug from his mouth. The other boys lay around on the carpet, totally intoxicated and unaware of themselves: he looked at them thoughtfully as he drank from the beer can. His eyes, though swollen, were bright enough. The drug had not knocked him out fully. This had happened the last three times too. Though his friends had been knocked senseless after taking drugs, the effect on him was not so pronounced. The first two times he had left them in their stupor and had driven home, late in the night. This time too he wanted to get away: the odor of the drugs in the room repulsed him. He stumbled as he tried to stand up. He straightened up and picking his key and wallet off the floor, he turned off the stereo. He looked around the room as if trying to remember something. Then he turned towards the door and sitting down again, put on his joggers, tying their laces around his ankles. Finally, unlocking the door, he went out into the dark corridor. Groping his way, he went past the main door out onto the lawn. As he was coming down the stairs, he felt his nose was running and when he touched his upper lip, he felt a sticky liquid on his hands. He switched on the light in the entrance and saw blood on his fingertips. Reaching into his pocket for his handkerchief, he wiped the blood off his fingers and nose. There was a strange sharp sensation in his throat which he tried to clear, but he felt he was suffocating. He took a few deep breaths to ease the constriction and spat two or three times. Suddenly he felt a tingling in his nose. He doubled over as blood began gushing out of his nose pouring down the marble stairs like a stream.

The prize distribution ceremony was underway at the Golf Club. Salar Sikandar was to receive the first prize in the Under-Sixteen competition for his seven under par score.

Applauding when Salar's name was called out, Sikandar Usman thought he would have to do something about the cabinet where the trophies were displayed. The trophies and shields Salar would bring home this year would be as many as he had in the past year. All of Sikandar's children excelled in their studies, but Salar was different from the rest. In winning awards, he was far ahead of them. It was not just difficult to beat this boy who had an IQ score of 150, it was impossible.

Clapping proudly, Sikandar turned to his wife and whispered, 'This is Salar's thirteenth trophy and the fourth one this year.'

'You keep a record of everything, don't you?' she replied, smiling at her husband whose gaze was fixed on Salar as he received the trophy from the chief guest.

'Only for golf and you know the reason very well. I bet that even if Salar had been playing this tournament with professional players, he would have still won the trophy,' he claimed proudly.

Salar was shaking hands with the other winners seated around him. Sikandar's wife was not surprised by his claim about Salar. She knew that it was not an expression of paternal sentiment: it was the truth— Salar was indeed extraordinary.

She recalled when he had played 18 holes at this golf course with her brother Zubair for the first time. The way he had brought a ball that had accidentally fallen into the rough, out onto the green, was a display of expertise. Zubair was amazed. 'I can't believe it!' He had repeated this statement endlessly till the end of the game.

If the shot from the rough had amazed Zubair, then Salar's putters had floored him. As the ball rolled towards the hole, he leaned against his club and turned around to gauge the distance between Salar and his target. Shaking his head in disbelief, he looked at Salar.

'Salar Sahib is not playing well today,' muttered the caddie standing by the golf cart behind Zubair, who turned around in surprise. 'So he's not playing well?' He looked at the caddie. Was this a joke?

'Yes, sir, otherwise the ball would not have gone into the rough,' the caddie said. 'You have played here today for the first time, but Salar Sahib has been playing here for the last three years. That's why I say he's not playing well,' he added. Zubair looked at his sister who was smiling benignly.

'Next time, I will be fully prepared when I come here, and I will also select the site for the game.' Zubair was somewhat miffed as they walked across towards Salar.

'Any time, any place,' she confidently challenged her brother on her son's behalf.

==I want to invite you to Karachi this weekend, with all expenses paid,' Zubair said casually as he approached Salar.

==Why?'

==To play on my behalf against the president of the Karachi Chamber of Commerce. I lost the election to him, but if he loses a golf match, and that too to a child, he'll have a heart attack. So let's settle the score.' Salar's mother laughed at her brother's words, but a frown creased Salar's brow.

==Child?' He repeated with emphasis the only objectionable word in Zubair's comment. ==Uncle, I think I'll have to play another 18 holes against you tomorrow.'

Asjad opened the door and entered his mother's room.

==Ami, I need to discuss something important with you.'

==Yes...what is it?'

Asjad sat down on the sofa. ==Have you been to Hashim Uncle's lately?'

==No...is there anything special?'

==Imama is over for this weekend.'

==Very well, we'll go this evening. Have you been there?' Shakeela smiled at him.

==Yes...'

==How is she? She's come home after a long time,' Shakeela remarked.

==Yes, after two months.'

Shakeela sensed Asjad was upset. ==Is there a problem?' ==Ami, I find Imama a little changed,' Asjad said with a sigh. ==Changed? What do you mean?'

==I cannot explain what I mean. It's just that her attitude towards me is rather strange.' Asjad shrugged his shoulders. ==Today she took offence to something quite minor. She's not the way she was before. I am not able to figure out the reason for this change.'

==It's your imagination, Asjad. Why would her attitude change? You are thinking too emotionally.'

==No, Ami. Initially, I thought I was being oversensitive, but after today I don't think I am imagining things. She treats me in a very offhand manner.'

==What do you think is the reason for this change in her attitude?' she asked as she put the brush back on the table.

==I have no idea...'

==Did you ask her?'

==Not just once, but several times.'

==And?'

==Like you, she always says that I am mistaken.' He shrugged again.

==Sometimes, she says it's because of her studies, sometimes, she says it is because she has matured now...'

==It's not so far-fetched; perhaps, that is the reason,' Shakeela replied pensively.

==Ami, it's not a question of her becoming serious! I think she's moving away from me,' said Asjad.

==You're being silly, Asjad. I don't believe there's any such issue. You have both known each other since childhood. You know your temperaments.'

Shakeela felt her son's fears were meaningless. ==Obviously, changes do take place as the years pass: you're no longer children. Stop worrying over trivialities,' she tried to reason with her son.

==In any case, Hashim Bhai wants the two of you to get married next year. Imama can continue and complete her education afterwards. He wants to fulfill his responsibility,' Shakeela revealed.

==When did he say this?' Shakeela was taken by surprise.

==Many times. In fact, I think they may have started the preparations.' Asjad breathed a sigh of relief. ==Maybe that is why Imama is agitated.'

==Yes, possibly. The wedding should take place next year,' Asjad replied with some satisfaction.

He was a tall, thin lad of sixteen or seventeen. He had a fuzzy growth on his face and had an innocent look about him. He was dressed in sports shorts and a baggy shirt, and had on cotton socks and joggers. He was in the middle of a crowded road, on a heavy duty motorcycle which

he was racing recklessly without any consideration for traffic lights or oncoming traffic. Zigzagging his bike through the traffic, he periodically lifted both his feet off the pedals performing wheelies. Then, without breaking speed, he turned and changed lanes going the wrong way through the oncoming traffic. Suddenly he braked with a sharp screech. He raised his hands from the handlebars and the motorcycle slammed full speed into an approaching car. He was flung into the air and thrown down. He had no idea of what had happened...his mind plunged into a dark abyss.

The boys stood behind the rostrums on the stage, facing each other. They were both canvassing for the post of head boy and this was part of the election programme. One rostrum had a poster saying 'Vote for Salar' pasted on it, while the other had a poster of the other contender, Faizan. At this point, Faizan was telling his audience what he would do for them if elected. Salar watched him intently. Faizan was the best orator in the school and was impressing the boys with his performance in a clipped British accent which was so popular. The excellent sound system carried his voice very clearly and there was pin-drop silence in the hall which was sporadically broken by the thunderous applause of his supporters. When Faizan finished half an hour later, the clapping and whistling carried on for several minutes. Salar Sikandar also joined the applause. Faizan looked around triumphantly, and seeing Salar clapping, he nodded in appreciation. As Faizan knew well, Salar was not an easy opponent,

The compere called Salar to begin his speech. To a roar of applause

Salar began. 'Good morning friends...' He paused, and then continued. 'Faizan Akbar is certainly an asset to our school as an orator. Neither I nor anyone else can compete with him ...' He stopped again and looked at Faizan, who looked around with a proud smile. But the rest of Salar's sentence wiped the smile off his face. '...If it were only a matter of spinning yarns.'

Sounds of giggling filled the hall. Salar maintained a serious attitude. 'But there's a great difference between an orator and a head boy: an orator has to speak while a head boy has to work.' The hall echoed with the applause of Salar's supporters.

'I do not have the eloquence of Faizan Akbar,' he continued. 'I have my name and my record to speak for me. I do not need a stream of words where just a few would do.' He stopped again.

'Trust me and vote for me.' He thanked the audience and switched off the mike. Thunderous applause filled the air. Salar had spoken for one minute and forty seconds, in his typical measured style and calculated

words, and in that brief time he had overturned Faizan's ambitions. After this preliminary introduction, there was a question and answer session. Salar responded in his customary brief

manner; his longest response was not more than four sentences. On the other hand, Faizan's shortest response was not less than four sentences. Faizan's eloquence and way with words, which were his strength, now appeared bombastic compared to Salar's short and sharp responses on stage, and Faizan was all too aware of this. If Salar gave a one-line reply to a question, Faizan, out of sheer habit, went on with a monologue. Whatever Salar had said about Faizan seemed to be proving true to the audience—that an orator can only speak, not act.

‘Why should Salar Sikandar be the head boy?’ came a question.

‘Because you should elect the best person for the job,’ he replied.

‘Wouldn't you call this arrogance?’ came the objection.

‘No, it is confidence and awareness.’ The objection was refuted. ‘What is the difference between arrogance and confidence?’ another pointed query arose.

‘The same as the difference between Faizan Akbar and Salar Sikandar,’ he replied in a serious tone.

‘What difference will it make if you are not appointed head boy?’

‘It will make a difference to you, not to me.’

‘How?’

‘If the best person is not appointed as the leader, it affects the community, not the best person.’

‘Again, you are referring to yourself as the best person.’ Once again, there was an objection.

‘Is there anyone in this hall who'd equate himself with someone bad?’ ‘Perhaps there is...’

‘Then I'd like to meet him.’ Sounds of amusement rose from the audience.

‘Tell us about the changes Salar Sikandar will bring about as head boy.’ ‘Changes are not talked about, they are demonstrated and I cannot do this before I become head boy.’

A few more questions were asked and answered and then the compere called for the last question. A Sri Lankan boy stood up with a naughty smile.

‘If you answer this question of mine, then I and my entire group will vote for you.’

Salar smiled, ‘Before I reply, I'd like to know how many people there are in your group.’ ‘Six,’ the boy replied.

Salar nodded in assent and asked, ‘Okay, what's your question?’

‘You have to calculate and tell me that if 952852 is added to 267895 and then 399999 is subtracted from the total and 929292 is added to the sum,’ he read slowly from a paper, ‘then

the figure is multiplied by six and divided by two and 492359 is added to the final figure, what would be one-fourth of it?’

The boy could barely complete his words when Salar’s response to this

‘silly’ question came with lightning speed. ‘2035618.2.’

The boy glanced at the paper in his hand and, shaking his head in disbelief, began clapping. Faizan Akbar at that point felt that he was merely an actor; the hall was filled with applause— Faizan saw this entire programme as nothing more than a joke. An hour later, coming down the stage ahead of Salar, Faizan knew that he had lost the competition to him even before it had begun. He had never felt as envious of this 150 IQ scorer as he did now.

.....

‘Imama Apa, when are you going to Lahore?’

She looked up from her notes with a start. Saad was slowly cycling around her. ‘Tomorrow. Why do you ask?’ She shut her file.

‘When you go away, I miss you a lot,’ he said.

‘Why?’ she asked with a smile.

‘Because I like you very much and...you get toys for me and you take me out for drives and...you play with me,’ he answered in detail. ‘Can’t you take me to Lahore with you?’

Imama was not sure whether this was a suggestion or a question.

‘How can I take you with me? I live in a hostel myself, so where will you live?’ she asked.

He pondered this over as he cycled round. ‘Then you should come more often.’

‘Very well. I’ll come more often.’ She smiled at him. ‘You can talk to me on the phone. I’ll call you.’

‘Yes—that sounds good.’ Saad liked this idea. He began to race his bicycle round the lawn. Imama looked at him absent-mindedly. Saad was not her brother: he had come to their house five years ago. She did not know where he had come from—and was not concerned— but she knew why he had been brought in. He was ten years old now and had settled in with the family. He was closest to Imama. She often felt very sorry for him, not because he was an orphan, but it was his future that she felt sad about. Her paternal uncles had also adopted orphans and their future too was a cause for concern for Imama.

Book in hand, she continued to look at Saad cycling the garden. Watching him, she was often troubled by such thoughts, but she had no answers—there was nothing that she could do for him.

All four of them were in Heera Mandi, the red-light district of Lahore. They were between eighteen and nineteen years of age and their appearance gave away their upper class background; but out here neither age nor social background meant anything, because young boys often frequented the area and the elite were among the most regular customers.

The boys made their way through the narrow lanes of the bazaar. Three of them were lost in conversation but the fourth looked around with interest and a sense of mystery. It seemed that this was his first venture into this domain, and a later exchange with his friends confirmed this. On both sides of the lane, in open doorways, stood women of every age, shape, size and complexion—fair and dark, beautiful and plain—all heavily made up and dressed in a revealing way. And men of all ages also passed through the lane. The boy observed everything very carefully.

‘How often have you been here?’ He addressed the boy to his right who laughed and repeated the words.

‘How often? I don’t remember now—I haven’t kept count! I come here quite often,’ he said proudly.

‘I don’t find these women very attractive...nothing special about them,’ the boy shrugged his shoulders. ‘If one has to spend a night somewhere at least the environment should be pleasant—this is such a filthy place,’ he said looking distastefully at the potholes and the piles of garbage in the lane. ‘Besides, what’s the point of coming here when you have girlfriends?’

‘This place has its own charm and there’s no comparison between these women and our girlfriends. Girlfriends can’t dance like the women here,’ the other boy said with a laugh. ‘And today one of Pakistan’s top actresses is going to perform—just wait till you see her.’ ‘But you had taken me to see her dance,’ the first boy interrupted.

‘Oh that was nothing—just a —mujra at my brother’s wedding. But here it’s a different story.’

‘But that actress lives in a very posh locality; why would she want to come here?’ His tone was somewhat suspicious.

‘Ask her yourself today, if you want. I don’t ask such questions.’ The other boys laughed at this remark, but the first one looked at him askance.

They finally reached their destination at the end of the lane. From a shop near the entrance, they bought garlands of motia which they wound round their wrists, and also on the wrist of

the boy who was objecting to being there. Then they bought paan laced with tobacco and also offered one to him—he had probably never had paan before. They went up the stairs.

He looked around critically and a look of satisfaction crossed his face when he saw that the place was not only clean but well decorated too. The floor was covered with white sheets and there were bolsters to recline on. Curtains fluttered softly on the doors and windows. Some people had already arrived but the performance had not yet started. A woman with a lovely but fake smile swiftly made her way to them. As she spoke to them, the first boy took in her appearance. She was middleaged, plastered with make-up and sported masses of rose and motia garlands in her hair. She was dressed in a screaming red chiffon sari and her blouse seemed to have been made not to cover but to reveal her body. She led the boys to a corner of the room and seated them. As soon as he sat down, the first boy immediately spat the paan out into a spittoon nearby. It was hard for him to talk with his mouth full of paan; besides he did not quite like its feel or flavor. The other three boys were speaking in low tones. He looked around at the other men in the room who reclined against the cushions with wads of notes and bottles of alcohol in front of them. Most of the older men were dressed in starched white clothes; it was the first time he had seen so many people dressed in white other than at Eid congregations. He himself was dressed casually in black jeans and a black T-shirt like his friends and the younger crowd.

A little later, another woman in garish clothes entered the hall and, seating herself in the centre, began to sing a ghazal. Musicians accompanied her. After a few songs, she collected the money that had been showered on her and left. Then the famous actress for whom they had all been waiting entered the hall and everyone's eyes were riveted on her. She twirled around and welcomed her admirers with a gracious nod.

The musicians did not play this time and loud recordings of raucous songs filled the room. The performer began to dance. The silence that had preceded her performance was broken by applause as the men noisily appreciated her dancing and drinks went around. Some of the more intoxicated men got up and began to dance with her.

The only one who sat still watching the performance was the first boy. His face was impassive, but if one looked closely it was obvious that he was enjoying himself. When the actress came to the end of her dance about two hours later, most of the men in the hall had passed out. Going home was not a problem for them as they had not come with the intention of going back any time soon—they were there for the night.

The four boys also spent the night there.

The next day, on their way back, one of the boys turned to the first one who was looking out of the car.

‘So, how was the experience?’ ‘All right,’ he replied casually.

‘All right? That's all? Honestly...’ Annoyed, he broke off in midsentence.

—It’s a good place to visit occasionally. What more can I say? But it did not have that —something special touch about it. My girlfriend is better than the woman I spent last night with,’ he retorted.

Hashim Mubeen’s entire family was present at the dining table. They were chatting amiably as they ate. Imama was the subject of their conversation.

—Baba, have you noticed that Imama is becoming more serious with each passing day?’ observed Waseem as he looked at her provokingly. —Yes...I’ve noticed this over the past few months,’ Hashim Mubeen replied, his eyes searching Imama’s face.

Imama stared at Waseem as she took a spoonful of rice.

—Imama, is there a problem?’

—Baba, he talks nonsense and you fall into his trap. I’m serious and busy because of my studies—after all, not everyone is as useless as Waseem,’ she said with some annoyance. He was sitting next to her and she rapped his shoulder lightly.

—Baba, what will become of her when she qualifies as a doctor if this is what she is like in the early years of her studies,’ joked Waseem. —It’ll be years before Miss Imama Hashim smiles...’

Everyone smiled around the table: this type of sparring always went on between these two. It was seldom that Imama and Waseem did not argue with each other. But Waseem was also Imama’s best friend— probably their being the siblings closest in age lay at the heart of their friendship.

—And just imagine that Imama...’ but she did not let him finish this time. She turned around and landed a fist on his shoulder with all her might. It made no difference to him. —What else can we have at home but a doctor with a —healing touch ? You’ve just seen a demonstration and you can guess how doctors treat their patients these days. One of the reasons for the rising death rate in our country...’ —Baba, please stop him! Imama conceded defeat as she implored Hashim Mubeen.

—Waseem!’ He suppressed a smile as he turned to his son who dutifully kept quiet.

He emptied the entire contents of the paper bag into the grinder and turned it on. The cook entered just then. ‘Chote Saab, let me help you,’ he offered but was waved away. ‘No, I can manage. But get me a glass of milk.’ He turned off the grinder. The cook got him the milk. To half a glass of milk he added the contents of the grinder, stirred briskly, and gulped it down. ‘What have you cooked today?’ he asked the cook, who started to tell him what he had cooked. A look of displeasure crossed his face. ‘I won’t have anything. I’m going up to sleep; don’t disturb me,’ he said harshly and left the kitchen.

He looked unkempt with a stubble, and except for one or two buttons in place, his shirt front was open. Dragging his slippers on the floor, he went into his room and locked the door behind him. Then he walked over to the huge music system and began to play Bolton’s ‘When a man loves a woman’ at full volume. He flung himself face down on the bed, remote in hand, and feet swinging to the music.

Except for him and his bed, everything in his room was in order. There was not a speck of dust anywhere. The audio-video cassettes were neatly arranged on a shelf by the music system and on a shelf on the wall. Another shelf was filled with books and the computer table in the corner reflected his organized nature. Posters of Hollywood actresses and various bands adorned the walls, while the bathroom door and a few windowpanes were decorated with cut-outs of nudes from Playboy. Anyone entering the room for the first time would be startled because the nude pinups in the windows were life-size and lifelike and placed in special order. Along with the audio system, there was a keyboard, and a guitar, a piccolo and an oboe hung on the walls. It was obvious that the occupant of the room had great interest in music. In front of the bed was a television cabinet on the shelves of which were several shields and trophies. In another corner of the room cricket bats and racquets were artfully slung across posters of sports stars. It looked as if a tennis racquet was in Gabriela Sabatini’s hand, while the other was held by Rodney Martin, and the squash racquet was in Jehangir Khan’s hand. The double bed where he was lying on the crumpled silken sheets was a mess. A few pornographic magazines, mostly Playboy, lay scattered about with a paper-cutter and snippets—evidence that he had been cutting out pictures. Chewing gum wrappers, an empty coffee mug, a packet of Dunhill’s and a lighter, an ashtray and scattered ash littered the white silk sheet that had holes burnt through. Somewhere there was a wristwatch and a tie, and a cell phone by the pillow where the young man lay face downward, perhaps half asleep as his hand mechanically but unsuccessfully searched the bed when the phone rang. The beeping went unheard and the remote in his hand fell to the floor as his grip relaxed. Michael Bolton’s voice continued to fill the room with the lyrics of ‘When a man loves a woman’—the knocking on the door became persistent and louder, but he lay motionless on the bed.

.....

==Don't tell me! Imama, are you really engaged?' Zainab appeared jolted by Javeria's disclosure. Imama cast an accusing glance at Javeria who looked at her shamefacedly.

==Don't look at her—look at me and tell me if it's true that you're engaged,' Zainab addressed Imama sharply.

==Yes, but it is not something extraordinary or amazing that you should react like this,' Imama replied with composure. They were all sitting in the library and trying their best to talk in low tones.

==But at least you should have told us. What was the big secret?' This was Rabia.

==There's no secret and neither is it so important. Besides, we have become friendly only recently and the engagement took place years ago,' explained Imama.

==What do you mean by —years ago ?'

==I mean two or three years ago.'

==But still you should have told us...' Zainab persisted.

Imama smiled at her. ==When I get engaged again, I'll definitely tell you—whether or not I tell anyone else.' ==Very funny.' Zainab glared at her.

==At least show us a photograph of him... Who is he? What's his name? What does he do?' As usual, Rabia's questions came pouring out in one breath.

==He's my first cousin...his name's Asjad,' The words came slowly and Imama paused thoughtfully. ==He has completed his MBA and runs his own business.'

==What does he look like?' asked Zainab. Imama looked at her closely. ==He's all right.'

==All right? I'm asking you is he tall, dark, and handsome?'

Imama smiled at Zainab without a word. Javeria replied on her behalf. ==This is Imama's choice...he's quite good-looking.'

==Yes, we should have known—after all he's Imama's first cousin. Now Imama, your next task is to show us his photograph,' ordered Zainab.

==No, her first duty is to take us out for a treat,' interjected Rabia. ==But now let's leave; I have to go to the hostel.' Imama got up and they all left together.

==By the way, Javeria, why didn't you tell us about this earlier?' Zainab asked her.

==Listen, Imama did not want it—that's why I never brought it up,' said Javeria. Imama turned around and gave Javeria a warning look.

‘Why wouldn’t Imama want it? If I had been engaged and that too to a boy of my choice, then I would have screamed it out from the rooftops,’ Zainab declared loudly.

Imama chose to ignore her.

Your son is amongst those 2.5 percent of the world’s population who have an IQ of more than 150. With this level of intelligence, whatever he does may be extraordinary, but not unexpected. Salar had been at the International School for only a week when Sikandar Usman and his

wife had been called over by the school administration. The school psychologist had informed them about Salar’s various IQ tests in which his performance and score had amazed his teachers and also the psychologist. He was the only child in the school with such a high IQ

and very soon he became the focus of everyone’s attention. During his meeting with Mr and Mrs Usman, the psychologist got another opportunity to dig out more information about Salar’s childhood. He had been studying Salar’s case with much interest which was personal rather than professional—it was the first time he had come across such an IQ level.

Sikandar Usman remembered well that when Salar was just two years old, he was remarkably fluent in his speech, unlike other boys of his age, and very often he came up with things that left him and his wife wondering.

One day he was speaking to his brother on the phone while watching

TV, and Salar was playing nearby. After the call ended, Sikandar saw Salar pick up the phone and say, ‘Hello, Uncle, this is Salar.’

Sikandar watched him as he happily chatted away. ‘I am well. How are you?’ Sikandar thought he was play-acting. The next sentence made him sit up. ‘Baba is right here, watching TV. No, he did not call—I called you.’

‘Salar, who are you talking to?’ asked Sikandar.

‘Uncle Shahnawaz,’ he replied. Sikandar took the phone from him. He thought Salar may have dialed at random or else pressed the redial button.

‘Salar has dialed the number, I’m sorry,’ he apologized to his brother.

‘How could he do that? Isn’t he too young?’ His brother was surprised. ‘He probably pressed the redial button accidentally.’ Sikandar switched off the phone and put it back in place.

Salar, who was quietly listening to this conversation, went and picked up the phone again—Sikandar looked at him as he expertly dialed Shahnawaz’s number, just as an adult would. He was shocked—he did not expect a two-year-old to do this, He reached out to disconnect the call.

‘Salar, do you know Shahnawaz’s number?’ he asked. ‘Yes,’ came the calm reply.

‘What is it?’

Salar rattled it off. Sikandar stared at him—he did not think Salar knew how to count, let alone remember a string of digits. ‘Who taught you this number?’

‘I learnt it myself.’ ‘How?’

‘You just dialed it.’ Salar looked at him.

‘Do you know how to count?’

‘Yes.’

‘How far can you count?’

‘Till a hundred.’

‘Show me how.’

Like a machine, Salar counted from one to one hundred, in one breath. Sikandar could feel knots in his stomach. ‘I am going to dial a number now, and when I disconnect you call the same number,’ he said. ‘OK.’ Salar was enjoying this game. Sikandar dialed a number then switched off the phone. Salar immediately took the receiver and dialed

the same number as confidently as his father had. Sikandar’s head was spinning. Salar could remember any numbers that he dialed, and could then dial them accurately. He had a photographic memory. Sikandar called his wife. ‘I haven’t taught him numbers,’ she said. ‘Yesterday I just said out the numbers one to hundred. But I did get him

some books a few days ago.’

Sikandar asked Salar to count to a hundred—this he did while his mother watched in amazement. Convinced that the child was far ahead in intelligence for his age, they enrolled him in school much earlier than they had his siblings. He excelled in school.

‘This child needs your special attention, because compared to children of average intelligence, such children have a more sensitive and complicated nature. If he has a good upbringing, he will be an asset to your family—indeed to the country.’ Sikandar Usman and his wife listened with pride to the psychologist who was a foreigner. They began to give Salar preferential treatment at home: he became the most beloved and favorite child and they were very proud of his achievements.

At school, he was promoted to the next class after just one term, and then again at the end of the term he was promoted yet again. Sikandar was perturbed—he did not want Salar to be sitting for his O levels and A levels at the age of eight and ten. Considering the speed of his progress, this seemed quite likely.

‘I would like you to let my son spend a full year in class before he is promoted to the next level. I do not want him to race through his academic career in school at this abnormal speed. You can increase his subjects and activities, but let him progress normally towards promotion.’

So, Salar was not moved up mid-term; his talents and energy were channeled into sports and other extra-curricular activities. Chess, tennis, golf and music interested him the most, and he took an active part in whatever happened in school—if he did not participate in something it was only because he did not find it challenging enough.

‘Javeria, give me Professor Imtinan’s notes, will you?’ Imama asked Javeria who was studying. Javeria handed her a notebook which she began to leaf through it. Javeria continued with her reading, but suddenly turned to Imama, as if she had remembered something.

‘Why have you stopped taking notes during lectures?’

Imama looked up. ‘I would if I could understand them.’

‘What do you mean? You don’t understand Prof. Imtinan’s lectures?’

Javeria was surprised. ‘He’s such a good teacher.’

‘Did I say he wasn’t? It’s just that...’ Imama trailed off, distracted. She turned back to the notebook. Javeria looked at her closely. ‘Aren’t you getting absent-minded lately? Are you disturbed about something?’ She put away her book; her tone was caring.

‘Disturbed?’ Imama muttered. ‘No...’

‘You have dark circles under your eyes. Last night—I think it was three o’clock—when I woke up, you had not yet slept.’ ‘I was studying,’ Imama replied defensively.

‘No, you weren’t. Your book was in front of you but your thoughts were somewhere else. Is there a problem?’

‘What problem could there be?’ ‘Then why have you become so quiet?’ Javeria ignored Imama’s attempts to stall the conversation.

‘Now, why should I be at a loss for words?’ Imama tried to smile. ‘I’m as talkative as ever.’

‘It’s not just me, but others too have noticed that you have been disturbed,’ Javeria said seriously.

‘It’s nothing—just the usual tension because of studies.’

‘I don’t believe you. After all we’re all together—you cannot be any more tense than us.’ Javeria shook her head. Imama sighed—she was getting fed up with this.

‘Is everything all right at home?’

‘Yes, absolutely fine.’

‘Have you quarreled with Asjad?’

‘Why would I quarrel with him?’ Imama responded in the same tone.

‘But there can still be differences and...’ Imama cut her off in midsentence.

‘When I am telling you that there’s no problem, why can’t you believe me? In all these years, what have I not shared with you or what do you not know about me? Then why are you questioning me as if I were a criminal?’ Imama was losing her temper.

Javeria was confused. ‘Of course, I believe you. I thought you were holding back because I might worry. That’s all.’

Javeria, somewhat contrite, got up and went back to her table and resumed reading her book. After some time she yawned and turned towards Imama. She was sitting up, her back to the wall and notebook in hand, but her eyes were fixed on the wall in front.

He parked the car some distance away from the bridge across the canal. He opened the boot and took out a sack and a length of rope and moved towards the bridge, dragging the sack behind him. Some passersby saw him but they did not stop. Once on the bridge, he pulled off his shirt and flung it into the water—in a few moments the shirt was swept away by the flow. His tall, athletic frame, clad in dark blue jeans, was a handsome sight.

His eyes were inscrutable. He could have been anywhere between 19 to 29 years of age, but his height and appearance made him look much older. Holding on to one end of the rope, he threw it over the bridge till it hit the water. Then he started tightly winding and knotting the rope in his hand around the mouth of the sack till he had used it all up. Now, he pulled back the length of the rope, leaving aside about three feet; standing with his feet together, he firmly tied them with this length. Next, he made two loops with the remaining rope and hopped on to the railing of the bridge, and then passing his hands through the loops behind his back, he pulled the knots

and tied up his hands too. A smile of satisfaction hovered on his lips. Taking a deep breath, he threw himself backwards over the bridge. His head hit the water sharply and he was submerged to the waist, head down and hands tied behind his back, dangling from the rope tied to the weighted sack above. He held his breath and tried to keep his eyes open underwater, but the canal was murky and the silt stung his eyes. He felt as if his lungs would burst and when he breathed in, the water entered his body through his nose and mouth. He began to flap about helplessly—he tried but could not use his arms to raise himself up from the water. Gradually, his movements slowed.

Some people who had seen him jump off the bridge, ran to the railing, shouting. The rope was still shaking. They did not know what to do— there was no visible movement under the water; his legs appeared to be still. A crowd gathered, looking with fear at the lifeless body: the water swung him like a pendulum, back and forth...back and forth...back and forth.

‘Imama, get ready quickly!’ called Rabia, taking her clothes from the closet and flinging them on the bed. ‘Get ready? What for?’ Imama looked at her, surprised.

‘We’re going shopping. Come with us.’ Rabia moved fast as she ironed her clothes.

‘No, thanks. I don’t want to go anywhere.’ Imama lay back on her pillow, her forearm shielding her eyes.

‘What do you mean by —I don’t want to go anywhere ? Who’s asking you, anyway? I’m telling you,’ Rabia continued in the same tone.

‘And I’m telling you that I am not going,’ replied Imama without moving.

‘Zainab’s coming too—the whole group is going—and we’ll go to the movies when we are done shopping.’

Imama looked up. ‘Zainab’s coming along?’

‘Yes, we’ll pick her up on the way.’ Imama became thoughtful.

‘You are getting duller by the day, Imama!’ Rabia’s tone was piqued.

‘You’ve stopped going out with us; what on earth is happening to you?’ ‘Nothing. I am just too tired today and want to sleep,’ Imama said, looking at Rabia.

After a while Javeria came in and she too tried to persuade Imama, but there was just one refrain from her: ‘I am too tired, I want to sleep.’ Unable to coax Imama outdoors, the girls grumbled as they left her behind.

As they picked up Zainab on the way, Javeria realized that she had left her wallet behind in the hostel. _We'll have to go back for my wallet,' said Javeria. When they got to the hostel they were shocked to find the room locked. _Where's Imama?' Rabia was surprised.

_Don't know...where could she have gone, locking up the room like this? She'd said she wanted to sleep,' said Javeria.

_Could she be in someone else's room?' wondered Rabia. For the next few minutes, they looked for Imama in their friends' rooms, but there was no sign of her.

_Could she have gone out?' A sudden thought struck Rabia.

_Let's check with the warden,' said Javeria, and they went to see him. _Yes, Imama went out a while ago,' the warden confirmed. Rabia and Javeria exchanged looks, speechless. _She said she'd return by the evening,' the warden informed them.

They came out of the warden's room. _Where could she have gone? She refused to accompany us saying she was tired...she wanted to sleep... was unwell...and then she goes off like this.' Rabia was really annoyed. It was quite late at night when they returned. Imama was in the room and welcomed them back, smiling.

_Looks like you've done loads of shopping,' she said, looking at their bags and parcels. They did not reply—putting down their shopping, they stared at her.

_Where were you?' asked Javeria. Imama got a jolt. _I came back to get my wallet and you weren't here. The room was locked.'

_I went after you both.'

_What do you mean?'

_I changed my mind when you left, so I went to Zainab's as you were going to pick her up. But her chowkidar said that she had left with you, so I came back. I just stopped on the way to get some books,' explained Imama.

_See—we'd told you to come along but you refused. Then, like a fool, you traipse behind us. We were getting suspicious about you,' said Rabia as she took her purchases out of their bags. She seemed relieved. Imama did not reply: she just smiled at them when they showed her their shopping.

.....

_Your name?'

_I don't know.'

_What did your parents name you?' _Go ask my parents.' Silence.

=What do people call you?’

=Boys or girls?’

=Boys.’

=They call me by many names.’

=Mostly what?’

=Daredevil.’ More silence.

=And girls?’

=They too have many names for me.’

=What name do they usually call you?’

=I can’t tell you that...it’s too personal.’ Silence and then a deep breath and...silence again.

=Can I give you a suggestion?’

=What?’

=Why don’t you try to find out something about me that neither you nor I knew before? That white file on the table to your right has all my particulars. Why are you wasting your time?’

By the light of his table lamp, the psychoanalyst observed the young man lying on the couch. He kept moving his feet from left to right. His face was calm and he wore an expression that seemed to say that the session with the psychoanalyst was a waste of time. The room was cool and dark, and as the boy spoke, he looked around the room. He was a dilemma for the psychoanalyst; he had a photographic memory, his IQ level was 150, he had an outstanding academic record throughout, he had won the President’s Gold Medal for golf for the third time running...and this was his third attempt at suicide. His desperately worried parents had brought him to the psychoanalyst.

The boy belonged to one of the few prestigious and extremely wealthy families of the country. He was the fourth of five siblings—four brothers and a sister; two brothers and his sister were older than him. His parents doted on him because of his intelligence and capabilities—yet in the last three years he had tried to kill himself three times. The first time was when he was speeding on his bike in the wrong direction on a one-way road and had lifted his hands off the handlebar. The cop behind him had seen him doing this. He was lucky that when he crashed into a car, he was thrown over another and landed on the other side of the road. He suffered a few broken ribs, and a fractured arm and leg. Even though the police officer had seen this happening, his parents believed it was an accident. He had told them that he had mistakenly entered the one-way street.

The next time—a full year later—he had tied himself up and jumped into the canal. People on the bridge had saved him by pulling him up by the rope he had used. This time there were several witnesses but his parents still could not believe that he had attempted suicide. Salar claimed that some boys had stopped his car near the bridge, tied him up and thrown him over, and the way he was tied, it did seem as if someone else had done it. For the next few weeks, the police kept searching for boys whose appearance matched the description given by Salar. Usman Sikandar hired a guard to be with Salar, day and night.

But the third time he could not deceive his parents. He ground a large quantity of sedatives and swallowed them. The effect was such that even after a stomach wash, it took him a long time to recover. This time, there was no mistaking what Salar had done—the cook had witnessed him grinding the pills, adding them to a glass of milk, and gulping down the whole.

Tyyaba and Sikandar were in a state of shock—they thought of the previous two incidents and regretted that they had believed his stories. The entire household was upset and the news spread to the school, in their neighborhood and to the whole family. He could no longer deny that he had attempted suicide, but he was not willing to explain why— neither to his brothers and sister and nor to his parents.

Sikandar had intended to send Salar abroad after his A levels, as he had his other two sons. He knew that getting admission was not a problem for Salar: he would even be able to get a scholarship. But all his plans seemed to have gone up in smoke. And, on the advice of his friend, he sent Salar to a psychoanalyst.

==Very well, Salar, we'll keep our discussion to the point. Why do you want to die?'

Salar shrugged. ==Who told you I want to die?'

==You have made three attempts at suicide.'

==There's a great difference between trying and dying.'

==It's a coincidence that you have been saved all three times; otherwise, you had left nothing to chance.'

==Look, what you call an attempted suicide is not what I intended—I just wanted to know the pain of dying...how it feels.' The psychoanalyst watched his face as he very calmly clarified his purpose.

==And why do you want to experience the pain of dying?'

==Just like that...call it curiosity.'

He took a deep breath and looked at this brilliant young man who was now staring at the ceiling. ==So your curiosity was not satisfied with one attempt?'

==Oh, I passed out then—I was unconscious, so I could feel nothing. The next time too, and this time too—I could not feel it.’ He shook his head. ==So you’ll try again for the fourth time?’

==Certainly. I want to know how it feels to experience the furthest limits of pain.’

==What do you mean?’

==Like ecstasy is the furthest limit of joy—but I don’t understand what comes after ecstasy. And so it is with pain...there must be some level of pain beyond which one cannot go.’

==I don’t get it...’

==Suppose you’re watching a striptease—there’s loud music, you’re drinking and you’ve also taken drugs, you’re dancing, and slowly you lose your senses—you’re in ecstasy...where are you then? What are you doing? You don’t know...all you know is that you like it very much, whatever it is. When I go abroad for my vacations, I go to such bars with my cousins: my problem is that unlike them, I never get wild with joy, I’m never ecstatic. I don’t get turned on like they do—and it makes me unhappy. I thought that if I cannot cross the limits of happiness then perhaps I could go to the limits of pain, but I couldn’t.’ He looked very disappointed.

==Why do you waste your time on such things? You have such a fantastic academic record...’

==Please, please, do not start harping about my intelligence. I know what I am.’ Salar’s tone was one of resignation. ==I am sick of hearing my praises.’ The psychoanalyst watched him for a while.

==Why don’t you set a goal for yourself?’

==I have.’ ==What?’

==I have to try suicide once again.’ He was completely serene.

==Are you depressed about something?’

==Not at all.’

==Then why do you want to die?’

==Shall I start all over again—to tell you that I do not want to die? That I am trying to do something else?’ He was bored sick.

It was back to square one: the psychoanalyst fell quiet for a while. ==Are you doing all this because of some girl?’

Salar turned in surprise to look at him. ==Because of a girl?’ ==Yes...some girl you are very fond of and would like to marry.’ He burst out into loud, uncontrolled laughter. ==My God! You mean I would kill myself for some girl?’ he laughed. ==In love with a girl and kill myself—too funny!’

The psychoanalyst had several such sessions with Salar and the result was always the same—he had no clue.

‘My advice is that you not send him abroad; instead keep him here and keep a close eye on him. Perhaps he does this to attract attention.’ This was his suggestion to Salar’s parents after several months. As a result, instead of sending him abroad for higher studies, Usman enrolled Salar in one of Islamabad’s top institutions. He thought that if Salar was kept close to the family, he would not attempt suicide again.

Salar did not show any reaction to this decision just as he had not shown any reaction to his earlier decision of sending him abroad.

After the last session with the doctor, Usman Sikandar and Tyyaba sat Salar down in their bedroom and had a long talk with him. They listed all the luxuries they had provided for him over the past so many years; they told him about their expectations of him and their love and affection for him. He sat before them, expressionless, chewing gum mechanically and watching his father’s distress and his mother’s tears.

Frustrated, Usman finally asked him, ‘What is it that you lack? What more do you want? Tell me.’

Salar thought for a while and said, ‘A sports car.’

‘Very well, I’ll import a sports car for you, but don’t ever do such a thing again—okay?’ Usman Sikandar felt better.

Salar nodded in affirmation. Tyyaba wiped away her tears and drew a sigh of relief. When Salar left the room, Usman turned to his wife.

Lighting a cigar, he said, ‘Tyyaba, you will have to cut down on your activities and keep an eye on him. Try to spend some time with him

daily.’ She nodded in assent.

Waseem saw Imama sitting out in the lawn. She had the earphones on and was listening to something on her Walkman. He slipped up very quietly behind her and grabbed the earphones off her, but she swiftly turned off the Walkman.

‘What are you listening to, sitting here all by yourself?’ he said in a loud voice as he stuck the earphones into his ears.

Imama had already switched off the cassette. She got up and pulled at the earphones.

==This is the height of bad manners—Waseem, behave yourself!’ She was furious. Waseem did not let go of the earphones: Imama’s anger had no effect on him.

==I want to hear what you were listening to—what’s rude about that?

Switch on the cassette.’

==I wasn’t sitting here with this for your listening pleasure.’ Annoyed, she detached the headphones. ==Here, take these and get lost.’

She sat down again, firmly gripping the Walkman. Waseem felt that she seemed somewhat disturbed...worried. But why should she be worried? He shrugged off the thought. Pulling another chair, he sat down and put the earphones on the table before her.

==Here take these and don’t be so angry. Carry on with whatever you were listening to,’ he said, trying to placate her.

==No—I don’t want to listen to anything now. You can keep them.’ Imama did not reach for the earphones.

==By the way, what was it?’

==What could it be?’ she replied in the same tone.

==Ghazals, perhaps?’ wondered Waseem.

==You know, Waseem, you share many traits with old women.’ ==For example?’

==For example, nit-picking.’

==And...?’

==And spying on others without the least embarrassment.’

==And do you know how selfish you are gradually becoming?’ Waseem replied likewise.

Imama did not mind it. ==So now you know how selfish I am?’ she replied with a smile this time.

==You are so silly that I couldn’t believe you’d come to this conclusion.’

==If you’re trying to embarrass me, then don’t bother—I’m not going to be ashamed.’ He was being bull-headed.

==But still, it is one’s duty to try.’

==Aren’t you being too smart today?’ Waseem looked at her closely.

==Possibly.’

==Not possibly—certainly. Anyway, it’s better than that monastic silence you adopt on your return to Islamabad.’ ==What monastic silence?’ Imama responded.

==You've changed a fair bit since you went to Lahore.'

==I'm under the pressure of studies.'

==Everybody feels that pressure, Imama, but you seem obsessed.' Waseem said, interrupting her.

==Let's not fall into this silly argument...tell me, what are you doing these days?'

==Having a ball!' He was rocking his chair.

==That's what you do all year long. I'm asking you about any special interest now.'

==Just hanging out with friends. You should know what I do once the papers are over—you're forgetting everything, Imama.' Waseem looked at her somewhat sadly.

==I asked you this in the hope that you may have improved—but obviously my question was redundant,' replied Imama.

==You should know that I am a year older than you, so please wind up your allegations.' He was trying to rub in his being older.

==How are things with this boy next door?' Imama suddenly remembered something.

==Chu-Chu? Somewhat strange, I'd say,' shrugged Waseem. ==He's a weird chap. If he's in a good mood, he'll exalt you to the seventh heaven; if he's in a bad mood, he'll dump you into the gutter.' ==Most of your friends are like that,' she said with a smile. ==Birds of a feather flock together.'

==No—that's not the case. At least, I do not behave the way Chu-Chu does.'

==Wasn't he going abroad?' Imama asked Waseem.

==Yes, he was supposed to, but I'm not sure. I think his parents don't plan to send him.'

==His appearance is very odd—looks like he's from some hippy tribe or will be.'

==Have you seen him lately?'

==I saw him yesterday, when I was coming home. He was going out then—there was a girl with him.'

==A girl? Was she wearing jeans?' Waseem was suddenly interested.

==Yes.'

==And she had mushroom-cut hair? She was fair?' Waseem snapped his fingers with a smile.

==Ursa—his girlfriend.'

==The last time you named someone else,' said Imama, staring at him.

__The last time? When was that?’ Waseem wondered.

Seven or eight months ago, when you spoke to his girlfriend.’

__Oh, that was Sheba. Wonder where she’s now?’

__Then he had a mobile number painted on the rear screen of his car,’ laughed Imama as she repeated the number. __You mean you remember the number?’ laughed Waseem.

__How could I forget? I’ve never seen a mobile number written so boldly and that too on a car!’ she laughed again.

__I think I’ll put my mobile number on my car too,’ he said, running his fingers through his hair.

__Which mobile? The one you haven’t bought yet?’ she scoffed.

__I’m buying one this month.’

__Then be prepared for Baba’s wrath...if you have the number painted on the car, he’ll be the first one to call you.’ __That is what holds me back,’ Waseem said with resignation. __It’s best for you that rather than have your bones broken you should keep your emotions under control. Besides, there are other issues... what if Samiya gets to know about your mobile connections?’ Waseem cut her short. __What will she do? I’m not scared of her.’ __I know you’re not scared of her but she’s the only sister of six brothers, if you please. While you plan to get engaged to her, do consider the pros and cons of consequences that may arise from any untoward action on your part.’ Imama was bent on teasing him.

__Alas, what can I do now? My fate is sealed,’ Waseem replied with a mock sigh. __I should never buy a cell-phone as it will be of no use to me—at least, not for finding a girlfriend.’ He began to rock on his chair again.

__Better late than never, but you have seen sense,’ Imama said, as she reached for earphones on the table.

__What was it that you were listening to?’ Waseem remembered s he saw her pick up the earphones.

__Nothing special,’ she replied, putting off the question.

.....

__If you’re going to Lahore then stop by Imama’s hostel on your way back. I’ve got her clothes from the tailor—you could drop them off,’ said Salma to Hashim Mubeen.

__I’m going to be very busy—I can’t possibly go around to Imama’s hostel.’ Hashim wasn’t too happy with the idea.

__The driver's going with you; if you can't go then he can deliver the parcel. The season's coming to an end—if she doesn't get the clothes now, they'll just lie unused, and I don't know when she'll come next.' Salma launched into a long explanation.

__Right—I'll take them. If I don't find time, then I'll send them over with the driver,' agreed Hashim.

He spent a fairly busy day in Lahore and it was past five by the time he was free. He decided to take the parcel himself to Imama and went to the hostel. It was the first time he had come here since her admission. He sent her a message through the gatekeeper and waited for her. Ten minutes passed...then fifteen, then twenty: he was getting impatient. Before he could send another message, he saw the gatekeeper coming back, accompanied by a girl. When they came closer, he saw it was Imama's childhood friend from Islamabad.

__Assalaam Alaikum, Uncle!' said Javeria.

__W'alaikum Assalaam, child—how are you?'

__Very well, thank you.'

__I've got some clothes for Imama—her mother sent these as I was coming to Lahore. I've been waiting here for nearly an hour, but she hasn't come.' Hashim sounded plaintive.

__Uncle, Imama's out shopping with her friends. You can give me the parcel, I'll hand it over to her.'

He held out the parcel for Javeria and saying goodbye, he left. Javeria went back to the hostel. The smile had disappeared off her face and her anxiety was only too apparent. As she turned in towards her room, she came across the warden and her smile reappeared. __Did you talk to her father?' the warden enquired. __Oh yes. There's nothing to worry about—she's at home in Islamabad. Actually, he brought me some clothes sent by my family; as he was coming to Lahore, Imama suggested he take them along. But he asked for Imama instead when he got here.' In one breath, Javeria rattled off many lies.

The warden breathed a sigh of relief. __Thank God! I was worried sick...she'd told me about going home for the weekend...where could she be?'

As Javeria stepped into the room, Rabia jumped up. __What's the news? She is in Islamabad, isn't she?' __No,' Javeria said despondently.

__My God!' Rabia put her hands on Javeria's shoulders. __Where could she have gone?'

__How should I know? All she told me was that she was going home—but she didn't. then where is she? Imama is not that kind of a girl,' said Javeria, as she tossed the parcel on her bed. __What did you tell the warden?' asked Rabia, worried.

‘What did I tell the warden? I lied; what else could I do? If I’d told her that she wasn’t in Islamabad, all hell would’ve broken loose—she’d have called the police.’

‘And what did you tell Uncle?’ asked Rabia.

‘I lied to him too that she had gone shopping.’

‘But what happens now?’ Rabia was very worried.

‘I am concerned that if she doesn’t get back, I’ll be in real trouble. Everyone will think that I’m hand in glove with her—that I knew her programme and I lied to her father and to the warden.’ Javeria’s anxiety was mounting. ‘Could Imama have met with an accident? She’s not the sort who...’ A new fear struck Rabia.

‘What can we do now? We can’t even discuss this with anyone,’ said Javeria, biting her nails with worry. ‘Let’s talk to Zainab,’ suggested Rabia.

‘For God’s sake, Rabia, be sensible for once! What are we going to achieve by talking to her?’ Javeria was really annoyed. ‘Then let’s wait. Perhaps she’ll be back by tonight or tomorrow morning—then there’s no problem. And if she doesn’t, then we have to tell the warden the truth.’ Rabia spoke seriously as she considered the situation. Javeria said nothing but worry was written large across her face.

Javeria and Rabia could hardly sleep that night: they were gripped by fear. What if she did not return? The question loomed like a menace. They could see their careers smashed and they knew what the reaction of their families would be—they would be maligned and criticized for colluding with Imama, for not telling her father the truth about her and for hiding the facts from the warden.

They had not figured what the reaction of Hashim Mubeen and his family would be when they were faced with the truth—how would they judge the role of these two friends. The other girls in the hostel would talk about them and if this became a police case, they would be accused of conspiring in the crime. When they thought of these repercussions, their hair stood on end.

Once more the question arose: where on earth was Imama? Where had she gone and why? They were trying to analyze her past behavior. She had undergone such a change in the last one year: she’d stopped going out with them and used to be worried and irritable; she’d lost her enthusiasm for studies and had become withdrawn.

==Remember when she refused to go shopping with us and then took off somewhere else? She's gone to the same place, I'm sure—and like fools, we believed whatever she said,' recalled Rabia.

==But Imama was not like this—I've known her since childhood. She was never like this.' Javeria still did not suspect her.

==It doesn't take long to change—a person just needs to have a weak character.' Rabia's suspicions were getting the better of her.

==Rabia, she got engaged of her own choice—she and Asjad are very fond of each other—so why would she do such a thing.' Javeria tried to defend her friend.

==Then you tell me where she is? I've not turned her into a fly and stuck her on a wall. Her father comes here to meet her and he has come from his home, so obviously she's not there—and she told us she's going home.' There was helplessness in Rabia's voice.

==It could be that she met with an accident...that she did not get home...' ==Whenever she goes home, she always calls up to tell them that her brother should pick her up from the bus stop. Had she called up this time too, they would not be sitting complacently if she hadn't reached home—they would have called the hostel. From her father's attitude, it seemed that she had no plans for going home this weekend.' Rabia stopped Javeria in her musings.

==Yes, she never goes home twice in a month, but this time she decided to...the very next week. In fact, she took special permission from the warden. There's definitely something wrong somewhere.' Javeria's fears were aroused again.

==We're going to be in deep trouble along with her. We really made a grave mistake in covering up—we should have been honest with her father that she's not here; he could have done what he wanted to...it would be his problem. At least we would not have been in this mess.' Rabia went on muttering.

==Anyway, what can we do now? Let's wait and see till morning—if she does not turn up then we have to tell the warden.' Javeria was pacing around the room.

They spent the entire night talking, worrying—they had not slept a wink. The next day they did not attend classes—there was no point in going in their sorry state. Imama used to get back by nine on Saturdays when she went home for the weekend, but there was no sign of her. Rabia and Javeria were at the end of their wits—it was two thirty and she hadn't returned. Ashen-faced and trembling, they left their room to see the warden, making up their statements.

They were a short distance from the warden's room when they saw Imama entering, calm and collected. Bag slung over her shoulder and folder in hand, she was certainly returning from college. Javeria and Rabia felt as if the ground slipping away from beneath their feet had suddenly become firm. Their stilled breath was restored and the headlines that seemed to be

screaming at them from the next day's papers miraculously evaporated. All these fears were replaced by the anger that was aroused in them by the sight of Imama.

She had seen them and was moving towards them; there was a very pleasant smile on her face. Why didn't you come to college today? she asked after greeting them. We would think about going anywhere if we had respite from your woes. Rabia's tone was bitter and sharp. Imama's smile disappeared. What's the problem, Rabia, why are you so angry? she said with some concern.

Just step into the room, and I'll tell you why. Rabia grabbed her arm and pulled her in. Javeria followed them without a word. Imama was surprised, confounded by Rabia's and Javeria's attitude. Rabia shut the door and faced Imama. Where are you coming from? she asked in a sharp, angry tone. Islamabad, where else? Imama put down her bag. Her reply added to Rabia's fury.

You should be ashamed of yourself, Imama...deceiving us like this, pulling the wool over our eyes...what do you want to prove? That we're duffers? Idiots? Fools? Fine, we are, I admit, or else we'd not blindly believe you nor be so deceived, said Rabia.

I fail to understand you...what deception are you talking about? It would be better if you sat and spoke to me calmly. Imama appeared helpless.

Where did you spend the weekend? For the first time, Javeria interrupted the conversation.

I told you, I was in Islamabad and I came to college directly, and now from college... Rabia did not let her complete her words.

Stop this rubbish, Imama. The lie is not going to work—you did not go to Islamabad.

How can you say that? Imama raised her voice.

Because your father was here yesterday. The color drained from Imama's face. She was silent.

Why are quiet now? Why don't you insist that you were in Islamabad? Rabia was sarcastic.

Baba was here? Imama asked slowly.

Yes. He brought some clothes for you, said Javeria.

He got to know that I was not in the hostel?

I lied to him that you had stepped out on an errand. He gave the clothes and left, replied Javeria. Imama drew a spontaneous sigh of relief. That means he did not get to know anything, said Imama as she sat on the bed and undid her sandal straps.

No... he did not find out. Next week you can take off somewhere else.

Mind you, Imama, I am going to talk to the warden about this business.

We've had enough worries on your behalf and we're not going to take any more. It is better that your parents should know what you're up to.' Rabia was terse; Imama looked up at her. _What am I up to? What have I done?'

_Done what? You say you're going home and disappear from the hostel—that's nothing unusual for you.'

Imama did not reply. She began to undo the straps on the other foot. _I should have gone to the warden,' said Rabia as she moved towards the door.

Javeria got up and stopped her. _We'll talk to the warden later. Let's first talk to her—don't be hasty.'

_But just look at her cussedness...her attitude. Not a trace of embarrassment on her face,' Rabia gestured towards Imama; she was furious.

_I'll tell you everything; there's no need to get so agitated. I haven't done anything wrong nor gone to any wrong place...and neither did I run away.' Imama spoke softly as she released her feet from her shoes.

_Then where had you been?' Javeria enquired.

_With a friend.'

_Which friend?'

_There is one...'

_Why did you have to lie?'

_I wanted to escape your questions and if had told my family or asked their permission, they would never have allowed me.' _Where did you go and why?' Javeria was mystified.

_Didn't I say I'll tell you? Give me some time,' replied Imama. _Give you time so that you disappear again and perhaps not return this time!' Rabia was still angry, but spoke less severely now. _You didn't even realize you were putting us in an awkward position. Do you know how humiliating it could be for us—have you any sense at all?' she continued.

_I never expected Baba to turn up here so suddenly, nor did I think it would create an embarrassing situation for you—I would not have done such a thing otherwise.' Imama's tone was repentant.

_At least you could have trusted us and told us where you were going,' added Javeria.

_I'll never do this again,' promised Imama.

_Well, I don't have any confidence in you or your promises,' said Rabia brusquely.

_Rabia, let me clear my position—you are grossly mistaken,' Imama replied weakly.

__Do you realize that our careers and our lives are at stake? Is this what you call friendship?’

__All right, I made a mistake—I am sorry, forgive me.’ Imama conceded defeat.

__Until you tell us where you had disappeared to, we’re not going to accept any apologies or forgive you.’ Rabia was adamant.

Imama looked at them silently. After a while she said, __I had gone to Sabiha’s.’

Rabia and Javeria exchanged surprised glances. __Who?’ they asked in unison. __You know her,’ replied Imama.

__That fourth year student, Sabiha?’ Javeria could not contain herself.

Imama nodded. __But why did you go there?’

__She’s my friend.’

__Friend? What friend? You barely know her. You only meet her in college; you don’t even know what kind of person she is, and you go off to spend the weekend at her place,’ exclaimed Javeria.

__And that too by deception—at least there was no need for you to lie to us or to your family about this,’ added Rabia. Her tone reflected her anger.

__You can call her up and ask her if I had been there,’ offered Imama.

__Fine, you were there, but may we ask why?’ persisted Javeria.

__I needed her help,’ said Imama after a pause.

They looked at her, surprised. __Help with what?’

Imama looked up and stared at them without blinking. Javeria squirmed. __What sort of help?’ she repeated.

__You know very well,’ replied Imama softly.

__I?’ Javeria was somewhat taken aback; she looked at Rabia who was watching her intently.

__Yes, you know very well.’ __Don’t talk in riddles, Imama. Come out with it,’ Javeria spoke sharply. Imama looked at her quietly for a few moments and then lowered her head—she had lost her case.

.....

__Tell me, what is your life’s dearest desire?’ That day Imama had pursued Javeria.

Javeria looked at Imama’s face for a while and then said, __My dearest wish is that you become a Muslim.’

A current shot through Imama—shocked and uncertain, she looked at Javeria who spoke on softly, slowly.

‘You are such a dear friend, so close to me that it hurts to see you on a misguided path...not just you, but your entire family. If God should send me to heaven for any good deeds, then I would like you to be with me—but it is essential that you be a Muslim.’

A myriad expressions passed across Imama’s face. It was a while before she could say anything.

‘Javeria, I did not expect that you would speak to me like Tehreem; I thought you were my friend, but you too...’

Javeria interrupted her gently. ‘Whatever Tehreem told you then was right.’ Imama stared at her steadily: she was deeply hurt by Javeria’s words. ‘I wasn’t friendly enough with you then to tell you, though I wanted to, that I agreed with Tehreem. If she said that you aren’t a

Muslim, she wasn’t wrong—you aren’t.’ Imama’s eyes filled with tears. She got up abruptly, without a word. Javeria stood up too. Imama tried to leave but Javeria grabbed her arm.

‘Let go of my arm... let me go. Don’t even try to talk to me again.’ Imama’s voice was choked and she tried to free herself from Javeria’s grip.

‘Imama, try to understand what I am saying...’

But Imama did not let her finish. ‘You have really hurt me, Javeria. I did not expect this of you.’

‘I do not want to hurt you: I am telling you the truth. Instead of getting emotional or crying, just think objectively and coolly about what I said. Why would I want to hurt you for no rhyme or reason?’ Javeria did not let go of her arm.

‘You may know why you’re doing this, but what I know is that there’s no difference between you and Tehreem. In fact, you have caused me more pain than her—she was not such a close and old friend as you.’

Tears streamed down Imama’s face and she tried to wrest her arm out of Javeria’s grip.

‘You insisted that I tell you what was closest to my heart. This is why I

was not telling you—I even warned you that you would be upset, but you assured me that you would not,’ Javeria tried to remind her. ‘Had I known that this would be your reply, I would never have asked you what your life’s desire was,’ Imama said angrily.

‘Well then I shall never talk to you on this subject,’ replied Javeria defensively.

‘What does it matter? I know now what you think about me. Our friendship can never be the same again. I have never criticized your beliefs, but instead of considering my faith as being one of the sects of Islam, you have put me outside the pale of the religion,’ Imama said. ‘If that’s what I’m doing, then I’m not wrong—all the sects of Islam do share the belief that Prophet

Muhammad (PBUH) is Allah's last messenger and that prophethood ended with him.' Javeria too was angry and upset now. 'Mind your language!' Imama burst out.

'I'm telling you the truth, Imama...and it's not only me...everyone knows that your family changed its faith to acquire wealth. There's no need to get so worked up—try to think objectively—try to reason...'

'I have no need to think coolly over your words,' Imama interrupted. 'I know what's true and what isn't...'

'You don't know anything, and that is the sad part,' retorted Javeria. Imama said nothing. She pulled her arm away with a jerk and walked away with quick steps. Javeria made no attempt to follow her. With concern she watched her walk away—Imama was not given to such a display of temper and this worried Javeria.

END OF CHAPTER 1

Chapter 2

All this began with an incident in school. Imama was then a student in the Matric class; Tehreem was one of her good friends. They had not only been together in school for many years, but their families knew each other very well. Amongst all her friends, Imama was closest to Tehreem and Javeria, but she was upset that, despite their friendship, these girls shrank from visiting her home. Imama would invite them to her birthday and also to other events at home, but they would always decline on the pretext of not being allowed to go out. On a few occasions Imama herself spoke to their parents, but they still did not allow their daughters to visit her. Finally, she complained to her parents about this.

‘Both your friends are Syeds. Generally, they do not approve of our sect and this is why your friends’ parents do not allow them to come to our house,’ explained her mother.

‘What’s the meaning of this? Why don’t they approve of us?’ Imama was surprised at her mother’s words.

‘Only they can tell you why they don’t like us. They even call us non-Muslims.’

‘Why do they say that? Are we not Muslims?’ retorted Imama.

‘Of course we are Muslims...but they do not believe in our prophet,’ said her mother.

‘Why?’

‘Now what can I say to this —why ? They’re just very rigid in their beliefs.’ ‘But Ammi, they never talk to me about religion, so how come religion becomes the problem? What difference does it make and how does it involve visiting each other’s homes?’ Imama was confused.

‘Who can explain these matters to them? They accuse us of lying and harass us. If they knew more about us and the teachings of our prophet, they wouldn’t do this. Anyway, if your friends don’t visit you, there’s no need to fret—you shouldn’t go to their homes either.’

‘But Ammi, their mistaken notions about us should be corrected,’ said Imama.

‘You can’t do this—their parents are constantly brainwashing them against us, filling their hearts with poison.’

‘No, Ammi! They are my best friends—they shouldn’t think this of me. I’ll give them some of our books to read...maybe then their minds and hearts will be cleared of these misunderstandings.’ said Imama with hope. Her mother fell silent.

‘Don’t you like my idea?’ asked Imama.

‘It’s not that... give them your books but not in such a way that they think you’re trying to preach your faith. Just tell them that you’d like them to know more about us so as to be able to understand us better,’ said her mother. Imama nodded quietly.

A few days later, Imama took some books with her to school. When they were together during recess, she brought the books along.

‘I have something for you.’

‘Really? Let’s see what it is.’

Imama held out two sets of books from the bag, one towards Javeria and the other towards Tehreem. They quietly glanced at the books. Javeria said nothing, but Tehreem reacted.

‘What’s this?’ she said coldly.

‘I brought these books for you,’ Imama replied.

‘Why?’

‘So that some of your wrong impressions about us can be corrected.’ ‘What sort of wrong impressions?’

‘The wrong impressions you have about our sect,’ Imama explained. ‘Who told you that there are any wrong impressions about your —religion or your prophet?’ Tehreem asked very seriously.

‘I can judge that myself: that is why you do not come to my house. You think perhaps that we do not read the Quran or that we do not consider Hazrat Muhammad, peace be upon him, a prophet although that’s not the case—we believe in all of these things. It’s only that we say that after the Prophet

Muhammad (PBUH), we have another prophet of our community who is as revered as Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).’ Imama explained with great seriousness.

Tehreem handed back the books she was holding. ‘We have no misunderstanding about you or your religion. We know more than enough about your religion, and there’s no need for you to give explanations,’ she said brusquely. ‘And as far as these books are concerned, neither I nor Javeria have spare time to waste on this pile of foolish claims, fanciful ideas, and

misguided beliefs that you call your books.’

Tehreem snatched the books from Javeria and handed them back to Imama, whose face was crimson with embarrassment. She had not expected Tehreem to react so violently or else she would never have made the mistake of bringing the books or showing them to these girls.

==As for this reverence that you have, you should know that there's a vast difference between a prophet ordained by God and a self-appointed prophet. If you truly believed in the Quran then you would believe in every word of it—it's one thing to be a prophet and another to become one.'

==Tehreem, you are insulting me and my faith!' Tears welled up in Imama's eyes.

==I am not insulting anyone—I am merely speaking the truth and if you find it insulting, it's too bad. I can't do anything about it.' Tehreem spoke in an abrupt and sharp manner.

==But we do believe in the prophethood of Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH),' Imama stressed.

==We also believe in the prophethood of Jesus and that the Bible is a divine book, so does that make us Christians? And we believe in the prophets Moses and David too...are we Jews?' Tehreem queried in a mocking tone. ==Our faith is Islam and we are the followers of the Holy Prophet, and though we respect other prophets and their teachings, we remain followers of Islam. we are not followers of their faiths. Similarly, you follow your prophet thereby denying the finality of the prophethood of Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) but yet you insist that your faith is also a sect of Islam. Your prophet and the leaders of your community claim that whoever denies Mirza as a prophet is not a true

Muslim—in effect, we've all been thrown out of Islam.'

Throughout Tehreem's harangue Javeria remained quiet.

Tehreem continued firmly, stressing each word. ==It would be better for you not to discuss your religion or mine. We have been friends for many years. Let the friendship continue as it is.'

==As regards us not visiting you at home, you're right...my parents don't approve of it. Being friends with you in school is another matter—one can be friends with many people and religion is not an issue, but visiting each other's homes is different. I don't think my parents would object to my going to the homes of my Christian or Hindu friends because they follow their own beliefs and do not call themselves Muslims. But in your case they would disapprove because the reality is that your people have changed to a new faith —yet you

pretend to be part of us.' Tehreem finally rose to go.

Watching her go, Imama turned to Javeria who was sitting beside her. ==Do you think the same way about me?'

==Tehreem said all this in a fit of rage—don't get upset by her words,' Javeria tried to pacify her. ==Just ignore it. Let's go back to class...the break's about to end.'

Imama got up and went with Javeria.

When Imama got home that day, she locked herself in her room and cried her heart out. Tehreem's words had really hurt her.

Hashim Mubeen got back from work earlier than usual that day and his wife Salma told him that Imama was unwell. He went to her room to see her. He was taken aback to see that her eyes were swollen.

‘What is it, Imama?’ he asked, coming closer. She sat up in bed and without saying anything, she burst into tears again. He sat with her on the bed. ‘What happened, Imama?’

‘Tehreem was very rude to me in school today,’ she said between sobs.

Hashim was a little relieved. ‘So did you have a fight again?’

‘Baba, you don't know what she said to me,’ Imama said. ‘Baba she...’ Imama told her father all that had passed between her and Tehreem. Hashim's face began to change color.

‘Who told you to take those books to school to educate them?’ he scolded her.

‘I wanted to correct their impressions about us,’ she responded weakly. ‘What is the need for you to go around correcting people's impressions? They may not visit our home; they may think we are bad—so what? Let them be: what difference does it make to us?’ Hashim tried to explain. ‘But I wonder what she'll think of you after this...what you were trying to do by giving her those books. Her family will also be very angry. Imama, you should know that you do not have to tell others all about yourself or your community. Even if someone pulls you into an argument, just agree politely with them, otherwise they will make unnecessary and unwelcome comments and will become needlessly suspicious about us,’ he counseled.

‘But, Baba, you yourself preach to so many people. Why are you stopping me from doing it?’ Imama was puzzled.

‘It's a different thing with me—I talk about religion only with those people with whom I am close and friendly...when I feel they are ready to accept what I have to say. I don't go about distributing books to mere acquaintances,’ he clarified.

‘Baba, they are not just acquaintances—we have been friends for years,’ objected Imama.

‘Yes, but they are Syeds and their families are very orthodox. You ought to have remembered that.’

‘I only wanted to tell them about our sect so that they do not think we are non-Muslims,’ said Imama.

‘Even if they think of us as non-Muslims, what difference does it make? They themselves are non-Muslims,’ said Hashim very piously. ‘They are the misguided ones, on the wrong path.’

‘Baba, she said that you receive funds from foreign missions, that they pay you to convert people to our faith.’

Hashim Mubeen shook his head with disdain. ‘I get money only from my community—money that our community collects at home and abroad. We have enough finances of our own...haven’t we got our own factories? Besides, if foreign missions were to finance me I would accept it happily—what’s wrong with it? If Christianity can be preached in this country, then why not our faith? After all, we are another sect of Islam trying to bring people on the path of real guidance,’ he elaborated.

‘Don’t talk to others about this issue,’ he continued. ‘There’s no point in argument or discussion. We are a minority now, but when we become the majority then such people will not dare to speak up like this—they will be afraid to insult us to our face. However, you should not get involved with such people now.’

‘Baba, why have we been declared non-Muslims and a minority in the constitution when we are a sect of Islam?’

‘All this is the handiwork of the mullahs—for their vested interests, they ganged up against us. When our numbers increase, we too will bring in laws that favor us, and all such amendments to the constitution will be abrogated,’ declared Hashim forcefully. ‘And you need not lock yourself up like this and cry,’ he said as he got up. Imama watched him walk away.

That was the last day of her friendship with Tehreem . Imama was so heartbroken by Tehreem’s diatribe that she could not bring herself to continue their relationship. Tehreem too did not try to bridge the silence between them. Hashim Mubeen was one of the influential leaders of the Ahmadi community. His older brother Azam was also an important Ahmadi leader. Barring one or two people, his entire family had converted to the Qadiani creed many years ago when Azam had begun this mission; those who had not done so had severed ties with the others. Following in his brother’s footsteps, Hashim had also converted, and like his brother, he too worked towards its propagation. In about ten or fifteen years, both brothers had made a name for themselves in their community. They were amongst the elite of Islamabad but despite their affluence, their homes were very traditional. Their womenfolk observed purdah but there were no undue restrictions placed on them.

Imama had also grown up in this environment. Indeed, she was one of those born with a silver spoon in her mouth , and though she knew that her father was actively propagating the Ahmadi faith, she accepted it as a matter of course. She had grown up seeing her father and her uncle preaching their faith and to her it was something being done in the service of Islam. Imama

regularly attended religious gatherings with her family and also listened to the lectures by their leaders transmitted via satellite from London. Before the showdown with Tehreem, she had never really pondered over her religion—for her, her sect was just another one of the different sects in Islam. She had been brought up to believe that her community was the only one on the true path of Islam and would be the only one to enter paradise. Very early Imama and her siblings had been instructed not to divulge anything about their faith in school. In school Imama had learnt that in 1974 the Constitution had been amended by Parliament to declare them to be non-Muslims and their community as a minority community. She believed it was a political decision taken under pressure from other religious leaders. However, the argument with Tehreem compelled Imama to think more deeply about her community and her faith.

This brought about a change in her: she began to read literature and the holy writings on her faith as well as other books. Initially, there was much confusion in her mind, but as she studied this in greater depth, it cleared her mind. Soon after her matriculation exam she was engaged to Asjad, her uncle Azam's son. Although this was not a love match, Asjad and Imama were happy with this relationship and after the engagement Imama developed a soft spot for Asjad.

—You seem to be quite worried for the last few days—is there a problem? Waseem asked her that night. Imama had been upset and quiet lately. —No, it's nothing. It's your imagination.' Imama tried to smile.

—It's not my imagination: there is something wrong. But if you don't want to share it, then it's a different matter,' said Waseem, shaking his head. He was lying on one side of Imama's double bed while she sat away from him leafing through her notes in a file. Waseem waited for her reply and then said, —I was right, wasn't I? You don't want to talk about it.'

—Yes. I don't want to talk about it at present,' she admitted with a sigh.

—Tell me—perhaps I can help you.' Waseem tried to goad her.

—Waseem, I'll tell you myself but not now. And if I need your help, I'll ask you,' she said, closing the file.

—Fine, as you wish. I just wanted to help you.' He got up.

Waseem had figured it out correctly: Imama had been withdrawn and quiet since the day she had an argument with Javeria. Even though Javeria had apologized to her the next day it had

not helped Imama's distress and hurt— Javeria's words had confused her. They brought back memories of the showdown with Tehreem a year and a half ago, and the doubts and questions about her faith that arose in her mind when she began to study it in detail as a result of the argument. Javeria had declared that her life's dearest wish was for Imama to become a real Muslim.

She was in state of strange uncertainty. 'Am I not a Muslim? Does my closest friend too not accept me as a Muslim? Is all this simply the result of the propaganda about our faith? Why is it that only we are being targeted this way—are we really on the wrong track? Have we adopted the wrong creed? But how can that be—after all, why would my family and our entire community do such a thing?'

And perhaps to find the answers to these questions, the next week she bought a copy of the Quran with translation and notes by a well-known Islamic scholar. She wanted to know what the stand of other sects was concerning her sect and their faith. She had read the translation of the Holy Quran earlier too, but it was one recommended by her community. She did not believe, before studying the translation and notes by the famous scholar, that the version she had been reading had changes in certain places, that the translation of the Quran read by her sect was not the same as the original. One after another, she read the translations of the Quran published by scholars of various other sects—none of them had the changes that she found in the version read by her faith, although they did differ in their interpretations. As she continued the comparative study of the various interpretations, her concern and confusion multiplied. Every translation and interpretation confirmed that Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) was the last messenger of Allah; nowhere did they mention or even hint at another successor or prophet to follow him. Even the truth about the promised messiah was all too clear to her. The contradictions between the prophecies of her religious leader and the real events that had taken place became all too evident to Imama. Before staking his claim to prophethood, their leader had used the most objectionable language to malign the Prophet Jesus yet went on to state that the spirit of Jesus had descended into him. Even if this claim were to be accepted, then according to tradition, Jesus would have lived for another forty years after his reappearance by which time Islam would have been ascendant in the world. However, when the Ahmadi prophet died, then far from Islam being spread across the world, even the Muslims of India did not have the freedom they yearned for. Imama was further surprised by the tone and language used by the Ahmadi leader against his opponents and other revered prophets—could a true prophet ever employ such vocabulary about anyone as this claimant to prophethood had done?

In a very subtle way, her faith and interest in the literature and holy books of her religion declined. Let alone her faith and belief, she even began to doubt their veracity. She did not mention to Javeria that she had moved away from the literature of her sect and had started reading other books. At home too no one had a clue about the kind of books she was bringing

home to read; she had hidden them very securely in her room. Only once it so happened that Waseem came to her room, looking for some book and the first one he laid his hands on was the interpretation of the Quran she had been reading—he was stunned.

‘What’s this, Imama?’ He turned to her in surprise. Her heart stopped as she looked at him.

‘It...it’s...it’s the interpretation of the Holy Quran,’ she replied, trying to control the trembling in her voice.

‘I know, but what’s it doing here? Did you buy it?’ he enquired seriously.

‘Yes, I bought it, but why are you so concerned?’

‘Do you realize how furious Baba will be if he comes to know?’

‘Yes, I know, but I don’t find it to be such an objectionable issue.’ ‘Why on earth did you need to get it?’ Waseem replaced it on the table. ‘Because I want to know how others interpret the Quran and what their point of view is about us in the light of the Quran,’ Imama replied thoughtfully. Waseem looked at her steadily. ‘Are you in your right mind?’

‘I’m very much in my right mind.’ She was quite composed. ‘What is the harm in my getting to know about other sects and reading their interpretation of the Quran?’

‘We have no need of such things,’ Waseem reacted with annoyance. ‘You may not need to, but I do,’ said Imama sharply. ‘I am not in favor of accepting any beliefs blindly,’ she made herself clear.

‘So reading these interpretations has removed your suspicions?’ Waseem inquired sarcastically.

Imama looked at him. ‘Initially, I had no doubts about my faith—now I do.’ Waseem exploded. ‘See—this is the result of reading these kind of books! This is why I am telling you that there’s no need to read these books; our books are quite enough for us.’

‘I have gone through so many translations and interpretations of the Quran, Waseem. It is amazing that there’s no mention of our sect in any one of them! In every one of them ‘Ahmed’ is used in context of Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) and nowhere in terms of our prophet. Even if our sect or our prophet is mentioned, it is as a false claim to prophethood.’ Imama’s perplexity was reflected in her tone.

‘Who else other than these people would say such things about us? If they were to accept our prophet then the problem would be solved, but they’ll never write the truth about us in their books,’ Waseem explained bitterly.

‘And what about our translation and interpretation—have we written the truth in them?’

‘What do you mean?’ He was taken aback.

“Why does our prophet use wrong terms and poor language for the other prophets?”

“He talks of them in his own context—they did not believe him to be a prophet,” Waseem replied.

“So should they be abused for not believing?” Imama asked.

“Yes,” he shrugged. “Anger does find expression one way or another.” “Anger or helplessness?” she asked him. He looked at her, shocked. “When people did not accept Jesus as a prophet, he did not abuse them. When Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) was not believed in, he did not abuse the disbelievers—in fact, he prayed for those who stoned him. The Divine message revealed to Hazrat Muhammad does not contain abusive language, whereas that collection of verses which our prophet claims was revealed to him by God is full of vituperation.”

“Imama, every individual has a different personality and reacts differently,” Waseem replied sharply. Imama shook her head—she was not convinced.

“I’m not talking of everyone—I’m talking about the prophet. How can one who has no control over his anger lay claim to being a prophet of God? How do you expect someone who is so abusive to say words of truth and

righteousness? Waseem, I am confused about our religion and its principles!” She paused, then continued. “Reading all these interpretations and translations, I found that the only prophet of his community was Hazrat Isa. And I do not believe that our prophet is either Hazrat Isa or the

Messiah. No...he is not the one who has been prophesied in the Quran,” she reiterated.

“You’d better stop your nonsense now—you’ve said enough,” Waseem snapped at her.

“Nonsense? You think I’ve been talking nonsense?” Imama looked at him with surprise. “If there’s a Masjid-e-Aqsa in our city, then what about the other Masjid-e-Aqsa in Palestine? Would God want to confuse Muslims by having the same sacred mosque in two separate places? And never mind the Muslims, what about the Christians and the Jews—they too believe that this mosque was the very first qibla. Isn’t it odd that we should not believe this?”

“Imama, I can’t argue with you on these matters. It’s better that you discussed them with Baba.” Waseem was tired. “You know, you’re not doing the right thing by getting into this pointless argument. I am going to tell Baba all that you’ve been saying and also what you’ve been reading,” he threatened as he left the room.

Imama was perplexed—she walked about her room, biting her lip. She was afraid of her father and feared his reaction when Waseem would tell him about her—and she knew he would.

.....

Waseem did tell Hashim Mubeen about his conversation with Imama but he censored much that would have provoked his father. Despite that, Hashim Mubeen was shocked into silence.

‘So Imama told you all this?’ he enquired after a long pause. Waseem nodded in assent.

‘Call her.’ Waseem hesitated as he left the room, but instead of going to Imama himself he sent a servant to do his father’s bidding and returned to his own room. He did not want to be present when his father confronted her. Imama knocked at her father’s door and entered. He and their mother were seated there in absolute silence. The way her father looked at her made her tremble.

‘Baba, did you...send for me?’ in spite of her effort to control herself, her voice faltered.

‘Yes, I did. What’s this rubbish that you’ve been discussing with Waseem?’ He asked angrily, without any preliminaries. ‘What did I ask you?’ he shouted again. ‘You should die of shame! You are sinning and dragging us down with yourself!’ Tears sprang to Imama’s eyes.

‘We are ashamed to call you our offspring!’ He was livid. ‘What are these books that you have brought here? You will return them tomorrow to wherever they came from—or I’ll throw them out!’ ‘Yes, Baba,’ replied Imama, wiping away her tears.

‘And if you see Javeria again or talk to her, I’ll put an end to your going to college.’

‘Baba, Javeria did not say anything to me. She does not even know any of this.’ Imama protested in a more firm tone.

‘Then who is it that has filled your head with this garbage?’ he thundered.

‘I did so...myself...’ Imama tried to explain.

‘Who do you think you are? Look at your age and you dare to question your faith and the veracity of your prophet!’ His temper flared again. ‘Look at me. I have spent all my life preaching his religion—am I blind to have done this or are you wiser? You hardly know anything and here you are questioning our faith.’ Hashim Mubeen rose from his place. ‘You were born with a silver spoon in your mouth because of this prophet whose infallibility you are questioning today. If it were not for him our family would have been out on the streets today; yet you are ungrateful and are denying the very source of your prosperity.’

Hashim Mubeen’s voice grew hoarse and Imama’s tears flowed faster.

‘No more education for you! All this learning is leading you astray!’ His words left Imama speechless, stunned. Even in her wildest dreams she had not expected to be denied education.

‘Baba, I am sorry!’ she pleaded. Her father had brought her to her knees. ‘I do not need your apologies or excuses. I’ve made myself clear—you will stay home from now.’

==Baba, this is not...what I meant. I...I don't know what Waseem has told you. I'm telling you that in future I will not read anything you don't want me to. I will not say anything you disprove of. Baba, please!' She was crying, begging with her father.

Her entreaties and pleas continued as she kept apologizing to her father for the next few days. Eventually, by the end of the week, he softened his stance and relented: Imama was allowed to go back to college. But for all those days, she was at the receiving end of taunts and barbs from everyone in the family. So, though Hashim Mubeen, with very strict warnings, had allowed her to return to college, the attitude of her family further distanced her from her faith. She did not stop reading the books that had provoked her thought: the only difference was that instead of bringing them home she read them in the college library.

After making it to the merit list in the F.Sc. examinations, Imama got admission into medical college. Javeria also got admission into the same institution and now their bonds of friendship were stronger than before—the main reason for that was the change that had come in Imama.

Imama's first meeting with Sabiha was purely by chance. One of Javeria's classmates was Sabiha's cousin, and it was through her that Imama came to know her. Sabiha was associated with the student wing of a religious organization and delivered a weekly lecture in class on any one aspect of Islam. These lectures were attended by about forty to fifty girls.

When Imama and her friends were first introduced to Sabiha, she had invited them all to the lecture.

==I'll definitely come—you can be assured of my attendance,' responded Javeria.

==I'll try, but I can't promise,' said Rabia, with a sheepish smile.

==I won't be able to make it. I'll be busy that day.' Zainab excused herself. With a smile, Sabiha turned to Imama, who had been listening quietly. ==And what about you? Will you come?' she asked her. Flustered, Imama exchanged a glance with Javeria who was looking at her.

==By the way, what is your topic this time?' asked Javeria—maybe to turn Sabiha's attention away from Imama.

==This time we'll talk about squandering money. This trend is pushing our society into decline—we'll talk about what measures should be taken to control it,' Sabiha explained.

==Imama, you didn't tell me if you'll come to the lecture.' Sabiha turned to her again. Imama paled. ==I'll let you know,' she stammered.

==I'll be very happy if the three of you come to the lecture with Javeria. We can't do it everyday, but we should make an effort at least occasionally to learn about our faith. I am not the only one who speaks on religion. Anyone from the audience is welcome to speak on the selected topic, and if there's any special issue to be discussed then that can also be arranged,' explained Sabiha before she left with Javeria and her cousin.

When they were in the corridor, she turned to Javeria and said, ==I felt Imama wanted to come: why don't you bring her along?'

==She follows a different faith. She will never participate in such gatherings,' said Javeria, very seriously. Surprised, Sabiha looked at her.

==Then you ought to invite her to study Islam. Perhaps she may, in this way, be able to tell between right and wrong,' said Sabiha.

==I tried it once—she became very angry. I do not want our longstanding friendship to come to an end on this score,' replied Javeria.

==True friends are those who save another from going astray: it is your duty to do so.'

==Yes, but what if one is not ready to hear a word about it?'

==Even so it's our moral duty to say what is right. It is possible that one is compelled to think about what you say.'

Javeria conceded with a smile that Sabiha was right in her stand.

==Will you go to her lecture?' Zainab asked Rabia when Sabiha was out of earshot.

==No, I don't intend to. I can't digest such stuff,' Rabia replied casually, gathering up her books. She was more liberal in her thinking compared to Imama, Javeria and Zainab and not particularly inclined towards religion. ==I have heard a lot of praise for Sabiha, though,' responded Zainab.

==Most certainly—Sabiha does speak very well,' Rabia said. ==I have heard that her father is also associated with some religious organization—obviously, that would have some effect,' Rabia added.

Imama was sitting at a distance, ostensibly studying her books but could hear the conversation. She was grateful that they had not tried to drag her into the discussion.

Three days later, she made an excuse and went off at the specified time to hear Sabiha's lecture. Zainab, Rabia and Javeria had decided to stay away from the lecture, so Imama changed her mind and decided to go but did not tell them where she was going.

Sabiha was somewhat surprised to see Imama. 'I'm very glad to see you here.

I did not expect you to come,' she said, greeting Imama warmly.

This was Imama's first step towards changing her faith. During this period she had read so much on Islam that, at least, she was not ignorant or uninformed about it. She was also well-versed about the Islamic and Quranic injunctions about squandering wealth and being spendthrifts. Yet her real reason why she had accepted Sabiha's invitation was to cover the distance from her professed faith to Islam—a difficult task.

And then, this was not the first and last lecture she attended. Week after week, she continued to listen to the lectures; hearing from another person the same things that she had read, left an impact on her. Her admiration and belief in Sabiha grew with time. Sabiha did not let Imama know that she had known about Imama's faith. It was about two months since she had started meeting Sabiha that there was a lecture on the finality of the Prophet

Muhammad (PBUH).

'The Holy Quran is a book that was divinely revealed to Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH),' began Sabiha, 'and in the Quran Allah declares that prophethood came to an end with Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH). There is no margin here for any other prophet to follow. If there is any mention of another prophet, like Hazrat Isa (AS), returning to this life it is not as a new prophet; rather, it is by Allah's will that a prophet appointed much before Hazrat Muhammad

(PBUH) returns not for his own people but for the followers of our Holy Prophet (PBUH), who will be Allah's last prophet on earth. At no time in the past nor in the future has this seal of finality been given to anyone except Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH), so is it possible that Allah will withdraw what He has bestowed on one prophet to reward it to another? In the Holy Quran, Allah asks who is truer to his word than Allah Almighty.

Is it possible that He should reject His own words? And if Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself is witness to his being the last and final messenger of Allah, then is it proper and justified that we should even entertain anyone else's claims to prophethood? Man is the only one of God's creations that has been blessed with the faculty of reason and he can use this intelligence to search for evidence of God's existence. He does not stop there— his thinking extends to God's prophets; he seeks out the divine messengers and questions their message before declaring his faith in them. Despite the injunctions of the Quran, man searches for more prophets, forgetting that prophets are not man-made but appointed by God. Today we are in the last decades of human evolution when the course of prophethood has ceased because God has selected one faith and one prophet for mankind.

== There is no further need for any new faith, except to follow what has been sent, and not just to follow, but to practice this last and final faith completed with Hazrat Muhammad Mustafa (PBUH). Those who do not hold fast to Allah's bonds and, instead, spread dissensions, will be in loss. What difference would there be then between us and an animal that breaks away from its herd

to chase a bundle of grass?'

In this forty-minute long lecture, Sabiha never once mentioned any other sect or belief. Whatever she said was relevant: the only irrelevant thing was about the finality of Hazrat Muhammad's prophethood, that he was the last divine messenger who died 1400 years ago in Madina. During his life and since then, all Muslims have stood in his shadow as one community, and even today, he alone is our prophet and guide. There has not been nor will be any other prophet after him, and those who believe otherwise should take stock of their

beliefs and clear their minds and hearts of the chaos they find themselves in.' Imama used to meet Sabiha after every lecture, but this time she left swiftly without seeing her. Her mind was seething in confusion and she came out of the college and began walking; she walked on for a long time—over footpaths, across the roads, on and on, not realizing how far she had come. She sat down on a bench by the canal. The sun was about to set. Out on the road, the traffic was crowded and noisy. She just sat silent, watching the water flow past. After a long spell of silence, she muttered to herself.

== What am I doing to myself? Why am I going round in circles? What am I searching for and why? I didn't come to Lahore for this—I came here to study medicine, to become the best ophthalmologist ever. Why does everything come to an end for me with the word ==prophet'? Why?' She buried her face in her hands.

== I have to get out of this—I can't focus on my studies this way. My problem should not be religion and faith—whatever was handed down by my elders, right or wrong, should suffice. I won't go to Sabiha's lectures again, nor will I think about any faiths or prophets,' she thought as she sat there.

It was 8.00 p.m. when she returned. Rabia and Javeria were quite concerned.

== I'd just gone to the bazaar,' Imama told them with a drawn face.

== Hey, Imama! You've come after a long time. Why did you stop coming?' It had been quite some time since Imama had been to Sabiha's and the lecture that was just about to begin.

‘I need to talk to you about some things. I’ll wait out here till you’re through,’ said Imama instead of replying to her query.

When Sabiha came out of the room 45 minutes later, she found Imama strolling in the corridor. They went back to the room which was now empty. Sabiha looked at Imama, waiting for her to begin.

Imama was lost in thought for a while; then she said, ‘Are you aware of my faith?’

‘Yes, I am. Javeria told me,’ Sabiha replied calmly.

‘I cannot tell you how frustrated I am...I feel like running away from this world! I ... I ...’ She held her head. ‘I know that...’ She stopped midway again. ‘But I cannot give up my faith. I’ll be destroyed—my parents will kill me. My career, my dreams, all will be lost. I have even stopped praying, but I don’t know why I cannot find peace. Please try to understand my situation—I feel all this is wrong, but I don’t know what is right.’

‘Imama, accept true Islam.’ Sabiha’s response was this one statement.

‘I can’t do this—I told you what problems I’ll face!’ ‘Then why did you come to me?’ Sabiha was very composed.

‘I don’t know why I’ve come to you,’ she said helplessly.

‘You came because you wanted to hear just that one sentence. I cannot give you any justification. You are not in search of any answers because you know them. You just have to accept the truth—isn’t that so?’

Imama’s eyes were brimming with tears. ‘I feel as if the earth is slipping away from under my feet—as if I am floating in space.’ Her voice was choked. Sabiha did not reply: she was reading ‘Bismillah’.

Imama wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. ‘There’s nothing, Sabiha! I can see nothing,’ she said looking at her.

‘La Ilaha illallah’ Sabiha began to recite the kalima softly. Imama sobbed, her face covered by her hands as she repeated the words after Sabiha.

‘Muhammad ur Rasool Allah,’ she said next, her voice close to breaking. Imama was unable to comprehend why she felt so tearful—she had no regrets, she was not unhappy, yet she could not control her sobbing. When she did stop after quite a while, she found Sabiha sitting there—and looked at her with a teary smile.

Rabia and Javeria stared at each other in shocked silence. Imama kept drawing patterns on the floor with her foot, lost in thought.

Javeria broke the spell. ‘You ought to have told us all about this earlier on.’ Imama looked up at her serenely. ‘And what would that do?’

‘At least we would not have had such misgivings about you. We could have helped you.’

Imama shook her head and in a strange tone, replied, ‘That would have made no difference.’

Javeria moved closer to her and spoke gently. ‘I am very happy that you have made the right decision, Imama, that you’ve turned away—better late than never—from a wrong path. You have no idea how I feel about this.’

Imama looked at her quietly. Javeria continued, ‘If there’s anything we both can do for you, then don’t hesitate to ask us: we’ll be only too happy.’ ‘I will need your support—a great deal,’ Imama replied.

‘Is it because of me that you have taken this decision and changed your faith?’ Javeria was saying.

Imama looked at her, surprised. ‘Because of you?’ she thought. Her mind clouded and a face began to emerge from that fog like someone surfacing from water. Imama smiled as she recognised the features and heard the voice.

To him who begs for a drop You grant the seas.

‘Just don’t let anyone else know about this. Not even Zainab.’ Javeria and Rabia nodded in agreement.

Poore qad se jo khara hoon to ye tera hai karam

(If I stand tall today it is your mercy)

Mujh ko jhukne nahi deta sahara tera

(For your support lets me not waver)

She knew this voice, she knew this face. It was Jalal Ansar's.

A few days after Imama had joined the medical college, she called Zainab in Lahore when she had come home to Islamabad for a weekend.

‘Hold on, child, I'll call Zainab.’ Her mother had received the call. As Imama waited she heard a well-known poem in praise of the Prophet (pbuh) being recited in a male voice—whichever it was, there was a passion in his recital.

Qatra mange jo use too use darya de day

(To him who begs for a drop

You grant the seas.)

Mujh ko kuch aur na de apni tamanna de day

(And I ask you for nothing but your love)

She had no idea that a man's voice could be so beautiful that it could cast a spell over all. Imama stood awed, as if she had forgotten how to breathe.

Log kehte hain ke saya tere paikar ka na tha

(The light of your frame never cast a shadow they say,)

Me to kehta hoon jahan bhar pe hai saya tera

(But I say the universe itself is in your blessed shade)

In human lives, some moments are blessed, like that auspicious night in Shabe-Qadr/the Night of Power which some people carelessly allow to slip away. But some wait patiently, hands raised in prayer, begging for His blessings. This is the awaited moment that stills flowing waters and makes still waters flow, that turns the unspoken prayer into fate. This blessed point of time came into Imama Hashim's life not during the Night of Power nor had she stretched her hands

to Heaven in prayer, yet the earth and stars stood still in their course—the cosmos was a dome where just one voice echoed.

Dastgiri meri tanhai ki too ne hi to ki

(Sole companion of my solitude)

Me to mar jata agar sath na hota tera

(But for your succor, I would no longer be)

Wo andheron me bhi durrana guzar jate hain

(Undaunted, they cross the darkness)

Jin ke maathe pe chamkta hai sitara tera

(Whose brows are illumined by your brilliance)

The voice was strong and clear. Imama sat mesmerized, the receiver held to her ear.

‘Hello Imama!’ It was Zainab. The man’s voice disappeared the earth that had stopped began to spin again.

‘Hello, Imama, can you hear me?’ She was jolted back to life.

‘Yes, I can...’

‘That’s better: I thought the line had dropped,’ Zainab said with some relief. Imama chatted with her awhile but her mind was engaged somewhere else.

.....

Jalal Ansar was Zainab’s older brother. Imama knew about him but they had not met. Zainab and Imama were classmates and first met when Imama joined college. Their acquaintanceship grew and so Imama got to know about her family, that they were four siblings and Jalal was the eldest; he was doing a house job as a doctor. Zainab’s father was an engineer in WAPDA and their family was quite religious.

On her return to from Islamabad, Imama said, ‘Zainab, that night when I’d called, there was someone reciting a naat in the background. Who was it?’ She tried not to be too curious.

‘Oh, that ...that was Jalal Bhai. He was practicing for a naat competition. Our phone’s in the corridor and his room was open so you must have heard him,’ she explained. ‘He has a very nice voice.’

__Yes, he does. His recital of the Quran is even better than the naat. He's won many prizes for his recitals. He's going to participate in a competition in college—you must come.'

Zainab did not know then about Imama's religious leanings. She was very careful about purdah so Zainab thought Imama too was from a conservative background like herself.

Two or three days later, without informing her friends Imama bunked classes to attend the naat competition. That was when she saw Jalal Ansar for the first time. He was a bearded young man, about 25 years old, and resembled Zainab. Imama's eyes followed him as he rose from his seat and came on stage to take his place at the rostrum. Eyes closed and arms folded across his chest, he began reciting:

Kuch nahi mangta shahon se ye sheda tera

(Your admirer asks nothing from the kings)

Is ki dolat hai faqat naqsh-e-qaf-e-paa tera

(For the dust of your tracks is my greatest reward)

A current seemed to run through Imama. There was pin drop silence in the hall where only his voice echoed, casting a spell. She did not notice when he finished and came offstage, who came next, what the outcome of the competition was or when the last student left the hall. After a long time the realization hit her that she was the only one sitting there.

__I heard your brother recite yesterday,' she told Zainab.

__Really? He won the first prize.' Zainab smiled.

After a pause, Imama replied, __It was a beautiful naat.'

__He has been reciting the Quran and naats since childhood and winning awards. Now he has lost count,' Zainab said with some pride. __The beauty of his voice lies in the depth of his faith and the passion with which he recites,' she continued. __He venerates and adores the Holy Prophet (pbuh) beyond limits. He has never recited anything except the Quran and naats. Whenever asked to participate in other events, he says that the tongue that serves God and His Messenger could never sing praises of anyone else.

__We love the Prophet (pbuh) too, but I have not seen the kind of adoration that my brother has. He has not missed a single prayer in the last ten years and he completes the reading of the entire Quran every month. You've got to listen to his Qirat...' Zainab extolled her brother. Imama listened to her quietly but did not ask any more questions.

The next day, Imama just lay curled up in bed instead of getting ready for class.

‘Don’t you have a class? It’s getting late.’ Javeria tried to awaken her. ‘You run along—I’m not going,’ Imama said, closing her eyes again. ‘Why?’

‘Not feeling good,’ said Imama.

‘Your eyes are irritated—too red. Didn’t you sleep well last night?’ ‘No... and now, please let me sleep.’ Imama warded off more inquiry and Javeria left for class.

Imama had indeed not slept well. Jalal Ansar’s voice kept echoing around her and she could hardly focus on anything else. She kept repeating his name under her breath, wondering what attracted her so, why she could not dislodge him from her mind. Imama recalled Zainab’s words as she stood by the window. ‘The beauty of his voice lies in the depth of his faith and the passion with which he recites. He venerates and adores the Holy Prophet (pbuh).’

Depth of faith, passion, the pain and sweetness of his voice...what was it that had moved her so? ‘The world begins with the adoration of the Creator and ends with the adoration of His messenger, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh),’ she remembered. The thought plunged her into silence and deeper thoughts— as if she were descending step by step into herself, searching the dark void for some light, some guidance. ‘What is it about the Prophet (pbuh) that brings tears to the eyes of his devotees? That touches a chord in their hearts? Faith? Veneration? Passion? Why was I not moved to tears? Why did words of praise not rise on my lips?’

Imama’s voice broke as she tried to recite the verses presented by Jalal. She cleared her throat and tried again, and tried again, standing by the open window. Halfway, she stopped: it was Jalal’s voice that haunted her, loud and clear, like a call to prayer. She felt a wetness on her face and realized that she was crying. Her fingers touched her streaming eyes. Confused, and covering her face with her hands, she sank to the floor and sobbed her heart out. The most difficult dilemma for a person is perhaps when his heart testifies to an inevitable reality yet his tongue will not proclaim it, when his mind screams in acceptance of the truth but he cannot bring himself to state it. Imama Hashim found herself at the same crossroads. The decision that had tortured her for the last two or three years had been made by a call—without searching or examining the basis of faith in the Holy Prophet (pbuh). For years, she had heard praises being sung of their prophet, yet they never evoked such a response—brought no tears to her eyes nor softened her heart—but whenever she had heard, read or talked about Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh) she found herself strangely moved, drawn towards him. Her resistance to Sabiha’s lectures evaporated, and Jalal Ansar’s voice was like a firefly leading the way.

Me tujhe alam-e-ashya me bhi paa leta hoon

(Your presence guides me in the material world,)

Log kehte hain ke hai alam-e-baala tera

(Though your abode is celestial I am told.)

This was the beginning of a new journey for Imama. She went to Sabiha regularly and participation in these gatherings reaffirmed her decision and dispelled her doubts. Change of faith was a grave decision for Imama, one that impacted every aspect of her life. She could no longer marry Asjad as he was not a Muslim; she had to distance herself from her family, sooner or later, as she could not live in an environment where the truths and principles of Islam were being blatantly distorted. She began to have doubts about the source of the funds that paid for her education, and that she received for her expenses. That life that had seemed like a fairy tale now appeared to be nightmare though she herself had chosen this path. She was amazed at her decision to convert: she had prayed to the Almighty for courage and steadfastness and He had rewarded her but she was still young enough to fall prey to fears and suspicions.

‘Imama, do not disclose your faith to your parents as yet. You should be able to survive on your own—then you can refuse to marry Asjad and tell your family about your conversion,’ advised Sabiha, when they discussed Imama’s dilemma.

‘I do not want to spend the money my father gives me, especially when I know that he has acquired his wealth by propagating a false religion. It would not be right to use such funds.’

‘That’s right, but you have no option. It’s better that you should complete your education so that you’re no longer dependent on your father then.’ Even if Sabiha had not shown her a way out, Imama had no choice: she did not have the courage to give up her dream.

It was 10 p.m. when he came out of the cinema hall and walked on, munching on leftover popcorn. Half an hour later, he rang the bell of a huge mansion.

‘Shall I serve dinner, Sir?’ the servant inquired.

‘No.’

‘Milk?’

‘No.’ He walked to his room and shut the door. Switching on the light, he aimlessly turned over the books and papers scattered around. Then he went into the bathroom and taking a new razor blade from the shaving kit, he came and sat on his bed. He turned on the bedside lamp

and switched off the main lights. Very carefully, he unwrapped the blade and then with a swift sharp move, sliced across his right wrist. A whimper escaped him but he clenched his lips. He tried to keep his eyes open as his right arm drooped over the edge, blood flowing in a steady stream onto the carpet.

His mind seemed to fall into a vortex from which sudden explosions jolted him. The noise increased and he opened his eyes, but he could not make any sense of it.

She was rudely awakened from sleep. _Imama! Imama!’ It was Waseem, shouting out her name and loudly banging on the door.

_What is it? Why are you shouting?’ She opened the door to find Waseem in a state of panic.

_Do you have a First Aid kit?’

_Yes. Why?’ She felt the ground slipping away.

_Just get it and come with me. Choo-Choo has tried to kill himself again—he slashed his wrist. Their servant is downstairs...come on!’

Imama suddenly sighed in relief. _Your friend belongs in a mental hospital, considering his behavior,’ she said with annoyance as she picked up her dupatta and followed Waseem.

_I’ve just seen him—he’s still conscious,’ said Waseem as they came down the stairs.

_You should have taken him straight to the hospital.’

_That I’ll do, but at least bandage his wrist so that the bleeding stops.’ _I can’t do very much, Waseem. God knows what he used to cut his wrist, Anyway, where’s his family?’ Imama asked.

_No one’s at home except for the servants. They came to tell him about a phone call and finding no response, they broke down the door.’ Imama tried to say something about Salar, but Waseem turned around angrily. _For God’s sake, can’t you stop your comments? His condition is serious and you go on maligning him!’

_I have no sympathy for people who do such things.’ They were now in Salar’s house and, shortly, entered his room. Imama stopped in the doorway, shocked. The entire room was plastered with life-size posters of half-nude models—almost as if they were actually there. She blushed and the injured young man on the bed fell further in her opinion. The posters reflected the shallowness of his character and were a source of embarrassment for Imama because of the presence of other people in the room.

She quickly moved to the bed where Salar Sikandar lay. Waseem tightly held his wrist, covered with a corner of the bed sheet, to staunch the bleeding while Salar, half-conscious, tried to wrest himself free and at the same time attempted to talk to Waseem and the servants.

‘Look at his wound,’ Waseem said, as he held out Salar’s wrist. Imama sat down and removed the sheet—the cut was long and deep. Salar again yanked his arm but Imama’s grip was firm.

‘Waseem, get me the bandage from the kit. The wound is too deep—we can’t do anything here, he needs to be taken to the hospital. I’ll bandage his wrist to control the bleeding,’ she said.

Salar jerked his head and tried to open his eyes. Everything was shrouded in a mist through which he saw a girl holding his arm very firmly. Agitated, he tried to pull his arm away but a current of pain shot through: he felt almost as if he would die but the next minute he again tried to free himself.

‘Who the hell are you? Go away! Get lost!’ he faltered despite his anger. ‘This is my room.... how dare you enter it? You’re Waseem...get out! Just get lost...bloody bastard!’ he shouted, stumbling over his words.

Imama heard him abuse her brother but did not let go of Salar’s arm and in spite of his thrashing around, managed to bandage his wrist. Through the fog, Salar felt something gentle around his wrist. Once again, he attempted to release himself using his left arm to pull away, but he failed. His arm hit the girl’s head, her dupatta slipped away and her hair fell open. She held on to his wrist with her left hand and her right hand slapped him sharply across his face. It was such a stinging blow that he came to for a moment to see her face, red with anger.

‘If you make another move, and I promise that I’ll slash your other wrist too—do you hear me?’ she shouted.

Salar heard Waseem say something too, but he couldn’t make out his words. As he lost consciousness, he heard a female voice, ‘Check his blood pressure...’ He suddenly remembered the slap on his face and tried to look up, he heard the girl’s voice again but the words escaped him as he slipped into darkness.

The next time he came to, he was in a private clinic. He opened his eyes to look around: a nurse was present in the room, adjusting the drip. Salar saw her smiling and tried to say something but once again, he faded into the dark. He could not recall when he regained consciousness the second time, but he found himself surrounded by familiar faces. His mother came close as he opened his eyes.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Just fine,’ he replied softly, looking at Sikandar Usman who stood at a distance. Before she could say more, a doctor in the room came up to check his pulse. He gave Salar an injection and

gave him another drip. Salar watched the proceedings listlessly and turned his eyes to the ceiling as the doctor spoke to Sikandar Usman and his wife, Tyaba.

There was absolute silence in the room. Sikandar and Tyaba sat, despondent. Despite their best efforts and precautions Salar had attempted suicide the fourth time, and had nearly succeeded. A few minutes delay would have been the end of him, the doctors said.

Sikandar Usman and his wife had been informed about Salar by the servant at two in the morning. In their desperation and anxiety, they could hardly sleep, and Sikandar must have smoked more than a hundred cigarettes till they caught the morning flight from Karachi to Islamabad.

‘I fail to understand why he does this...all our guidance, our counseling have had no effect on him. It seems my mind will explode when I think about him. What have we deprived him of? What have we not given him? All the luxuries, the best education...I even took him to the best psychiatrist and yet this is the result. Where did we go wrong that we should be punished so? I’m the laughing stock of my friends and acquaintances.’

Sikandar was deeply worried. He walked a knife’s edge as far as Salar was concerned and a moment of neglect had ended in this mishap. Tyaba wiped her tears. Now in the hospital, they were at a loss for words, but Salar recognized their state of mind and welcomed their silence. However, three days later they confronted him.

‘Just tell me why you do such things?’ Sikandar asked him with equanimity. ‘What is the problem? You had promised not to behave like this. I even got you a sports car as a reward. Yet you seem to have no regard for us or your family’s position.’

Salar sat unresponsive. ‘If nothing else, at least think about us, your parents,’ pleaded Tyaba. ‘If there’s a problem, share it...discuss it, but for God’s sake, don’t try to take your life. Have you ever considered what would have happened to us if you had succeeded?’

Salar listened to them impassively. This was nothing new: it was the usual dialogue after every failed suicide attempt.

‘Why are you silent? Haven’t you understood us?’ Tyaba was frustrated and angry. ‘You seem to get a kick out of humiliating your parents!’ They used his achievements and his potential as an incentive to evoke a response, and Salar thought, ‘Here they go again.’ He yawned.

Finally, he spoke. ‘What can I say when you’ve said it all? My life is a personal matter for me and I’d told you earlier that I did not intend to die...’ Sikandar intervened. ‘Whatever you intend, don’t do it! Have pity on us!’

‘Just say that you’ll not do such things again. Please stop,’ Tyaba implored. ‘Very well, I won’t,’ replied Salar, to free himself of their pleas and despair. Sikandar and Tyaba were not convinced, but they had little choice. They had always been so proud of Salar, yet he alone had given them more worries than all their other children together.

_How's your friend now? Did you look him up?' Imama was out with Waseem when she was suddenly reminded of Salar.

_Better. He may be discharged in a couple of days,' replied Waseem. _Shall we check on him on our way back?'

Imama was a little hesitant but Waseem reassured her and she agreed although she thought it was pointless to enquire about the welfare of such a patient.

_One would have thought his parents would have had the courtesy to visit us or thank us for helping him,' she said.

_You have no idea of their condition,' objected Waseem. _What do you expect them to say if they are asked, when they come here, why their son does such things? For fun?' He felt sorry for them and said, _His parents did thank me profusely and also thanked Ammi and Baba when they had gone to the hospital to see Salar. I'm glad they did not mention the incident to his parents—it would have been awful.' _But why does your friend act this way?' Imama persisted.

_You're asking me as though he informs me before he decides to take his life.' Waseem was quite annoyed. _He's a close friend of yours.'

_Not all that close either. Besides, what he does is his business. Maybe there's a problem.'

_Then you should keep a distance from such people. What if you should start behaving in the same way tomorrow?'

_If you remember the way you behaved that day, that incident will certainly create a difference in this friendship,' Waseem said smugly. _It was not quite the right reaction on your part.'

_I don't think he'll remember that slap—he was hardly conscious. Why? Did he say something?' Imama asked. _Besides, he was trying to pull his arm away and he was abusing and then he pulled off my dupatta,' she added. Waseem tried to defend Salar.

_Whatever it was, I was very angry then, but I regretted it and was grateful to Allah that his life was saved—or else I'd feel terrible about slapping him.'

Imama was really remorseful, but when Waseem suggested she apologize to

Salar, Imama refused. _Why should I rake up what's past? Besides, he's not so close that this should affect our relationship.'

When they were through with their shopping, Waseem drove to the clinic to see Salar. He was having soup when they walked in and he immediately recognized the girl with Waseem. Salar's mother had told him that it was Waseem's sister who gave him first aid—he remembered nothing of that but he did remember the tight slap across his face. He stopped as he saw Imama. His piercing look convinced her that he had not forgotten the events of that night.

After exchanging greetings, Tyaba and Sikander Usman thanked Imama. Salar had known Waseem for some years now, and had seen Imama at their house but had never really paid attention to her. However, he stared at her rather critically: he was not grateful or indebted to her—she had ruined his plans by saving his life. Imama continued to talk to his mother but was also acutely aware of his eyes on her. Never before had anyone looked at her so distastefully—she felt like walking out. Salar sank further in her opinion; she had meant to apologize, but now she felt like landing him with a few more hard slaps.

A while later, they said their goodbyes but Imama did not bother to address

Salar and left without even looking at him. She was relieved to be out. She criticized Waseem on his choice of friends. He was taken aback and asked her why.

‘He does not even have the courtesy—after all he knows I'm your sister and that I was in the room with you. He's not worth wasting one's time on—and it is better that you have little to do with him.’

‘I'll be careful,’ Waseem assured her. ‘You need not repeat this episode.’ He tried to change the subject and Imama kept a studied silence. But Salar was now on her list of objectionable persons. It was a coincidence that she was in Islamabad when this incident took place, otherwise she would not have had this unpleasant introduction and close encounter with Salar.

After her conversion to Islam, Imama saw Jalal Ansar closely when he came to their college. She was sitting with her friends on the lawn and he came to have a word with Zainab. They moved to a side, but Imama could not take her eyes off him. A strange sensation of happiness surrounded her. He left but her gaze followed him till he was out of sight. Her friends were busy in conversation, but she was oblivious to her surroundings. It was when she could see him no more that she was jolted back to reality.

Her second encounter with him was at Zainab's house when she accompanied her home from college. Zainab had been asking her friends over but everyone else declined with one pretext or another, so Imama went along. She used to feel an inexplicable sense of peace in Zainab's house—perhaps, it was the association with Jalal.

Imama was waiting in the drawing room while Zainab went to get the tea. Jalal walked in and was surprised to see Imama; he did not expect to find her there. He greeted her in his usual manner and Imama responded, shyly.

‘Did you come with Zainab?’ he asked. ‘Where is she? I needed to talk to her. I didn’t know she had company,’ he excused himself and turned around. ‘You recite naats very well,’ said Imama spontaneously. He stopped in his tracks.

‘Thank you. Where did you hear me?’

‘When I had called Zainab one day and was waiting for her...and then Zainab told me about the competition. You had recited that naat...’ She went on and Jalal was at a loss—should he feel happy or surprised?

He thanked her for the compliment—this tall, slim chadar-clad young woman whose dark eyes had a strange impact on him. Many people had praised his skill but this girl’s praise was remarkable, and more so was her expression of it. He walked away from the drawing room. Speaking to girls was not his forte, much less to one whom he barely knew.

Imama sat there in a state of ecstasy—she could not believe that she had spoken to Jalal Ansar. So close—facing her. She stared at the spot where he had been standing a while ago, and in her mind’s eye she could still see him there.

Their next meeting was at the hospital. If Imama had been to Zainab’s house by choice, then this meeting was by chance. She had accompanied Rabia who wanted to meet a friend there. She missed a heartbeat when she saw Jalal in the corridor with a group of Final Year students. The corridor was too crowded for Imama to move towards him and she realized then how hard it was for her to stop herself. Even as she sat in the room, her thoughts were out there with him.

When Rabia and Imama came out after more than an hour, the students had dispersed from the corridor; she felt a pang of disappointment. Rabia was busy chatting when going down the stairs and they came face to face with Jalal. Imama felt an electric wave run through her.

‘Assalaam Alaikum, Jalal Bhai! How are you?’ Rabia greeted him. Jalal replied politely, then asked what brought them to the hospital. Rabia explained the reason while Imama stood looking at him quietly.

Dastgiri meri tanhai ki too ne hi to ki

(You have been my saviour in my loneliness)

Me to mar jata agar sath na hota tera

(Were it not for you, I would have been dead)

His voice seemed to send her into a trance. Seldom had she heard anyone speak such chaste Urdu, and every time he spoke, his voice reminded her of the same beautiful naat she had first listened to. She felt curiously proud, and envious looking at him.

Speaking to Rabia, Jalal had perhaps realized Imama's concentration and turned to her with a smile. Imama looked away. For a moment she had an irrepressible desire to get closer to him. She looked away from him, and glancing about her, recited 'In- haul' under her breath. 'Maybe Satan wants to lead me astray,' she thought to herself, but despite her supplications to ward off evil, there was no difference in her feelings: she still felt the same attraction.

Despite the years-long engagement to Asjad, she had never felt drawn to him this way. Standing there that day, she feared Jalal for the first time. 'What will I do if I lose control of myself every time I set eyes on him? I was never so weak. What is it about him that melts my will?'

Zainab knocked on Jalal's door and entered.

'Are you free?' she asked, then continued. 'I have a request from a friend: can you record some naats in your voice on a cassette?' Jalal was surprised and looked enquiringly at her.

'It's for my friend Imama. She requested me and I agreed.'

Jalal smiled—he was reminded of his meeting with her. 'Isn't she the same girl who was here?' he asked.

'Yes. She's from Islamabad but studies here. She lives in the hostel. Her father's a big industrialist, but she's very modest,' Zainab divulged.

'Seems to be very religious, from what I saw of her with you,' observed Jalal.

'The college environment has not affected her.'

'Yes. She's always been wearing a chadar since she came and I think her family's very conservative. But they're all very well-educated, her brothers and sisters too. She's the youngest among them,' Zainab went on. 'So you'll record the cassette for me, won't you?'

‘You can have it tomorrow,’ he replied. Zainab left the room and he returned to his reading.

Their next encounter was in the library. Imama’s reaction was spontaneous when she saw him there: she went up and greeted him. ‘I wanted to thank you.’

Jalal looked at her, confused.

‘For the cassette.’

He smiled at her. ‘I had no idea that such a request would be made of me.’ ‘You’re very fortunate,’ she said softly.

‘In what way?’

‘In every way... you’ve been blessed with so much.’ ‘So are you blessed,’ he replied. She looked at him with a wistful smile and he suspected her eyes were moist. She lowered her gaze.

‘To begin with I had nothing, but now I do,’ she intoned with the same softness. Jalal was trying to give meaning to her words. ‘You have such veneration, such love for the Prophet (PBUH) when you say his name...’ she stopped midway, but Jalal waited for her to complete her words.

‘I envy you,’ she said. ‘Not all people feel the same way as you do. Nor can they express their adoration for him like you—in a way that leads the listener to fall at the Prophet’s (PBUH) feet. Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) must love you too.’ She looked up at him, clear eyed.

‘Perhaps, it was a misconception on my part,’ he thought, then spoke up. ‘If it is so then indeed I am very fortunate. All I know is that I do feel a deep love and respect for our Prophet (PBUH) and that is a blessing indeed for me.’

Allah blesses few with this feeling.’

Jalal spoke with sentiment and Imama could not take her eyes off him. She had never felt as insignificant before as she did now.

‘Perhaps, I may recite naats some day, but never with the passion of Jalal Ansar. My voice will never move people the way his recital does,’ she thought despairingly as she walked away from the library.

.....

After those meetings with Jalal, Imama tried her best to avoid him—even avoid thinking about him. She tried to distance herself from Zainab too, but it was all to no avail. Her helplessness increased with each passing day and she was brought to her knees. ‘There’s something about him that breaks all my defenses,’ she conceded. Perhaps it was this admission that turned her

attention towards him again; this may have been an unconscious act earlier on, but now she consciously put Jalal in Asjad's place in her life.

__What is wrong with my seeking the company of someone whose voice compels me to return to the presence of my Prophet (PBUH)? Why should I not desire a man whose love for the Prophet (PBUH) is more than mine? Why should I not pray that our fates should be intertwined, that his name should be my identity? He is someone I know, someone I envy for all that he's been blessed with.' Imama had all the justifications, all the answers to validate her emotions.

She began to find ways of being where Jalal would be. She'd call up Zainab when she knew he would be home too, as he often received the phone. The random conversations between them became longer and purposeful and finally they began to meet. Javeria, Rabia and Zainab were unaware of the growing friendship between Imama and Jalal. He was doing a house job and Imama often went to his hospital. They had not declared their love but were fully conscious of their sentiments for each other. He knew that her feelings for him were stronger than just attraction just as she too was aware of his feelings for her.

Jalal was so religious that he never expected to find himself thus involved with a girl or that he would be meeting her this way, but it all happened involuntarily and gradually. He did not mention his feelings for Imama to Zainab; had he done so, she would have told him about the engagement to Asjad. Had he known, he would have been very careful and would not have allowed the relationship to grow to this degree.

During one of their meetings, Imama came up with a proposal, much to Jalal's amazement.

__What do you plan to do when your house job's finished?'

__I'll go abroad for specialization.'

__And then?'

__Then I'll return and set up my own hospital.'

__Have you thought about marriage?' Her question caught him off guard.

__Everyone thinks about marriage,' he smiled.

__Who do you plan to marry?'

__That remains to be seen.'

After a pause, Imama asked, __Will you marry me?' Jalal was too stunned to reply.

__Did I offend you?' she asked as he sat in shocked silence. She repeated her question, shaking him out of his stupor.

__It is a question I should have asked you. Will you marry me?'

==Yes.' She was composed, collected. ==And you?'

==I...I ...yes, of course. Who else would I marry?' He saw a glow on her face as he completed his words. ==When my house job's done, I'll send my parents to your family formally.'

She was quiet for a while, then said, ==Jalal, how could I marry you without my parents' approval?'

He was surprised. ==What do you mean?'

==It could be that they may object to our marriage.'

==Haven't you told them about us? How would you know their reaction?'

==No,' she said. ==But I know them.'

Jalal was perplexed. He had not expected any resistance on the part of her parents, but she knew otherwise. ==Will you still marry me, despite their opposition?'

He pondered the situation and his silence pushed her into turmoil. At last, he spoke. ==Yes. Even then, you'd be my only choice. I cannot think of marrying anyone else. I'll try to convince your parents to agree, but if they refuse then we will go ahead all the same.' ==Will your parents agree?' she asked.

==Yes, and I will persuade them if they don't. They never refuse me,' he said with a hint of pride.

==Hello!' Imama turned round at the call. It was Salar, standing a few feet away, as casual as ever with his shirt unbuttoned and hands thrust into his jeans' pockets. Taimur was with him too. For a moment, Imama did not know how to react.

==Come, let me introduce you to the young lady,' said Salar when he saw Imama at the bookshop.

==This chadar-clad person?' Taimur was taken aback when he saw her. ==Who's this?'

==She's Waseem's sister.'

==What do you have to do with them? Waseem and his family are very conservative, so why do you want to meet her?'

==I'm not meeting her for the first time...I've met her before, and anyway, what's the harm in talking to her?' Salar ignored Taimur's objections. Imama's eyes moved from the magazine to

Salar and to his friend. ‘How are you?’ he asked, seeing her look towards them. ‘Fine,’ she replied.

Salar introduced Taimur, saying he was also Waseem’s friend. ‘Waseem’s out there.’ She gestured towards the shopping center.

‘But we’re not here to meet him,’ said Salar. She looked at him seriously. ‘We’re here to talk to you.’

‘I hardly know you, so what’s there to talk about?’ she replied coldly. She did not like the look in Salar’s eyes—he never spoke to people with his eyes lowered, she thought, especially not to girls. She began to flip through the magazine.

‘You don’t know me?’ he sneered. ‘I live right next to your house.’

‘You certainly do, but I don’t know you —personally,’ she clarified, eyes still fixed on the magazine.

‘Some months ago you saved my life,’ he mocked her again.

‘As a medical student, that was my duty. I would have done that for anyone dying in front of me. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I am busy.’

Salar did not budge even though Taimur tugged at his sleeve; he had some regard for Imama because of Waseem. Salar freed himself.

‘I wanted to thank you for that night, although your treatment of me wasn’t altogether professional,’ Salar said seriously and Imama looked up at him. ‘If you are referring to my slapping you, then it was unprofessional and I am sorry (although I’m sure you deserved more),’ she said swallowing the half unsaid words.

‘I didn’t mind that. I meant something else,’ he replied nonchalantly. ‘You bandaged my wrist very sloppily and you weren’t even able to check my blood pressure properly,’ he said, popping a stick of chewing gum into his mouth. Imama felt her earlobes turning red. She stared at him without blinking. He continued to mock her. ‘What a shame that you could not even do what any untrained person can be expected to do.’

‘I am not a doctor: I’m just a medical student. And as for being unprofessional, there’ll always be a next time since you are in the habit of making such attempts. I can keep practicing on you to make myself perfect.’ But Salar was unfazed. He smiled at her saying, ‘If you are trying to embarrass me...’

‘I will fail as you are not embarrassed,’ she completed his statement. ‘I know that because embarrassment is a trait found in humans.’ ‘And what am I in your opinion?’ Salar asked in the same tone.

‘A vet may be better able to answer that question,’ she retorted. Salar burst out laughing.

==Every dictionary defines a bi-ped animal as a human being. I walk on two feet.'

==From a bear to a dog, animals can walk on two feet if required to or if they desire to.'

==But I have only two feet and I use them all the time.'

==Well, you're lucky not to be four-legged; that's why you should go to a vet— he'd be able to explain better.' Imama's tone was cold. She was disgusted, but Salar was not to be put down.

==You know so much about animals that you'd have made a great vet. I'm very impressed by your knowledge.' Imama's face turned a deeper crimson. ==If you become my vet, I'll come to you for treatment and perhaps you could even do research on me. What fee will you charge?' He talked in a serious tone and Imama was at a loss. Getting into a conversation with him was inviting trouble.

==Waseem will inform you,' she said, trying to ward him off.

Salar joked about that suggestion despite understanding the threat in her voice. Taimur tugged at him again. ==Come on, Salar! I have work to do.' ==OK, yaar—don't pull at me!' He then turned to Imama. ==I was just joking—I really wanted to thank you. You and Waseem were a great help. Bye!' Imama breathed a sigh of relief seeing them go away. This fellow was truly crazy: she was surprised that a person like Waseem could be friends with him.

==Did Salar come to see you?' It was Waseem. He had seen Taimur and Salar from a distance.

==What did he have to say?' Waseem was curious.

I'm surprised how you can have such friends—I have yet to meet someone as rude and obnoxious as him.' Imama was very annoyed. ==He had come to thank me and at the same time to tell me that I could neither bandage properly nor check blood pressure.' ==Forget it,' Waseem smiled. ==He's crackers.'

==I felt like landing a few more slaps on his face...just turning up with his friend who's no better. By the way, he said he was your friend too,' she remembered.

==Not exactly—just an acquaintance.'

==How can you keep company with such boys? Look at the way they dress, their appearance, the way they talk! You should have nothing to do with them.'

Imama began to walk out and Waseem followed her.

==I'm amazed though how he could have noted that the bandage was not applied correctly or that I had a problem checking his blood pressure. He was flailing about so much—how could he have observed what was going on?' Imama was compelled to think.

==He was right,' Waseem noted with a smile. ==You did have a problem.'

‘I know, I was very nervous,’ she conceded. ‘I’d never seen such a case before, and all that gushing blood really scared me. And his attitude, to top it all...I’ve not seen a suicide case behave this way.’

‘And you aspire to be a doctor, a competent and renowned one—it’s unbelievable!’ he said.

‘I didn’t tell you all this for you to make fun of me,’ she protested as they walked to the parking lot.

.....

Imama noticed a change in Zainab and Jalal over the last few days—it was in their attitude. They seemed abrupt; there was a tension between them and her. She tried calling Jalal a couple of times at the hospital, but the answer was always the same: he was busy. When he came to pick up Zainab from the college, he did not stop to meet her as before. And even if he came across Imama, it was a perfunctory greeting.

She thought first that it was just her suspicion, but when this attitude became more pronounced she decided to confront him and turned up at the hospital. Jalal’s reaction was cold and indifferent—not even a smile crossed his face when he met her.

‘It’s been a while since we met—so I thought I’d come over,’ she said, trying to shake off her fears.

‘I’ve got to go, my shift is about to begin.’

Imama was shocked. ‘Zainab told me your shift ends at this time, which is why I came now.’

Jalal was quiet for a few moments, then he replied. ‘Yes, that’s right, but I have some other work today.’

Imama tried to understand what he was thinking. ‘Jalal, are you upset with me about something?’

‘No. I’m not upset with anyone,’ he replied curtly.

‘Can you come out for ten minutes and hear me out?’

Jalal looked at her and, with his coat on his arm, came out without a word. He glanced at his watch as if to give her a cue.

‘Why are you misbehaving with me this way?’ she asked point-blank.

‘Am I misbehaving with you?’ he countered.

‘You’ve been ignoring me for the past few days.’

==Yes, I have.' Imama was taken aback by his blunt admission—it was unexpected. ==Because I do not want to meet you,' he completed his statement. ==Why?' She was stunned. ==There must be some reason why your attitude has changed so suddenly.'

==Yes, there is,' he said abruptly, ==but it's not necessary to tell you—just as it was not necessary for you to tell me certain things.' ==I? What have I kept from you?'

==That you are not a Muslim,' he said bitterly. Imama's breath choked. ==Did you not hide this from me?'

==Jalal, I wanted to tell you.' Her voice betrayed her defeat.

==Wanted to....but you didn't. You tried to deceive me.'

==I did not try to deceive you! Why would I do that?' she protested.

==But you did.' He shook his head in disgust. ==You deliberately trapped me.' Imama's eyes welled up. ==Trapped you?' she murmured, looking at him in utter defeat.

==You knew of my love for the Prophet (pbuh). Now that I've come to know about you, let alone marriage, I don't want to have anything to do with you. Don't ever try to meet me again.' Jalal's tone was bitter and curt.

==Jalal, I have converted to Islam,' she whispered.

==Oh, come on! Standing here you've just converted for my sake,' he mocked her, with a dismissing gesture.

==I've not done this for you—although you have been a path to it. This happened many months ago and if you don't believe me, then come along— I'll show you proof.'

Jalal was perplexed. ==I accept I made the first move towards you,' Imama continued, ==trapped you, as you say. But I was helpless as far as you were concerned—it was beyond my control...it was your voice. I told you what I felt when I first heard you recite. Would you have behaved the same way if you'd already known about me? This is what I feared and why it took me so long to tell you. There are some things in life beyond our control—for me, it was you.'

==Does your family know about this?'

==No...no...I can't tell them. I am already engaged—I didn't tell you about this either.' She paused. ==I don't want to be married into that family...I want to marry you. I'm just waiting to complete my education so that I am on my own feet, and then I'll marry you. Four years down the road, when I have qualified as a doctor, perhaps my parents will not object to my choice. If I tell them now about my acceptance of Islam, they'll pull me out of college and marry me off to Asjad.' She expressed her fears.

—I am still dependant on them...my hands are tied. You were my only hope for a way out, and I truly love you, Jalal, or else I would not have proposed marriage. You have no idea of my circumstances, my problems—if you were

in my place you'd realize that I had no choice but to cover up'

Jalal sat down on the wooden bench nearby. He was distinctly disturbed.

Imama wiped away her tears. —Do you feel nothing for me? Are you involved with me just because I love you?'

—Sit down, Imama,' he replied. —The whole Pandora's box now lies open before me. If I cannot estimate your circumstances, neither can you understand my situation. There's no way my parents will agree to me marrying a non-Muslim, regardless of my feelings for her.' —Jalal, I am not a non-Muslim,' she reiterated.

—You're not one now, but you were before, and then your family...'

—Those are things I can do nothing about,' she replied weakly. They just sat in silence. Then she turned to Jalal. —Can't you marry me without your parents' consent?' —That would be a very major step,' he said, shaking his head despondently. —And suppose, I decide to, I cannot do it—like you, I am also dependent on my parents.'

—But you're doing a house job and will be established in a few years.' —I want to specialize after the house job and I can't do that without financial backing from my parents. It'll take me three to four years to establish my practice after specialization.' —Then?' Imama's tone was steeped in despair.

—Then give me time to think—to find a way out. I don't want to lose you and I don't want to lose my career, either. My problem is that I have nothing of my own—whatever I have is my parents' and they are spending all their savings on me in the hope that I'll do something for them in the future.' He stopped and then said, —Is it not possible that your parents should agree to marry you to me? In that case, at least my parents will be satisfied that you didn't marry me secretly against your parents' wishes.'

Imama looked at him, hopeless. —I don't know...I can't say whether this is possible or not.' She spoke slowly. —Not a single girl of my family has married outside of her own free will for me to say what followed. But I do know that the reaction to such an action would be very severe. My parents love me very much but they'll never allow me to take this step. You have no idea of the humiliation and loss of face it means for my father—they'll not change their ways because of me.

—If I had any hope of support from my family, I would not have searched for help outside nor from you.' Imama was speaking softly, trying to control her voice from breaking down.

== Imama, I will help you...my parents will not reject me though it will take time to convince them. I will help you...you're right, I should help you.' Jalal was thoughtful but disturbed.

Imama felt a slight sense of relief; Jalal had not let her down. == I made the right choice,' she thought to herself.

=====

Chapter 3

‘This idiotic advice must be from Asjad—no one else can suggest such a thing! Doesn’t he realize that I am still studying?’ Imama fumed at her sister in law.

‘No, it wasn’t Asjad or any of his family—it was Baba’s idea,’ she replied with composure.

‘Baba’s idea? I can’t believe it! When I got admission in the medical college, there was no such plan on the horizon. In fact, he used to tell Uncle Azam that I would not be married till the completion of my house job. What’s overcome him now?’ Imama was nonplussed.

‘There must be some pressure, but Ammi told me that Baba wants it this way,’ her sister in law explained.

‘Then tell them that I don’t want to get married before I’ve done my house job.’

‘Fine...I’ll convey your message, but it’s best that you talk to Baba yourself,’ she advised.

Her sister in law left the room, but Imama was very concerned. This news was so sudden and unexpected that she was jolted by it—not just figuratively but actually. She was hoping to complete her house job and then start her practice: that would make her financially independent and she could go ahead with her plan to marry Jalal who would also have established himself by then. But this sudden business of her wedding—why had it come up now?

‘Asjad’s family have not made any requests; I have spoken to them myself,’ Hashim Mubeen calmly explained. Imama was in his room—she was insistent to know what was going on.

‘You’ve already spoken to them—without even asking me, Baba? How could you do that?’ Imama couldn’t believe it.

Her father looked at her seriously. ‘If you remember, Imama, this marriage proposal had been accepted with your consent,’ he said. ‘An engagement is something else...and marriage is different. You had agreed that there would be no wedding before the house job,’ she reminded him.

‘Why do you have an objection to the wedding? Don’t you like Asjad?’ ‘It’s not a question of liking or disliking him. I do not want to get married in the middle of my studies. You know very well that I want to be an eye specialist: if I get married now, then my plans, my dreams will never materialize.’

‘Many girls continue with their education after getting married. We have examples in the family...’ he tried to pacify her, but she interrupted. ‘Those girls must be very smart, very intelligent—I’m not. I can do just one thing at a time.’

‘I’ve spoken to Azam Bhai and they are coming over to finalize the dates.’ Hashim Mubeen’s tone was firm.

‘You are wasting all my efforts,’ she protested. ‘If this is what you wanted, then you shouldn’t have made any promises.’

‘Things were different then; the situation is different now...’ She interrupted him again. ‘Why? What has changed now that you should treat me so?’

‘I assure you that Asjad will cooperate fully in letting you complete your education; he will not stop you in any way,’ Hashim tried to reassure her.

‘Baba, it’s not Asjad’s cooperation but yours that I need,’ she pleaded. ‘Please let me complete my studies.’

‘Imama, stop being obstinate...I am going to do what I have decided,’ he said firmly, ignoring her pleas. ‘You’ve been engaged for four years and that’s a long time. What if they decide to break off the engagement?’ ‘Then let them do it. They can call it off now—why wait till tomorrow?’

‘After all, it’s not the end of the world!’

Hashim was shocked and angry. ‘Have you any idea what it means? The humiliation...what will people say?’

‘What humiliation? It’ll be their decision, not our fault. Nothing’s going to happen, believe me: tongues will wag for a few days and then it’ll all be forgotten. Baba, you are worrying unnecessarily,’ she said with nonchalance, trying to persuade her father.

‘You must be out of your mind...talking such nonsense. Now please leave,’ Hashim Mubeen said sharply, looking at her with disapproval. Imama left, feeling wretched: she could hardly sleep that night. The next day she went back to Lahore. Her father had not spoken to her again in this regard, and she tried to put the matter out of her mind. She had to study for the forthcoming exams.

Her father had not dismissed this conversation, though. He was a very cautious person. He had become worried about Imama when the school incident involving Tehreem had taken place. It was not so serious, but to play safe he had Imama’s betrothal to Asjad confirmed. He believed that the development of a new relationship would divert Imama’s thoughts from her doubts about her faith; and he was right. Imama began to show more interest in Asjad and also to participate in the religious activities of their faith. But what Waseem had revealed to him shook his very being. He could not gauge to what extent Imama had explored Islam, but he

could see that there was a distinct change in her beliefs and views. This was a cause of concern not just for him but for their entire family.

He wanted her to be well-educated like his older daughters, and more so because she would be married into a family that prided itself on its education; Asjad himself wanted Imama to be well-qualified. Hashim Mubeen could not cut short Imama's studies till the wedding—much as he wanted to—without having to explain the rationale behind such a decision. He'd rather they did not know—they would find it hard to accept Imama's doubts and queries about their faith and her married life with Asjad would be unhappy.

On one hand, he strictly forbade his family members from any discussion on this topic and, on the other, he pleaded with Imama to let good sense prevail.

Imama was so careful about her presence at Sabiha's lectures and her meetings with Jalal that these matters did not come to the notice of her family. Secrecy could be maintained also because Imama had also kept Javeria and Rabia in the dark; otherwise rumors would have floated around and reached Hashim Mubeen's ears. He was satisfied on that score, but the subtle change in Imama's attitude bothered him and the only solution that he could come up with was to marry her off. He thought it would relieve him of her responsibility, so he took this abrupt decision. *****

‘Jalal, my parents have decided on my wedding...to Asjad,’ she revealed. He was the first person she met when she got back to Lahore.

‘But they were going to let you finish your house job.’

‘That's what they'd said but now they say I can complete my studies after marriage. Asjad will find a place to live in Lahore so that I can study.’ Jalal could fathom her distress by looking at her. ‘There's no way that I can marry Asjad.’

‘Then come clean with them, Imama—tell them you want to marry me, not Asjad,’ he said decisively.

‘You have no idea how they'll react...I'll have to tell them everything.’ She thought for a moment and said, ‘Jalal, ask your parents to talk to mine. Tell them about me. If my parents pressurize me, I'll have to leave home and I'll need your help.’

Jalal agreed; he reassured her that they would understand and accept his decision. For the first time, a faint smile arose on her face. She was busy with the examinations for the next few weeks and did not have the chance to meet Jalal. The day the examinations ended Waseem turned up in Lahore to take her home. He had caught her by surprise.

‘Waseem, I can't go home today. My papers have just finished and I have some work to wind up,’ she said.

‘I’m here till tomorrow; I’m staying with a friend, so you can do whatever you have to and then come along,’ he replied, closing her last option. Imama agreed half-heartedly.

‘You’d better pack up all your stuff,’ he called as he was leaving. ‘You’ll be spending all the holidays at home.’

She nodded, but she had no intention of packing all her belongings or of spending the entire vacations in Islamabad. She planned to return to Lahore after a few days—but she was mistaken.

She was with her family around the dinner table when her father asked,
‘How did your papers go?’

‘Very well, as usual,’ she replied, helping herself to some rice.

‘Good! At least there’s no more tension about exams. Now you can start your shopping tomorrow,’ he said. Imama was startled. ‘What shopping?’

‘First go to the jewelers and then for furniture. The rest of the preparations can follow at your pace.’ Instead of replying to Imama’s question, Hashim Mubeen addressed his wife.

‘But why, Baba?’ Imama asked again.

‘Didn’t your mother tell you that we have fixed the wedding date?’ The spoon in her hand fell onto her plate and the color drained from her face. ‘My wedding?’ She looked at her parents uncertainly; they could not grasp the situation.

‘How can you do this...without asking me?’ She stared wildly.

‘We spoke to you about this the last time you were here,’ Hashim Mubeen’s tone was somber.

‘I had refused. I...’

‘I do not care about your refusal. I have already discussed this with Asjad’s family,’ he angrily rebuked her.

There was silence at the table as they ceased to eat. Imama stood up suddenly. ‘I’m sorry Baba, I can’t marry Asjad now. You fixed the wedding date so you’ll have to tell them to postpone it. Or else. I’ll talk to them myself.’

Hashim Mubeen was about to explode with fury.

‘You’ll marry Asjad and on the day I have decided,’ he shouted.

‘It’s not fair!’ Imama was almost in tears.

‘So now you’re going to tell me what’s fair and what’s not—is that so?’ He was furious.

==Why are you forcing me when I'd told you I don't want to get married now?' Imama was crying.

==Because I have the right to do so!' He screamed at her. She did not reply. Clenching his teeth and blazing with anger, he walked out of the room.

==Please sit down and have your dinner,' Salma Mubeen went after Hashim. ==I'll talk to her. Don't get so worked up—she's just being emotional.'

As soon as her mother left the room, Imama turned on Waseem. ==Get out! Get away from here!' she screamed, shoving him away.

==Why? What have I done?' He moved back.

==You lied and brought me here by deceit. If I'd known about this in Lahore, I'd never have come back with you to Islamabad.'

==I did what Baba told me to—he forbade me to tell you why you were coming home. I was just following his orders,' Waseem tried to clear himself.

==Then go and sit with him—what business do you have here?' Imama could hardly contain her temper. Waseem left without saying a word. After coming into her room Imama sat down on her bed—the earth had shifted beneath her feet. She had never imagined her family could do this to her, be so rigidly conservative in their views. She still could not believe this was happening to her: her heart began to sink. ==I have to face this situation; I cannot give up. I must contact Jalal somehow, as soon as possible; he must have spoken to his parents. I'll find some way out by talking it over with him,' she thought as she restlessly paced her room. After midnight she came out to call Jalal. She knew her parents and siblings would have retired for the night. She dialed Jalal's number: the phone kept ringing without response. She tried several times for the next half hour but to no avail. She couldn't call Javeria or Rabia as they were in the hostel. Then, Imama tried Sabiha's number. Her father answered and told her that Sabiha had gone to Peshawar with her mother for a family wedding; he said he'd be leaving the next day.

==Peshawar?' Imama became tense.

==If there's a message for Sabiha, I can tell her,' he offered.

==No, thank you, Uncle,' she said softly. What could she possibly tell him—she hung up. Her heart plunged into despair at the thought of not being able to contact Jalal. She dialed his number again, but someone took the receiver away from her—it was her father.

==Who are you calling?' His tone was very composed.

==A friend,' she replied, without looking at him. She could not look him in the eye and lie.

‘I’ll dial the number for you,’ he said and pressing the ‘Redial’ key, held the receiver to his ear. Imama paled as she watched him. He put the receiver back after a while: obviously, there was no response.

‘Who’s this friend that you were calling at this hour?’ he asked sternly.

‘Zainab,’ she said, as it was Zainab’s number on the CLI window. She did not want her father to have any doubts about Zainab that would lead him to Jalal. ‘What for?’

‘I had to give her a message for Javeria,’ she said with some hesitation.

‘Tell me what it is, I’ll deliver the message personally. Imama, tell me honestly, are you interested in someone else?’ he asked without any fuss.

She looked at him for a while, then said, ‘Yes.’

Hashim Mubeen was stunned. He repeated his words and Imama nodded in acceptance. Impulsively, he slapped her across her face. ‘That’s just what I feared.’

Imama, lost in thought, her hand still on her cheek, looked at him. It was the first time in her life that he had hit her, his favorite child—she could not believe it. Tears began to roll down her cheeks.

‘You will not be allowed to marry anyone else except Asjad. Even if you are interested in someone else, you have to forget him...Now! Never, never, never, will I let you get married anywhere else! Now get back to your room, and if I see you near the telephone again, I’ll break your legs!’ He was trembling with rage.

She returned to her room without a word and flinging herself on her bed, burst into tears. She could not get over her father’s violent reaction. After crying a long time, she got up and, mindlessly, began to look out of the sealed glass window panes. Beneath was the garden of her own home and its lawns. Her glance fell across the wall at Salar’s house. His room was on the ground floor; she could see some movement there and gauged that it must be Salar.

It hit her like a flash! He could help her—if she confided in him and got him to contact Jalal, her problem could be solved. But how was she to get in touch with him. She concentrated and recalled his mobile number painted across the rear screen of his car. She repeated it and scribbled it on a piece of paper for reference. Then at three in the morning, she tiptoed down to the lounge and called Salar.

Salar was asleep when his cell phone began to beep. As the tone continued, he woke up and groped around his bedside table with considerable annoyance.

‘Hello,’ he said drowsily. Imama recognized his voice. ‘Hello?’ he said again.

‘Salar, it’s me, Imama’ she said.

He was about to say ‘Imama who?’ but he sat up with a jolt. Along with the name, he recognized the voice too.

‘I’m Waseem’s sister.’

‘I know.’ He switched on the lamp and reached for his watch. It was ten past three. There was silence at the other end of the line. ‘Hello,’ he said again.

‘Salar, I need your help.’ He frowned, trying to understand. ‘I saved your life once and I want you to save my life now.’ He listened to her. ‘I need to contact someone in Lahore, but I can’t.’

‘Why?’

‘Because no one’s picking up the phone.’

‘At this time, you want...’

She interrupted, ‘Please just hear me out. I can’t call during the day and perhaps not even tomorrow night—I’m not allowed to... I want you to note this number and address and to contact Jalal Ansar. Ask him if he has spoken to his parents, and if so, what their response is; and tell him that my parents have fixed my wedding date and will not let me leave Lahore until I get married.’

This was interesting: Salar sat up in bed, pulling his blanket over his knees, and listened to Imama dictating the telephone number and address. He did not write it down—he didn’t need to.

‘And what if I get no response either?’ he asked.

‘Then please go to Lahore and meet him.’ She was pleading now. ‘This is very important for me.’

‘If he should ask me how I come into the picture...’

‘Tell him whatever you want—that doesn’t interest me. I just want out of this mess.’

‘Wouldn’t it be better for you to talk to him?’ Salar said.

‘I’ve told you that he’s not answering the call now, and I may not get another chance to call him,’ she replied. Salar was silent and she hung up, feeling hopeless.

Salar switched off his phone and tried to piece the jigsaw together:

Imama Hashim...Jalal Ansar...contact...talk to parents...forced marriage. He hadn’t asked Imama, but was trying to figure out her relationship with Jalal. It was interesting that a girl like Imama should be involved in such an affair—and that despite her aversion for Salar, she should be seeking his help.

“What’s this female trying to do? Use me or frame me?” he wondered. He lay back and tried to sleep, but could not. He had known Waseem and his family for some years now and had also seen Imama fleetingly, but had never really looked at her. He really didn’t know much about her. Compared to his own family, Waseem’s family was quite old-fashioned so he could not visit them as freely as he went to other friends’ homes. It did not bother him as he felt that people have their own traditions, but he had some idea of Imama’s moods and temperament. However, Imama’s call had shocked him and he tossed about restlessly.

“To hell with Imama and the rest,” he muttered as he pulled his pillow over his head in an effort to get back to sleep.

Imama returned to her room and sat down. She could feel knots in her stomach—her life had been overturned in a few hours. She hadn’t slept all night. She did not come out for breakfast—her appetite had vanished. Around ten thirty, she heard cars start and drive out of the porch. Her father and older brother must have left for their office—she was waiting for them to leave. She emerged from her room half an hour after Hashim Mubeen’s departure. Her mother and sister-in-law were in the lounge. Imama reached for the phone, but her mother called out.

“Your father has said that you are not to use the phone.”

“I’m calling Asjad.” Imama looked at her mother who asked her why. “I want to talk to him.”

“And tell him the same rubbish you were talking last night?” her mother retorted.

“I am speaking to him in your presence...let me speak. If I say anything improper, you can cut off the call.” Imama’s voice was steady and calm. Her composure seemed to reassure her mother.

Imama dialed but it was not Asjad’s number: the person who received the call was Jalal. A current of joy raced through Imama.

“Hello, this is Imama,” she said confidently, without naming Asjad. “Why did you leave for Islamabad without telling me? I went to the hostel to meet you,” said Jalal.

“I came to Islamabad yesterday, Asjad,” she continued.

“Asjad? Who are you talking to?” Jalal was surprised.

“Baba told me last night that the wedding date has been fixed.”

It was as if a bolt of lightning had hit Jalal. ‘Wedding date?’ he muttered, but she continued to speak calmly. ‘I want to know if you’ve spoken to your parents. I do not want to marry anyone other than you, so talk to them and let me know.’

‘I could not...’ It suddenly dawned on Jalal that someone was around Imama—that was the reason for her calling him Asjad. ‘I’ll talk to them.’

‘When will you call me?’

‘You tell me when.’

‘Call tomorrow. What date has been set for the wedding?’ There was concern in his voice.

She was not aware of the schedule, but he reassured her that he would sort out the matter with his parents. Imama thanked him and said goodbye. She was relieved that neither her mother nor her sister-in-law had suspected that she was speaking to someone other than Asjad.

‘This wedding has been arranged by your father and Azam Bhai, and they’re not going to postpone it for you or Asjad,’ her mother said in a more relaxed tone.

‘Ammi, I’m just going down to the market—I have to get some things for myself,’ Imama said instead of responding to her mother.

‘It’s one thing to allow you to use the telephone, but you are not to go out of the house. Your father has warned me and the chowkidar too not to let you out.’

‘Ammi, why are you people treating me this way? I haven’t refused marriage—I’m only asking to be allowed to complete my house job.’ Imama sat down helplessly.

‘I fail to understand why you are delaying the wedding—the date has been brought forward but this match isn’t against your will.’ Imama’s sister-in-law tried to reason with her. ‘The whole house has been plunged into tension since last night just because of you. You surprise me, Imama—you were never so stubborn. What’s come over you? Something has happened ever since you’ve been to Lahore...’

‘And our wishes will make no difference, let me tell you. Your father has made up his mind,’ her mother added.

‘But at least you could have tried to reason with him,’ protested Imama. ‘Why? I’d have spoken up if there was something to object to—but that was not the case,’ her mother replied. Fuming, Imama returned to her room.

Uncharacteristically for him, Salar woke up late. When he saw the time, he decided not to go to college. His parents were away in Karachi and he was alone at home. He was watching TV when the servant brought in his breakfast.

He remembered something and asked for the maidservant, Nasira, who came in shortly. 'I need you to do something for me,' he told the middle-aged woman. 'Your daughter works in Waseem's house, right? What time does she go there?' Salar put down the remote control and turned his attention to her.

'Yes, she does....she is there now.' She looked at him, a little taken aback. 'Why? What happened, Salar sahib?'

'Nothing. I just want you to go there and give this mobile to her. Tell her to give the phone to Imama.' Salar casually held out the cell phone.

Nasira was confused. 'I did not understand you, sir.'

'Give this phone to your daughter and tell her to give it to Imama without letting anyone know,' he repeated firmly. 'But why? And what if someone gets to know?'

'You don't need to know why,' he said sharply, 'and people will find out only if you or your daughter opens your big mouths. And will be in big trouble if you do so...But if you don't then it will remain a secret and you will benefit too.'

Without a word, Nasira picked up the phone. Salar warned her again. As she was about to leave, he stopped her. Taking some money from his wallet he gave it to her and she took it with a slight smile. This was a familiar situation in the homes of the rich people she worked for—she knew of the secrets their children had and keeping them hidden was a nice way of making extra money. She concluded that Salar and Imama had something going and the cell phone was a gift. She was surprised at herself—how come she hadn't discovered this, and then Imama...wasn't she getting married? Then why was she up to this mischief? 'And to think that I always thought she was such a good girl!' Nasira was appalled at her ignorance of this development.

about 6 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

'Abbu, I want to talk to you about something.' That night Jalal went to his father's room.

'Yes, come in. What is it?' He looked up from the files he was studying. Jalal pulled up a chair and sat down, but he did not speak up. Ansar Javaid, looking at his son's worried expression, realized that something was amiss.

'I want to get married.' Jalal came to the point without any fuss. 'You want to what?' This was hardly what he expected to hear from his son. Jalal repeated his statement.

'How come you took this sudden decision? Till yesterday you wanted to go abroad for specialization,' he smiled.

==Well... the situation is such that I had no choice but to talk it over with you.'

His father became serious; Jalal continued with some hesitation after a pause. ==Have you seen Zainab's friend Imama?'

==Yes. Are you interested in her?' His father asked and Jalal nodded in agreement. ==But they are very wealthy people. Besides, they are not Muslims.' Ansar Javaid's tone had changed.

==Abbu, they are Qadianis, but she has converted to Islam,' Jalal explained.

==Do her parents know?' his father asked, and when Jalal's answer was negative, he sharply rebuked him. ==Do you think they will accept this proposal?'

==Her parents' permission is not needed—we want to go ahead without it,' Ansar Javaid was livid. ==Have you lost your mind? I cannot allow this under any circumstances.'

Jalal was crushed, but he persisted. ==I have a commitment...'

==Did you do so with my permission? At this age people have many commitments, many interests, but that does not mean that you should ruin your life. I know how well-connected that family is—they'll ruin us if they get to know.'

Jalal pleaded with his father but Ansar Javaid was adamant that he would not entertain any wedding plans for his son until he had completed his specialization. When Jalal made it clear that Imama was his sole choice, he advised that she should speak to her parents in this regard: if they agreed, then Ansar Javaid would give his blessings too.

==Abbu, please try to understand her problem—she's a very nice girl and she wants to marry a Muslim, but her parents will not accept her decision. She needs our help.' Jalal deliberately did not mention her engagement to Asjad.

==I am not interested in others' problems and nor should you be. You should be thinking about your future. Many people have problems and need help—can you help them all? Besides, there's a huge difference in their status and ours. I'm not going to earn their enmity nor am I going to lose face among my own people by bringing a non-Muslim into our family.'

==I told you she has converted.' There was annoyance in Jalal's tone.

==This was even before we met.'

==Were you a witness?' his father was not convinced. ==Even if this is true, then she should sort out her problems; why does she want to involve you?

Only if she takes her parents into confidence and they agree, will your mother and I consider your marrying Imama. We're not going to have a runaway daughter-in-law.'

No amount of persuasion or argument in favor of religious sentiment could move Jalal's father.

__Don't drag religion into this! You're not the only Muslim who must find a solution. Be realistic. It's all very well to be aware of your moral responsibility but you also owe it to your parents to respect their wishes. It is incumbent on you to obey us.'

__Supposing you do marry her, what next? You'll go off abroad in six months or so and she'll have to stay home. I cannot afford to educate your siblings, pay for your studies abroad and for her education as well,' he continued. __How long will she sit home? Besides, what if her family sues us? We can be convicted and even be jailed. What becomes of your sister then?'

Jalal had no answers to his father.

__Think coolly, rationally, instead of being so emotional,' his father reiterated. __If her parents do not approve of you, then tell her to marry someone else. You'll come to know how damaging your decision in her favor could be.'

__Baji, shall I do your room?' the maid, knocking at the door, asked Imama.

__No! Go away,' Imama waived her off. The maid, instead of leaving, shut the door behind her and stood before Imama.

__Did I not tell you to..... ?' Imama started, but choked on her words. The maid produced a cell phone from her chader. Imama was taken by surprise.

__Baji, my mother has given me this. She said that your neighbor, Salar Saab, has sent this for you.' She quickly held out the phone to Imama, who snatched it. Her heart raced.

__Listen, you're not to tell anyone that that you've brought me a phone or anything,' Imama cautioned her.

__No, Baji, don't worry—I won't tell anyone. In fact, if you want to send something for Salar Saab, you can give it to me.'

__No, I have nothing to send. You can leave,' she said, regaining her composure.

Imama hastily locked the room as the maid left. With great trepidation, she took out the phone from the drawer and began dialing Jalal's number, as she wanted to talk to him in detail. Jalal's mother picked up the phone. __Beta, I'm afraid Jalal's not home and he'll be back at night. You could speak to Zainab. Shall I call her?'

__No, thank you, Auntie! I'm in a bit of a rush, actually. I'll speak to Zainab later. I'd asked Jalal for some books and I wanted to find out about them. I'll call again,' Imama said as she hung up.

Imama did not eat that afternoon either. She was waiting for the night when Jalal would be back home and she could speak to him. In the evening, the maid informed her that there was a call from Asjad.

When she went down to the lounge, only Waseem was sitting there. She totally ignored him and moved to the phone. As she picked up the phone, she heard Asjad's voice at the other end. It made her blood boil, even though she knew that her father, rather than Asjad, was instrumental in arranging this match. Asjad was enquiring after her welfare. She was furious. _Asjad, why have you deceived me?'

=What deceit, Imama?'

=Fixing the wedding date.....why didn't you speak to me?' she asked, fuming.

=Didn't Uncle talk to you about it?'

=He did and I'd told him that I did not want to marry just now.'

=Whatever, now it is too late.....and what difference does it make if you get married now or some years later?' Asjad responded with some indifference.

=Asjad! Whether it affects you or not, it certainly makes a difference to me. I don't want to get married till I've completed my studies.....And you know this very well too.'

=Yes, I know, but in this whole affair I'm nowhere involved. Let me tell you that this whole marriage is being arranged at Uncle's insistence.'

=You have it stopped.'

=What are you saying, Imama. How can I have it stopped?' Asjad exclaimed.

=Asjad, please!'

=Imama, I can't do it. Try to understand my position. Moreover, the wedding cards have been printed, both the families are preparing for the wedding and.....'

Imama abruptly banged down the receiver. Waseem had not interfered in the whole conversation. He had quietly listened but when Imama broke off, Waseem said, _You are quite unnecessarily making a terrible issue of the whole thing. Eventually, you'll have to marry Asjad, then why are you creating problems for yourself. As it is, Baba is very upset with you.'

=I did not ask for your opinion so mind your own business. You've hurt me enough!' Imama stormed back to her room.

That evening too she did not leave her room, but ate the food the servant had brought her. Towards eleven o'clock, she phoned Jalal who himself picked up the phone. Perhaps he was expecting her call. After some brief preliminaries, he came to the point.

==Imama, a short while ago I spoke to Abbu.'

==Then?'

After a few moments, Jalal said, ==Abbu is not in favor of our marriage.' Imama's heart sank. ==But you were saying that he would have no objection.'

==Yes, I'd also thought so, but he has a lot of reservations. He feels that there's a lot of difference in the social status of our families ... and he knows about your family, and his biggest objection is the fact that you want to marry me against your parents' wishes. As such, he is afraid that your people will create problems for us.'

She sat motionless with the mobile to her ear, listening to Jalal. ==Did you not try to make him agree?'

After a long pause, Jalal said ==I tried my best. He said that if your people were willing then he would also consent, regardless of your family's faith, but without their consent our marriage is just not acceptable to him.' ==And what.....what do you say?'

==Imama, I'm unable to think,' Jalal said plaintively.

==Jalal, my parents will never agree to my marrying you. If I were to marry you, our entire community would boycott my parents and they would not be able to bear this. And then there is my engagement to Asjad.' When Jalal insisted she try again, Imama said, ==I've already been slapped by my father just for disclosing that I am interested in someone else. If he should discover that you're not from the same faith as ours, he'll kill me.' She begged Jalal to try again to persuade his father.

Jalal relented but he was very upset. Imama was in despair after her conversation with Jalal: she had never thought that his parents would object to their getting married. Cell phone in her hand, she sat lost in thought.

==Your father has already spoken to me about this and he's absolutely right: you have no business putting yourself into peril.' Jalal's mother spoke with finality when he approached her.

==I can't see what's so perilous—you're needlessly anxious,' he protested.

==Jalal, you're naïve to the point of stupidity! Your father knows Imama's family and their background. What do you think—that they'll leave you alone once you get married or that they'll not hound us?'

Jalal persisted. ==We'll keep the marriage secret—no one will get to know. I'll leave for my specialization and then call Imama over after some time.'

==I see no reason why we should take such a risk for Imama's sake. And you should know that we do not marry outside the family—there are plenty of eligible girls. Had I known your inclination, I'd have fixed you up elsewhere,' she said angrily. ==It makes no difference that you like her: what matters is what we think, and your father and I do not like Imama or her family.'

He tried his best to convince his mother—that she had seen Imama up close as she was Zainab's friend, that Imama had taken a major step in changing her faith and needed support and sympathy...

==Well then, her taking a major decision doesn't mean that she should put others in a risky situation. I respect her decision, she did the right thing, but we have our own concerns,' she continued in a gentler tone. ==Think rationally: you have to go abroad to establish yourself professionally, set up your own hospital one day. Getting married into a good family will help you achieve your aims—you have no idea how many offers there have been for you.'

==What can you hope to get by marrying Imama? Her family will boycott her and it'll be a social stigma for all. Have you thought of the future—what will you say when your own children question you?'

Jalal's mother spoke somberly and he listened without interruption or protest, impassive. It was hard to gauge from his expression if her words had had any impact.

Imama called Jalal again the next night: he received the call. His words plunged her into despair when he disclosed that he'd spoken to his mother and she was more opposed to this match than his father was.

==When I told her about your decision, she said it was your problem, not ours.' Jalal's bluntness pierced Imama.

==I've tried my best, Imama, but there's no way my mother will agree,' Jalal conceded quietly.

==Can't you marry me without their approval?' she asked plaintively.

==No, I cannot—I love them too much to hurt them, to take this step without their good wishes.'

She begged and pleaded with him to rescue her from this situation, to save her life, but he was firm in his reply. =I cannot disobey my parents.

Don't pressurize me so.'

Imama's nerves were shattered. She had never abased herself so. She entreated him to have the nikah read secretly and said he could also then marry anyone else of his parents' choice—that she'd have no objection.

=Imama, stop being so childish! You should know what it'll mean if my parents get to know: they'll throw me out of the house. What are we supposed to do then?'

=We'll work hard, we'll do something, we'll survive.'

=Will this —something finance my studies abroad?' His tone was sharp, sarcastic. She had no answer.

=No, Imama, I can't sacrifice my dreams, my ambitions for you or for anyone else. I love you, yes, but I cannot display such sentimentality like you. Do not call me again because I am putting this whole affair behind me. I feel sorry for you but you have to solve your problems yourself—I can't help you. Khuda hafiz.'

Jalal hung up. It was 10.50 p.m. Imama felt as if her world had gone up in smoke around her. Who knew better than her, at this moment, the agony of losing everything that was once within her grasp? He mind was numb, her very being torn: she sat on her bed like a lifeless statue.

=I should tell Baba everything...what other option do I have? Perhaps, he'll throw me out—at least, I'll be free of this place.'

=I do not want to marry Asjad so the question of shopping for the wedding does not arise,' Imama told her mother in a determined tone. =First you were opposed to the idea of getting married; now you are opposed to marrying Asjad—what on earth do you want to do?' her mother was exasperated.

=I don't want to marry Asjad.'

=Then who do you want to marry?' Hashim Mubeen was standing in the door. He must have certainly heard the conversation between Imama and her mother when he was in the corridor. He could not control his temper. Imama was silent. =Tell me, who is it that you want to marry? Have you lost your tongue? Why don't you want to marry Asjad? What's your problem? Answer me!' He was screaming furiously.

Imama composed herself and spoke courageously. ‘Baba, marriage is a lifetime commitment. I want to marry of my own choice.’

‘Till yesterday, Asjad was your choice,’ he reminded her bitterly.

‘That was yesterday, not today,’ she replied. ‘Why not now? Tell me, why not now?’ he asked in a raised voice.

For a few moments, Imama looked at him without a word. Then she said,

‘Baba, I want to marry a Muslim.’

The heavens seemed to fall on Hashim Mubeen. ‘What did you say?’ he asked uncertainly.

‘I do not want to marry a non-Muslim because I have changed my faith to Islam.’

There was absolute silence in the room for the next few minutes. Salma was in a state of shock and Hashim Mubeen...he seemed to have turned into stone. He stared speechlessly at Imama, as though he had forgotten how to breathe. He had never imagined, in his wildest dreams, that he would have to face such a situation in his own home, and that too at the hands of his most loved child. His life was being sucked onto a vortex.

‘What the hell do you mean?’ Rage rose up in him like a wave.

‘You know what I mean, Baba. You know very well.’

‘You’re out of your mind!’ he hollered. Imama shook her head silently; she knew the state of his mind. ‘Was this why we brought you into the world...that you should... you...’ He searched for words. ‘You’re doing all this just so that your marriage to Asjad should be called off, that you can marry the man of your choice!’

‘No, it’s not that.’

‘It is...do you take me to be stupid?’ Hashim Mubeen was frothing at the mouth.

‘You can arrange my wedding with anyone you like. I have no complaint as long as he is not from your community. At least, then you cannot say that I did all this for a particular person.’

Her father’s anger knew no bounds: just a chit of a girl and telling him what to do. What did she know?

‘I know a lot, Baba. I’m twenty years old; I don’t have to be led by you. I know that your faith has brought a great deal of prosperity to our family.’ She spoke with composure in a steady voice.

‘You will not be forgiven for your sins!’ He admonished her. Imama felt sorry for him—he was standing in Hell and warning her of its horrors. She felt sorry for the man whose eyes were

blindfolded, whose heart was sealed. She felt sorry for him whose soul had been crushed, who stood at the topmost level of waywardness and error.

“You have been led astray...just reading a few books has...” he began to say, but Imama interrupted him.

“You will not be able to debate with me on this issue. I know everything— I have researched and confirmed it. What can you tell me or explain? You have chosen your path and I have chosen mine. You are doing what you think is right and I do what I believe to be right. Your faith is your personal matter and mine is my personal matter. Isn’t it better that you accept my decision as a conscious deliberate act rather than as an emotional step?” Imama spoke with dignity and clarity, but her attitude further provoked her father. “Allowing you to change your faith... do you know the repercussions? The community will boycott me and I’ll be reduced to nothing. We’ll be brought to the streets. No, Imama, this cannot be! You may have lost your mind but I haven’t lost mine. You can follow whatever faith you wish, but you will marry Asjad and be part of their family. Leave this house and go live with them—perhaps, you will then know what to do with your life.” Hashim Mubeen stormed out of the room. As soon as he left, Salma turned on Imama, seething. “If I’d known what shame you were going to bring on us, I’d have strangled you at birth. You seem determined to humiliate us in public.”

Imama looked at her without a word. Salma went on ranting and raving, and then walked out. About an hour after Salma left, there was a knock on the door—it was Asjad. Imama did not expect to see him here. Worry was written all across his face. Apparently, Hashim Mubeen had called him over and disclosed everything to him.

“What’s going on, Imama? Why are you doing this?” he asked as he entered.

“Asjad, if you’ve been told what I have done, then you must also know why I’ve done it.”

“You do not realize what you’ve done,” he said, pulling up a chair. “One makes such decisions in a fit of sentimentality...”

“I’m aware of my actions.” Imama cut across his words. “What do you mean by sentimentality? Does one change one’s faith out of sentiment? I have been studying Islam for the last four years, and that’s not a short period.”

“You must have been swayed by others’ views. You...”

“No, I was not swayed by anyone. I discarded what I thought was wrong and took up what is right, that’s all.”

Asjad had no grounds for argument. He shook his head and said, “Very well—your faith is your concern, but why are you against our getting married? Let the wedding take place.”

“You and I cannot get married. It will not be valid.”

Asjad was shocked. _Why? Am I not a Muslim?'

When she replied in the affirmative, he blurted out, _Uncle was right— you've been brainwashed!'

_Then why should you want to marry such a girl? It's better that you find someone else for yourself,' she retorted. _I don't want you to ruin your life.'

_Ruin my life?' she laughed. _What life? The life I am living with people who have sold their souls for worldly wealth?'

_Behave yourself! You seem to have forgotten your manners the way you speak so carelessly—saying what you like about anyone,' Asjad rebuked her.

_I cannot respect a person who's leading others astray,' she said curtly. _At your age, people do become confused about their identity. When you're older, you'll understand whether we're on the right path or the wrong one.' Asjad calmed down and tried to pacify her.

_If you people think I'm in the wrong, then why don't you leave me alone, let me go free? Why am I a prisoner here? If you believe that your faith is true, let me find out for myself...'

_If someone so close is bent on self-destruction, and that too a girl, we can't just leave her to destroy herself. Imama try to understand the sensitivity of this situation—your family and all they have is at stake because of you.'

_Nothing is at stake because of me...even so, why should I care? Why should I go to hell for their beliefs or cast aside my faith for their sake? Asjad, I cannot tread this misguided path with you all—let me go where I choose.' Imama's voice was firm.

_And even if you forced me to marry you, it will be of no use to you: I will not be your wife in the real sense. I will not be faithful to you. I'll escape whenever I get the chance...how long will you imprison me or guard me?

And I'll take your children away too—you'll never see them again.' She tried to paint a horrifying picture of their future. _If I were you, I'd never marry a girl like Imama Hashim: it would be a total loss, the limit of foolishness. You still have the opportunity to refuse—your future is at stake. Why don't you marry a nice girl of your community and live a happy life? Not me—I'll prove to be the worst nightmare. Asjad, just say no to this match; tell Uncle Azam you don't want to marry me. Or go away somewhere and come back when this matter blows over.'

_Stop giving me this silly advice: I'm not going to give you up—never. Nor am I going to pull out of this relationship or run away from home. You're the only one I will marry. Now it's a question of our family's honor and name. If you had any idea of the losses we'll have to face should this wedding be called off, you would not come up with such crazy notions. As far as being a bad wife or running away is concerned, that is a later issue. I know your temperament

well—you're not inclined to harass people unnecessarily— least of all me who you love,' Asjad concluded complacently.

‘You're mistaken, Asjad, I've never been in love with you and, especially since I accepted Islam, I have severed my relationship with you. You're nowhere in my life now. If I can be a problem for my family, you should know what problems will follow for you and your family—so don't fool yourself. We cannot be together: I cannot be a part of your family.’ She paused, and then went on. ‘There's a vast gulf between us, Asjad—we're so far apart that I cannot even see you. And I will not bridge this gulf. I'm just not prepared to marry you.’

Asjad's color changed as he watched and heard Imama.

about 6 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

‘Can you do me a favor?’

‘What do you think I've been doing all along?’ asked Salar.

There was silence at the other end; then she said, ‘Can you go to Lahore and meet Jalal?’

Salar closed his eyes momentarily. ‘Why?’ Imama's voice was low, heavy with tears.

‘To request him on my behalf—to marry me. If not forever, then temporarily—I want to leave this house and cannot do so without his help. Tell him to just have the nikah finalized.’

‘You're in touch with him on the phone, why don't you tell him yourself?’ Salar said while munching on potato crisps.

‘I did’ she replied more tearfully. ‘He refused.’

‘Very sad,’ said Salar. ‘So it's a one-sided love affair.’

‘No.’

‘Then why did he refuse?’

‘What's it to you?’ She was peeved.

‘What is the point of my going all the way to talk to him—you can call him again.’

‘But he does not speak to me; he doesn't receive the phone nor will he take any calls at the hospital. He's pointedly avoiding me.’

‘Then why are you chasing him? Obviously, he doesn't love you.’

‘You can't understand this—just help me out. Go there and tell him about my situation—he can't do this to me.’

‘And if he should refuse to entertain me—then?’

==You can still try—at least once. Perhaps, a way can be found out of this mess.’

A smile arose on Salar’s lips. He found Imama’s predicament amusing. He switched off the phone and thought about her problem as he popped crisps into his mouth. He was getting more deeply involved in Imama’s situation—it was the biggest adventure of his life, it seemed: first smuggling the cell phone to Imama, now contacting her boyfriend, Jalal. Imama had told Salar in detail about Jalal’s home and the hospital. He was now thinking of what he’d say to Jalal.

Salar took a good look at the man before him. He was disappointed—an ordinary face and build, and medium height; perhaps he would have looked better without that beard. Salar’s good looks, tall frame and athletic physique made him very attractive to the opposite sex, but this person was bereft of such advantages. Salar wondered what it was that had drawn Imama to this man. He thought she was more foolish than he believed.

==I am Jalal Ansar. You wanted to meet me?’ ==Salar Sikandar,’ Salar extended his hand.

==Sorry, I didn’t recognize you.’

==Naturally, we’re meeting for the first time.’ Salar had come to the hospital, looking for Jalal. With a little help, he found him and was now with him in front of the duty room.

==Can we sit down somewhere and talk?’ asked Salar.

==Talk about what?’ Jalal looked somewhat concerned.

==About Imama.’

==Who are you?’ Jalal’s expression changed.

==I’m her friend.’ Jalal looked at Salar without a word and they began to walk.

==My car’s in the parking lot—let’s go there,’ suggested Salar. They did not exchange a word till they reached the car.

==I’ve come from Islamabad,’ began Salar. ==Imama wanted me to speak to you.’

==Imama never mentioned you to me,’ Jalal said rather oddly. ==Since when do you know her?’

==Almost since childhood...our houses are adjacent. We’re very good friends.’ Salar didn’t know why he made the last statement. Maybe he was enjoying the spectrum of expressions crossing Jalal’s face—he had noticed his look of displeasure.

‘I’ve spoken to Imama in detail. I cannot see what’s left to talk about after that,’ Jalal said in a flat tone.

‘Imama wants you to marry her.’ Salar’s voice was equally expressionless, like a newsreader’s. ‘I have informed her of my decision.’

‘She wants you to review it.’

‘That’s not possible.’

‘She’s a prisoner in that house, in custody of her parents, her family. If you cannot commit yourself permanently, she wants you to make a temporary commitment and get her released with help from a bailiff.’ ‘How can that be when she’s being held captive?’ queried Jalal and Salar said the nikah could be conducted over the telephone.

‘No, I cannot take such a risk—I don’t want to get involved in such matters. My parents will never allow this and they are not prepared to accept her anyway.’

Jalal’s look was fixed on Salar’s ponytail—he disapproved of Salar the way Salar had disapproved of him.

‘She’s ready to enter a temporary arrangement,’ Salar reiterated, ‘so that she can leave her home. You can divorce her afterwards, if you wish.’

‘I think I’ve said clearly that I can’t help her. Why don’t you marry her if it’s just a temporary arrangement? After all, you’re her friend, aren’t you?’ Jalal said pointedly. ‘If you can come all the way from Islamabad to Lahore to help her, surely you can do this too.’

‘She didn’t ask me to marry her, so I didn’t think of it,’ Salar shrugged. ‘In any case, she loves you, not me.’

‘What’s love got to do with a makeshift marriage? You can divorce her later on.’ Jalal suggested a solution.

‘Thank you, I’ll convey your advice to her,’ replied Salar seriously. ‘And if this is not possible, then tell Imama to find some other way out. In fact, why don’t you go to a newspaper office and tell them about her predicament...how her parents are holding her against her will. When the media highlights this issue, her parents will be compelled to set her free, or you can go to the police and procure her release.’

Salar was surprised: Jalal was talking sense—why had Imama not thought of this herself? This was a safer way out.

‘Fine, I’ll convey this too.’

‘Please don’t come to me again and also tell Imama that she’s not to contact me in any way in the future. As it is, my parents are planning my engagement.’ Jalal added this revelation.

==Very well—I'll tell her all that you have said,' replied Salar casually. Jalal said nothing more and stepped out of the car.

If Imama had any hope that Salar would be able to convince Jalal to marry her, it was a great mistake on her part. Salar had no sympathy for Imama nor had he entered this tangle out of any desire to do a good deed; it was just an adventure for him, and Imama marrying Jalal was not part of it. If he had to justify their marriage the only justification he had was that they loved each other, but this was rejected by Jalal. Salar could not cite religious or moral reasons to persuade Jalal because he himself was so distant from the concepts of religion and morality. Above all, why would he get into a lengthy argument for Imama's sake, with someone whom he disliked at first sight? These thoughts crossed his mind as he drove back from Lahore to Islamabad. It was curiosity that took him to Lahore in the first place—what did this guy Jalal look like? How would he react to Imama's request? He had conveyed her message verbatim and now he was taking back Jalal's response. It was an amusing scenario for Salar. What would Imama's reaction be? She was not going to marry Asjad and Jalal was not ready to marry her; she could not leave home and there was no one else who could come to her aid—so what would she do next? Usually, girls chose to take their lives in such circumstances.

==Oh yes, she'll come to me asking for poison or a revolver. Suicide...very exciting,' he thought, in a perverse fashion, contemplating the possibilities. ==After all, what else can she do?'

==Will you marry me? By nikah, on the telephone?' A shock hit Salar—he was speechless.

On returning from Lahore, he had repeated Jalal's response to Imama. He thought she would burst into tears and ask him for a weapon to end her life. Instead, she was quiet for a few moments and then sprang the question which left him stunned and silent.

==I need your support just for a few days so that my parents cannot force me to wed Asjad. Then you can get me out of here with a bailiff's help. I will not need you after that and I'll never disclose your name to my parents,' Imama explained.

==OK, I'll do it, but this bailiff business is tricky—there are many legalities involved—hiring a lawyer and...'

Imama interrupted him at the other end. ==You can get your friends to help you—they must be experts in doing such things.' Salar frowned with annoyance. ==What sort of things? ==These sort of things,' she replied calmly.

==How do you know?'

Waseem tells me that you don't keep very good company,' blurted Imama and then there was silence. She regretted having said that—it was inappropriate.

My company is very good—at least, better than Jalal Ansar's.' There was sharp irony in Salar's tone. Imama was quiet. 'Anyway, I'll see what I can do. But you should remember that this is a very risky course of action.' 'I know, but it's possible that my parents may throw me out when they discover that I have married; then there'll be no need of a bailiff. Or they may accept my marriage, in which case, I'll divorce you and marry Jalal.' Salar shook his head with disbelief—he had never met anyone so stupid. This girl could be crowned the Queen of Folly.

'Anyway, let's see what can be done,' he said and hung up.

I want to sign a marriage contract—a nikah.'

Hasan stared at Salar and burst out laughing. 'Is it a new adventure or your last adventure?'

'The last adventure,' Salar replied in a serious tone.

'So you're going to have a wedding?' asked Hasan as he took a bite of the burger.

'Who's having a wedding? I just want to go through a nikah with a girl who needs help—I want to help her.'

Hasan looked at him intently. 'Are you joking?'

'No, not at all. I didn't call you here to joke with you.'

'Then what's this nonsense about a nikah and...helping a girl?' Hasan was annoyed. 'Are you in love or something?'

'My foot! Am I crazy to go falling in love and that too at this age?' Salar scoffed.

'That's what I was wondering...why are you doing this?'

Salar spoke to Hasan in detail about Imama and her problem but he did not tell him that she was Waseem's sister because Hasan knew Waseem quite well. However, Hasan immediately asked about the girl's identity.

Salar took a deep breath. 'She's Waseem's sister.'

'What?' Hasan literally jumped up. 'The one who studies in a medical college in Lahore?' Salar nodded in assent. 'You must be crazy to do such a senseless thing. You'd better tell

Waseem about the whole situation.’ =‘I’m asking for your help, not your advice.’ Salar was upset.

=‘What can I do to help?’ Hasan was unsure.

=‘You arrange for a nikah registrar and some witnesses so that the nikah can be read over the phone,’ Salar came to the point. =‘How’s this going to benefit you?’ Hasan wanted to know.

=‘In no way, but then I’m not doing this for any benefit.’

=‘Damn it, Salar! Why are you getting into this mess and that too for Waseem’s sister...’

Salar cut him short. =‘Just tell me if you’ll help me or not? You need not bother about other things.’

=‘OK, I’ll help you, I’m not refusing you. But you’d better think twice because this is a very dangerous step.’ Hasan seemed to have given up.

=‘I’ve thought about it. Now tell me the details.’ Salar was more relaxed now. He popped some French fries into his mouth.

=‘There’s one more thing—what if your parents find out?’

=‘They won’t—they’re not here, they’re in Karachi and will be there for some days. It would have been tough for me if they were here.’ Salar tried to appease Hasan. They continued to munch on the fries, but Hasan’s mind was somewhere else. Salar, however, was not too concerned on that account. Hasan was not worrying about the situation—he was figuring the best strategy. Salar had no fears about Hasan: he was Salar’s best friend.

Hasan made all the arrangements very smoothly. Salar gave him some funds and three witnesses were arranged for while he himself was the fourth witness. The nikah registrar had some apprehensions that something was amiss about this whole affair, but apart from a handsome fee he was also given a clear warning, and he quietly obliged.

It was late afternoon when Hasan came over with the registrar and the witnesses. They all went into Salar’s room and the nikah papers were filled out. Salar had already informed Imama and at the appointed time the nikah contract was read out over the telephone. Salar sent the nikah forms over to Imama through the maidservant. As soon as she received the papers, Imama signed them swiftly and sent them back to Salar. The maid brought them back to him but the mystery was killing her—who were these people in Salar’s room? What were they doing? What were these papers that Imama had signed?

She had a suspicion that Salar and Imama were getting married, but she could not control her curiosity. Handing the papers to Salar, she put on an air of innocence and asked ‘Salar Saab, what are these papers?’ ‘How do they concern you? Mind your own business,’ he told her off sharply. ‘And understand this very clearly that you are not to talk about this to anyone. You’d better keep your mouth shut—it’s best that you do so,’ he warned her sternly.

‘Why should I go about talking, sir? I was just asking you. You can rest assured Salar Sahib, I won’t breathe a word to anybody.’ She was petrified. As it was, Salar had an abrupt and terse manner and she was scared to approach him. He gestured imperiously for her to leave. He did not worry about the maid telling everyone what was going on—even if she did, so what?

‘Please meet Jalal once again...please,’ Imama was pleading to Salar over the phone.

Salar was irritated by her request. ‘Imama, he does not want to marry you—he’s said this so many times. Why can’t you understand that there’s no point in talking to him again? He said his parents wanted him to get engaged...’

‘He’s lying,’ Imama intervened, ‘just so that I shouldn’t contact him again. His parents can’t fix him up so soon.’

‘Well then, if he doesn’t want to marry you; doesn’t want you to contact him, then why are you wasting yourself on him?’ ‘Because it is my fate to be wasted.’ She was crying.

‘What does that mean?’

‘It doesn’t mean anything...you won’t understand. Just go and tell him to help me. He holds Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) in such high esteem, tell him to marry me for the Prophet’s (PBUH) sake.’ She broke into sobs. Salar was unmoved by her tears. ‘What logic is this? Will he marry you for saying this?’ But Imama did not reply, she was weeping uncontrollably.

Exasperated, Salar said ‘Either cry or talk to me.’

Imama hung up. Salar called back at once but she did not receive the call. After about twenty minutes, Imama called again.

‘I’ll talk to you if you promise not to cry again...otherwise hang up,’ he said when he heard her voice.

Instead of replying, Imama asked, ‘Then you’ll go to Lahore?’ Salar was amazed by her determination—she was tough and she stuck to her stand.

‘All right, if you say so,’ he conceded. ‘Have you told your family about the nikah?’

==No, not yet.' She had regained her composure.

==When will you tell them?'

==I don't know. When will you go to Lahore?'

==Soon enough. I have some work here or I could have left immediately.' This time Salar was lying: he had no work as such and he did not intend to go to Lahore either.

==What do you plan to do once the bailiff helps you leave your house? I mean, where will you go, since Jalal may not be willing to help you?' he tried to distract her attention.

==I'm not assuming any such thing—he will help me,' Imama asserted. Jalal shrugged.

==You're not ready to make any assumptions otherwise I'd have told you that things won't turn out the way you want them to. What will you do then? You'll again need your parents' help so it's better for you to stay put—don't get into the court and bailiff tangle because ultimately you'll come back here.'

==I'll never come back, under no circumstances.' ==That's being emotional,' he observed.

==You can't understand these things.' Imama repeated her pet phrase. Salar was cheesed off. ==Do what you please,' he said and hung up.

about 6 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

==Your nikah with Asjad and the rukhsati will take place tomorrow evening,' Hashim Mubeen came to Imama's room that night and announced gruffly.

==Baba, I will refuse. It's better that you do not force me into this marriage.'

==If you refuse, I'll shoot you on the spot. Keep that in mind.'

She looked up at him. ==I have been married, Baba,' she announced. ==This is the reason for my refusal.'

Hashim Mubeen's expression changed. ==You're lying.'

==I'm not lying: I got married six months ago.'

==Who did you marry?'

==I can't disclose that.'

Hashim Mubeen had never imagined that this child would be the cause of such misery. In a fit of rage, he sprang upon Imama and began to hit her left and right. She tried to cover her face with her hands but to no avail. The noise from the room drew in Waseem, who got hold of his father and pulled him away from Imama. She stood against the wall, weeping.

==Baba, what are you doing? This matter can be resolved peacefully.' The other family members followed Waseem into the room.

==She has married someone.' Hashim Mubeen was in a state of anger and despair.

Waseem did not accept that. ==Baba, she's lying—how could she have done this when she hasn't been out of the house even once?' ==She got married six months ago.'

Imama did not look up. Waseem could not believe she'd do such a thing—he knew too well. Imama looked at him with blurred eyes and quietly said, ==It's true—I am married.'

==What's the proof? Do you have the nikah papers?' he asked roughly. ==Not here, they're with my things in Lahore.'

==Baba, I'm going to Lahore tomorrow to get her stuff. We'll see then,' he declared. Imama regretted having said that—what could they find among her things?

==Even if you are married, it makes no difference. I will get you divorced and then marry you off to Asjad.' Hashim Mubeen spoke with finality. His face was red with fury as he walked out of her room. Gradually, all the others left too. She sat down on her bed—she knew now what a trapped bird must feel. It was a coincidence that they did not send her a copy of the nikahnama; even if she had it, she could not have shown it to her father as Salar's name was on it. It would be child's play for Hashim Mubeen to get to Salar and get rid of him. On the other hand, if they did not find the nikah papers in her belongings, then no one would believe her statement. Imama locked the door and called up Salar: she told him everything.

==Go to Lahore once more and tell Jalal about me...I cannot live here any longer—I have to get out of here and there's nowhere else I can go but to him. Hire a lawyer for me and tell him to file a case against my parents on my husband's behalf for unlawful confinement.'

==You husband? Meaning on my behalf?'

==Don't give the lawyer your name. In fact, it's better if one of your friends hired a lawyer and filed the appeal—you can ask them to use any fictitious name. If my parents get to know about you, they'll get you and I don't want that to happen.'

Imama did not reveal the extent of her fears to Salar and he didn't try to probe. The next day, around 11 a.m. a lawyer called up Hashim Mubeen and spoke to him about Imama; the lawyer also informed him about the case being filed against him by Imama's husband. Hashim Mubeen needed no further proof. Erupting with rage, he stormed into Imama's room and beat her up badly.

==You'll see how you are destroyed, Imama...you'll be deprived of everything. Girls like you who gamble away their parents' honor and dignity deserve to be treated so! You have dared to take us to court when we've done so much for you—you have been thankless. Daughters like you should indeed be buried as soon as they are born.'

Imama endured the beating quietly. She could understand the state of her father's feelings but she could not explain her own emotions and thoughts to him.

‘You have left us without a shred of honor—we cannot face anyone. You have literally buried us alive.’ Salma had followed her husband into the room but made no attempt to stop him.

‘You have destroyed our confidence,’ her father continued. ‘I wish you were not my daughter—not born in our family—or that you had died at birth or that I had killed you with my own hands.’

Today, Imama did not weep at his words or at his beating: she just took the blows and accusations without a word. Hashim Mubeen, exhausted, stopped hitting her—he was breathing heavily. Imama stood silent before him.

‘You still have time—leave everything behind. Divorce the man and marry Asjad: we’ll forgive you everything, forget it all.’ This was Salma speaking firmly.

‘I did not accept Islam to revert to the old ways. I will not return to your faith.’ Imama spoke softly but with determination. ‘Just set me free, let me leave this house.’

‘If you leave this house, the world will kick you around. You have no idea of the world outside—people are waiting like crocodiles to swallow you up.’

The man you have married, and insulted us, will make your life miserable. He must have married you for our money and status, but when you are turned out with nothing to your name, he’ll ditch you. You will have no refuge, no shelter.’ Salma tried to frighten Imama by painting a grim picture. ‘There’s time yet Imama—you still have time.’

‘No Ammi, I have no more time—I have made up my mind, I have told you my decision. I cannot accept this life—please let me go. If you want to cast me out from the family, do so. If you want to disinherit me, do so—I have no objections. But I will do what I have said—I have chosen a path for my life and neither you nor anyone else can change my decision.’

‘If that’s the case, then just dare step out of this house—I’ll kill you but I will not let you leave this house! As for that lawyer, I’ll take good care of him too. If you think that any court can take you away from my custody, you are grossly mistaken. I will never let you go anywhere. I’ll move you before the bailiff gets here—I’ll see how you do not change your decision then. And if I do not find the man you have married, I will marry you to Asjad, regardless of whether or not your nikah has taken place. I refuse to accept this nikah—your wedding will only be by my wishes or not at all.’ Saying this in a state of agitation and anger, he walked out with Salma. Imama stood silent, confused and frightened, staring at the door. The very purpose for which she had married was now disintegrating before her. She had gained nothing from it. Hashim Mubeen was like a rock in his determination.

_Poor Imama Bibi!' exclaimed Nasira as she cleaned Salar's room. Salar was organizing the papers, etc. on his writing table; he turned around to look at her.

_She got a really bad beating last night,' added Nasira, noticing his attention.

_Who got a beating?' Salar asked, arranging his books.

_Imama Bibi, who else...' Salar stopped to look at Nasira. She continued that her daughter had informed her that Hashim Mubeen had been very violent with Imama.

Salar appeared amused. _Really? Very nice.'

Nasira couldn't fathom his remarks which were in English. Salar inquired about the reason behind this episode. The maid was surprised by his reaction and his sardonic smile—she did not expect this reaction. According to her understanding of the relationship between them, Salar should have been saddened but the situation was quite the opposite.

_If poor Imama Bibi found out that Salar Saab was smiling at her plight, she'll die of shock,' she thought.

_Why else would her father be so furious,' she said aloud. _She refused to marry Asjad Saab because she wanted to marry another boy.' Nasira stressed on the last word and looked meaningfully at Salar.

_That's all?' he remarked casually.

_It's not an ordinary thing, sir. Their household is in an upheaval. The wedding dates have been fixed, invitations sent out, and now Imama Bibi is refusing stubbornly—so her father beat her up.'

_That's no reason for such punishment,' he commented.

_You may think so, but for them it is a very serious matter. I feel very sorry for Imama Bibi—such a nice, polite girl and now she's in such a mess. Hashim Saab has locked her up at home. My daughter tells me that she's in poor shape.'

Nasira went on about Imama's sad condition in the hope that, believing her to be a sympathizer, Salar may reveal some secret. But he was no one's fool and nor was he interested in Nasira's so-called sympathy. He was not concerned about Imama's hardships and punishments but he did find it amusing that in this day and age, there were people who would raise their hand against grown-up offspring for defying them—and that too people of Hashim Mubeen's status, rich, affluent. It was a revelation. Many conflicting thoughts crossed his mind.

Nasira went on talking as she went about her work but Salar took no notice of her words so she finally quietened down, rather disappointed. She had never seen such indifference between lovers. _His reaction is so peculiar—no distress, no anxiety, even after listening to all that Imama has gone through. Perhaps she may also feel amused if he were to suffer a similar fate,’ Nasira wondered as she dusted a picture and put it back on the shelf.

The decision to leave home was the most difficult and most painful decision of Imama’s life, but she had no choice. She had no clue as to where her father would take her or how he would dissolve her marriage to get her married to Asjad. All she knew was the reality that once Hashim Mubeen took her away somewhere else, she had no way out: he would never kill her, but she preferred death to the kind of life she knew would be her fate if she stayed on.

When her father left the room, Imama wept for a long time. Then, for the first time, she took stock of her life, her situation. She had to get out of the house before morning and find herself a safe place. _Safe place?’ the question arose in her mind and she thought of Jalal Ansar again. To her, he was the only one who could give her that security in the real sense of the word. _Perhaps, if he sees me in person, he may change his mind, his attitude...perhaps, he’ll be compelled to review his decision and give me support and protection...perhaps his parents will have pity on me.’ A faint hope arose in her heart. Even if his parents did not help them, at least she would be free to live her life the way she wanted to. _But the question is how am I going to get out of here and where will I go?’ She was agitated and then she thought of Salar: if she could reach his house in some way, he could help her out.

She called Salar on his mobile. It was switched off. She tried several times but couldn’t get through. She put down her mobile, and she put some clothes and other things in a bag.

She had some jewelery and some money, which she also put in the bag. Then she collected all her other valuables which she could easily carry and which could fetch her ready cash. Finally, she shut her bag, changed her clothes and prayed two nwafil.

Her heart was heavy and her whole being was engulfed in sadness and despair. Even her tears did not provide her relief. After offering the nwafil, she recited all the ayaat and surahs she could remember.

Imama took the bag, switched off the light and tiptoed out of her room. Except for one light in the lounge, all the lights were off and it was quite dark. She cautiously descended the stairs to the ground floor and made for the kitchen, where it was pitch dark. Feeling her way in the kitchen, she got to its door which opened on to the lawn where, at the rear end, some

vegetables were grown—the kitchen door was the only exit that was not locked but just bolted. The door was not locked that night also. She quietly opened it and exited. At some distance were the servants' quarters; very cautiously, she walked across the lawn to the boundary wall separating her house from Salar's. She quietly tossed her bag over the wall and, after some effort, managed to scale the wall and get to the other side.

The sound of a knock entered the subconscious of Salar who was in deep sleep. This turned into a tapping—intermittent but persistent. He was lying prone, fast asleep, but the sound awakened him.

He sat up in bed and, in the darkness, tried to look around. A shiver of fright raced through him. The faint tapping sound was coming from the windows. Perhaps someone was trying to open them. Salar's first reaction was that it may be a burglar trying to get in because these were just sliding windows and, unfortunately, there was no grill. But it was not felt necessary to provide an iron grill because the glass was high quality, imported, and could not be easily broken and, further, the windows could only be opened from the inside. Besides, the lawn surrounding the house was patrolled by three guards and dogs. But, in spite of these precautions, there was somebody in the small verandah on the other side of the window trying to open it.

Salar got up and moved silently towards the opposite end of the window; he lifted the curtain carefully and peeked out. He was shocked to see the figure standing outside, visible in the light of the garden lamps.

‘She's crazy,’ he said involuntarily. If their ferocious pedigreed dogs had seen her, they would rip her apart even before Salar or anyone else got to her and if the guards saw someone moving suspiciously, they would shoot instead of wasting time questioning the suspect. But she stood there safely—certainly, she had jumped over the wall, Salar thought.

Teeth clenched, Salar switched on the bedroom light. The knocking stopped. The dogs had started barking. He drew the curtain and slid the window open.

‘Come in quickly!’ he told Imama. She entered somewhat nervously, bag in hand. Salar closed the curtains and turned to her. ‘For God's sake, Imama—you're insane!’

Saying nothing, she put the bag at her feet.

==You crossed over the wall? If the dogs or the guards had seen you, you'd have been history; your body would be lying out there.' ==I called so many times, but your mobile was switched off. I had no choice.'

For the first time, Salar observed her face. Her eyes were swollen and her face drawn. She was wrapped in a wide, white chadar which, along with her clothes, had stains on it.

==Can you give me a ride to Lahore?' she asked him.

==At this hour?' Salar was taken aback.

==Yes, right now—I have no time.'

Salar looked at the wall clock in surprise. ==The lawyer had called at your house...didn't that solve your problem?'

Imama shook her head. ==No. they're planning to send me away somewhere. That's why I was calling you so desperately to tell the lawyer to get a bailiff and secure my release. It could not wait till the next day as they would have moved me to some unknown place.'

Salar yawned: he was sleepy. ==Sit down,' he said as she was still standing.

==If you can't take me to Lahore, then drop me off at the bus stand—I'll make my way to Lahore.'

He was about to tell her that they would leave in the morning, but she interrupted him. ==No, not in the morning. I want to get out of here before that. If I can't catch the bus to Lahore, I'll go to some other town and take the Lahore bus from there.'

==At least sit down,' Salar gestured. She hesitated, then took a seat on the sofa. Salar sat at the foot of the bed, facing her. ==Where will you go in Lahore?'

==To Jalal's.'

==But he has refused to marry you.'

==I'll go all the same. He loves me—he can't leave me in the lurch, and ditch me this way. I'll request him and his family; I know they'll listen to me, they'll understand my situation.' ==But you are now married to me.'

Shocked, Imama looked at him. ==But that's only a paper marriage. I made it clear that the nikah was only out of necessity—it's not a real marriage.' He gave her an unblinking look. ==Do you know that I've been to Lahore today to meet Jalal?'

Color paled from Imama's face. ==Did you tell him about my problem, my circumstances?'

==No.' Salar shook his head.

==Why not?'

==Jalal got married.' He spoke casually. Imama's breath caught in her throat as she stared at him. ==It's been three days now,' he continued. ==He's going to the Northern Areas with his bride in a couple of days. He told me all this even before I could say anything—perhaps because he didn't want to hear any more about you. His wife is a doctor too.' Salar paused. ==I think his family rushed through the wedding because of your relationship with him.' Salar went on lying effortlessly.

==I cannot believe this.' Her voice seemed to float in from space.

==Yes, I couldn't believe it either, nor I did not expect you to believe it—but it's true. You can ring him up and discuss this with him if you want to,' Salar said with apparent unconcern.

Imama found herself in a dark void. That ray of hope she had followed to this stage had suddenly been extinguished. Let alone find a way out, she could not find her own being.

==It's up to you now—what will you do in Lahore? He cannot marry you now, nor can his family provide you any shelter. It's better for you to return home before your family finds out.'

Imama felt as if his voice was coming from a great distance. She looked at him, blankly and muttered, ==Drop me off to Lahore.'

==You'll go to Jalal?'

==No...I won't go there. But I cannot go home anymore.' She suddenly stood up. Salar looked at her with concern and took a deep breath. ==Or walk me to your gate—I'll find my way. Tell your chowkidar to let me out.' She picked up her bag.

==Have you any idea how far the bus stand is? Can you find the way on your own in this fog and cold?'

==When I have nothing left, then what do the cold or fog mean?' Salar saw her smile wanly, eyes brimming with tears as she wiped them away with the back of her hand. He had no intention of going anywhere with her, let alone to Lahore. He was very sleepy and he did not like this girl who stood before him.

==Wait—I'll come with you.' He didn't know why or how these words were spoken. Imama saw him go towards his dressing room. He emerged a while later, having changed from his pajamas to jeans and a pullover. He picked up his key chain, watch and wallet from his bedside table. Coming to Imama, he put out his hand to take her bag.

==No, thank you, I can carry it.'

==Let me,' he said and slung it over his shoulder. They walked down in single file to the porch. Salar put her bag on the back seat and opened the front door for her. As the car approached, the chowkidar opened the gate for them. Passing by, Salar noticed the amazement in the man's

eyes when he saw the passenger in the front seat; he must certainly wonder what she was doing in the house at this hour and how she got in.

‘Will you drop me at the bus stand?’ asked Imama as the car approached the main road.

Salar turned to glance at her. ‘No. I’m taking you to Lahore.’ His eyes were fixed on the road ahead.

END OF CHAPTER THREE

Chapter 4

The car was racing down the wide, almost empty road. There was hardly any traffic. He had his right hand on the steering wheel whilst stifling a yawn with his left and trying to beat the sleep. On the adjoining seat, Imama sat quietly crying, of which Salar was aware. From time to time she would wipe her tears and blow her nose, and continue weeping as she stared at the road through the wind screen.

Salar, from time to time, glanced at Imama. He did not try to console her. He thought she would herself settle down but, when even after half an hour she didn't quieten down, Salar began to tire.

‘If you are so upset at running away from home, you shouldn't have done so,’ Salar said, breaking the silence. Imama did not reply. A little while later, he suggested —‘There is still time: most probably no one has yet noticed your absence.’

‘I have no regrets,’ replied Imama, after some time, in a choked but firm voice. ‘Then why are you weeping?’ he shot back.

‘There's no point in telling you.’ she wiped her eyes again. Salar turned around and looked at her curiously, then turned away again.

‘Where will you go in Lahore?’

‘Don't know.’

Salar was quite surprised by her response. ‘What do you mean? Don't you know where you're going?’ ‘Not now...’

‘Then why are you going to Lahore?’

‘Where else can I go?’

‘You may as well have stayed in Islamabad.’

‘Where in Islamabad? With whom?’

‘There's no one in Lahore either who could put you up permanently...other than Jalal.’ Salar stressed the last three words and tried to see her reaction. ‘So you're going to him,’ he said in a cutting tone. ‘No. Jalal is out of my life. How could I go to him?’ Salar couldn't fathom if there was more disappointment in her tone or more sadness.

‘Then where will you go?’ He was intrigued.

‘That I can say only when I reach Lahore—where I go and to whose place.’ Salar looked at her doubtfully: did she really not know or did she not want to tell him? There was silence in the car once again.

==Your fiancé—what’s his name? Oh yes, Asjad—he’s a very nice person, very handsome,’ Salar broke the silence again. ==And this other fellow, Jalal, is nothing compared to Asjad. Haven’t you been unfair with Asjad?’ Imama did not reply, but stared at the road ahead. Salar turned towards her awaiting her response, and then realized that she did not want to reply. ==I haven’t been able to understand you...or what you’re doing. Your actions are weird and you’re even more so,’ he said after a pause. This time, Imama turned to look at him.

==Am I stranger than you and are my actions stranger than yours?’ Imama spoke in a soft but firm tone. Her words left Salar speechless.

==What’s strange about me and which action of mine did you find odd?’ he asked after a spell of silence. ==You know which actions were strange,’ she replied looking straight ahead. ==You’re referring to my suicide attempts, surely.’ He answered his own question. ==Although I do not want to kill myself, I’m only trying to—I’m just experimenting.’

==What sort of experiment?’

==I’ve always asked people this question but no one has been able to give me a satisfactory answer. So I’m trying to find the answer myself,’ he continued.

==What is your question?’

==A very simple question, but everyone finds it hard to answer. What is next to ecstasy?’ he asked Imama.

She looked at him for a while, then said, ==Pain.’

==And what is next to pain?’ he shot another question at her.

==Nothingness.’

==What is next to nothingness?’ he asked in his typical style.

==Hell,’ she replied.

==What is next to hell?’ Imama watched him in silence. ==What is next to hell?’ he repeated.

==Aren’t you afraid?’ He heard her query in an unfamiliar tone.

==Afraid of what?’ he was surprised. ==Of hell—the place which has nothing ahead...everything is left behind. What remains after being condemned and destroyed that is worth your knowing?’ she asked sadly.

==I fail to understand your argument—it’s gone over my head,’ Salar declared. ==Don’t worry: there’ll come a time when all this will make sense to you. Then your laughter will end to be

replaced by fear—fear of death, of hell too. Allah will make it all clear to you...and you'll never ask anyone what is next to ecstasy,' Imama said with composure.

==Is this your prophecy?' Salar responded sarcastically to her remarks.

==No,' she retorted in the same tone.

==Experiment? Yes, I suppose so, because you too have tried to end your life. I did it my way and you've done it in your way,' he said coldly. Imama's eyes filled with tears again. She looked at Salar. ==I've not done anything to end my life.'

==To leave home for any man is tantamount to suicide for a woman and that too for someone who is not ready to wed her. Look here, I'm a broadminded, very liberal man, and don't see anything wrong with a girl running away from home for a civil marriage with a man of her choice—but at least the man should stand by her. To leave home for a married man...tsk, tsk! I can't figure that and that too at your age—it's utter stupidity.' ==I haven't left home for any man.' ==Jalal Ansar,' he reminded her.

==I haven't run away because of him!' she shouted suddenly. Salar's foot hit the brake as he looked at her in amazement.

==Why are you screaming at me? There's no need for it,' he admonished as she sat looking out of the window.

==You know, this religious theory or philosophy or point you've made— whatever it is, I don't get it! What difference does it make if anyone follows another prophet? There's more to life than these silly arguments—fighting over religion, faith and sects—what rubbish!'

Imama gave him an angry glance. ==It's not necessary that things which are meaningless for you should be so for others. I do not want to continue with the religion I was born into, or to marry a man from the same faith. It's my right to do what I want. I don't want to argue with you over things that are beyond you so don't make any comments on these matters.'

==I have a right to say what I want: freedom of expression,' Salar shrugged.

Imama's response was to stare silently out of the window.

Salar drove on without a word, but a little later he broke the silence and returned to his topic.

==This Jalal Ansar...I was talking about him. What's so special about him?' he glanced at Imama who looked straight ahead. ==He's no match for you. He's not at all good-looking and you're a beautiful girl—I'm amazed at your interest in him. Is he very intelligent?' he asked her.

She was surprised. ==Intelligent? What do you mean?'

==See, people are attracted by one's looks, but I don't think it was his looks that attracted you or his family background. I don't know about his social or financial status, but I know that you have a very sound family background so you could not have been attracted to him on that score. The

only thing that remains is a person's intellect, his capability...so is he very intelligent? Brilliant and outstanding?' 'No,' she murmured.

Salar was quite disappointed. 'Then what was it that drew you to him?' She continued to gaze at the road ahead, lit up by the car's headlights. Salar did not repeat his question; he just shrugged it off, focusing on his driving. There was silence between them.

'He used to recite naats very well,' she spoke under her breath, as if to herself, after a while. Salar had heard her but it seemed unbelievable.

'What?' He wanted confirmation.

'He recited naats very well.' This time Imama's voice was louder.

'Just for his voice...is he a singer?'

'No. he recites only naats, and very beautifully.'

Salar laughed. 'So you fell in love with him just for that! I can't believe it.' Imama looked at him.

'Then don't—who needs your conviction?' she said brusquely. There was silence again.

'Let's accept that it was his style of reciting naats that affected you so deeply that you went to such lengths, but it's very impractical. It's right out of a Barbara Cartland romance whereas you are a medical student with a mature mind,' he said somewhat unkindly.

Imama looked at him again. 'I'm very mature—to mature, and in the last three or four years no one can claim to have considered things as practically as I've done.'

'I reserve my comments. Possibly my being practical is quite different from your view of practicality. Anyway, I was talking about Jalal, what you said about his naat recitals.'

'Some things are beyond one's control...I have none either.' Her tone reflected defeat.

'I don't agree with you—everything is within our power; at least we can control our feelings, our emotions and actions. We know when and why we develop feelings for someone; and these emotions do not grow unless we let it happen knowingly. Therefore I cannot accept that we have no control.' While talking, he turned to look at Imama and was aware that she was not listening. She was staring, unblinking, at the windscreen or the scene ahead. She was somewhere far away, he couldn't say where. She looked abnormal to him. After driving in silence for a fairly long time, Salar addressed her again.

'Besides reciting naats, what other qualities does he have?' His rather loud tone startled her. He repeated his question.

'All those qualities that should be present in a good human being, a good Muslim.'

'Such as?' Salar raised his eyebrows.

==And even if he had no other qualities, I would still prefer him over other men because he has such adoration for the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that this alone would have been enough for me.'

Salar smiled quizzically. ==What logic! I can really not understand such an argument.' He shook his head in disbelief.

==Will you marry of your own choice or your parents' choice?' Imama's sudden query took him by surprise.

==My choice, of course! Parents's choice does not prevail in this day and age,' he said nonchalantly.

==You too will fall for some quality in the girl you choose to marry, or you'll develop some understanding with her, won't you?'

==Definitely.'

==That's just what I am doing. It's a question of one's priorities—you'll marry for the reasons you listed; I too wanted to marry Jalal Ansar for a similar reason.' She paused. ==It was my wish to marry someone who loved the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) more than me. Jalal was such a person and I felt he was the one I should marry. But, as I told you, some things are beyond one's control—there are some desires that one cannot be rid of...' She shook her head sadly as she spoke. ==And now that he is married, what is your plan?'

==I don't know...'

==I'll tell you what—find yourself another naat reciter and marry him,' he laughed, mocking her. Imama stared at Salar: he was insensitive to the point of cruelty.

==Why are you looking at me this way? I was just joking.' He had stifled his laughter. Imama looked away without a word.

==Your father beat you?' Salar resumed the conversation after a while.

==Who told you?' she asked without looking at him.

==The maid,' he replied calmly. ==The woman thought you had refused marriage because of me so she conveyed your —pitiable condition in her most melodramatic style. Did your father beat you?' ==Yes.' She registered no reaction.

==Why?'

==I didn't ask him...perhaps he was angry, that's why.' ==Why did you let him beat you?'

Imama turned around. ==Because he's my father, he has the right to raise his hand on me.' Salar looked at her in surprise. ==Anyone else in his place would have done the same thing in this situation. I did not mind it,' she said in an even tone.

==If he has the right to hit you, he also has the right to marry you where he wishes. Then why are you making such a fuss about this?' His tone was sharp.

==As long as it was to a Muslim, I would have married wherever he wished.' ==Even if it weren't to Jalal Ansar?' he quizzed.

==Yes...as if I'm married to him now.' Her eyes seemed to be moist again.

==Then you should have told him.'

==Of course, I did—you think I didn't?'

==I'm really amazed by one thing: why did you decide to approach me for help? In fact, how did you do this, considering that you actually disliked me?'

==I had no other option beside you,' she said quietly, pausing between sentences. ==None of my friends were in a position to help me the way a man could. Other than Asjad, you and Jalal were the only men I knew, and you were the closest whom I could have contacted immediately—so I did.'

==You were convinced that I'd help you?'

==No; I took a risk. How could I be sure of your help? As I said, I had no choice.'

==So you're saying that you were ready to exploit a situation to suit your purpose?'

This comment summed up Salar's reaction and Imama was cornered into silence. He was an expert at driving home a point, but he was not wrong in saying so to her face.

==Very interesting.' He was quite pleased with his observation.

==I want to stop the car here for a while.' Salar looked at the dingy hotel and gas station by the roadside. ==I need to get the tyres checked. There's no spare tyre in this car and a flat tyre would mean a real problem.' Imama nodded. He pulled his car into the gas station. From some distant mosque the call for fajr prayers came across. Except for the couple of hotel staff, there was no one else around. Seeing the car drive in, one of the workers came out; perhaps he had heard the car. Salar opened the door and stepped out.

Imama leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes for a while. The azaan became louder: she looked around and then alighted from the car. Hearing the door open, Salar turned around.

==How long will we stop here?' she asked him.

‘Ten or fifteen minutes... I need to get the engine checked too.’ ‘I want to say my prayers; I need to perform the wuzu,’ she said. Before Salar could reply, the man said, ‘Baji, there’s water in this drum if you want it for wuzu.’

‘And where will she pray?’ Salar inquired of the man.

‘In that room there—I’ll get her a prayer rug. Let me do that before I check the engine for you,’ he said as he went towards the room. Salar saw Imama move towards the drum and stand there looking somewhat puzzled. Involuntarily, he approached her. The water was in a large barrel that was once used once for road tar; it had a cover on it. ‘How can I get water from this?’ Imama turned at the sound of footsteps behind her. Salar looked around and seeing an empty pail, he brought it.

‘I think they use this to get the water,’ he said as he dipped the pail in and filled it up for her.

‘Let me help you,’ he said. Imama looked somewhat uncomfortable at first; then she rolled up the sleeves of her pullover and taking off her watch, held it out to Salar, and squatted on her feet. As Salar poured some water on her outstretched hands, she shuddered as if a current had hit her and drew them back. ‘What’s the matter?’ he was taken aback.

‘Nothing—the water’s very cold. But pour it, please.’ She held out her hands. Salar began to pour the water as she performed the ablutions. For the first time, he saw her arms up to her elbows; for a while, he could not take his eyes off her wrists and then he shifted his gaze to her face. Without removing her chadar, she very carefully cleansed her hair, her ears and throat, and Salar’s eyes followed the movements of her hands. He discovered for the first time too the gold chain swinging from her neck and the pearl pendant on it. Every time Salar had seen her she had been covered in a chadar—the colors would be different but she always wore it in the same style. He had never thought about her shape, her figure.

‘I’ll pour water on my feet myself.’ She stood up and took the pail, now nearly empty, from Salar. He moved back a few paces and watched her, fascinated. His fascination came to an end when she had completed her wuzu; he held out her watch.

They walked to the room indicated by the man. He had already spread out the prayer mat in a corner. Imama moved forward quietly. There were a few chairs and a small stool also in the room. Salar could not immediately comprehend the use of this room; then he moved to the window-like counter at the other end.

‘Get us two cups of tea,’ he told a boy there who nodded obediently and proceeded to light a stove. Salar then returned to the room. Imama had begun her prayers. He sat down on a chair and, stretching his legs to the table across, he watched her pray. He thought that, considering her predicament, she would collapse into tears in supplication—it was but expected. But, to his disappointment, she did nothing of the sort. Hands raised, she prayed quietly for a while, and then passing her hands over her face, she stood up. Salar drew a deep breath and looked away.
about 6 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

As soon as they entered the precincts of Lahore, Imama said, ‘You can drop me off at any bus stand now; I’ll make my own way.’

‘I’ll drop you wherever you want to go. Waiting in this fog for any transport will take a long time.’

The roads were quite deserted at this time in the early morning hour and fog engulfed everything.

‘I have no idea where I’ll be going, so how can I give you any directions? I think I’ll go to the hostel now, and then...’

Salar interrupted. ‘Then I’ll take you to the hostel.’ There was silence between them as he headed towards the hostel.

At some distance from the building, Imama said, ‘Stop here; I’ll walk over. I don’t want to be seen going there with you.’ Salar stopped the car. ‘In the last few weeks, you have been extremely helpful towards me: I want to thank you: if it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be here now.’ She continued after a pause. ‘I still have your mobile with me—I’ll need it for a while, but I’ll send it to you later.’

‘No need for that; you can keep it.’

‘I’ll contact you after a few days; you can send me the divorce papers then.’

She added, ‘I hope you will not divulge anything to my parents.’ ‘Need you say that?’ His eyebrows went up. ‘If I wanted to, I’d have told them long ago,’ he said indifferently. ‘You had a very poor opinion of me—do you still think in the same terms, or has your opinion changed?’ Salar suddenly asked with a knowing smile. ‘Don’t you believe that I’m really a very nice person?’ ‘It’s possible,’ she uttered softly.

‘It’s possible?’ Her response shocked Salar. He gave a doubtful smile. ‘Even now, you say it’s possible. You are really ungrateful, Imama—I’ve done all that for you which no young man would be ready to do, and yet you are not willing to admit any goodness about me.’

‘I’m not ungrateful. I accept that you have done me many favors and that anyone else in your place would not have obliged...’

‘So that means I am good, right?’ he interjected. She did not reply, but kept looking at him.

‘No. I know that’s what you want to say; although an eastern woman’s silence is assent, they say, but your silence means refusal. I’m right, am I not?’

‘We’re getting into a pointless argument.’

‘Possibly,’ he shrugged. ‘But I’m surprised that you...’

This time, Imama cut him short. ‘You have certainly done a lot for me, and if I did not know you, I’d certainly believe you to be a very good human being and even say so. But—I know you well so I cannot say you’re a good person.’ She stopped. Salar stared at her steadily. ‘A person who attempts suicide, who drinks alcohol, who has plastered his room with pictures of nude women cannot be good.’ She spoke bluntly.

‘If you had gone to a man who did none of these three things but did not help you either, would he be good in your eyes?’ Salar spoke angrily. ‘Like

Jalal Ansar?’

Imama’s expression changed. ‘Yes. He did not help me but that doesn’t make him bad. He’s a good man...I still consider him good.’

‘And I helped you, I married you, and certainly in your opinion, I am still a very bad person?’ He smiled sardonically as he said this. ‘What do you think about yourself, Imama—that you’re a very good girl?’

His tone was acerbic and, without waiting for her response, he continued. ‘I don’t think you’re a very good person: you ran away from home for another man...you deceived your fiancé...you ruined your family’s honor.’ He was speaking without thinking of consideration and courtesy.

There was a hint of tears in her eyes. ‘You’re right. I am not good, and I have yet to hear this from many others. I could give you a lengthy explanation but there’s no point in doing so, as you can’t appreciate these things.’

‘Suppose I had taken you somewhere else instead of bringing you down to Lahore, then? But I brought you here safely; do you realize what a favor I’ve done you?’

Imama looked at him and said, ‘I was certain that you would bring me here, that you would not take me anywhere else.’

‘You believed in me? Why? I’m a bad person, remember?’ Salar chuckled. ‘I didn’t believe in you—I believed in God.’ Salar frowned at her words. ‘I gave up everything for God and His Prophet (PBUH). It could never be that I would be left helpless at the mercy of someone like you.’ ‘Suppose it had happened,’ he insisted.

‘Why should I presume something that did not happen?’ She was equally insistent.

‘That’s to say that you don’t give me any credit whatsoever?’ he taunted her. ‘What if I do not let you go now? What then? The car doors won’t open unless I unlock them, you know that; what will you do?’

She fixed her gaze on him. He went on. Or I do this, he said and picking up the cell phone on the dashboard began to key in the numbers. I call up your home. He waved the phone before her—her number flashed on the screen.

I tell them where you are and with whom, and then I take you straight to the police station and hand you over—what of your trust and belief then? He mocked her.

Imama watched him without a word. Salar felt very pleased with himself. He switched off the phone and showed her the screen.

Do you see what a favor I have done you by not doing what I could have done? he asked, replacing the instrument on the dashboard. Although you were utterly helpless, last night, I could have taken you somewhere else— what would you have done then? I'd have shot you. she spoke one word at a time.

He laughed in her face. Done what? —I'd have shot you , he mimicked her as laughed hilariously, his hands on the steering wheel. Have you eve seen a pistol in your life? he mocked her.

He saw her reach for her feet. I think this is what they call a pistol.

The smile was erased off his face. In Imama's hand was a small and costly ladies' pistol. Seeing her grip on the weapon, he realized that she was no amateur. He looked at her uncertainly.

You could have shot me?

Yes, I could, but I didn't do so because you did not deceive me in any way. Her tone was composed, firm. She had not pointed the weapon at Salar, but kept holding on to it.

The car's lock... She did not say anything further. Salar unlocked the doors. She placed the pistol in her handbag. There was no more conversation between them; opening the door, Imama stepped out. Salar saw her move swiftly towards a van that approached them and she got aboard.

Salar prided himself on his keen power of observation: he could read a person's mind by looking at their face. But, on that fog-engulfed road, he had to confess that he had not been able to figure out Imama Hashim. Hands on the steering, he sat there for many moments in a state of uncertainty. This experience had augmented his dislike for Imama Hashim. Regardless of the foggy conditions, Salar drove home at top speed. All the way, his mind was in turmoil— where had she pulled the pistol out from? He was certain that when she was performing the wuzu and washing her feet, there was nothing visibly strapped to her calf. He had watched her from head to toe when she was praying and did not observe anything. She had gone to the car and sat down when they had finished eating; he had followed her a few moments later. Definitely, she must have had the pistol in her bag, he figured.

He was in a foul mood when he got home. When he pulled the car into the gate, he summoned the gatekeeper.

‘You will not tell anyone about the girl who was in the car with me last night, do you understand? In fact, I did not go anywhere as far as you’re concerned,’ he warned him in a threatening tone.

‘Yes, sir. I will not breathe a word to anyone about anything,’ the man nodded obediently. He was no fool to go around talking about such things. Salar went to his room and slept peacefully. He did not intend to go anywhere that day.

He was in deep sleep when he heard a sudden loud banging on his door. He sat up. The door was being jolted by the noise. He looked at the wall clock with half-open eyes—it was 4:00 a.m. Rubbing his eyes, he went to the door, furious at whoever was knocking on it. Angrily, Salar yanked the door open to find the servant standing there.

‘What’s your problem—why are you banging on the door? Do you want to break it down?’ he shouted at the man.

‘Salar Sahib, the police are outside.’ The servant was flustered. Salar’s sleep and fury both vanished. In a trice, he knew why the police was there and he was surprised at the alacrity of Imama’s family and the police; how on earth had they reached him within a few hours of last night’s events? ‘Why are the police here?’ Salar asked, keeping his voice calm and his face expressionless.

‘That they’re not saying, sir, except that they want to meet you. But the chowkidar has not let them in. He told them that you weren’t home, but they have a warrant for you. They said they’ll break in if they’re not allowed to come in and they’ll arrest everybody.’

Salar breathed a sigh of relief: the chowkidar had acted really sensibly. He must have been sure that the police were here to investigate about the girl last night so he had neither let the police enter nor told them about Salar being home.

‘Don’t worry...I’ll handle this somehow,’ Salar told the servant and went back into his room. If it were any ordinary citizen’s house, the police would have stormed in; but the size of the house and its location intimidated them. If Imama’s family were not as influential, perhaps the police would not dare enter this sector, and that too with a warrant—they were now between a rock and a hard place.

Salar immediately called up Sikandar Usman in Karachi. ‘Papa, there’s a small problem. The police are standing outside our gate and they have an arrest warrant for me.’

Sikandar Usman almost dropped the cell phone. Why?

I don't know, Papa. I was sleeping when the servant woke me up to inform me. Should I go and inquire from the police why they want to arrest me? Salar asked his father in a tone of filial obedience.

No, there's no need for you to go out or call the police in. Stay in your room; I'll call you in a while. Sikandar Usman hung up quickly. Salar was relieved that the police would no longer be there a little later and that's just what happened. Ten or fifteen minutes later, the servant came to inform Salar that the police had left. The man was still talking to Salar when Sikandar rang him up.

Have the police gone? he asked the minute he heard Salar's voice.

Yes, they've left, Salar spoke in a calm and relieved voice.

Now listen to me carefully. Your mother and I are reaching Islamabad tonight. Till then you are not to leave the house. Do you understand that? Salar found his father's tone rather strange—it was cold and brusque. Yes, I do, he said and put down the phone. As he did so, his gaze fell on the carpet which had footprints all over. The servant was also looking at them in surprise as they seemed to come in from the window across the room.

Clean up these footprints, Salar ordered.

The servant went out. Salar went to the sliding window and opened it. He had figured it out right—the same muddy footprints trooped across the verandah too. Imama had jumped over the wall into the flowerbeds and trudged the mud all over. The marks stood out on the white marble floor of the verandah. Salar let out a deep breath. He turned to see the servant cleaning the marks on the carpet.

There are footprints in the verandah also. Clean them, said Salar. The servant could no longer contain his curiosity. Whose footprints are these?

Mine, Salar replied abruptly.

He was busy having his dinner when Sikandar Usman and Tayyaba arrived home. Their faces were drawn. Salar continued to eat, unconcerned. They walked past quietly.

Come to my room when you've finished eating, said his father as he went out. Instead of replying, Salar helped himself to some fruit trifle. When Salar went up to his parents' room fifteen minutes later, Sikandar Usman was pacing up and down while Tayyaba sat on the sofa in a state of anxiety. Papa, did you call for me? Salar asked as he entered.

Sit down and I'll tell you why I sent for you. Sikandar stopped in his tracks and took a seat beside Tayyaba. Where's Imama? he asked without losing a second.

‘Imama who?’ If it were someone other than Salar, his face would have reflected some reaction or alarm, but Salar was one of a kind. Sikandar’s face was red with fury. ‘Your sister!’ he growled.

‘Papa, my sister’s name is Anita.’ There was no limit to his composure. ‘Tell me just one thing—how many times and in how many ways will you humiliate me?’ Sikandar got up and sat down on the other sofa. ‘What are you talking about Papa? I fail to understand,’ Salar said in surprise.

‘Although you understand everything very well,’ his father shot back sarcastically. ‘Look here, just tell me without any fuss where Imama is—this matter is not as simple as you think.’

‘Papa, which Imama are you referring to? I don’t know any Imama.’ ‘I’m talking about Waseem’s sister,’ Sikandar spoke gruffly.

‘Waseem’s sister?’ he fell into thought. ‘Oh yes, I remember now—the one who gave me first aid last year.’

‘Yes, the same girl. And now that your memory has been restored, tell me here she is.’

‘Papa, she must be at home or in the hostel at the medical college. What have I got to do with her?’ he told his father in a surprised tone.

‘Her father has lodged a case of her abduction against you.’

‘Against me? I don’t believe it! What do I have to do with her?’ Salar’s voice and face were remarkably composed.

‘That’s what I want to know—what is your connection with her?’

‘Papa, I don’t even know her. Except for a couple of times, I haven’t even met her. So how am I linked to her abduction? I didn’t even know that she had been abducted.’

‘Salar, stop this acting now and tell me where the girl is. I have promised Hashim Mubeen that I will restore his daughter to him.’

‘Then fulfill your promise and do restore his daughter to him if you can find her. But why are you troubling me with this?’

‘Look here, Salar, if there’s any sort of understanding between you and

Imama, we’ll work it out. I’ll arrange your wedding with her myself. But for the time being, tell me where she is.’ There was a shift in Sikandar’s tone and stance.

‘For God’s sake, Papa, stop it! What understanding, what wedding... if I had an understanding with someone, would I kidnap her? What makes you think I’d develop any understanding with Imama? She’s not my type.’ Salar’s voice rose.

==Then why are they accusing you of kidnapping her?'

==You should ask them, instead of asking me,' Salar replied in the same distasteful manner.

==Today, Hashim Mubeen is saying this. Tomorrow, someone else will come up with a similar accusation and you'll start screaming at me. I told you I was sleeping when the police arrived and now you come and grill me...I had no clue whether or not Waseem's sister had been abducted...why are they accusing me? What proof do they have that I was involved in this abduction? And suppose I did, would I be sitting here at home? I should be with her,' he said bitterly.

==I came to know of your case through the SP. I called up Hashim Mubeen from Karachi, but he was not willing to speak to me. I had to beg and plead to talk to him...he said that his daughter had disappeared during the night and that you were also away from home all night and returned this morning.'

==So where does abduction figure in this? To begin with, I did not go anywhere last night, and secondly, to kidnap someone you have to enter their home and I did not force my way into anyone's house.'

==Hashim Mubeen's gatekeeper saw you leave last night and return this morning.'

==His gatekeeper is a liar,' Salar said loudly.

==Our gatekeeper saw you leave with a girl last night,' Sikandar retorted, gritting his teeth in anger. Sikandar was momentarily speechless. Obviously, Sikandar had already grilled the chowkidar as soon as he got home.

==It was one of my friends,' Salar replied, looking at Tayyaba.

==Which friend? Who was she? Tell me her name and address.'

==Sorry, Papa, I can't do that—it's personal.'

==You went to drop her in the city, here in Islamabad?'

==Yes.'

==You've dropped her off in Lahore—the SP told me you crossed four checkpoints and your number has been noted at all four of them. On the way, you stopped at a service station to have your car checked and you also had dinner with that girl,' Sikandar told him, giving him the name of the service station and that of the hotel. Salar looked at his father but said nothing.

==The SP himself gave me all this information. He has not spoken to Hashim Mubeen as yet; he said I should talk to you and the girl should be recovered and quietly returned home, or else we should tell her family of her whereabouts so that the matter is brought to an end without any problems. But how long do you think he will keep this from Hashim Mubeen? Even if he covers up all this out of friendship and consideration,

Hashim Mubeen is very resourceful and he'll get to the bottom of this—and you'll spend your life in prison.'

Sikandar tried to scare him—Salar kept looking at Sikandar, unmoved.

'Now stop lying and tell me where the girl is?' 'That girl is in the red light area.' 'What!' Sikandar was jolted.

'I brought her from there and that's where I left her.' Ashen-faced, his parents looked at him.

'But it was not Imama. I had gone to Lahore day before yesterday and I brought this girl home to spend the night with her; I dropped her back last night. I don't have her contact number, but if you accompany me to Lahore I'll take you to her or give her address and the police can verify these facts.' There was stunned silence in the room. Sikandar and Tayyaba were looking at Salar in disbelief and he sat looking out of the window—relaxed and peaceful.

'I can hardly believe you would do such things...go to such places.' Sikandar spoke after a long pause.

'I'm sorry, Papa, but I do...and this is also known to Imama's brother Waseem. I've been there on several weekends and Waseem knows about it; you can ask him.'

'Give me the girl's address,' scowled Sikandar

'I'll get it from my room,' said Salar, getting up.

As soon as he got into his room, Salar immediately called a friend from his mobile and explained the situation to him.

'Akmal, I've given my father the address of that house in the red light area where we've been going. Inform any girl who knows me there about this; I'll call you again a little later.'

Then he quickly wrote down the address on a piece of paper and took it to Sikandar's room. He put the paper before his father, which he literally snatched, looking at him angrily. 'Get out of here!'

Salar walked away calmly. When he was in his room, he called up Akmal again. 'I'll call you when I get there,' said Akmal.

Salar relaxed on his bed waiting for Akmal's call which came fifteen minutes later.

'Salar, I've prepared Saneeya; I've explained everything to her.' Salar knew Saneeya.

'Akmal, get a pen and paper and note down what I tell you,' he said and then he began to describe the outward appearance of his house and its location. 'What's this? I've been to your place, I know...' asked Akmal, surprised. 'You've seen it, Saneeya hasn't. I'm giving you all these details for her. If the police come to investigate, they're going to ask her just to verify that she had indeed come to Islamabad with me. She had come under cover in the car, at night, so she

could not see very much, but coming into the house, there are lawns on both sides; my car is red and it's a sports car; its number is...' he went on dictating. 'We crossed four police check posts; she was wearing a white shalwar qameez, a white chadar and a black pullover. On the way we stopped at this gas station,' he gave Akmal the name. 'But she could not see the places clearly because of the fog.' Salar continued to provide the details, one after the other, from the description of the man at the service station to that of the boy who served them tea and the room they sat in, the food they ate, and the conversation between them. He included the smallest detail of his house too, from the porch to his room and the stuff in it.

'Tell Saneeya to memorize all this,' he said—his last instructions to Akmal—then he ended the call. He was sitting on his bed, thinking back on this, when Sikandar Usman barged in.

'What's the girl's name?'

'Saneeya,' Salar said at once. Without saying any more, Sikandar Usman left the room.

After Sikandar left the room, Salar suddenly remembered the lawyer through whom they had contacted Hashim Mubeen. Hasan was the one to hire the lawyer who did not even know Salar Sikandar's name, but Hasan's involvement in this affair bothered Salar—through the lawyer Hashim Mubeen could reach Hasan, and through Hasan, Salar.

Salar's next call was to Hasan to whom he explained the developments.

'I'd been warning you all along,' Hasan reacted. 'I know Waseem and his family very well and I know the extent of their influence and contacts,' he went on.

Ennui—Salar found this tiresome. 'I did not call you up to predict my future—I just wanted you to be aware of the danger of this situation.'

'What danger?' Hasan was alarmed.

'That they can reach you through the lawyer you hired and through you, easily reach me.'

'That they can't do.' Hasan was nonchalant.

'Why?'

'Because I have done everything most carefully and taken all precautions. The lawyer can't get to me either: the address and phone number I gave him were fake.'

Salar broke into a smile—he should have expected this cleverness of Hasan who did such things expertly, leaving no loose ends. Hasan continued, 'I've been to that lawyer just once; after that

I called him up. Besides, my appearance was so different when I met him that I don't think he can recognize me or link me to Hashim Mubeen.'

==But if he should?'

==Then...I don't know, I haven't thought about it.' Hasan was very candid. ==Wouldn't it be better for you to go away for a few days and make it look like your absence was tied to some very important work?' suggested Salar. ==I have a still better idea—to give that lawyer some money and instruct him to provide a misleading description of me in case Hashim Mubeen or the police turn up at his door for investigation. At least, it will throw them off track for some time and I won't be caught in any anxiety. Besides, I'm going to England for a few weeks,' Hasan revealed, ==so if they do come, I'll be far beyond them, rest assured.'

==If you're really so confident and relaxed, then it's fine. Possibly, they may not come for you at all, but I thought it was important to inform you.' Salar was about to disconnect the call.

==By the way, where did you drop her off in Lahore?'

==On a road—where else could I have left her? She gave no details of her whereabouts—no directions, no location. She just went away.' ==You're such a fool—you should have had the guts to ask her.'

==Maybe, but I didn't need to.' Salar deliberately avoided divulging his last conversation with Imama.

==I'm surprised that you should be involved in such affairs. With one's own type of girls it's a different matter, but someone like Waseem's sister—your taste is declining.'

==I'm —involved ? Salar exploded. ==You've really lost it or else you'd not say such rubbish to me. There's a huge difference between involvement and adventure, Mr. Hasan.' His tone dripped with sarcasm.

==And you covered this distance in one leap, did you, Mr Salar?' Hasan retorted in the same tone.

==You're crazy, that's all!'

==And you're crazier than me—otherwise you'd not term such foolhardiness an adventure.' Hasan was quite exasperated.

==Just because you helped me, it doesn't give you the right to say what you please.' He was infuriated by Hasan's remarks.

==I'm not through with you yet; what are you referring to—my comments about your taste or your stupidity?' Hasan asked as before: he was not affected by Salar's temper.

==Okay, shut up! Stop arguing senselessly.'

‘Talking about these things at this point is to dig up old issues.’ Hasan was serious. ‘Suppose the police do get to us and want to know Imama’s whereabouts, what will we say? I don’t think they’ll buy your story about not

knowing anything—what do you plan to do then?’

‘Nothing—I’ll tell them just what I told you,’ Salar’s raised his voice.

‘Yes, and that’s where the problem will begin—with this statement of yours: —I don’t know anything about Imama.’ Hasan repeated Salar’s words. ‘You should know very clearly that they will get to her by any means.’

‘That’s a later scenario. I don’t worry myself to death over hypotheses and possibilities. We’ll cross the bridge when we come to it,’ Salar casually dismissed Hasan’s fears. ‘The only help I need from you now is to keep this entire affair a secret and keep yourself out of the clutches of the police.’ ‘I’d do that even without your saying so. If I were to get caught, I’ll be in no position to face Waseem. You’ve landed me in a really embarrassing spot

this time.’

‘I’m going to hang you because you’re heading for another fit of dire warnings and regrets—you’re acting like my father!’

Salar abruptly ended the call. His brow was furrowed as the events of the past night crowded his mind.

‘I could never have believed he’d sink to these depths. Red light area—God Almighty! No one from our past seven generations would have gone there and this boy—what did I not do for him? Have I deprived him in any way? And yet he tries to kill himself, and now this...Oh God, how far will he go?’ Sikandar Usman sat holding his head in his hands.

‘I am really angry about the servants—they should not have let that girl enter the house. They should keep an eye on what goes on in our absence,’ said Tayyaba, veering away from the topic.

‘There’s a world of difference between keeping an eye on the house and keeping an eye on the master of the house,’ Sikandar retorted bitterly. ‘In this case, it was not the house but the master who had to be watched. Moreover, no one saw the girl enter the house—he said he brought her over the same day and then dropped her back. The chowkidar denies seeing any girl come in with him, but they all agreed that he drove out with a girl.’

‘That means that he made sure she was well-hidden.’

‘He’s got the devil in him...you know that. Just pray that this matter ends here, that Hashim Mubeen finds his daughter and we’re out of this mess— then we’ll think about what to do with him. God knows where we went wrong that are being punished so...I really don’t know what to do.’ about 6 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

The next morning, he woke up and got ready for college as usual. When he came down for breakfast, he was surprised to see Sikandar Usman at the table. Normally, he did not have his breakfast at this time as he went to the office later. Salar was somewhat taken aback to find him there, but his drawn face and reddened eyes showed that he had not slept well. Seeing Salar ready to go out early in the morning, he asked rather sharply,

‘Where are you going?’

‘College.’

‘Are you out of your mind? After hanging this albatross round our necks, you’re going off to college? Look here, you’re not going anywhere till this matter’s settled. Don’t you realize the danger you’re in?’ ‘What danger?’ Salar’s mind was alerted.

‘I don’t want you to suffer at Hashim Mubeen’s hands, so it’s best for you to stay put at home.’ Sikandar spoke curtly. ‘Once his daughter’s found, you can resume your classes.’ ‘If his daughter goes missing for a year, does that mean that I stay home?’

‘Didn’t you tell him about my statement?’ Salar spoke sharply to his father.

‘I did and Saneeya also verified your statement.’ His voice was sad and bitter when he mentioned Saneeya’s name. ‘But Hashim Mubeen insists that you’ve abducted his daughter.’

‘So what should I do? Too bad if he won’t believe me—what difference does it make?’ Salar reached for the food on the table.

‘It may not make a difference to you—it does to me. You don’t know Hashim Mubeen—how influential he is and to what extents he can go, but I know. And I don’t want you getting hurt so just stay home for the time being.’

Sikandar Usman spoke more gently this time. Perhaps he had realized that his sternness would have no effect on Salar who wouldn’t listen to him. ‘But Papa, this will affect my studies. Sorry, I can’t stay home.’ Sikandar’s leniency had no impact on Salar.

‘I’m not concerned with the effect on your studies—I just want you to be home, do you understand?’ Sikandar suddenly snapped at him.

‘At least, let me go today; I have some urgent work to wind up.’ Salar was puzzled at his father’s temper.

‘You can instruct the driver, he’ll do the work for you. Or call up one of your friends to do so,’ he spoke firmly.

‘But papa, you can’t...’

Sikandar Usman walked out without listening to Salar, who grumbled loudly and shut up in frustration. He knew his father would curtail his movement, but he didn’t expect to be locked up like this. He had thought that bringing Saneeya into the picture would have convinced his own family as well as Hashim Mubeen, and would take this onus off him. He was amazed when his father revealed that Hashim Mubeen still did not accept his statement. As he finished his breakfast, Salar sat there for a while pondering over these developments. Not going to college meant being cooped up at home, and he didn’t want that. The thought put him in a foul mood. He pushed away the food and went to his room.

‘Sikandar Sahib, I would like to speak to you.’ He was in the lounge, reading the newspaper when the maid approached him, hesitantly. ‘Yes, what is it? Do you need money?’ he replied while reading. He was generous with his servants.

‘No sir, it’s not that. There’s something else I need to tell you.’ ‘Then say so...’ he was still absorbed in the newspaper. Nasira was worried. After much consideration, she had decided to tell Sikandar Usman about Salar and Imama, because the matter was getting very complicated. She did not want that, sooner or later, her role as a go-between should be discovered and that she and her family be hauled up before the police for being accomplices. She discussed the situation with her husband and decided to confess all to Sikandar Usman—she needed the backing of at least one of the two families involved in this.

‘Why don’t you speak?’ Sikandar asked her, eyes fixed on the paper.

After a long pause, she said, ‘Sir, I want to tell you about Salar Saab.’ ‘About Salar? What do you want to say about him?’ Sikandar put down the paper on the table and looked at her. He was serious now. ‘I have to tell you some things about Salar Saab and Imama Bibi.’

Sikandar’s heart took a somersault. ‘What about them?’

‘Many days ago, Salar Saab gave me his mobile phone and told me to send it to Imama Bibi through my daughter.’ Sikandar Usman was rooted to the spot: so Hashim Mubeen’s persistence and his worst suspicions were well-founded.

‘Then?’ It seemed to him as if his own voice came from some distant cavern.

==I refused, saying I couldn't do this, but he threatened me. He said he'd have me thrown out, so I was forced to agree and get the mobile to Imama

Bibi.'

To protect herself, Nasira added lies to her statement. ==Then some days later, he gave me some papers to be given to Imama Bibi and brought back to him at once, so I gave them to my daughter and did as he had instructed. I asked him what those papers were but he didn't tell me. I suspected it was a nikahnama because there were five people present in his room at that time and one of them was a moulvi.'

Sikandar Usman broke out into a cold sweat as she divulged these details.

==How long ago did this happen?' he inquired.

==A few days before Imama Bibi went away.'

==Why didn't you tell us all this earlier?' he said sternly.

==Sir, I was very frightened...Salar Saab had threatened me that if I told you or anyone else, he would have me thrown out,' she replied

==Who were those people in the room? Do you know any one of them? Can you recognize them?' Sikandar Usman was very agitated.

==Only one, sir...Hasan Saab,' she named one of Salar's friends. ==I don't know who the others were. I was very worried, sir. I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid of what you'd think of me...but I couldn't keep this to myself any more.'

==Who else knows of this besides you?' he asked.

==Only myself, my husband and my daughter, sir,' she said quickly.

==Do any of the other servants know anything?'

==May Allah forgive me, sir! Why would I let anyone else know? I haven't told a soul.'

==I will deal later with whatever you have done, but get this straight—you will not breathe a word of this to anyone. Keep your mouth shut for all times otherwise not only will you be thrown out, but I'll tell Hashim Mubeen and the police that you were behind all this business—you led them astray, you carried messages back and forth. Then think of what the police can do to you and your family—you all will spend your entire lives in jail.' Sikandar threatened her in a fit of rage.

==No sir, never...cut out my tongue if I ever breathe a word about this again.' Nasira was petrified.

==That's enough—you can go now. I'll talk to you later.' Sikandar curtly dismissed her.

He began pacing up and down in a state of anxiety. The heavens had indeed fallen on him: for the first time he was aware that he and his family had been fooled by Salar. He had been brazenly lying to them time and again with absolute cussedness and deceit; he had been cheating them with impunity and so smoothly that they never suspected him. Had it not been for the maid, they would have taken his word for it and been content that he had nothing to do with Imama and her disappearance.

Salar had resumed his classes at college after a few days of incarceration at home. His father knew that a watch was being kept on Salar and also what it would mean when Hashim Mubeen came to know the details—he knew this too well. The relief he had earlier felt had evaporated: he had a good idea of the nature of those documents, of the presence of five people in Salar’s room, and the nature of the relationship between Salar and Imama. At this point he wanted to strangle him or shoot him but he knew he could not do any such thing because among his children he loved Salar the most. Having been so deceived by him, Sikandar thought to himself that he would never trust Salar, and would keep him in the dark about his plans, just as Salar had been doing with them .

__How did he get to know Imama?’ Sikandar Usman, pacing restlessly in his room, turned to Tayyaba.

__How should I know? He’s not a child to be led around,’ she reacted with some annoyance.

__I had warned you more than once, to keep an eye on him... but of course, if you can spare the time from your own activities...’

__It’s not my responsibility alone to watch over him, Tayyaba burst out. __You should also curtail your activities--why blame me for everything?’

__I’m not blaming you, and anyway, end this argument. Do you have any idea what this marriage with Imama means? Hashim Mubeen is going to play hell when he gets wind of this.’

__I am still shocked... what led Salar to do such a thing--he gave no thought to our position in society.

Sikandar was sitting with his wife worrying about their problems with Salar. __Hardly are we over with one problem, and he throws up another one at us. This business must have started last year when she saved him after that suicide attempt. It was our stupidity not to have paid attention; otherwise this could have been nipped in the bud.’

==And I'm sure this girl has been involved in this affair of her own will....it's not so simple to go marry someone by force. Look at the way Hashim Mubeen is accusing Salar for all that's happened--as though his daughter's totally innocent!' Tayyaba was all worked up again.

==Whatever it is, it's our son's fault--he'd not be in this mess if it weren't for his deeds,' said Sikandar flatly. ==Now you've got to find a way out of this.' ==It's not as bad as you think,' said Tayyaba.' The police or Hashim Mubeen have no evidence as yet to frame Salar--and without evidence, they can't do anything.'

==Have you thought about what happens when they get the evidence? What then?' Sikandar Usman retorted.

==You are talking of possibilities--—what ifs --but it has not happened and maybe, it won't either.' Sikandar pondered over this.

==If he has deceived us to this extent then perhaps another aspect of his deceit could be his not being in touch with the girl. Perhaps, he is in touch with her...'

==Perhaps--then what do we do?'

==If I speak to him, it will be like hitting my head against a wall--he'll lie to me again, He's an expert liar,' Sikandar's voice was filled with loathing. ==There are a few more months to go, to complete his BBA, and then I'll send him abroad. At least that will take care of our fears of what Hashim Mubeen can do to him,' Sikandar pulled on his cigarette.

==But you've forgetting something, Sikandar,' said Tayyaba seriously, after a short silence.

==What's that?' Sikandar sat up.

==Salar's secret marriage with Imama: you have to do whatever needs to be done about it.'

==What else can one do except file for divorce?' Sikandar spoke with finality.

==When he's not ready to accept the marriage, will he be ready to divorce her?'

==When I show him the proof, he has no choice but to accept it.'

==And what if he accepts that he married her but refuses to divorce her?' ==We will have to find a way out—whether he divorces her of his own will or we force him to do so—I will put an end to this matter. Marriages like this are nothing but a permanent problem. This situation has to be ended once and for all--if not, I have decided to disinherit him completely.'

Hasan was at one of the Islamabad hotels when his father called him, asking him to get home immediately. His tone was unusual, but Hasan did not pay heed. However, when he reached home shortly afterwards, he was shocked to see Sikandar Usman's car on the porch. He could recognize all of Salar's cars by their make and registration numbers.

__Sikandar Uncle has no proof of my involvement in this business, so I needn't worry. He must have come because I'm Salar's friend and I could answer some of his questions. I'll do that very calmly and refute any allegations--my anxiety may make me suspect in my father's eyes so I must not reveal anything when I meet Sikandar Uncle.

Hasan had it all thought out and planned. He walked into the study, confident and composed. His father, Qasim Faruqi and Sikandar were having coffee. Hasan saw that their faces reflected unusual concern and seriousness.

__How are you, Uncle Sikandar? You've come to our place after a long time.' Sikandar and Qasim maintained their silence--there was no response to Hasan's cheery greeting, but he carried on casually. Sikandar Usman looked him up and down.

__Sit down,' Qasim said tersely. __Sikandar has some questions for you: you must answer correctly. If you lie then Sikandar has my permission to take you to the police. As far as I'm concerned, you can go to hell--I'm not going to do anything to save you.' Qasim Faruqi had come to the point immediately.

__What are you talking about, Papa? I don't get it.' Hasan tried to act surprised, but his heart was racing. The situation was not as straightforward as he imagined.

__Don't try to be overly smart,' his father rebuked him,' Sikandar, ask him whatever you want to—I'll see how he dares to lie.'

__Did you attend Salar's marriage with Imama?'

__Uncle—what marriage? Whose marriage?' Hasan behaved as if he was surprised.

__The same wedding that took place in my house, in my absence, for which papers were sent to Imama.'

__Uncle, please! You are accusing me. I do visit your house but I don't know anything about Salar's wedding. As far as I know, he has not done any such thing. I don't even know the girl you're naming....possibly Salar is involved with some girl, but I don't know about it—he doesn't tell me everything.'

Sikandar Usman and Qasim Faruqi heard him in silence. When he stopped speaking Sikandar Usman picked up an envelope lying on the table before him and drew out some papers. Hasan's face went white--it was Imama and Salar's nikahnama, the marriage document.

==Look at this carefully—these are your signatures, aren't they?' Sikandar asked coldly. Had Hasan not been questioned before his father, he would have flatly denied it, but how he was trapped. ==It is my signature, but I did not sign this,' Hasan stuttered.

==Then who did this—Salar, or some spirit on your behalf?' Qasim asked, his tone dripping sarcasm.

Hasan was speechless; he nervously looked at his inquisitors. He had never suspected, for even a moment, that Sikandar Usman would thus place the nikah papers before him. He didn't even know where he got those papers--from Salar or...all his cleverness and cunning had got him nowhere.

==So you'll not admit that Salar and Imama's nikah took place in your presence?' Qasim Faruqi interrogated Hasan.

==Papa, I had no hand in this; it was all Salar's obstinacy. He forced me.' Hasan suddenly decided to confess. There was no point in hiding anything and lying would only weaken his position.

==I tried to talk him out of this but...' Qasim Faruqi cut him short. ==This is no time to explain or justify—that's not what you've been called for. Just tell me where Salar has kept the girl.'

==Papa, I know nothing about that,' Hasan said at once.

==You are lying again.'

==I swear, Papa, I really do not know anything. He dropped her off in Lahore.'

==I don't believe this pack of lies--just tell me the truth.' His father spoke sharply.

==I am not lying, Papa' Hasan protested.

==Where in Lahore did he drop her?'

==On some road; she said she'd find her own way.'

==Do you think Sikandar and I are fools to believe that Salar would marry the girl, then drop her off on some road in Lahore? Don't try to fool us!' Qasim Faruqi was furious.

==I am telling you the truth. At least, that's what he told me. That he'd left her on some road in Lahore.'

==Didn't you ask him why he'd married her, if this is what he did?'

==Papa, he married her to help her out. Her family was forcing her to marry someone else against her will. She contacted Salar and asked for his help—he agreed. She wanted Salar to marry her temporarily, so that she could use the nikah papers to refuse her parents if they insisted on forcing her.'

Hasan could no longer cover up the reality and he decided to tell them whatever he knew.

== If she was held against her will by her parents, her release could be arranged through a bailiff. There's no question of a love marriage here because she's in love with someone else. If you read the nikahnama carefully, you'll see that she has retained the right of divorce, so that she can file for it without even getting in touch with Salar.'

== Is that it—or is there any more?' Qasim Faruqi asked Hasan, who just looked at them quietly, without a word.

== I do not believe a word of this nice little story, you've made up. I'm not a child to swallow it. You have to help Sikandar Usman reach Imama,' Qasim said in a final tone.

== How can I do that, Papa, when I know nothing of her whereabouts?'

== How? You have to find out. All I have to say is that you have to find her.' == Papa, please believe that I know nothing about Imama. I had nothing to do with this except to help Salar with the nikah!'

== You were close enough to Salar to help him with this secret marriage, and now you say you don't know where his wife is after she ran away from home? I cannot buy this yarn, Hasan.' Qasim spoke curtly. == Even if you don't know, you will have to find out where she is. Ask Salar, he'll tell you.'

== He keeps a lot of things from me, Papa.'

== I'm not concerned with other things he may or may not tell you; all I want to know is where Imama is. Do whatever you need to, but find out where she is. And do this without letting Salar know that Sikandar has knowledge of this secret wedding or that he has met you in this regard. If I learn that

Salar has been told about this, then just remember what I'll do with you.

I've given Sikandar Usman permission to tell Hashim Mubeen about you. Then it's up to Hashim to deal with you—directly or through the police. It's your choice now either to keep up your friendship with Salar or live in this house.'

Qasim Faruqi spoke with finality and determination.

== Papa, I will try somehow to find out about Imama. I'll talk to Salar without letting him know that Sikandar Uncle has forced this out from me,' Hasan said mechanically, parrot-like. This time he was trapped beyond his wildest dreams.

Salar stayed house-bound for a few days but then he insisted and got his own way. He resumed classes at college. Hashim Mubeen and his family had moved heaven and earth in search of Imama. Although they tried to keep the whole business under wraps, Sikandar came to know of it through the police and the servants. The Mubeens were also trying to contact Imama's friends in Lahore.

Then Salar saw a 'wanted' notice in the newspaper, offering a handsome reward for information on the whereabouts of one 'Javaid'. Salar was familiar with the name as it was given by Hasan as Imama's husband to the lawyer. Surely, this advertisement had been placed by Imama's family, although the contact member given was not theirs. Salar was certain that the police had reached the lawyer who could not have provided 'Javaid's' details. Only Salar, the lawyer and Hasan knew that there was no real person by the name of Javaid Babar. Salar was a little relieved that he had succeeded in misleading Hashim Mubeen to some extent.

Throughout this period, Salar waited for Imama's call. He called her several times on her cell phone but it was always switched off. He was puzzled as to where she could be--Hasan's frequent queries about her added to this anxiety.

At times he would react. 'How do I know where she is or why she doesn't get in touch? I feel you are more interested in her than I am.' He had no idea that Hasan's queries and anxiety were the result of pressure. Hasan was under a lot of stress, Salar believed Imama might have met Jalal and even married him, although he had lied to her about Jalal's marriage--but he was certain she didn't believe him. She must have approached Jalal again. Salar wanted her to contact Jalal or meet him, if only once. He wanted to know if Imama was with Jalal, but there was no way of finding out.

Sikandar Usman had Salar under watch round the clock and he was aware that he wasn't the only one keeping a watch on him; Hashim Mubeen Ahmed was doing the same. If Salar had decided to go to Lahore, his father would not let him go--and even if he did allow Salar, he would probably accompany him, which Salar did not want. As time passed, Salar was losing interest in this affair. Thinking back, he considered his actions and the adventure that cost him dearly to be foolhardy. Sikandar and Tayyaba were always home and he had to seek their permission to go out.

Hasan hardly visited him. Salar was thoroughly bored with this situation.

about 6 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

That night he was surfing the net when he got a call on his cell phone. He picked it up casually and looked at the incoming call number—a bolt of lightning seemed to hit him. It was Imama, calling from the cell phone he had given her. 'So you remembered me after all.' And he whistled under his breath. Suddenly, he was wide awake, fresh—the ennui that had plagued him a while ago had vanished.

== I was almost convinced you'd never call me: what took you so long?' he said.

== 'I've been wanting to ring you up for quite a while, but just couldn't get round to it,' Imama replied.

== 'Why? What was the problem? You had my cell phone.' == 'There was a problem.' Her response was brief.

== 'Where are you now?' Salar asked, somewhat mystified.

== 'Don't be childish, Salar. You know I'm not going to tell you, so why do you ask? Anyway, how's my family?'

Salar was taken aback by this unexpected question.

== 'Oh, they're fine—very happy, enjoying themselves,' he mocked her. == 'You are a very good daughter indeed. You're so thoughtful about your family even after running away from home. How nice!'

There was silence on the other side. Then she said == 'How's Waseem?' == 'I can't say, but he must be okay, very good, I think. How can he be bad?' he continued in the same taunting tone.

== 'I hope they didn't discover that you'd helped me.' Salar found Imama's tone rather odd.

== 'Discover? Imama, my dear, the police turned up at my door the same day that I got home after dropping you off in Lahore.' Salar's manner was derisive. == 'Your father filed an FIR against me on charges of your abduction.' He laughed. == 'Just imagine, can a person like me kidnap anyone, least of all you, who'd shoot anybody, any where, any time.'

He continued, == 'Your father's trying his best to land me in jail for the rest of my life, but I suppose I'm lucky to have escaped that fate. I'm being guarded on way from home to college and back. I get dumb calls. All sorts of things are happening. What can I say except that your family is making our life miserable.'

== 'I didn't think they'd get to you,' Imama said ruefully. == 'I thought they'd never suspect you. I am sorry to have put you through all these problems. My intention was to first secure my position and then to call you. I am really safe now.'

Salar was listening to her with curious interest.

== 'I'm not going to use your mobile any more and I want to send it back, but it's not possible now. And I'll also send you some money to cover all the expenses you incurred on my behalf.'

== 'No need to send any money...and you can also keep the mobile and use it; I have another one,' Salar interrupted her.

__No, I won't because I don't need to use your mobile.' After a pause, she said, __I want you to send me the divorce papers and along with them a copy of the nikahnama that I couldn't take from you earlier.'

__Where do I send these?' asked Salar in response to her demand. It suddenly struck him that she was asking for a divorce, she wanted the right he had granted her in the nikahnama as she had asked.

__You can send them to that lawyer you had hired, and give me his name and address so that I can get them from him.'

Salar smiled: she was being very cautious. __But I have no direct contact with him nor do I know him, so how can I send the papers to him?' __Then send them through that friend of yours who arranged for the lawyer.' She was determined not to reveal her whereabouts.

__Why do you want a divorce?' Salar was in full swing. There was silence at the other end: she had not expected this question. __Why do I want a divorce? This is a very odd question since it was agreed that I will divorce you,' she replied, a little surprised.

__But that was then—a long time ago—and I don't want to divorce you now,' he said seriously. He could gauge that the ground literally shifted under her feet.

__What are you saying?'

__I'm telling you, dear Imama, that I don't want to divorce you, and I will not.' He gave her another shock.

__You have already given me the right of divorce,' she retorted.

__When? Where? How?' Salar spoke calmly.

__You should remember that before the nikah I had told you clearly that I want the divorce clause retained in the nikahnama. Even if you don't divorce me, I can file for divorce,' she claimed.

__You could have exercised this right if I had given it to you—but I did not. You saw the nikah papers when you signed them; there's no such clause there. Anyway, you must have seen them; otherwise you wouldn't be talking to me about divorce.'

There was silence again on her part. He had taken a chance, a shot in the dark, but it was on target. Imama had certainly not bothered to read the papers carefully before signing them. Salar was getting a kick out of this situation. __You have deceived me,' he heard her say after some time.

__Yes, just as you deceived me by pulling a gun on me,' he retorted. __I think you and I can have a great life together. We both have so many shortcomings and failings that we complement each other quite nicely.' His tone was sober once again. __Spend a lifetime together, Salar, and that

too with you? Impossible! _I should quote Napoleon that the word —impossible does not exist in my dictionary. Or perhaps request you to join me in making the impossible, possible.’ He was joking again.

_You have done me countless favors, Salar...Do this last favor and divorce me.’

_No. I am tired of being kind to you and cannot do it any more, and especially this favor that you ask, it’s not possible.’ He spoke seriously. _I’m not your type, Salar. Our lifestyles are very different; otherwise, I could have considered your offer, but in the present situation it cannot be. Please divorce me,’ she said in a soft, almost pleading voice. Salar felt like laughing out. _If you promise to consider my offer, I’ll change my lifestyle,’ he said gently. _Try to understand...we have nothing in common: we are totally different, our philosophy of life is different. We can’t live together.’ Imama was exasperated.

_No, I don’t think so. Our philosophy of life is actually very similar. You need not worry about this—even if there are some differences, they can be overcome with minor adjustments.’ He spoke as if talking to his best friend. _Otherwise too, what do I lack? I may not be as handsome as your exfiancé, but I’m not as plain as Jalal Ansar. You know my family fairly well, and you have no idea how bright my professional future will be. I’m better than Jalal in every way.’ Salar stressed his words. His eyes were sparkling and a naughty smile played on his lips as he teased Imama who was irritated by his comments. _No one can replace Jalal in my eyes—least of all, you—never.’ Her voice reflected her annoyance.

_Why?’ he asked with mock innocence.

_I don’t like you! Why can’t you understand this? If you don’t divorce me, I’ll go to court,’ she threatened him.

Salar burst out laughing. _You are most welcome! You can do so whenever you wish. What better place can there be to meet and talk face to face? It will be such fun!’ He was enjoying this sparring.

_You’d better remember that not only I, but your parents will be there too, in the court,’ he warned her.

_Salar, there are enough problems in my life and these are growing by the day. At least you don’t have to add to them.’ Imama spoke sadly, despairingly, but Salar was gloating at her plight.

_Adding to your problems? My dear, I am wasting away trying to make your life easy, sympathizing with you. Just consider what a secure and happy life you can have with me,’ he pretended to be serious.

Imama’s response was brutally honest. _You know why I put myself through all this, Salar. Do you believe that I will agree to spend my life with a man who has indulged in all the cardinal sins our dear Prophet (PBUH) has condemned? Good women are the partners of good men, and

evil women are for evil men. I may have done wrong things in my life, but I am not so bad that someone like you should be part of my life. I could not marry Jalal, but I will certainly not spend my life with you.’ Imama spoke bitterly.

‘Perhaps, that’s why Jalal did not marry you—because for good men there are good women, not someone like you.’

Salar’s words were like cold steel. The silence on the other side was interminable—till Salar queried ‘Hello? Are you listening?’

A choked voice responded. ‘Salar, divorce me!’ Her anguish gave him a strange thrill.

‘Then you can go to court for it, as you said you would,’ he concluded and heard the phone being switched off.

In these last few months, Hasan claimed he had tried his best to worm some information about Imama from Salar but without any success. He refused to believe that there was no contact between them, but had failed in his attempts to call Imama on her mobile.

Sikandar had told Salar to apply for admission to various universities in the USA—he knew that Salar’s academic record would ensure his entry to any one of the best institutions.

Imama did not call Salar again, although he thought she would. Then he would tell her that he had already ceded her the right of divorce in the nikah papers and would send them to her. He’d confess he was just joking. But she did not contact him, nor did he bother to see the marriage documents again. Had he done so, he would have learnt much before that his nikaahnama was missing.

The day he got home after his last examination, he found Sikandar waiting for him. ‘You’d better pack your stuff. You’re leaving tonight for the US, to stay with Kamran.’

‘Why, Papa? This is very sudden! Is everything OK?’ ‘Yes—everything except you,’ his father retorted acidly.

‘Then why are you packing me off like this?’

‘I’ll tell you on the way to the airport tonight. Now go and do your packing.’ ‘Papa, please tell me why you’re doing this? It’s all so sudden,’ Salar protested weakly.

‘Didn’t I say I’ll tell you? Now go and pack up or else I’ll leave you emptyhanded at the airport,’ Sikandar threatened. Salar watched him quietly, then turned towards his room.

His mind was in a turmoil as he put his belongings together. Why had Sikandar Usman taken such a sudden decision? A thought struck him like a bolt and he began to rummage through the papers in his desk drawer. He could not find the nikah papers—where were they? He could now understand his father’s strategy. He regretted his own carelessness in leaving those papers lying around. They were in possession of no one other than his father, because no one else would dare to go through his belongings, except Sikandar.

Salar felt no more confusion, no more anxiety. He quietly packed his bags. All he thought of was what his father would tell him on the way to the airport. When they left that night, only father and son were together; Tyaba did not accompany them. They spoke dryly, without emotion. Salar too did not raise any queries. As they got to the airport, Sikandar took a sheet of blank paper from his briefcase and giving Salar a pen, said, ‘Sign here.’ ‘What’s this?’ Salar looked at the blank paper with surprise.

‘Just sign it. Don’t ask questions.’ His father’s tone was brusque. Without another word, Salar signed the paper. Sikandar folded it and put it away in his briefcase. He then turned to his son.

‘After whatever you have done, there’s not much point in talking to you. You have lied to me constantly, time after time, thinking that I’ll never get to know the truth. You know, instead of sending you off to America, I feel like handing you over to Hashim Mubeen so that you realize what a fool you have been. But my problem is that I am your father—and I have to save you. You have been taking advantage of my weakness, but no more. I am going to hand over the divorce documents to Imama and if you ever contact her again or even try to do so, you will regret it, I promise. You have no clue of what I’ll do then! You have created enough problems for us, Salar, and this has to stop now—do you understand?’

Sikandar was furious and upset. Instead of replying, Salar kept looking out of the window. He seemed strangely content and carefree: Sikandar was incensed. Here was his son who had an IQ of 150+, but anyone looking at him would have wondered if he had any IQ at all.

=====

END OF CHAPTER FOUR

Chapter 5

The next few months spent in the US were the most trying days of Salar's life. Earlier too he had been to the US and Europe on holiday with his family; but the way Sikandar had packed him off now not only infuriated Salar but also created many problems for him. His friends who had completed A levels with him were enrolled and studying in various universities across the US. Likewise, his cousins and other relatives, and even his own siblings, were in different cities there. He wasn't all that attached to his family nor was he homesick, but the sudden forced move left him restless and miserable.

His cousin, Kamran, would be away at college all day and would be busy with his assignments when he got home. Salar, on the other hand, was cooped up in the apartment, either watching movies or flipping television channels. When he tired of this, he would simply roam around town to entertain himself. During those days in New York, Salar had thoroughly explored the environs where Kamran lived. In the city, there was not a night club, discotheque, pub, bar, theatre, cinema, museum or art gallery that Salar had not been to.

His academic record was such that all three Ivy League universities he had applied to for admission had issued acceptance letters without even waiting for his BBA results. These universities were those where none of his relatives were enrolled, nor any other friend, and Salar had deliberately applied to them to be away from constant scrutiny. There was no one he knew there who would be sending back reports to Sikandar Usman whose other children had not been given admission to an Ivy League institution. Sikandar Usman should have been proud of Salar's achievement; instead he and his wife were more apprehensive about being unable to tag Salar, who had opted to join Yale. In fact, none of Sikandar Usman's friends or relatives were in New Haven.

Salar's academic record also earned him a merit scholarship at the university. Unlike his brothers, who had taken lodging at hostels, Salar insisted on living in an apartment. Sikandar was not in favor of this move, but the scholarship left Salar with enough funds to rent an apartment. As for his educational expenses, Sikandar had already transferred a handsome amount to Salar's account. Although his youngest son was also availing of a scholarship, yet Sikandar obliged Salar's demands. It seemed that he was destined to do for Salar all that he had not done for anyone else, and that Salar was destined to try his father and test his patience in every way possible. If the other children went east, Salar would go west; whatever the others did, he would do the opposite, and adamantly. And Sikandar Usman could do nothing except work himself up into a state.

Before Salar left for New Haven, Sikandar and Tayyaba flew over from Pakistan especially to spend time with him. For days, they counseled him, and reasoned with him: he heard them out, but did not pay any attention. He had become used to these sermons and advice and now all

counseling was like water off a duck's back, as far as he was concerned. As for Sikandar and Tyaba, they were not only very worried but actually feared for Salar as they flew for Pakistan.

Salar had selected Finance as his major for MBA. Shortly after joining classes at Yale, his extraordinary abilities began to be noticed. No doubt that the institutions he had attended in Pakistan were the topmost in academic terms, but the education offered there was a piece of cake for him. At Yale, however, the competition was tough; the presence of the cream of bright students was a challenge. But there too, Salar made his presence felt.

He was exceptionally gifted intellectually, but his attitude also contributed to his profile. The typical Asian warmth and friendliness were noticeably absent, as were courtesy and affability, in his personality. He was not overawed by the environment, as Asian students tend to be by American or European universities. He had studied in the best institutions since childhood and had no complexes about his background. He had been taught mostly by foreign teachers, and he knew that their knowledge was not unlimited. If Yale had given him a scholarship, it was not doing him a special favor. The other Ivy League universities he had applied to would also have offered him a scholarship – and even if that did not happen, his parents could afford to send him to the best institution of his choice. Besides, despite his family background and social status, Salar had a bitter side to his withdrawn nature, and he made no effort to put on an affable front to please people. The image was completed by his intimidating IQ level.

He managed to draw the attention of his colleagues and professors in the first few weeks. This was nothing new--he had been doing this since his early years in school. He did not waste time indulging in pointless arguments with his teachers, but his questions were such that the teachers were often at a loss for an immediate response. If the answer was unsatisfactory, he would not argue, but accept it quietly without voicing his opinion. He debated only with those professors from whom he knew he could learn something, or else those whose knowledge was neither traditional nor academic.

Salar did not find studies difficult at Yale, nor did he spend all his time with his books. Though it was not as easy as before, but he did find time to pursue his interests.

Nor was he a victim of homesickness and did not mope and yearn for Pakistan all the time. He made no special effort to search for Pakistanis in the community there, and neither did he miss the home culture and activities. But, as time passed, he got to interact with a number of Pakistanis present there. He also had membership to various societies, clubs and associations in the university.

After class, he would often spend, rather squander, time aimlessly, especially on the weekends. His life was divided, it seemed, between clubs, discotheques, cinema, and theatre. He missed no new film, play, concert or instrumental performance, and he had all the details about every new restaurant--big or small, pricey or cheap.

And in the midst of all this activity was the adventure which had been the cause of his being in the US now. Salar did not attempt to find out how, or when, or from whom Sikandar had learnt about the secret marriage; but he made some guesses as to how it had happened. He did not suspect his friend Hasan or the maid Nasira. It must have been Imama herself who revealed all the detail—which was why she did not contact Salar again. It must be after speaking to Imama that Salar rummaged through Salar’s room and found the nikah papers.

But when did all this happen? This question bothered Salar as he was unable to find a logical answer to it.

Thinking back on this chain of events also evoked a feeling of regret:

‘Why did I help her? When she contacted me, I should have called up Waseem, or his parents, or my own parents and informed them about it. Or, I should have told them about Jalal, or else, not listened to her at all, nor married her, nor helped her run away from home.’

At times, Salar felt he had let himself be used by her, like a helpless child—why this obsequious surrender, this obedience, he wondered, especially when there was no bond between them, nor was he obliged to help her.

More than an adventure, this whole business seemed to be sheer foolhardiness. Like a psychiatrist, he tried to psychoanalyze his attitude towards Imama.

‘With the passage of time, she’ll be out of my system, completely. And even if she isn’t, what difference will it make,’ he consoled himself.

As the days passed, Salar’s circle of friends widened and among them was a boy named Saad. He was from Karachi and, like Salar, he came from an affluent family; but unlike Salar, Saad’s family was quite religious. This was Salar’s perception. Saad had a fantastic sense of humor and was also very handsome. A friend in New Haven had introduced them and Saad was the first to extend the hand of friendship. Salar, however, was reluctant initially, as he felt they had little in common.

Saad was enrolled in the M.Phil. programme and was also working his way through university. His appearance—sporting a luxuriant beard— reflected his emotional attachment to his faith. He was also very knowledgeable about religion. For the first time in his life, Salar had befriended someone who was inclined towards religion.

Saad prayed regularly and would also exhort others to do likewise. He had membership in several clubs and organizations, where he was quite active. Unlike Salar, Saad had no relatives

in the US except for a distant uncle who lived in another state. Maybe, it was to dispel his solitude that he was so social. Saad was the youngest among his siblings; perhaps it was the special affection for the youngest that persuaded his parents to send him abroad for higher education. Otherwise, he too would have joined the family business after graduation, as his brothers had done.

Saad also lived in a rented apartment, but not alone--he shared it with four others. There were two Arabs, a Bangladeshi and a Pakistani, besides himself. They were all students.

Saad became quite friendly with Salar soon after their first encounter. When Salar's friend Jeff told Saad about Salar's academic achievements, he couldn't help but be impressed. Looking at Saad, especially at his bearded face, Salar was always reminded of Jalal. There seemed to be striking resemblance between them. Like his other friends, Saad would also be at Salar's over the weekend.

==You're a Muslim, but you don't have clue about religion,' he once told Salar.

==And you're too religious,' retorted Salar.

==What do you mean?'

==The way you pray five times a day and keep talking about Islam--it's overdoing it, you know.' Salar was very candid. ==Don't you get tired of praying all the time?'

==It's mandatory. Allah commands us to worship Him, to remember Him,' Saad said emphatically. Salar yawned lazily. ==You should pray too; after all, you're a Muslim.' ==I know, I know. Does my not praying make me a nonMuslim?' Salar's tone was sarcastic.

==A Muslim only in name – is that the way you want to be?'

==Saad, please don't get into this senseless argument. I know you're into religion, but I'm not. So it is better we respect each other's views and feelings instead of forcing them down each other's throats. I'm not asking you to give up namaz, so don't insist on my praying.' Salar spoke so bluntly that he silenced Saad.

A few days later Saad visited Salar at his apartment. Salar went to the kitchen to get something for him. Saad followed and casually opened the fridge as they were conversing. He happened to see a burger that Salar had picked up the night before from a fast food outlet, and took it out.

==Put it back--you can't have that,' Salar reacted.

==Why not?' Saad was going to put it in the microwave.

==Because it has pork in it,' said Salar quite casually.

Saad stopped in his tracks. ==Don't be funny.'

==What's so funny?' Salar said, surprised, as Saad almost flung the plate on the counter.

==You eat pork?'

==I don't eat pork. I eat this burger as I like it,' he replied, lighting the burner.

==Do you know it's forbidden--haram?'

==Yes.'

==And yet you eat it?'

==Don't start off with your preaching. I eat not only pork but all kinds of meat, he replied,' in a devil-may-care tone.

==I can't believe it.'

==Well--what's so unbelievable about it? It's something to be eaten,' said Salar as he took the milk bottle from the fridge.

Saad was incensed. ==Everything is not meant to be eaten. OK, so you're not very religious, but you are a Muslim and Muslims know that pork is forbidden for Muslims.'

Salar listened quietly as he went about his work

==Don't make anything for me--I won't have it,' Saad told him as he left the kitchen.

==Why? What happened?' Salar looked at Saad with some surprise, as he was washing his hands vigorously.

Saad did not reply, but continued to wash his hands as he recited the kalima. Salar, teeth clenched angrily, gave him a piercing look.

==I cannot eat anything kept in your fridge. In fact, I cannot eat out of your plates if you eat pork and God knows what else. Let's go out somewhere for a bite.'

==That's very insulting.' Salar was really annoyed.

==No – there's nothing insulting. It's just that I do not want to eat haram stuff, and you are not used to being careful about such matters,' Saad said very calmly.

==I didn't try to make you eat pork. I know you don't eat it so I told you not to have that burger. But you have some sort of phobia, it seems—you're reacting as if I keep pet pigs in my apartment and live with them.' ==Come, let's go out.' Saad tried to pacify him.

==If we eat out, I'm not going to foot the bill--you will,' said Salar.

==Fine, I'll pay. No problem.' Saad was somewhat relieved.

‘And next time you visit me, bring your own food.’ Salar was piqued. ‘Will do,’ replied Saad.

That weekend he was by the lake where many people like him were strolling around or sitting on the benches by the shore. Mindlessly, he looked around as he took a bite of ice cream. His attention was caught by a three-year-old kicking and chasing a football. The child’s mother, in hijab, stood there watching him fondly. Salar, without realizing it, was staring at her. The boy was moving towards Salar, following the ball which landed at Salar’s feet. Salar stopped it with his foot, but held it there. The boy came running up and stopped short: Salar didn’t let go of the ball—he looked at the boy’s mother, expecting her to come up. She did, somewhat puzzled by Salar’s reaction.

‘Let go of the football.’ She spoke in a polite but firm tone. Salar gave the ball a strong kick, sending it flying into the distance. He then looked at her very calmly. Her face had an angry blush; she said something under her breath and turned round, following her son who had run after the ball. Salar didn’t hear what she said, but it couldn’t have been very complimentary. Salar was not very proud of his behavior but he soon realized the reason behind it—the girl looked very much like Imama. She was tall and slim, wearing a long black coat and a black hijab. Her build, her pale complexion and dark eyes were just like Imama’s. Imama did not wear a hijab though— she would swathe herself in a voluminous chadar. Looking at this girl, he was reminded of Imama and in an involuntary way, by disregarding her he was not doing her bidding and it made him feel good—but she wasn’t Imama.

‘What’s the matter with me? To be doing this...’ he thought. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket, lit it and putting it to his lips he fixed his gaze on that girl once again. He was oblivious to everything else but her.

That night he thought about Imama for a long time—about her and Jalal. He was convinced that they were married by now because, on getting the divorce papers from Sikandar. Even though Salar knew that despite his persuading him, Jalal was not willing to marry Imama, nevertheless, he thought that once Imama turned up at his threshold, Jalal would not be able to refuse her. She would have coaxed and cajoled him into it.

Imama was really beautiful: Jalal was no match for her. Her family was among the richest and most powerful families in the country. It would have to be a fool who despite his status, like Jalal, would reject such a profitable proposition. Or perhaps, he really was in love with her.

Whatever it was, Salar was certain that they had got married and were in hiding somewhere, away from Hashim Mubeen's clutches—or perhaps, he had managed to track them down.

‘I really should find out about her,’ he thought, but the very next minute, he was chiding himself. ‘For God's sake Salar—what the hell! What difference does it make if her father has reached her or not?’

But his sense of curiosity did not abate and he wondered why he had made no effort to find out if Imama's whereabouts had been discovered by her father.

about 6 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

‘I'm Venus Edward,’ said the girl, extending her hand. She approached him as he was taking a book from the library shelf.

‘Salar Sikandar,’ he replied, shaking hands with her.

I know—you don't need to introduce yourself,’ she replied warmly.

Salar didn't say that she didn't need to introduce herself: he knew all of his fifty classmates by name and by face. Moreover, he could recount a brief bio-data of each one of them without making a mistake. He could have stunned Venus by telling her that she was from New Jersey where she had worked in a beverage company for two years, and that she had a degree in marketing. She was at Yale for a second degree and she was at least five to six years older than Salar. Though he looked older because of his height and physique, but in reality he was the youngest in the class, and he was the only one who was studying for his MBA degree without having any work experience. All the others had some years of job experience, but divulging all this to Venus at this point was tantamount to raising her expectations.

‘If I should invite you for a cup of coffee?’ asked Venus.

‘Then I would accept your invitation,’ he replied.

She laughed. ‘Then let's go.’ Salar shrugged and replacing the book, followed her out.

They sat in the cafeteria and talked for nearly half an hour. That was the beginning of his acquaintance with Venus. Developing a relationship with any girl was no problem for Salar—he had been doing this very smoothly and this time it was made easier by Venus' making the first move.

Just after three or four meetings, he had invited Venus to spend the night at his flat and she readily agreed. They spent much time together wandering about after class and returned to his apartment in the late hours. Salar was in the kitchen fixing drinks for them; Venus was casually inspecting the apartment. Then she came and stood by the counter.

‘I'd thought that since you live alone, the place would be a mess. I must say, you've kept it very well. Is this the norm or have you tidied up the place especially for me?’

Salar placed her glass before her and replied, ‘This is how I live, in orderly style.’ He took a sip and putting down his glass moved up to her. She smiled at him as he put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her close. Then he froze as he caught sight of a pearl swinging on a gold chain round her neck. She always wore this but he had not seen it before as she was always clad in high-necked warm clothes because of the cold weather. That day she wore a deep-necked dress and a long coat which she took off inside the flat.

Salar’s expression changed as that pearl jolted him back to another pearl, around someone else’s neck, somewhere far in the past. To hands that were performing the ablutions and to fingers that moved from wrists to elbows...over the face, from eyes to the forehead and from the forehead to fingers sliding over the dark hair under the chadar.

The chain around Imama’s neck was short so that the pearl on it rested in the hollow of her throat; had the chain been longer, he wouldn’t have been able to see the pearl. That night she was wearing a close-necked qameez and a cardigan too but a chance look at that pearl seemed to have paralyzed him for a moment.

And what a time to remember her. He tried to avoid looking at the pearl—he did not want to spoil his evening with Venus. He tried to smile

back at her as she said, ‘I find your eyes so attractive.’

‘Your eyes are repulsive.’

A voice seemed to whip him; the smile vanished from his face. Pulling away his arms from around Venus, he moved back a few steps and picked up his glass from the counter. Venus was taken aback.

‘What happened?’ She asked, putting a hand on his shoulder in concern. Salar did not reply; he just swallowed his drink in one gulp. Venus tried to fathom his silence as she looked on anxiously. It took just a few moments to kill his interest in Venus: he didn’t know why her presence was suddenly so annoying. He had been dancing with her for the last two hours at a night club and was having a good time, and now, in a few minutes... Salar tried to shake it off and moved towards the kitchen sink to wash his glass. Venus brought him the other glass. She stood there, arms folded across her chest, watching him as he washed the glasses. Her looking on was bothering Salar.

‘I...I’m not feeling too good,’ he said to her as he put the glasses on the shelf. Venus was somewhat shocked—in other words, he was asking her to leave. Her expression changed: Salar’s attitude was insulting. She stared at him coldly, then picking up her handbag and coat, she stormed out slamming the door behind her. Salar sank on to the sofa, holding his head. There was no similarity whatsoever between Venus and Imama; even the pearls they wore around their necks were different. Yet the sight of that pearl swinging from the chain around Venus’ neck revived the memory of Imama with a sharp pang. Why? Why now? Why ever? He

was agitated by the thought. It had ruined an enjoyable evening. Suddenly, he picked up the crystal vase on the coffee table and, with all his might, hurled it against the wall.

After the weekend, he happened to run into Venus again, but his attitude was cold and brusque. This was the only way to nip their relationship in the bud. He began to be irritated and put off by any female/woman who reminded him of Imama in any way and Venus had joined the list. She had been hoping he would apologise for his behaviour and invite her again, but she was disappointed and badly hurt. This was her first affair at Yale.

During the next few months, he was terribly busy with his studies—so busy that he had no time to remember Imama or to try and find out what had happened to her. And this situation might have continued if he had not run into Jalal Ansar by chance.

Over the weekend, he had gone to Boston, where his uncle lived, to attend a cousin's wedding there. That evening, Salar went out with his cousin to a restaurant for dinner. His cousin had stepped out after placing the order and Salar was waiting to be served. Suddenly someone called out to him.

'Hello?' Salar turned around. 'Aren't you Salar?' the man asked. It was Jalal Ansar. For a minute, Salar couldn't place him. He looked different: he had shaved off his beard.

Salar stood up to shake hands with him, and the adventure of a year ago repeated itself in his memory. After the perfunctory greetings, Salar invited Jalal to join them for dinner.

'No, thank you—I'm in a bit of a rush. I came over to say hello when I caught sight of you,' said Jalal, glancing at his watch. 'How's Imama?' Jalal asked by way of conversation.

Salar thought he had not heard him correctly. 'Sorry?' he asked apologetically. Jalal repeated the question.

'I was asking about Imama—how is she?'

Salar looked at him, unblinking. Why was Jalal asking him about Imama?

'I don't know; you ought to know about her,' Salar replied, shrugging his shoulders quizzically.

'Why me?' Jalal was surprised.

'Because she's your wife.'

‘My wife?’ A jolt went through Jalal. ‘What are you saying? How can she be my wife when I had refused to marry her? You know that very well because you were the one, who came to talk to me about this a year ago,’ he reminded Salar. ‘In fact, I had asked you to marry her yourself.’ Salar looked at him uncertainly.

‘I approached you thinking that you may have married her,’ Jalal explained.

‘So you didn’t marry her?’ Salar queried.

‘No... I had already spoken to you. How was that possible when I had clearly refused? I came to know that she had left home and gone away, and I supposed she was with you. That’s why I came up when I saw you.’ ‘I have no idea where she is. I’ve been here for the last seven or eight months,’ Salar replied.

‘And I’ve been here last month,’ Jalal told him.

‘After meeting me, did she meet you or try to contact you?’ Salar was perturbed now.

‘No.’

‘How can that be...that she should go to Lahore and not try to reach you?’ Salar found it unbelievable.

‘What would she have achieved by contacting me?’

‘She left home for your sake. You should have gone to her.’

‘No, she didn’t run away from home for me. You know that very well. I had told her very clearly that I could not marry her, so please don’t say that she did it for me.’ Jalal’s tone had changed. ‘The whole affair was discussed with you.’

‘You mean to say that she really did not approach you again?’ ‘Why would I lie to you? And if she was with me, then why would I ask you about her? Any way, I’m getting late,’ Jalal said abruptly.

‘Can I have your contact number?’ asked Salar.

‘No. I don’t think that you and I have any need to keep in touch.’ Jalal’s response was blunt and candid. He turned around and left. Confused, Salar kept staring at Jalal as he walked away. It was unbelievable that she did not meet Jalal again. ‘Why? Did she really believe me that Jalal had married someone else?’ Salar remembered lying to her; but how could she have trusted Salar’s word when she herself had said that she did not believe him? His mind was in turmoil. He pulled up a chair and sat down again.

‘If she did not go to Jalal, then where did she go? Was there some other man in her life about whom she had kept it secret from me? But, no—she would have told me to contact the other guy. Even if she had not met Jalal immediately, she should have gone to him after she got

the nikah papers from Sikandar and got to know about her divorce rights. ‘ Salar wasn’t sure why he had spoken to her about Jalal’s make-believe wedding. Perhaps he wanted to make her anxious or to see what she’d do next, or maybe it was because he was fed up with her constant requests to go talk to Jalal. Whatever it was, Salar was sure that Imama would go to Jalal for help. But now he discovered that, contrary to his expectations, that was not what she did.

The waiter served their order. Salar’s cousin had also returned and they ate while they made small talk. But even as he was eating and speaking, Salar’s mind was lost in thought about Imama and Jalal. Her memory had come alive after many months.

‘Could she have gone back home?’ The thought struck Salar; his mind seemed to be stuck in this groove, ‘I’m sure she has...I talk to Papa and ask him—he would certainly know.’

Sikandar Usman was also in town for the family wedding. Late at night, when Salar found his father alone, he approached him.

‘Papa, has Imama returned home?’ he asked straightaway.

The unexpected question left Sikandar speechless for a while.

‘Why do you want to know?’ he asked sharply.

‘Just like that.’

‘There’s no need to think about her or wonder about her fate. It’s better that you should concentrate on your studies.’

‘Please answer my question!’

‘Why? What have you got to do with her?’ Sikandar’s temper flared.

‘I met her boyfriend today—the one she wanted to marry.’

‘So?’

‘So why didn’t they get married? He said that Imama never came to see him. I had expected that’s where she’d go when she went to Lahore.’ Sikandar interrupted him. ‘Whether she went to meet him or not, whether they got married or not—it’s none of your business. You do not need to get involved in this affair!’

‘Yes, I agree it’s none of my business but I want to know if she came to you. How did you get the divorce documents to her? I mean, through whom were they sent to her?’

‘Who told you that she’d contacted me?’

Salar was surprised by his father’s question. ‘I estimated that.’

‘She did not contact me at all and if she had, I would have informed

Hashim Mubeen about it.'

Salar kept looking at his father. 'I searched through your room and that's where I found the nikah papers,' Sikandar disclosed.

'When you made me come here, you said you'd send the divorce papers to Imama.'

'Yes, but that was in the situation of her getting in touch with me—and she didn't. Why are you so sure that she contacted me?' It was Sikandar's turn to query.

Salar was quiet for a few moments. Then he asked, 'Didn't the police find out anything about her?'

'No; if the police had discovered anything, she would have been home by now. They are still searching for her,' Sikandar answered him.

'This is certainly decided, Salar, that you will not get into another drama about Imama. You should not wrack your brain about where she is or how she is, because you have nothing to do with her. As soon as the police trace her, I'll hand over those papers to Hashim Mubeen so that you're free of this hassle.'

'Papa, did she really never call for me?' Salar asked, not really paying attention to Sikandar's earlier remarks.

'Did she ever call you?'

'She called just once, and then I came away here. Maybe, she called again and you're not telling me about it.'

'She did not. If she'd called I would have sorted out many issues regarding your marriage. I would have completed the divorce proceedings on your behalf.'

'BTW how would you do that?' Salar appeared very calm.

'I had taken your signature on a blank paper when you were leaving. I have had the divorce papers prepared,' Sikandar declared smugly. 'Fake document. I didn't know you were getting my signature to file for divorce.'

'Do you want to start this mess all over again?' Sikandar flared up. 'I'm not saying that I want to have a relationship with her. What I'm telling you is that you cannot sever this relationship on my behalf. This concerns me and I alone will deal with it.'

'You should be grateful that you're living here safe and secure. The family that you'd taken on is so powerful that they would pursue you to the grave. It's entirely possible that they're

keeping a watch on you here as well, waiting for you to feel confident enough to contact Imama so that they can bury you both alive.'

_'You're making a futile attempt to frighten me. First, I'm not ready to accept that they have me under observation out here and that too after such a long time. The other thing is that I am not in touch with Imama as I really have no clue of her whereabouts, so there's no question of any contact.'

_'Then why are you so conscious of her welfare? Let her be wherever and how ever she may be.' Sikandar was somewhat relieved.

_'Please check my cell phone bills. She has my cell phone; she may be using it to make calls.'

_'She's not using your cell phone. It's permanently switched off. The few calls she did make were to her college friends, and the police has already questioned them. In Lahore, Imama went to a friend's place but that girl was away in Peshawar and Imama left her friend's house before her return.

The police were unable to trace where she went.'

Salar watched his father with a piercing gaze, then said, 'Hasan told you all about me and her?'

Sikandar had no answer to this. Only Hasan knew about Imama's having Salar's cell phone. Sikandar could not claim this discovery as a result of searching Salar's room. talking to his father, Salar suspected Hasan of having spilled the beans because Sikandar Usman knew minute details of this entire affair that were only in Salar's or Hasan's knowledge—there was no third person involved. Since Salar had not divulged anything to his father, undoubtedly it was Hasan who had apprised him of all that had taken place.

_'What difference does it make, whether it was Hasan or whoever? It was not like I wouldn't have come to know—it was foolish on my part to have shrugged off Hashim Mubeen's accusations and to have believed you instead.'

Salar sat quietly, without a word, as Sikandar spoke, but his expression mirrored his displeasure and anger.

_'Now that I have pulled you out of this unpleasant situation, you should not do anything that will...'

Sikandar's tone was gentler, but before he could even complete a sentence, Salar suddenly got up and left the room.

The conversation with his father swirled round Salar's mind all night. For the first time, he felt a sense of remorse, unhappiness—he should have complied with Imama's request and divorced her at the outset. She would have gone to Jalal, married him and settled down. Despite the aversion he felt towards Imama, he had to admit he was at fault.

‘She didn't contact me again. She didn't go to court to file for divorce. Her family hasn't yet been able to locate her. She didn't go to Jalal Ansar either—so where ever did she disappear? Could it be that she'd met with a mishap?’

He pondered, deeply and seriously, about her; for the first time he thought about Imama without a hint of irritation or annoyance.

‘It can't be that she's living quietly somewhere as my wife, although she loathes me. Why has she made no effort to get in touch with anyone?’ Worrying thoughts kept surfacing. It had been more than a year since the marriage: had she really met with an accident? He kept mulling over what could possibly have happened to her, but after some time, his thoughts were back on their usual track.

‘Well...what can I do if something untoward has happened? She left home at her own risk—and anyone can be involved in such a situation. So why am I flogging myself when I have no further connection with her? Papa was right that I need not be concerned, especially about a girl who's ungrateful to the point of arrogance—she looks down on others and probably deserved what she got.’

Salar tried to shake her out of his mind. The repentant sobriety he had briefly experienced vanished: he wasn't particularly sorry now about such a trivial matter. He relaxed and closed his eyes—Imama was nowhere in his thoughts.

‘Have you ever been to Vandame?’ asked Mike as he left the university with Salar.

‘Once.’

‘How's it?’ ‘Not bad.’

‘We should go there on a weekend,’ suggested Mike.

‘Why?’

‘My girl friend's very interested in that place—she goes there often.’

==Then you should go with her,' remarked Salar.

==It'll be more fun if we all go,' replied Mike.

==Who's all?' asked Danish, joining in the conversation.

==All of our friends—you, me, Salar, Sethi and Saad,' Mike explained. ==Drop Saad—he'll freak out at the mention of nightclubs or deliver a long sermon,' Salar interrupted.

==Fine; then it's just us,' confirmed Danish.

==Let's invite Sandra too.' Salar suggested his girl friend's name. So they went to Vandame on a Saturday night and enjoyed themselves thoroughly. The next morning Salar slept late. He was fixing his lunch when Saad called.

==Have you just woken up?' he asked, hearing Salar's groggy voice. ==Must have stayed up till all hours, I suppose.'

==Yes—we'd gone out.' Salar deliberately avoided the word ==nightclub'.

==We meaning you and Sandra?'

==No, the whole group,' Salar said.

==The whole group? And you ditched me?' Saad was hurt and annoyed.

==We never thought of you.' Salar's plain talk really hit Saad. ==You're a creep, Salar, a very cheap guy...was Danish there too?' ==All of us, my dear, all...' Salar's tone was complacent, mocking.

==Why was I left behind?' Saad's annoyance increased.

==Because children aren't taken to such places...you're not mature enough,' teased Salar.

==I'll break your bones, you...! Then you'll know.'

==I'm not joking, yaar—we didn't ask you because you wouldn't have gone there anyway,' Salar clarified.

==Why? Were you going to hell that I'd refuse?'

==Well, you would have called it hell. We went to a night club—would you have come along?'

==Why not?'

Salar was taken aback by this response. ==You'd have come?' ==Of course!' Saad affirmed.

==And what would you do there? You don't drink, you don't dance—so what would you do? Lecture us on our folly?'

‘Not quite. So, I don’t drink or dance, but it would have been a nice outing. I’d have enjoyed it.’

‘Doesn’t Islam forbid such activities—going to such places?’ Salar’s tone was acerbic.

After a brief moment of silence, Saad replied, ‘I wouldn’t be doing anything wrong, just enjoying the change of scene.’

‘Okay, we’ll include you the next time we plan something. Had I known last night I’d have called you. We really had a good time.’

‘Anyway...what’s your programme today?’ Saad was somewhat pacified. They chatted a while, then rang off. about 6 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

‘What are your plans this weekend?’ Saad asked Salar. They were in the campus cafeteria.

‘I’m going to New York with Sandra.’

‘Why?’

‘Her brother’s getting married; she’s invited me.’ ‘When do you return?’ Saad asked.

‘Sunday night.’

‘Then let me have the keys to your apartment—I’ll spend the weekend there. I have to work on some assignments, and all four of my flat-mates will be home this weekend. I can’t get any work done,’ Saad elaborated.

‘Fine—you can stay there,’ shrugged Salar.

Salar planned to leave with Sandra on Friday night. It was by chance that some work held her back and they had to postpone their departure till the next morning. Sandra was living as a paying guest so Salar had no choice but to go home for the night. He had given one of his keys to Saad and carried the other with him.

He got home after 11 p.m. and let himself in using his own key as he didn’t want to disturb Saad’s studies. The lounge was empty but the lights were on. Salar felt uneasy—he wanted to get to his bedroom, but stopped at the door. Sounds of conversation and laughter came from the other side—Saad had female company.

Salar froze in his tracks. Saad was the only one in their group who, they believed, had no relationship with the opposite sex. This was not expected of someone as religious as he was. Salar turned back, uncertainly. He caught sight of a bottle and glasses on the living room table; used plates and cutlery lay on the kitchen counter.

Salar left the apartment without a minute’s pause, as quietly as he had entered. He could not believe what he had heard and seen—Saad with a woman. It was incredible. A man who did not touch forbidden meat or alcohol, who prayed five times a day, and who preached Islam all the

time—that he should do such a thing! The bottle and glasses indicated they'd been drinking: eating and drinking in the very home that Saad considered unclean.

Salar smiled wryly at the thought that someone out to prove himself a pious, practicing Muslim should turn out to be such a fraud. Here was Saad laying claim to being the only true Muslim in all of the USA and the other real Muslim was that girl Imama who went around wearing a tent-like chadar, but had no qualms about running away from home for 'love'. Salar was disgusted with these so-called 'true' believers and the extent of their lies and hypocrisy.

Salar grumbled to himself as he drove the car out of the parking lot. It was too late to go to Sandra's so he decided to go to Danish's. Danish was surprised to see him. Salar pretended he was bored on his own and so he had come to spend the night at Danish's place. Danish was satisfied with the explanation.

Saad had left when Salar got back on Sunday night, as planned. There was no evidence or indication of a woman's presence; the wine bottle had disappeared. Salar surveyed his apartment with a sardonic smile: everything was in place as he had left it. He then called up Saad. After a casual exchange of pleasantries, he said, 'So did your studies go well? All assignments completed?'

'Thanks, friend, I got to focus on my studies the last two days. The assignments are almost done too. How was your trip?' Saad asked. 'Very good...'

'How long did it take you? No problem with driving at night I hope?' Saad said perfunctorily.

'No we didn't travel at night.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning that we didn't leave on Friday night but on Saturday morning instead,' Salar explained.

'Did you stay the night at Sandra's?'

'No, at Danish's.'

'You may as well have come home.'

'I did.' Salar remarked as a matter of fact. There was complete silence at the other end. Salar laughed to himself: Saad must be shaken to hear this.

'You came...wh..when?' he stammered.

'Around 11:00 pm. You were busy with some girl and I didn't think it proper to disturb you. So I left.'

Salar could not have guessed Saad's state of shock—he was speechless. He never expected Salar to discover his activities and expose him this way.

‘Incidentally, you’ve never introduced me to your girl friend,’ Salar added. He imagined Saad struggling to breathe.

‘Just one of those things,’ Saad murmured. ‘I’ll introduce you. But don’t mention this to anyone,’ he added quickly.

‘Why would I? You needn’t worry.’ Salar could understand Saad’s mental and emotional state. He felt a little sorry for him too. Saad cut short their conversation. Salar had a fairly good idea of his embarrassment.

After this incident, Salar thought that Saad would not flaunt his faith, his religiosity and preaching—at least, not before him, but he was surprised to note that Saad hadn’t changed a whit. He continued to talk about religion with a passion, vigorously exhort people to follow Islamic precepts and to pray, and to check them on unIslamic practices. For hours on end Saad would talk about his love for Allah and Islam, and would support his views with quotes from the Quran or hadith and even become misty-eyed when doing so.

Apart from his own group, there were others too who were much impressed by Saad and his personality—they envied him for his love of God, an exemplary Muslim despite the passion of youth and the rush of life. Without a doubt, Saad knew how to speak and influence people—except Salar on whom Saad’s preaching had no effect whatsoever. Salar was not convinced that Saad’s bearded Islamic appearance was a mark of his faith, nor by his soft-spoken style or his respect and courtesy for others. Salar’s repulsion for religious people began with Imama; Jalal took this negative feeling further and Saad stretched it to the limit. Salar believed that all such apparently religious persons took hypocrisy to its height—in the garb of an outwardly religious appearance they were given more to immorality than those who did not profess piety. Coincidentally, these three people that he had come across confirmed his belief. Imama Hashim, a purdah-observing girl had ditched her fiancé for another man and under cover of night, ran away from home. Jalal Ansar, who sported a pious mien, professed his love of Prophet (pbuh) in his melodious naats, had an affair with a girl and dumped/rejected her, who cleverly compartmentalized the worldly and the spiritual for his own convenience. And Saad Zafar: Salar’s opinion of him was further lowered by another incident.

Saad came over to Salar’s one day when the latter was busy at his computer, working on an assignment. They got talking and then Salar had to step out for some groceries from a neighborhood store. Saad stayed back. It took Salar about half an hour to get home. When he returned, he found Saad busy chatting online. They talked for a while before Saad went away. Salar had lunch and then went online; as he was doing so, he checked the history that Saad had been accessing—there he found those websites and pages that Saad had opened up. They were all pornographic. Salar would not have been surprised nor objected if he himself or any of his other friends indulged in such viewing, but to find Saad visiting such sites was a shock. Saad fell in Salar’s opinion.

==Then what are your plans? Are you coming back to Pakistan?' Sikandar was speaking to Salar; he informed his son that he was going to Australia for a few weeks with Tayyba to attend a family wedding there.

==What would I do in Pakistan if you both are not going to be there?' Salar said forlornly.

==That's not on—meet your brother and sister. Anita misses you a lot,' replied Sikandar.

==Papa, I'm OK here; I'll spend my holidays here. There's no point in returning to Pakistan.'

==Then come along with us to Australia. Moiz is coming too.'

==I'm not crazy enough to just tag along with you to Australia,' Salar said wearily. ==Besides, there's hardly any understanding between Moiz and myself that you should tell me about his company.'

==Well, I won't compel you—you can stay there if you want to, but look after yourself. And Salar, you should not do anything that's wrong,' Sikandar warned him. Salar knew very well what his father meant by this allusion to ==anything wrong', but he was so used to it because Sikandar always said this at the end of every conversation. Salar would have been surprised if he didn't say so.

Salar cancelled his booking after speaking to Sikandar. Then he lay on his bed and staring at the ceiling, began to think about what to do when the university closed down for the vacations. ==I should go skiing somewhere or...go to another state,' he thought. ==Fine, I'll go to a travel agent tomorrow, after class and we'll work it out from there,' he decided.

The next day he finalized a skiing programme with a friend. He then informed Sikandar of his plan.

A day before the holidays began, Salar went to an Indian restaurant for dinner, and then after spending some time there, he went to a pub nearby where he had a few pegs of whisky. Around ten, he headed home. A sudden wave of nausea overcame him. He pulled the car to the side and stepped out. For a while he paced up and down on the patch of grass alongside the road. The cool breeze and the nip in the air seemed to help him feel better, but once again he had another bout of nausea, accompanied by pain in his chest and stomach.

He didn't know whether it was the food or the whisky that was responsible for this misery. His head was spinning and as he bent over, he suddenly threw up. He was still doubled over; even though his stomach had emptied out, he felt no better. When he tried to straighten up, his legs were weak and wobbly. He tried to turn back towards his car, but his head was in a daze and his sight was blurred as he tried to focus on his car. He made a futile attempt to move a few

steps, but he was too weak and fell to the ground. He tried to get up but he was sinking into the dark. Before he lost consciousness, he could hear someone shake him; someone was talking to him a loud voice—it seemed there was more than one person.

Salar tried to shake his head but he couldn't even move it. He tried to open his eyes, but they would not respond. He slipped away into complete darkness.

about 6 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

He had spent two days in the hospital. A couple, passing by the road where he had collapsed, saw him fall and brought him to the hospital. According to the doctors, Salar was the victim of food poisoning. He regained consciousness a few hours after being admitted, but despite wanting to return home, Salar was too weak to move. The next evening he felt better, but the doctor advised him to spend another night at the hospital. Salar got home on Sunday afternoon and the first thing he did was to call up the tour operator and cancel the skiing trip. He had planned to leave on Monday morning and to try once more to get Sandra to go with him. When he cancelled his plans, he didn't call up Sandra or any other of his friends.

Salar had a light sandwich and a cup of coffee for lunch; then he took a tranquilizer and went to sleep. The next day he woke up at eleven; he had a severe headache. He felt his forehead and his body burning with fever.

‘Oh, come on!’ he was quite exasperated. After spending two days being ill, he wasn't planning to spend the next two days likewise—but that's how it was going to be, he estimated.

He dragged himself out of bed, and without even washing up, headed for the kitchen to get a cup of coffee. Then he began to check the answer service on his phone for missed and recorded calls. There were a few from Saad who had been trying to speak to Salar before leaving for Pakistan, and was quite annoyed at Salar's disappearing without a word. There were calls from Sandra who believed that Salar had gone off skiing without meeting her; Sikandar and Kamran also called, thinking that Salar had gone off without a word. There were some calls from other friends and classmates who were leaving for home. They all asked Salar to call back—and he would have done so had he not been laid low. He could have called Saad, Sikandar and Kamran in Pakistan, but was in no mood to do so.

Salar finished his coffee with a couple of slices of bread; then he took his medicines and went and lay down again. He thought he'd be rested enough by the evening to bring down the fever.

His estimate proved to be totally wrong. When he awoke from the drug-induced sleep that evening, his body was burning with fever. His mouth and tongue were parched and his throat was dry and sore. His head and his entire body were racked with pain. Perhaps it was the pain that broke his sleep.

He lay prone, his hands gripping his forehead—he tried to ease the pain by massaging his temples with his thumbs, but to no avail. He gave up and just lay still, his face buried in his pillow. Salar was not aware of when he fell asleep again, trying to endure the pain that gripped his being. When he awoke again, the room was in complete darkness. It was night and not just his room, but the entire apartment was in the dark. He was in greater distress than before. He made a futile attempt to get up from his bed, but his body seemed to have no energy and he lay down. Once again, he felt himself slipping into a state between slumber and unconsciousness. He could hear himself groaning but he could not stop himself from the act. Despite the central heating, he was shivering uncontrollably—the blanket couldn't warm him nor was he able to get into warmer clothes. Once more, he felt the pain cut through his chest and stomach.

Salar's tortured cries intensified as waves of nausea washed over him. He tried to get up and go to the bathroom, but was too weak to move. He struggled and sat up but before he could get off the bed, he retched violently and threw up whatever he had had in the past few hours. Even in this semi-conscious condition he was aware of the filth on his clothes and blanket, but he found himself almost paralyzed, groaning and mumbling in a daze, senseless.

How long this state lasted he did not know, but he did recall that at one point he felt he was dying, and for the first time the thought of death terrified him. He wanted to somehow reach the phone, to call someone, but he was unable to move—the soaring fever had pinned him down. Eventually his fever subsided and, far into the night, he emerged from his near-comatose condition. He opened his eyes to the dark in the room—his body wasn't burning and the chill had left him, but the pain in his head and body lingered, albeit to a lesser degree. For a while he lay staring at the ceiling, then he searched for the switch and turned on the bedside lamp. The light—after the long spell of dark—blinded him, forcing his eyes shut. He felt his eyelids with his fingers: his eyes were swollen and they hurt. With an effort, he kept his eyes open and looked around the room, trying to remember what had befallen him. Short bursts of memory revived the events.

Salar was sickened at his state. Still sitting on his bed, he unbuttoned his shirt and flung it off. With feeble tottering steps, he got off the bed and pulling away the sheet and blanket, threw them on the floor. Still staggering, he went into the bathroom. He was shocked when he caught sight of himself in the mirror—his eyes were sunken in, dark shadows encircling them, his face was pale and his lips were dry and peeling. Anyone looking at him would believe he had been suffering from a long illness.

‘Have I grown such stubble in just twenty-four hours?’ he thought, as he ran his fingers over his face.

‘I didn’t look half as bad in the hospital after that food poisoning episode as in this one day’s fever,’ he mumbled incredulously as he scrutinized his appearance in the mirror. Filling the tub with warm water, he stepped in. He was surprised why, in spite of the fever, he had not immediately changed out of those filthy clothes, instead of just lying there.

Having bathed, he went into the kitchen—he was ravenously hungry. He made some noodles for himself. ‘I must go to the doctor tomorrow for a complete check-up,’ he decided as he ate. He felt light and better after the shower, but his whole being felt drained and weak.

He had switched on the TV while eating and flicked channels to find something suitable: there was a talk show going on. Salar stopped eating— spoon poised in mid-air, he stared at the TV in distraction and picked up the remote to change channels. Now he was looking carefully at the programs on each channel and the confusion on his face was growing.

‘What’s this?’

He remembered that it was Friday night when he had been taken ill and had collapsed on the road, and had been taken to the hospital. Saturday was spent there, and he had returned to his apartment on Sunday. After going to sleep on Sunday afternoon, he had awakened the next morning at eleven; that night he had fever which must have lasted till Tuesday, and it must be Tuesday night now. But the television channels told a different story—it was Saturday night and the next day would be Sunday.

Salar glanced at his watch, lying on the living room table and his mouth fell open in amazement. He put down the bowl of noodles; he couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw the date on his watch.

‘Does this mean that I’ve been ill for five days? Out of my senses for five whole days? How can that be? How is it possible?’ he muttered. ‘Five days is a long time—how come I did not even notice the passage of time? How could I just lie there, senseless, for five days?’

He stumbled towards his telephone to check the answering service— there were no calls.

‘Papa didn’t even call me...and neither did Saadwhat’s the matter with them? Didn’t they miss me?’ Salar was shocked to find there were no messages for him. He sat silently by the phone for a long time.

‘How can it be that Papa did not even think of me? None of my friends thought of me—how could they just abandon me?’ He realized for the first time that the thought made his hands tremble; it wasn’t weakness or debility, but then what was it that had shaken him so? He sat down on the sofa and tried to finish the noodles, but they were no longer appetizing. He felt as if he was chewing in pieces of soft rubber—he couldn’t eat any more. He was in a strange state

of uncertainty—had he really spent five days alone and that neither he nor anyone else had known what had befallen him?

He went into the bathroom again. His face was not as haggard after taking a shower, but the dark circles around his eyes and his overgrown stubble were still there. He stood there, staring at his reflection and touching the shadows under his eyes as though he didn't really believe what he saw. Suddenly, his hirsute face was bothering him. He took out the shaving kit and prepared to shave; he realized then that his hands were still trembling and, in close sequence, he managed to nick his face in three places. He washed his face and patted it dry, trying to stanch the thin trickle of blood that had appeared. Vacantly, he kept staring at his image. The cut bled again—dark blood oozing out—and unblinking, he watched the tiny drops roll down his face. _What's next to ecstasy?'

_Pain.' A cold, low voice spoke. He stood rooted to the ground.

_What's next to pain?'

_Nothingness.' He remembered each word.

_Nothingness,' he mumbled, looking at himself in the mirror. The movement made the drops of blood roll down his face.

_And what comes after nothingness?'

_Hell.' Salar retched again, all of a sudden, and doubled over the wash basin. The food he had finished eating a few minutes ago, was ejected once again. He turned on the tap to clear away the mess. He remembered what he had asked her next and what her reply had been.

_You're unable to make any sense of anything right now—and you won't be able to, either. There'll come a time when everything will be clear to you and you'll understand it all. In every life, there's a time when everything becomes clear—when there's no more mystery. I am passing through that stage,' she had said, _but that stage will come upon you at some future point. Then remember to check if it doesn't amuse you.' Salar retched again. He felt his eyes streaming.

_In life, at sometime or another we come to a point where all relationships cease—where there is only us and Allah. There are no parents, brother or sister, or any friend. Then we realise that there is no earth under us nor is there sky above, but only Allah who is supporting us in this emptiness. Then we realise our worth – it is not more than a grain of sand or the leaf of a plant. Then we realise our existence is only confined to our being. Our demise makes not a whit of difference to the world around us, nor to the scheme of things.'

Salar was feeling an unusual pain in his chest. He licked the water flowing down his face and he retched again.

His thoughts continued. ‘We come to our senses; we understand our utter insignificance.’

He was trying to rid the voice from his mind. He wondered why he remembered her now.

He splashed water on his face, wiped it, opened the bottle of after-shave and applied it to the wounds on his cheek. For the first time, he felt the pain.

Coming out of the bathroom, he realized that his hands were trembling even now.

‘I must go to the doctor.’ He clenched his fists. ‘I need help. I must get myself checked up.’

He did not know this feeling of wild fear. He was suffocating. He felt as though someone was slowly squeezing the life out of him.

‘Is it possible that my people would forget me, forget me this way.....’ He took out clean clothes from his wardrobe and started to put them on. He wanted to get to the doctor fast. Suddenly, the apartment became a frightening place.

That night, on returning home, he had been awake almost the whole night. He was in a strange state: he could not accept that he had been forgotten. He had always been well looked after by his parents. Considering the way he was, Sikandar Usman and Tayyba had handled him cautiously. They always worried for him, but now he felt that for the last few days he was completely out of everyone’s lives—his parents, brothers and sister, friends. If, as a result of his illness, he had died in his apartment, probably no one would have known. Maybe till his corpse had begun to rot, and in this weather how much time would that take?

That night, he checked the phone’s answering service every hour. In a state of disbelief, he spent all of the next week waiting for someone to call, but no one called.

‘Have they all forgotten me?’

He panicked. After waiting a whole week, like a fool, for someone to call, he himself tried contacting his folks.

He wanted to tell them what had happened to him and what he had been through.

He wanted to share his woes with them. But, for the first time, he felt as though nobody was really interested in him. Everybody had details of their own activities.

Sikandar and Tayyaba kept telling him of their holiday in Australia and how much they were enjoying it. He heard them absentmindedly.

‘Are you enjoying your holidays?’ After a long conversation, Tyyaba enquired about him.

‘Me? Yes, very....’ He could utter only just these three words. He did not really know what to tell Tyyaba, what to disclose to her.

Speaking to every one that he called, he faced this situation for the first time: he realized that they were primarily interested in their own lives. Maybe, if he had told them what he had been through, they would have expressed shock, and maybe they would have got worried. But this would happen after he had told them. What place did he have in their lives? Was anyone interested to know what had occurred?

Perhaps then he pondered for the first time that if his life were to end why would it affect anyone else. What change would it bring to the world? What would his family feel? Nothing... nothing, except grief for a few days. As for the rest of the world, it would not be affected even momentarily. If Salar Sikandar were to vanish would it make any difference to anybody? He tried to banish such dark thoughts, but the despair and his state of mind overcame him. What's come over me? Of what consequence is it if people were to forget me temporarily? Several times I have myself lost contact with a lot of people. Then, why bother if this has happened with me.'

But why did this happen to me? And if I had really not regained consciousness.....If my fever had not subsided, if the pain in my chest and stomach not abated.....'

He tried to rid his mind of these troubling thoughts, but could not. He was more in fear than in pain. Maybe, I'm becoming too sensitive, otherwise why should I let mere temporary unconsciousness get to me so.' He fretted. At least now I've recovered, but why am I thinking of death? After all, I've fallen ill before also. Tried to commit suicide without cause, but now, why am I being assailed by these fears?' His agony increased. Nor do I remember the misery of the fever. It was, perhaps, only a dream or somewhat like a coma. I can't recall more.' He tried to smile.

What is bothering me? What disease? Or is it the realization that nobody needed me, nobody thought of me, not even my loved ones, my own family, my friends.....'

Oh, my God, what's happened to you, Salar!' Sandra exclaimed, seeing him on the first day of the new semester.

Nothing really.' Salar tried to smile.

Have you been ill?' she asked concernedly.

Yes, a little.'

But it appears to me that you have been quite ill. You've lost weight and have got dark rings around your eyes. What were you ill with?'

Nothing much. Just a little fever and food poisoning, I suppose.....' he smiled.

==Were you away in Pakistan?'

==No, I was here.'

==I phoned you several times before leaving for New York. Each time the answering service responded. You should have recorded that you'd left for Pakistan.'

==Just stop it!' he exploded. ==You're bombarding me with questions.' Sandra looked at him in amazement.

==You're interrogating me as if you were my wife.'

==Salar, what happened?'

==Nothing happened. Now, you stop all this talk of what-where- how-why rubbish.'

Sandra could not speak for a few moments. She had no inkling that he would react so.

Sandra was not the only one to have expressed such concern to Salar. All his other friends and acquaintances had reacted similarly on seeing Salar.

By the end of the day Salar was thoroughly rattled and had become somewhat aggressive. He had not gone to the university to be interrogated. The concern of his friends repeatedly reminded him that something really awful had happened to him, and he wanted release from this realization.

==Would you like to go to the movies this weekend?' Danish, who was visiting Salar, asked.

==Yes, I would,' Salar agreed.

==Then be ready. I'll pick you up.' Danish confirmed the arrangement. Danish picked up Salar as arranged. Salar had gone to the movies after several weeks and he was looking forward to an enjoyable evening, but ten minutes after the movie began he suddenly felt an acute and inexplicable fear. The characters on the screen ahead appeared to him like puppets that he could not understand. He quietly got up and left. He sat on the bonnet of Danish's car in the parking lot for a long time, then hailed a taxi and returned to his apartment.

Professor Robinson had started his lecture. Salar noted on the paper in front of him the date and the topic. He was speaking on the economic recession. As always, his eyes were fixed on the professor but his mind was elsewhere. This had happened the first time in his life that he did not know where he was mentally. His mind flitted from one image to another, and then onto another. From one scene to another, and then onto another. He heard one voice, then another and yet another. He had no idea where his journey started or where he was.

‘Salar, shall we not leave?’ Sandra asked, shaking his shoulder. He was startled. The classroom was empty and only Sandra was besides him. He looked in bewilderment at the empty classroom, the wall clock and then at his wrist watch.

‘Where’s Prof. Robinson?’ he blurted out.

‘The class is over and he has left.’ Sandra replied, looking at him somewhat amazed.

‘The class is over?’ he doubtingly asked.

‘Yes’. Salar rubbed his eyes vigorously and leaned back. The only thing he remembered of Prof. Robinson’s lecture was the topic and nothing else. He did not know what the professor had said.

‘You’re looking a bit upset?’ Sandra enquired.

‘Nothing, really nothing. I want to sit here alone for sometime.’

‘O.K.’ Sandra said looking at him, and picked up her things and left. He crossed his arms across his chest and started staring at the blackboard ahead. This was the third such occurrence of the day. He had thought that on rejoining the university everything would fall back to normal and that he would come out of his depression. But that did not happen. At the university too he continued to be a complete victim of his mental turmoil. Also, for the first time, he was losing interest in his studies: everything appeared artificial to him. For the first time in his life, he had gone into deep depression. Studies, university, friends, club, parties, restaurants, outings and the like had become meaningless for him. He had stopped meeting friends. His phone often had a recorded message that he was not home. On the insistence of his friends, he would relent to go out with them, but at the last moment drop out. Even if he did go, he would suddenly leave without saying a word. He was doing the same thing at the university. He would attend one day and absent himself the next two. One class he would attend and forego the next two.

Sometimes, he would spend the whole day in bed in his apartment. He would start watching a film but after a couple of minutes, he’d have no clue as to what he was watching. It was the same when he’d be flicking through the TV channels. His appetite had disappeared—he’d begin to eat but halfway, he’d leave the food and some days, he’d go without it. All he did was to down endless cups of coffee.

He wasn’t a chain-smoker, but he had become one now. He was an organised and tidy person by nature but now his apartment was the picture of chaos and dirt. He wasn’t bothered by the

sight of stuff strewn around the place. His contact with his parents and siblings had decreased and his conversation with them reduced to a minimum. They would keep talking and he would listen, hardly responding. He had nothing more to tell them or share with them—it had all come to an end, and he had no idea why this had happened.

But he knew that all these events, these thoughts were related to Imama Hashim: had she not come into his life, all this would not have happened. First he disliked her; now he hated her. The slight sense of regret he had earlier disappeared altogether. ‘Whatever happened to her was justified. Whatever I did to her was right. That is what she deserved,’ he kept telling himself. He loathed every word, every line that she had uttered. The memory of Imama’s conversations would drive away his sleep and peace of mind: he’d be engulfed by strange desperation. All that he had scoffed at now haunted him.

‘Am I going mad? Slowly losing my mind? Am I becoming schizophrenic?’ strange fears would grip him unexpectedly. The lack of meaning and purpose in everything was becoming increasingly apparent. Who was he? What was he and why? Where was he and why was he there? Such questions had begun to bother him all the time. ‘What happens when I get an MBA from Yale? I land a very good job, set up a factory, then what? Was this the reason for which I was created...with an IQ of 150+ so that I acquire some more degrees, run a successful business, get married, have children, enjoy luxuries, then die...that’s it?’

He had experimented with death four times in his life, just to satisfy his curiosity; but now, despite severe depression, he did not try to end his life.

In spite of thinking about death all the time, he did not want to approach it. However, if someone were to ask him if he wanted to live on, he would hesitate to answer in the positive.

He did not want to live because he did not understand the meaning of life. And he did not want to die because he did not understand death. He was suspended in a vacuum, in limbo, somewhere in between being alive yet dead and dead yet alive...He was reaching the limits of hedonism moment by moment—this man with an exceptionally high IQ, who could not forget anything said or heard in his presence. Swathed in cigarette smoke, swigging beer, dining in plush restaurants, dancing away in nightclubs, spending nights with his girl friend, there was just one question on his mind: is this the purpose of life?

‘Riches and luxuries, elegant clothes, excellent food, the best facilities available for a life of sixty or seventy years...and then?’ He had no answer to that ‘and then?’ but this query had upset the pattern of his life. He was gradually becoming an insomniac, and it was during this period that he found himself turning to religion. He had seen many people do this to escape depression and he did the same. He tried to read some books about Islam, but all the books went over his head. No word, no idea in them attracted him. He would force himself to read

but put them away after a few pages; a little while later, he would pick them up again and then put them back.

__No—perhaps I should actually start praying; maybe that would help.’ Salar tried to reason with himself, and one day when he was with Saad, he expressed this desire.

__I’ll come with you,’ he told Saad, who was stepping out.

__But I’m going to say the isha prayers,’ Saad reminded him.

__I know,’ he said, tying up his jogger laces.

__You’ll come to the mosque?’ Saad was surprised.

__Yes.’ Salar stood up.

__To pray?’

__Yes,’ he replied. __And there’s no need to give me that look—after all I’m not an unbeliever.’

__No you’re not, but...anyway, come on and pray,’ said Saad. Then he suddenly shifted the topic. __I’ve told you so often before to come along.’ Salar did not reply; he quietly walked out with Saad.

__If you’ve come to the mosque today, then keep it up. Don’t let this be your first and last visit,’ Saad continued.

It was snowing when they stepped out. The mosque was a short distance from the residential building; it was in a house belonging to an Egyptian family. They had given the ground floor to be used as a mosque while the upper floor was used as their residence. Sometimes, the number of people praying there would be twenty to twenty-five, but more often there were only ten or fifteen. Saad apprised Salar of all these details till they reached the mosque. Salar walked silently beside him, somewhat unconcerned, but carefully avoiding skidding cars and watching his step on road lined with piles of snow.

After walking for a few minutes, they turned into a side street and opening the door, Saad entered the house. The door was shut but not locked; Saad did not knock nor ask permission before entering—his movements were rather familiar. Salar followed him in.

__Perform your ablutions.’ Saad turned to Salar, and led him to the bathroom. The cold water on his hands made him shiver for a while. By the time Salar had reached the last stage of the wuzu under Saad’s supervision, the cold water had turned tepid. As he was running his hands over his head, he suddenly stopped. Saad thought that perhaps Salar did not know the right way, so he directed him again. Rather vacantly, Salar obeyed him. As his hands moved towards the nape of his neck, he felt the chain he was wearing and his glance fell on the mirror before him. Once again, his mind was somewhere else—Saad was saying something, but it did not register.

The ten people in the room were standing in two rows. Saad and Salar joined the back row. The imam began the prayer and along with everyone else, Salar also recited the niyat for prayer.

==Does prayer really give you peace?' He had found a young man in debate with Saad over prayer, about two weeks ago.

==It gives me peace,' Saad had replied.

==I don't mean you, I mean everyone—does it bring peace of mind to everyone?'

==That depends on the degree of involvement people have,' was Saad's response.

Salar stood aside, bored, listening to their argument, without any comment or interruption. He was consciously trying to enthuse himself on this topic.

==Peace? I really want to see what kind of peace it brings,' he thought to himself as he bowed for ruku. Then he prostrated himself for the first sajdah. His restlessness and anxiety suddenly increased. The words being intoned by the imam were strange to his ears; the people around him were strangers, unknown; the environment was unnatural, and whatever he was doing there appeared to be sham, an act of hypocrisy.

The burden on his heart and mind grew with each prostration, and he completed the last four stages with great difficulty. As he read the closing salam and turned, he saw tears roll down the face of the middle-aged man to his right. He wanted to just get up and flee from there but he forced himself to stand up for another round of prayer and do this with as much interest as he could.

==This time I'll focus on every ayat that is read,' he thought. ==Perhaps, this way...' but his thoughts dispersed. The niyat was being recited. Salar felt extremely dejected—the pressure on his mind seemed to increase.

The recitation of the opening Surah of the Quran, al-Fateha, began.

==In the name of Allah, the most Compassionate, the most Beneficent. All praise is for the Sustainer/Cherisher of the Universe, the most

Compassionate, the most Beneficent.' Salar tried his best to concentrate.

==The Lord of the Day of Judgment...' His attention wandered.

==It is to You that we bow in worship; it is You to whom we turn for help.' He knew the translation of the Sura al Fateha; he had read it a few days ago.

==Guide us to the straight path'—Sirat al mustaqeem, the straight path, he repeated to himself.

The straight path? He wanted to run away. He made a last attempt to continue with the prayer.

‘The path of those whom You bless...’ Once again, his mind receded. ‘(not) the path of those on whom Your wrath falls, and who go astray.’ He was in the last row: very quietly, he let down his arms and stepped out of line.

‘I can’t do this. I cannot pray.’ He was making a confession. He backed out slowly, unnoticeably as the others went into the ruku, and very swiftly, he came out of the room. Picking up his joggers, he stood absentmindedly on the stairs, looking right and left. Shoes and socks in hand, he came down the stairs to the back wall of the building. There was another flight of stairs, covered by snow and another door. It was dark as there was no light anywhere around. Bending down, he brushed the snow off a step, sat down and put on his shoes, then sat back against the door. His jacket hood was pulled over his head and his hands tucked into his pockets. On the road across, the traffic was thin.

Salar sat there watching the random cars and few pedestrians on the road. Sitting out there in the cold, foggy, night air he felt more at peace than he was in the warm and cosy prayer room. Pulling a lighter out of his pocket, he lit it, trying to melt the snow on the steps. This entertained him for a while but then he got bored and put the lighter away. As he straightened up he realized there was a woman standing before him; he had not noticed her presence as he had been looking down. Even in the dark, he could see the smile playing on her face. She was wearing a fur coat which had been left artfully open to reveal a miniskirt and a skimpy blouse. Hands thrust in her coat pockets, she stood before Salar very seductively. He surveyed her from head to toe. Her long, shapely legs were bare, the cold notwithstanding. He kept staring at her legs, highlighted by the neon lights behind her. She was wearing high-heeled boots and Salar wondered how she could manage them on these snowed down streets.

‘I charge fifty dollars an hour,’ she said very chummily in a very familiar way. Salar looked up from her legs to her face, then back at her legs. This was the first time ever that he had felt sorry for a prostitute, wondering what had compelled her to parade half naked in such snowbound weather when he had felt himself freezing despite his thick warm jeans.

‘OK, forty dollars,’ she said, when he did not reply. She thought he found the rate too high so reduced her price. Salar knew that forty was too much—on this street, he could get a girl for twenty dollars. This woman was around thirty-five or forty years, and she looked around cautiously as she spoke to him. Salar knew she was on the look out for the police. ‘OK, thirty—no more bargaining. Take it or leave it.’

She further reduced her rates, in view of Salar’s silence. Without a word, he fished out some notes from his pocket—he wasn’t carrying a wallet—and held them out towards her. She snatched them: here was a client who was, for the first time, giving her advance payment and that too fifty dollars, when she had quoted less.

==Will you come with me or do you want me to accompany you?' she asked very casually.

==Neither will I accompany you nor will you come with me. You can leave now,' Salar declared, looking beyond her at the shops across the road. The woman looked at him uncertainly.

==Really?' ==Yes,' he replied, unmoved.

==Then why did you give this?' She held out the notes, still in her hand. ==So that you move out of my sight. I want to look at those shops and you're in the way.' He spoke coldly.

She burst out laughing. ==You do joke, don't you? You really want me to go?'

==Yes.'

She kept looking at him for a few moments. ==OK, thank you.' Salar saw her turn and cross the road, and without much interest, saw her walk to the other side. A man was standing there.

Salar started looking at the shops once more. It began to snow again, but he kept sitting there as the snow fell over him. He stayed there till the lights in the shops shut down, one by one. Then, dusting the snow off his clothes, he got up. If he hadn't been moving his legs from time to time, he would not have been able to stand on his feet. It was half past two in the morning. Pushing his hands into his pockets, and flexing his legs, he began to walk home. He knew that Saad must have searched for him and not finding him around must have gone home too.

==Where did you go off?' Saad shouted seeing Salar who walked in without saying a word.

==I'm asking you something,' Saad remonstrated. He shut the door behind him and came after Salar.

==I didn't go anywhere,' replied Salar, taking off his jacket.

==Do you know how long I searched for you—calling up God knows where and who. I was worried sick and was about to call the police...where did you disappear leaving the prayer midway?'

==I told you—nowhere.' Salar was taking off his joggers.

==Then where were you all along?' Saad was standing before him.

==Just there, on the footpath behind the mosque.'

==What? You sat there all these hours, in the snow?' Saad couldn't believe it.

=Yes.'

=You are totally senseless!' Saad was exasperated.

Salar was stretched out on the bed. =Yes—really senseless,' he agreed. Saad enquired if Salar had eaten and asked him if he'd like to, but he refused saying he wasn't hungry. Salar just lay there, staring at the ceiling. Saad came and sat beside him.

=What ever is the problem? Can you tell me?'

Salar turned his neck to look at Saad. =Nothing; no problem,' he said flatly.

=I thought you had gone back to your apartment. I kept calling there, but got no response,' Saad was complaining, but Salar kept his gaze on the ceiling. =It would have been better if I hadn't asked you to come along for prayers. Don't accompany me next time.'

Saad was really annoyed. He got up and wrapped up his work; then switching off the night lamp, he lay down on his bed. A little while later, just as he was drifting off to sleep, he heard Salar call him.

=What is it?' Saad looked at him.

=What is the sirat-e mustaqim?'

This simple question nonplussed Saad. He turned to look at Salar who lay flat on the bed to his left.

=Sirat-e-mustaqeem ...it is the straight path.'

=I know, but what is the straight path?' Another question. =The straight path means the path to goodness.'

=What is goodness?' The tone was till flat, unmoved.

=Goodness is good deeds.'

=What are good deeds?'

=Actions which are done for others...like helping someone, doing someone a favour. These are good deeds and every good deed is goodness.'

=A few hours ago, I gave fifty dollars to a hooker on that footpath, though she was asking for just thirty dollars. Does this mean it was a good deed?

Goodness?'

Saad felt like punching him in the face: he was a weird guy. =Shut up and go to sleep, and let me sleep!' He pulled up his blanket.

=So this was not an act of goodness?' Salar was astonished at Saad's annoyance.

‘I told you, didn’t I? Just shut up and go to sleep.’ Saad screamed at him. ‘There’s no need to get so worked up. I asked you a very ordinary question.’ Salar spoke with great patience.

Saad flared up. He switched on the lamp and sat up in bed. ‘How can I explain to someone like you what is meant by sirat-e-mustaqeem? Are you crazy or ignorant? Or a non-Muslim? What are you...or nothing at all? You should know what this means! But how can a person who was out halfway through his prayers, know what this means.’

‘I left halfway through the prayers because you say that it brings serenity, and I felt no sense of peace or calm—so I left.’ Salar’s comments, delivered in a calm and composed tone further incensed Saad.

‘You did not find peace because your place is not in the mosque. For you, peace is to be found in cinema halls, theatres, bars and night clubs. The mosque is not for you so how could you find peace there? And you want me to tell you what the straight path is!’ Salar kept looking fixedly at Saad.

‘A person like you who runs away from prayer, who drinks and indulges in fornication, can neither understand the sirat-e-mustaqeem nor tread that path.’

‘Do you mean that those who imbibe alcohol and fornicate but do not turn away from prayer—that they also pray—understand sirat-emustaqeem and are on the straight path?’

Saad was speechless as he knew what Salar was referring to. Salar fixed his gaze on his friend.

‘You cannot understand these things, Salar,’ Saad replied after a while. Another voice echoed in Salar’s ears, jolting him. ‘Yes, indeed—I cannot understand. Turn off the light; I’m sleepy.’ Without another word, Salar turned and closed his eyes.

about 6 months ago

Umera Ahmed Official

‘I expected to find you here. You’ve deliberately left the answering machine on. Why did you run away from my place?’ Saad expressed his displeasure. He was at Salar’s apartment the next morning. Salar sleepily opened the door.

‘I did not run away—you were asleep and I did not think it was right to disturb you.’ Salar rubbed his eyes.

‘When did you leave?’

‘Perhaps at 4:00 or 5:00.’

‘That was no time to leave,’ Saad told him testily. ‘And why did you sneak out like this?’

Salar, instead of replying, went and lay face down on the sofa in the living room.

==Probably, you took offence at what I said. That's why I've come to apologize,' Saad said, as he sat on the other sofa.

==What did you say to me?' Salar asked, turning to look at him.

==All that I said to you in annoyance last night,' Saad was apologetic. ==Oh no, I don't take offence at such small things. You said no such thing for which you needed to come and apologize,' Salar replied nonchalantly.

==Then when did you take off so suddenly?' Saad insisted.

==It's just that I felt depressed so I came back here; and since I wanted to sleep, I left the answering machine on,' Salar explained calmly.

==Even so, I shouldn't have spoken to you like that. I've been regretting it very much since the morning.'

==Oh, let it be,' Salar said, keeping his face still buried in the sofa.

==Salar, what is the problem with you these days?'

==Nothing.'

==No, something is amiss; you are behaving rather strangely.' Salar suddenly turned around and, looking at Saad, asked him, ==For example, what is strange about me?'

==Many things....you have become rather quiet; you get worked up about trivial things. Ibad was telling me that you've stopped attending the university. And the most important is that you've started taking an interest in religion.'

The last observation brought a frown to Salar's face.

==Interest in religion? You must be mistaken. I am not trying to get interested in religion; I am trying to find peace of mind because I am very depressed these days. Never in my life have I felt so low as I do now. It was to rid myself of this depression that I went to the mosque with you.' Salar was acerbic.

==Why are you depressed?' Saad inquired.

==If I knew, I wouldn't be depressed—I'd have done something about it.'

==Still, there must be a reason—one doesn't feel dejected just like that,' Saad remarked.

Salar knew that Saad's words made sense, but he was not going to give Saad the chance to laugh at him by revealing the cause of his distress.

==I don't know about others, but it does happen to me without reason,' he tried to avoid the issue.

==Try an anti-depressant,' Saad advised.

==I've had loads—they make no difference.'

==Then see a psychiatrist.'

==That I'll never do. I'm sick of seeing them and I'm not going to do so now,' Salar blurted out.

Saad was surprised to hear this. His curiosity was aroused and he asked, ==Why did you see them before?'

==There were many reasons—let it be now.' Salar lay on his back, staring at the ceiling.

==Then you should pray regularly.'

==I tried, but I found no comfort in prayer. Besides, I didn't know what I was reading in the prayer or understand why I was doing it.' ==Then make an effort to find out...'

Salar cut him short. ==Let's not start last night's argument about the straight path—it will make you angry again.'

==No, it won't make me angry.'

==When I do not know what the straight path is, how can I pray?'

==Start praying and you'll get to know what it is.'

==How?'

==You'll avoid wrongdoing; you'll turn to good deeds, yourself,' Saad tried to explain.

==But I do not do anything that's wrong, nor do I have any desire to do good. My life is quite normal.'

==You cannot gauge which of your actions is right and which is not until...' Salar interrupted him again. ==Right and wrong actions are not my concern. It's just that I am disturbed and that has nothing to do with my deeds.'

==You indulge in all those things that make a person's life distressed.' ==Such as?' Salar asked sarcastically.

==You eat pork.'

==Oh come on! What's pork got to do with it?' Salar got up and sat by Saad. ==Tell me—you pray regularly and a lot—what change has prayer brought about in you?'

==I am not restless.'

‘Although by your formula you should be, because you also indulge in much wrongdoing,’ Salar retorted. ‘What wrongdoings? Give an example.’

‘You know very well. I don’t need to repeat myself.’

‘No, I don’t...so please repeat it,’ Saad was challenging him.

Salar kept looking at him for some time, then he replied. ‘I don’t believe, Saad, that any major changes can be brought about in life just by praying.

Good deeds and a good character are not because of prayer alone.’

‘That’s why I tell you to take some interest in your religion. Get some knowledge about Islam so that you can shed this misguided philosophy of yours and change your views,’ Saad interrupted.

‘My views are not wrong. I haven’t seen anyone more false, lying, hypocritical and deceitful than these religious people. I hope you won’t mind, but this is the truth. I have come across three such persons who were great stalwarts of Islam, preaching and praying, but all three were fakes,’ Salar spoke bitterly.

‘The first was a girl—very pious, purdah-observing, creating a lot of hype about her virtue and devoutness, and carrying on an affair with one boy while engaged to another. She ran away from home to be with her beloved, and when the need arose, she even took help from a person whom she hated—she thought nothing of exploiting him for her own ends. So much for Miss Piety and Devotion!’ A mocking smile played across Salar’s lips.

‘Then, I met this bearded man with a very religious appearance. He did not lift a finger to help the girl who had been begging him for support. He did not marry the girl who he had been fooling around with in the guise of love. Lately, I met him again, here in the US, and along with his faith, his beard had also vanished.’

Then Salar laughed out. ‘The third one is you. You don’t eat pork—that’s the one forbidden act you abstain from; the rest is all permissible to you. Lying, drinking alcohol, sex, going to clubs, backbiting, making fun of others—although you’re very pious otherwise. You’ve got a beard and you drive people up the wall with your preaching; you insist on forcing people to pray. You keep quoting Islam at every step—this ayat, that hadith... that ayat, this hadith...that’s all you have to say. You can’t imagine how unbearable your sermons can be! When I look at your behavior, I’m least impressed. There’s not much difference between us—with your religious appearance and ceaseless talk of Islam, you’re doing all that I do without a beard and without religion.

‘What great revolution has prayer brought in your life, except the misconception that you’re headed for paradise while the rest of us go to hell? If I had not found this anomaly in your words and deeds, I’d never have said this to you. but I do have a request: please do not try to attract people to religion, because I think you don’t know much about it either.

‘Now, please do not mind all I have said,’ concluded Salar. Saad was practically mute with shock.

After a while, Saad responded. ‘I agree that I make mistakes. But Allah forgives His beings. I never claimed to be a perfect Muslim or to find a place in paradise. But if I do something good and instruct others towards goodness, then I consider it a divine mission.’

‘Saad, don’t burden yourself with the responsibility for others. Try to reform yourself before you set out to reform others, so that you’re not called a hypocrite. As far as God’s forgiveness is concerned, then if He can forgive you, so can He forgive us. If you think that you can reduce our sins by preaching Islam and gain closeness to God—despite your sins—it’s not so. Improve your own track record, and look to yourself instead of worrying about others: Let us be as we are.’

Salar’s words were harsh, but he poured out his thoughts to Saad. When he had finished his speech, Saad got up and left. After that day, he never spoke to Salar on the topic of religion.

After a long time, he went to a restaurant for dinner that weekend. The waiter took his order, and then Salar passed the time looking at the road beyond the window. Sitting by the French windows, he felt as if he was actually out on the footpath.

His attention was diverted by the sound of a woman sobbing. Turning around, he saw a girl and a boy on the table behind him. The girl was sobbing softly and wiping her eyes with a tissue. The boy was patting her hand to console her perhaps. The restaurant was so small and the tables so close that he could have heard their conversation, but that was not his intention and he turned away. A wave of displeasure coursed through him: he disapproved of such carryings on. He had come to this place in search of a peaceful evening and this incident put him in a bad mood.

The couple behind him was Russian and they were talking in their own language. Salar began looking out of the window again but one ear was cocked towards the muffled sobs and quiet dialogue behind him. He turned towards them once again, and this time the girl caught his eye. Those few moments seemed endless—the girl’s swollen eyes and unhappy face brought back the memory of another face and eyes reddened with weeping—Imama Hashim’s.

The waiter brought his order and placed the food before him. Salar took a few sips of water and tried to brush away the memories. He took a few deep breaths and the waiter looked at him curiously—Salar was busy taking in the scene outside the window.

‘It’s a wonderful day and I’ve come here to enjoy some happy moments, to have a good meal. Then I plan to go to the movies. I should banish all thoughts about that girl—she was crazy, she talked rubbish and I should have no regrets about her in any way. How should I know

where she has gone? It was all her own doing. I was just playing along with her—had she contacted me, I'd have divorced her.'

Unconsciously, his regret surfaced as he tried to justify his actions regarding Imama. The weeping of the girl on the table behind now stabbed his mind.

_'I want to change my table,' he told the waiter, rather roughly.

_'Why, sir?' The waiter was quite surprised.

_'Or else change their table,' Salar gestured towards the couple behind. It wasn't clear if the waiter had understood Salar's problem, but anyway, he seated Salar at a corner table.

Salar was relieved that he could not hear her sniffing, but now she was almost facing him. He caught sight of her again as he lifted the first morsel to his lips. Suddenly, everything seemed tasteless, unappetizing. Definitely, it was his state of mind and not the food—the restaurant was known for its cuisine.

_'People cannot thank Him enough for the blessings they enjoy. This ability to taste food, to enjoy good food is such a blessing—that I can savor good food and relish it. There are many who are deprived of this bounty.' Her voice was echoing in his mind and this was the limit. Like a volcano, he erupted. Banging the spoon forcefully on his plate, he rose up from his seat, shouting.

_'Shut up! Just shut up!' a hush fell on the restaurant.

_'You bitch! You bastard! Just shut up!' His face was crimson. 'Why the hell don't you get out of my mind?' he screamed, holding on to his temples.

_'I'll kill you if I see you again!' He shouted again.

Then he had a glass of water and the place seemed to come into focus—the restaurant, the people there. He saw the waiter approach him with concern.

_'Are you feeling all right, sir?'

Without another word, Salar pulled out his wallet, put some dollar bills on the table and left the restaurant.

It was not Imama—it was a bad spirit that haunted him wherever he went. It would be her face or her voice and if it was not these then it was his regret. When he tried to forget one thing about her then something else would surface. Sometimes he would get so volatile and agitated that were she to appear before him, he would strangle her or shoot her. He hated everything about her. Those few hours spent driving her overnight had overshadowed his life completely.

.....

“But why are you coming?” Salar was irritated as he talked to his elder brother, who had called to tell him of his arrival in New Haven a few days later. Had Salar’s life been following a routine pattern, he would have welcomed this news. But he was going through a bad patch and Kamran’s arrival at this point annoyed him. He couldn’t hide his annoyance. “What do you mean by why am I coming? To see you of course, what else!” Kamran was somewhat taken aback by Salar’s tone. “And Papa also told me to look you up.”

Salar heard him out with clenched teeth.

“Pick me up from the airport. I’ll give you the flight details a day ahead.” After some banal conversation, they hung up.

Four days later, Salar received Kamran at the airport. He was shocked to see Salar.

“Have you been ill?” asked Kamran.

“No—I’m fine.” Salar tried to smile.

“You don’t look it.” Kamran’s concern grew. Salar used to look a person in the eye when he spoke. Now he was shying away. Kamran observed

Salar as he was driving; he used to be a very rash driver, to the extent that you sat with him at your own risk, but now he was driving very carefully. Kamran felt this was a positive change in his brother; however it was the only positive change—the other changes that Kamran saw were worrying him.

“How are your studies coming along?”

“Doing well.”

Throughout the trip, these were the kind of responses Kamran got from Salar. When they got to his apartment, Kamran was appalled as he followed Salar in.

“Is this your apartment, Salar? My God!”

Salar used to be very organized, keeping everything in place but this orderliness was nowhere in view. Everything was in a chaos—his clothes and shoes lay strewn about; books, newspapers and magazines were scattered all over; the kitchen was in a messy state and the bathroom worse still. Kamran surveyed the apartment, shocked by what he saw.

“How long has it been since you cleaned this place?” “I’ll do it right now,” Salar replied coldly.

“You were not used to such living—what happened now?” Kamran was most concerned. His glance fell on an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts. He picked it up and began to sniff the contents. Salar gave his brother a piercing look but said nothing. Kamran replaced the ashtray in disgust and turned to him.

‘Salar, what are you up to this time? Come clean—what’s the problem? What’s going on? Are you into drugs?’

‘No, I’m not taking anything.’ His reply angered Kamran, who gripped Salar’s shoulders and dragged him before the bathroom mirror.

‘Look at yourself—you look like a drug addict and you act like one. Raise your eyes, Salar, look at your face!’ Kamran was tugging at his collar. Even without seeing his reflection, Salar knew what he must be looking like. What else could one see but for the dark rings around his eyes and the overgrown stubble on his face. The image was completed by the spots and pimples on his face and his dry flaking lips—the result of endless coffee and cigarettes. He had stopped shaving because of his acne-ridden skin. Upset, he jerked himself free of Kamran’s hold and tried to get away without a glance at the mirror.

‘You look absolutely despicable, cursed!’

Cursed was a word that Kamran often used, but Salar had never felt it so keenly as he did now. He was incensed.

‘Yes—despicable and cursed: so what?’ he stood defiantly in front of Kamran. ‘When I’m telling you that I do not take drugs, you should believe me.’

‘Believe you? huh!’ Sarcasm dripped from Kamran’s tone. Teeth clenched in fury, Salar continued to clear up the room without a word. ‘Are you attending classes at the university?’ Salar felt a warning bell ring.

‘I am.’

Kamran was not satisfied.

‘Come with me to the hospital; I want you to have a complete check up.’

‘If this is what you’ve come for, it is better you return. I’m not a kindergarten child—I can look after myself.’

Kamran did not reply. He joined Salar in putting things in order. Salar breathed a sigh of relief; he thought that this argument had come to an end—but he was mistaken. Kamran extended his stay in New Haven by a week. During this period, Salar attended classes regularly. Kamran on the other hand, met with Salar’s friends and his professors. He learnt from Salar’s friends of his failure in the semester—this was a shock for Kamran. Anything could be expected of Salar but to fail so poorly, when till lately he had been breaking academic records and topping the university.

This time, Kamran did not discuss anything with Salar. Instead, he called up his father in Pakistan and briefed him on the situation. Once again, the earth slipped away from under Sikandar Usman’s feet—Salar was maintaining his old record. Every couple of years, he

presented his father with a new set of problems. The Hashim Mubeen and Imama business was about that old now.

‘Don’t talk to him about this now,’ suggested Kamran. ‘The university is going to close down for the holidays, so call him home to Pakistan for a while. Then Mummy should accompany him back and stay here till he completes his studies.’

Sikander followed Kamran’s advice. A few days before the vacation commenced, he arrived in New Haven. The sight of Salar left Sikandar with knots in his stomach, but he did not argue with him. He simply asked Salar to come home for the holidays. Salar made excuses about studies and classes, but Sikandar ignored his demurrals and booked his seat for the flight home. Against his will, Salar was brought back to Pakistan.

It was one in the morning when they reached Pakistan. Sikandar and Tyeba retired to their room; he went to his room. He was looking at it after nearly one and a half years—everything was as he had left it. He changed, switched off the light and lay down. He had slept during the flight so he did not feel sleepy now. Perhaps it was also the time difference.

‘Looks like I’ll gradually become an insomniac,’ he said as he lay in the dark room. Tossing and turning for some time, he sat up; then he went to the window and drew the curtains open. Across the wide lawn was Hashim Mubeen’s house on the other side. Salar had never really taken notice of that house in all these years but now he surveyed the building by the lights from the first floor. The memories came flooding back—he drew the curtains shut.

‘Were Waseem’s folks able to find Imama?’ he asked Nasira the next day. She gave him a doubtful look.

‘No, jee, no trace of her. They looked everywhere but there was no trace of her. They still suspect you, do you know? Salma Bibi curses you.’

Salar kept staring at her.

‘The police questioned all the house servants too, but never did I utter a word. They also sacked me and my daughter—but they called us back later on. They keep asking me about you. Perhaps they re-employed us so that I could pass on news about your house to them. But, jee, I make excuses and get away with it.’ Nasira went on extending her tale. ‘Is the police still searching for her?’ Salar interjected.

“Yes sir, they are still looking. I don’t know much because they keep these things from the servants. They don’t mention Imama Bibi before us, but one catches snippets of conversation. Salar Saab, don’t you know anything about Imama Bibi?” Nasira asked quite suddenly.

“How should I know?” He fixed his gaze on her.

“I was just asking—just like that, because you were friendly with her... I thought you might know. Those papers you once sent through me—who were they for?” Her curiosity was getting dangerous.

“Those were property papers, for this house—I transferred it to her name.”

Nasira’s mouth fell open. Then she composed herself and said, “But sir, this house belongs to Sikander Saab.”

“Yes, but I didn’t know it then. Have you told anyone that you took the papers to her?”

Nasira touched her ears. “Never, sir! I did not tell Sikander Saab anything.”

“And it’s best for you not to say anything—just keep your mouth shut. If my father gets to know he’ll throw you out lock, stock and barrel; you know his temper. Now leave,” Salar spoke tersely. Nasira left without a word.

On the weekends, sometimes, he used to go hiking in the Margalla Hills. That wasn’t a weekend, but he felt like going anyway. As usual, he parked the car at the foot of the hills, and a small bag slung over his shoulder, he went off. He turned back giving himself enough time to get to the car before dark—it would have taken him two hours so he came onto a path used by many people. He had barely gone a few yards when he heard footsteps behind him. He turned around and saw two boys: they were fairly far from him but were moving fast.

He turned away and continued his trek downwards. By their appearance, the boys did not look shady. Dressed in jeans and T-shirts they looked like anyone else, but as he walked he felt someone quite close behind him. He suddenly turned and was dumbstruck—they were facing him, revolvers in hand.

“Hands up or we’ll shoot you!” one of them shouted. Salar lifted up his arms. One of them went behind him dragging Salar, tried to push him to the ground. Salar tottered on his feet but did not lose his balance.

“This way!” Salar moved in the shown direction without putting up any resistance. They wanted to get him away from the path so that they were not confronted by anyone coming that way. The boys propelled him towards the bushes and the undergrowth.

“Kneel down!” one of them harshly ordered. Salar obeyed them: he knew that they would snatch his belongings—cell phone, money—and would let him off. He did not want to do any such thing that would provoke them into harming him. One of the boys went behind Salar and took the backpack off his back. There was a camera, a few rolls of film, battery cells, a pair of binoculars, a first aid kit, water, some snacks and his wallet in it. The boy who had taken the bag fished through the items in it; then he surveyed the contents of the wallet—some cash and his credit card. Next, he pulled out the packet of tissues and the first aid kit.

“Now get up!” the boy ordered Salar. He stood there, arms still raised.

The boys went behind and began to probe the pockets of his Bermudas. He pulled out the car keys.

Good! He has a car.’ Now, Salar was beginning to get worried. “Look, you can take my stuff, but leave the car.’ For the first time, he addressed them.

“Why? Why leave the car? Are you my cousin that I should leave the car with you?’ the boy spoke roughly.

“Even if you tried to take the car, you’d have many problems—there are all kinds of locks in it.’

“That’s our problem, not yours!’ the other boy stepped up and snatched Salar’s sunglasses.

“Take off your joggers.’

“My joggers—what for?’ Salar looked at him in surprise. But the boy, instead of replying, slapped Salar with all his might. Salar staggered at the blow.

“Don’t ask again—just take off your joggers.’

Salar gave him a baleful look. The boys cocked their revolvers at him menacingly. The one who had hit Salar slapped him again on the other cheek.

“Stare again, will you? Your joggers...” he demanded without looking at him, Salar slowly took off his shoes. He had only his socks.

“Now, your shirt.’ Salar wanted to protest but he wasn’t ready for any more beating. If they were not armed, Salar could easily have taken care of them as he was physically bigger and stronger. But unarmed, he felt vulnerable. He took off his shirt and held it out.

“Throw it down.’ Salar did so. The boy then pulled something out of his trouser pocket—it looked like a ball of thin nylon twine. Salar at once understood their intention and was very disturbed. It was getting on towards sunset and shortly, it would be dark—how would he get out of there.

“Look here—don’t tie me up. You can take my bag and my car—I won’t tell a soul,” he said defensively.

Without a word, the boy swung around and punched Salar in the stomach. Salar doubled up with pain and a stifled cry escaped him.

“No suggestions!”

The boy then pushed Salar hard to one side. Salar, feeling excruciating pain, blindly did as he was ordered. The boy sat Salar against a tree trunk and very deftly started to tie his wrists behind the slim trunk with the twine. The other boy stood at some distance calmly looking around but with the revolver aimed at Salar.

After tying up his hands well, the boy came in front and took off Salar’s socks and with the pair of scissors from the first aid kit started to cut out strips from Salar’s shirt. He, again, with great dexterity, tied up Salar’s ankles with the strips. Then he opened the box of tissues and emptied it.

“Open your mouth.” Salar knew what he was going to do. He was mentally cursing the boy, who stuffed all the tissues one by one in his mouth. Then passing the last remaining strip from the shirt across Salar’s mouth, like a horse’s bit, he tied him to the tree trunk .

The other boy was now calmly closing the bag. A few minutes later they had both vanished from the scene. The moment they left Salar started to make efforts to untie himself, but he soon realized that he had landed in great trouble. The boy had tied him up with great expertise and he could not wriggle himself free. Nor could he loosen the twine.

The more he tried the more the twine cut into his flesh. He was in a very bad state. He could neither call out for help nor could he in any other way draw attention to himself.

Around him, there were tall bushes and with the growing darkness it would have been a miracle for someone to stumble on him. He was left only with his knee-length Bermuda shorts and the night was getting chilly.

At home, nobody knew that he had come here hiking and even when he would be missed how could anyone have found him, all tied up, in the dark in this thick forest.

After half an hour’s effort, when he was able to loosen and then undo the strips around his ankles, the sun had completely set. If the moon had not appeared he would not have been able to see his hands and feet and his surroundings. By now, the noise of people and traffic had almost completely died down. Around him was the cacophony of insects . He could feel the abrasions from the neck to the waist as he was tied to the tree trunk. The twine had cut into his wrists at the back of the tree and he was unable to move his hands any more. He could not bear the stinging pain in his wrists. By now, the tissues which had been stuffed into his mouth had become pulp and he had started to move the strip in his mouth, but he was unable to call out,

because he could neither swallow nor spit out the softened tissues. There were so many tissues that he was unable to chew them like gum.

He was beginning to shiver. In this condition, he would have been surely dead by the morning, if he had not either died of fear or been bitten to death by some poisonous creature. His skin was crawling with small insects which were repeatedly biting him. He was able to shake off the annoying insects from his exposed legs but was unable to do this from the rest of his body. He wondered, if besides these small insects what other creatures he would have to contend with, and if there were scorpions and snakes.....

As time passed, his condition deteriorated. ‘Why has this happened to me? What wrong have I done?’ And if I were to die...Nobody would even find my corpse. It would be devoured by the insects and the wild animals.’ He pityingly thought.

His condition took a turn for the worse. He was gripped by numbing fear.

‘So, will I die like this, here.....in this state....naked....unaccounted for.....my people wouldn’t even know about me.....is this to be my fate.’ His heart missed beats. Suddenly, he felt so afraid of death that he found it difficult to breathe. He felt as though death stood before him to see how his breath went out, bit by bit.

Overcoming his pain he tried once more to free his wrists. His arms hurt excruciatingly. After struggling for fifteen minutes, he stopped. He then realized that the strip across his mouth had loosened and that he could get it out by manipulating his neck, which he did. Next, he spat out the tissues. He inhaled deeply for several minutes and then kept yelling aloud—as loud as he could—for help.

He was hysterical. After continuously shouting for half an hour his courage and voice packed up. He was out of breath, as though he had run several miles, but even so no one answered his call for help. The wounds on his wrists were hurting unbearably and now the insects stinging his face and neck also. He did not know what over took him but suddenly he burst out crying aloud uncontrollably like a child.

For the first time in his life he was crying with such intensity. Perhaps, never before had he felt so helpless, and tied as he was to the tree trunk, he realized that he did not want to die. He was being engulfed by death the way he felt he had been in New Haven. He did not remember for how long he cried out hysterically. Then his tears started to dry. Perhaps he was so tired that he could not even cry. Dog-tired, he leaned against the tree trunk and shut his eyes. His shoulders and arms hurt so much that he felt that they would be permanently paralyzed.

‘I have never hurt anybody like this, but why has this happened to me?’ Tears started to flow again from his eyes.

‘Salar! My life is already beset with problems, don’t try to increase them; my life is already difficult and with the passage of each day it is becoming even more difficult.’

At least try to understand my predicament and don't increase my difficulties.' Leaning against the tree trunk Salar opened his eyes. His throat was drying up. Deep down below, far, far away he could see the lights of Islamabad.

==Am I trying to increase your difficulties? Me....? My dear Imama! I am besought with your problems. I am trying to put an end to them. Consider, living with me what a good and protected life you could have.' Salar bit his lip.

==Salar! Give me a divorce,' she had exclaimed.

==Sweetheart! You go get it from the court, as you have already said you would.'

He was now quietly staring at the distant lights; he could discern his own image and that of someone else too in a mirror. ==I had only joked with Imama,' he mumbled.

==I....I did not want to hurt her.' His words appeared hollow to him. Heaven knows to whom he was trying to clarify. For a long time, he stared at the lights of Islamabad, then his eyes grew dim.

==I accept I've done some wrong.' His voice was a hoarse whisper. ==I had intentionally tried creating problems for her. I tricked her, but I made a mistake and I am remorseful. I know that by my not giving her a divorce and by lying about Jalal, she must have had to face a lot of difficulties. I am really sorry for all that happened, but apart from this I have not hurt anyone.' And he began to weep again. .

==My God.....if I get out of this, I'll seek out Imama and divorce her, and I'll never trouble her again. I'll also tell her the truth about Jalal. Please,

Lord, just release me.'

He was now sobbing uncontrollably. For the first time, he realized how Imama must have felt when he had refused to divorce her. Perhaps, she had felt her hands were tied, the way he felt now. Sitting there, he could, for the first time, imagine Imama's helplessness, fear, and pain. He had lied to her about Jalal Ansar's marriage and he still remembered the heartbroken expression on her face. He actually enjoyed seeing her in distress. She had cried almost all the way from Islamabad to Lahore that night—and it had amused him.

Now he could appreciate her mental and emotional state. That dark night, traveling in that car, she might not have been able to see ahead or behind her. The only refuge for which she had left home was Jalal Ansar's house, but Salar would not let her go there. At that hour of night, in that pervading darkness, he could feel Imama's fear and forebodings which had wrenched her heart.

==I am sorry, indeed, I am sorry, but.....but what can I do.....ifif I see her again I'll apologize to her, I'll help her as far as I can—but now...at this time I can't do anything. If.....If I have ever.....ever done any good, God, get me out of this misery. Oh God! Please....pleaseplease.'

With tears streaming, he tried to recall the good deeds that he had done. It occurred to him for the first time that, till now he had not done any good in his life. No good deed that he could present before God and, in return, ask Him for his release. He was gripped by another fear. He had never given in charity, as he did not believe in it. He did tip in hotels and restaurants, but never gave any alms to a beggar. At school or college, when funds were collected for various causes he would neither collect nor donate.

‘I don’t believe in charity,’ he would coldly expound. ‘I don’t have spare cash to throw about.’ He had continued with this attitude in New Haven also. This niggardliness was not just limited to charity; he did not believe in helping out anybody. He could not recall any instance where he might have helped someone. He had only helped Imama, but after what he had done to her he could not call it a good deed. He also did not pray regularly. Perhaps, as a child, he might have gone a few times for Eid prayers with Sikandar, but even that was more a ritual than worship. He remembered the night in New Haven when he had absconded midway from the isha prayer, and he also remembered the \$50 he had given to the hooker.

Probably, that was the one instance when he had felt pity for someone. He tried hard to recall any good that he might have done, but in vain. And then he was reminded of his misdeeds. What had he not done? His tears and supplications immediately stopped. The slate was clean. If he had died in that state, he would not have been dealt with unfairly. If, at the age of 22, with an IQ level of 150+, a photographic memory, and after thinking for several hours a person is unable to recall even one good deed that he had done, then how could he expect God to bail him out of his predicament?

‘What is next to ecstasy?’ he had said whilst taking cocaine in his teens, asked his friend, who was also imbibing it.

‘More ecstasy,’ he had said. Then, taking some more, he turned to look at Salar.

‘There is no end to ecstasy. It is preceded by pleasure and followed by more ecstasy.’

He went on in his stupor, but Salar was not convinced.

‘No, it does end. What happens when it ends? When it really ends?’ His friend looked at him strangely. ‘You know it yourself, don’t you? You have been through it off and on.’

Salar, instead of replying, again started taking cocaine.

The twine biting into the flesh of his wrists was now speaking: ‘Pain.’

‘What is next to pain?’

He had asked Imama Hashim jeeringly that night.

‘Nothingness.’

A rope-like thing had dropped on his body. It slithered over his head, face, down his neck, chest, stomach, and then slid away swiftly. Salar choked his scream as his body shook. It was a snake that had slithered off him without biting him. His body was soaked wet with sweat and shivering like a fever-ridden patient.

‘Nothingness,’ the voice was clear.

‘—and what is next to nothingness?’

The response was a sarcastic, contemptuous smile. ‘Hell.’

She had said the same thing. He had been there, tied up, for the last eight hours in that desolate, dark and terrifying solitude. He had been shouting for help with all his might for an hour and his throat had gone hoarse, unable to speak another word.

He was suspended between ‘Nothingness’ and ‘Hell’. Perhaps, he was about to enter ‘Nothingness’ and was about to reach ‘Hell’.

‘Don’t you feel afraid to ask what would come after Hell? What can come after Hell?’

After a person dies—condemned and sentenced—what remains of him that you are so keen to know?’

Salar looked around himself with terrified eyes: what was that place? His grave or hell or a glimpse of it in this life.....hunger, thirst, utter helplessness, crawling insects whom he could not stop from biting him, almost paralyzed hands and feet, wounds on his back and wrists getting worse by the moment.....whether it was fear or terror but he had begun screaming like a mad man. His screams were renting the air—hysterical and frightening screams, apparently without purpose. He had never felt such fear in his whole life. Never. He began to see demons and apparitions around him.

He felt that a blood vessel in his brain might burst or he might have a nervous breakdown. Then his screams slowly subsided and his throat was completely choked. He heard strange muffled sounds: he was sure that he was dying. His heart was failing or else he was losing his mental balance. And suddenly then, at that moment, the twine tying his wrists at the back of the tree loosened. His faltering senses seemed to jolt back to life. Biting his lower lip, he moved his hands. The twine began to loosen further. Perhaps, it had broken due to the constant friction with the tree trunk. He moved his hands a little more and realized that he was free of the trunk.

Unbelieving, he straightened his arms; waves of pain shot through them. ‘Have I, have I been saved?’ he wondered as he looked uncertainly at the outlines of his arms and hands in the darkness. ‘Why? What for?’ His mind was going numb. He removed from his neck the strip of cloth that had first been tied across his mouth. The movements made him groan as his arms

hurt very badly, so badly that he felt he might not be able to use them again. His legs were also going numb. He tried to stand up, but fell to the ground. A whimper escaped him. He tried to stand up again with the help of his hands and knees and this time he succeeded.

The two boys had taken his joggers and his watch as well. His socks were lying somewhere around. He could have felt around for them in the dark, but he would have had to use his arms and hands. He was incapable of doing this, neither physically nor mentally.

He only wanted to get out of there at any cost: stumbling through the dark, he somehow got through the bushes, bruised and scratched, till he reached the road where the boys had accosted him. He walked down barefoot. The pebbles and stones hurt his feet, but this was nothing compared to the physical and mental ordeal he had been through. He did not know what time it was but he was aware that more than half the night was over.

He did not know how much time it took him to walk down or how he did it. He only knew that he had wept loudly all the way.

He did not bother to look at the state he was in, even in the light on the roads of Islamabad. He did not stop, nor did he ask for help. Crying, he stumbled along on the footpath.

A police patrol car saw him first and stopped near him. The constables got down in front of him and stopped him. For the first time, he came to his senses but he could not stop his tears. They questioned him but what could he say? Within the next fifteen minutes he was in a hospital where he was provided first aid. They were asking him his home address, but his throat was choked. He was unable to tell them anything. With a swollen hand, he scribbled his home phone number and address.

.....

‘How much longer is he to be kept here?’

‘Not long. As soon as he regains consciousness, we’ll check him up again and discharge him. His injuries are not grave; he only needs complete rest at home.’

His mind was moving from the unconscious to the conscious state. The meaningless sounds were becoming comprehensible. He was beginning to recognize the voices. One voice was that of Sikandar Usman. The other voice must have been of some doctor. Salar very slowly opened his eyes. He was at once blinded by the light. The room was very brightly lit. He felt that it might be the private clinic of their family doctor. He had stayed in a room like this once before too, and a cursory glance was enough for confirmation. Now, his brain was functioning perfectly normally. He again became aware of the pain in various parts of his body, even though he was in a very soft and comfortable bed.

He was not in the clothes he had on in the government hospital where he had first been taken. He was in other clothes and his body may also have been cleaned up with water, because his arms exposed from the half-sleeved shirt did not show any dirt or grit. His wrists

were wrapped in bandages and his arms bore a lot of small marks. His arms and hands were swollen. He could imagine innumerable such marks on his face and other parts of his body. He felt that one of his eyes was also swollen and his jaws were also aching, but worst of all was his throat. There was a drip in his arm which was about to finish.

The doctor was the first to see him regain consciousness. He was not their family doctor; perhaps, he was some other doctor working with their family physician. He beckoned Sikandar towards him.

‘Has he come to?’ He saw Tayyba, who was seated on a sofa, move towards him, but Sikandar remained motionless. The doctor checked Salar’s pulse.

‘How are you feeling now?’

Salar wanted to say something but his voice failed him. He could only open his mouth. The doctor repeated his question, but Salar shook his head negatively.

‘Try speaking.’ Perhaps, the doctor was already aware of the problem with his throat. Salar again shook his head. The doctor picked up a torchlike instrument from the tray that the nurse was holding.

‘Open your mouth.’ Salar parted his aching jaws. The doctor examined his throat for sometime and then switched off the torch.

‘The throat needs to be thoroughly examined,’ he said to Sikandar Usman, turning towards him. Then he pushed a writing pad and pen towards Salar. The nurse, by now, had removed the drip from his arm.

‘Sit up and tell what’s happened to your throat.’ He did not have difficulty in sitting up. The nurse had put the pillow behind his back. He kept thinking, holding the pad in his hand.

‘What happened to you – to your throat, your body, your brain?’ He was unable to write anything. He kept looking at the pen held in his swollen fingers. He remembered what had happened to him. He remembered his screams which had rendered him unable to speak.

‘What am I to write? That on a hill I was robbed and tied up, that for a few hours I was lowered into a grave to find the answers to my questions....What is next to ecstasy?’

He kept looking at the crisp white paper and then briefly jotted down what had occurred. The doctor, holding the pad, quickly went through the seven or eight sentences and pushed the pad towards Sikandar Usman.

‘You should immediately contact the police so that the car can be retrieved. As it is, a lot of time has been lost. Heaven knows how far they’ve escaped with the car,’ the doctor sympathetically advised Sikandar Usman, who glanced at the writing pad.

‘Yes, I’ll contact the police.’ The two talked for some time about the check up of Salar’s throat after which the doctor and the nurse left. The moment they left, Sikandar Usman flung the writing pad at Salar’s chest.

‘Keep this pack of lies to yourself! Do you think that I’ll ever believe you? No, never.’ Sikandar was infuriated. ‘This may be your latest adventure, another suicide attempt.’

Salar wanted to say, ‘For God’s sake! It isn’t true,’ but he looked at him unable to speak.

‘What am I to tell the doctor? That he is in the habit of creating such situations, that he was born to create such problems?’ Salar had never seen Sikandar Usman so angry. Maybe, they were really fed up with him. Tayyba stood by silently.

‘Every year, there’s a new drama, new trouble. What sin have we committed in having you?’ Sikandar Usman was convinced that this was some part of a new adventure. Salar’s injuries could not be taken as proof of a dacoity, particularly, when there was no witness, as the boy had tried to take his own life four times in the past. Salar recalled the story about ‘crying wolf’. Some tales are indeed true. His constant lying had cost him the confidence of others. Maybe, he had lost everything: respect in the eyes of others, self-confidence, pride, honor—he had reached the nadir in all.

‘It was a long time since a new drama had been created, so you thought —Why deprive my parents? It was long since they had been embarrassed and humiliated—it was time to give them a fresh blow.’

‘Sikandar, maybe what he’s saying is correct. You should at least inform the police about the car,’ Tayyba said after reading the message on the pad.

‘Do you think he is telling the truth? Has he ever told the truth? I don’t believe even a word of his rubbish. This son of yours will have me hanged one day and you’re telling me to go report to the police? Make a laughing stock of myself? He must have done something with the car too—maybe sold it to someone or disposed it off somewhere.’

Now, he was really abusing Salar, who had never been spoken to abusively before. Sikandar would only scold him but even so Salar would react vehemently. Of all the four brothers, he was the only one who could not even stand being reprimanded and Sikandar would be very cautious speaking to him, because he would over-react. But, today, Salar did not react even to his abuses.

He could understand how his father despaired of him. For the first time, sitting on the bed, he was trying to understand his parents’ predicament. What had they not provided him? They had fulfilled his every wish without his having to utter a word. And what had he been giving them in return? What was he meting out to them now: mental anguish, worry, pain? Apart from him,

none of his brothers or his sister had ever caused them problems. He was the only one who.....

==Someday, because of you, we both may have to commit suicide. You would then be at peace with yourself.'

Last night, tied up on that hill, for the first time he had longed for his parents. He realized for once how much he needed them, what would he do without them, who would worry for him except them. For once, Sikandar's words had not hurt his pride. He was always close to Sikandar and he quarreled the most with him too.

==I don't want to see your face again. I want to have you dumped back in the place about which you are lying.'

==Now stop it, Sikandar,' Tayyba remonstrated.

==Why should I stop? Why doesn't he stop? Why doesn't he take pity on us and stop his antics? Has he been sent to make our lives hell on earth?' Sikander said with greater agitation.

==In a while, the police people who'd found him on the street will be here to record his statement, and he'd give them the cock and bull story that he, the innocent soul that he is, had been robbed. It would have been better if indeed he had been robbed and been thrown down the hill, so that my problems were over.'

Salar began to weep uncontrollably; he was crying with his hands clasped. Sikandar and Tyeba were taken aback. For the first time, they were seeing him cry and that too with his hands clasped, as if pleading. What was he doing? What did he want? What was he saying? Sikandar Usman stood absolutely still; Tayyba sat next to him on the bed and embracing him, tried to pat his back in consolation; and he, like a child, clung to her. Sikandar Usman, standing at the foot of the bed, suddenly felt that, perhaps, this time he was not lying, that indeed something might have happened to him. Clinging to Tayyba, he was crying uncontrollably like a little child. Tayyba, trying to console him, herself started to cry. Let alone small things, he had not shed tears over big issues too—so what had happened that his tears did not cease that day?

Standing there, Sikandar Usman had a change of heart. ==What if he was really tied up there all night.....?'

He had been up all night waiting for Salar and fuming at him. He thought that he had again gone off gallivanting in the car to Lahore or some place else. He was getting anxious but he knew Salar's behavior and, so, was more angry than worried. He had gone to bed at about three in the morning when he was informed on the phone by the police.

Sikander Usman had gone to the hospital and found him in a very serious condition, but he was not prepared to believe that he was a victim of some incident. He knew that he would, from time to time, inflict pain on himself. For a person who would cut his wrists, plunge his bike into

oncoming traffic on a one-way street, take an overdose of sleeping pills, or tie himself up and jump backwards into the water, it was not difficult for him to get himself into such a state.

His body was swollen where the insects had bitten him. In places, his skin had turned purple. His feet were also badly injured. Similar was the state of his wrists, neck and back; and there were wounds on his jaws. In spite of all this, Sikander Usman was certain that this was his own doing. Perhaps, even if Salar had been able to speak and convince him, he would never have been moved, but seeing him weep uncontrollably he had begun to believe that he was telling the truth.

He came out of the room and contacted the police on his mobile. An hour later, he came to know that a red sports car had been found and the two boys driving it had been taken into custody. This happened during a routine check for the car's papers and the police, suspecting at the boys' nervousness, nabbed them. They did not say from whom the car had been snatched; they had insisted that they found the car abandoned and took it for a joy ride. Since no FIR had been registered for the car, it was difficult to verify the boys' statement.

But shortly after filing the FIR, Sikander Usman had learnt about the recovery of the car, and now he was in real anxiety about Salar about 6 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

Sikander and Tayyba did not bring Salar home that night. He stayed at the hospital; by the next day, his body ache and swelling had considerably lessened. Around 11 in the morning, his parents came to take him home. Before that, two policemen had come and taken a long written statement from Salar about the events that befell him in Margalla.

Entering his room with his parents, Salar was embarrassed—for the first time—about the life-size posters of nude models plastered all over his windows. Tayyba and Sikander had come into his room many times and the sight of those posters was neither new nor objectionable for them. _Now rest. I have had fruit and juices kept in the fridge for you. Help yourself if you feel hungry or send for the servant—he'll serve you,' said Tayyba.

Salar was on his bed. His parents stayed with him awhile and then drawing the window curtains shut, asked him to sleep and left the room. As soon as they had gone, Salar sat up. Then he locked the bedroom door and drew the curtains open. Swiftly, he began to pull down the posters, pictures, cut-outs, all that adorned his windows and walls. He piled them up and put them in the bath tub. When he switched on the bathroom light, he caught sight of his face in the mirror—swollen and bruised as he had expected it to be. He went back to the room where several pornographic magazines also lay around. He gathered them all up and dumped the lot in the bath tub. Then, one by one, he took the videos from the racks and began to pull out their tapes. In no time, his carpet was covered by a mangled heap of video tapes. He trashed the cases and scooping up the heap of tapes threw them into the bath tub too. Then picking up a lighter, he set the tapes alight. As the sparks turned into flames, the bathroom was filled with acrid smoke. He turned on the exhaust fan and opened the bathroom windows to clear the air. He was burning this heap of pornographic trash because he wanted safety from

the flames of Hell that would embrace him. The fire was consuming the paper and plastic as though it had been created for the flames.

He stood watching the fire without even blinking as though he stood on the edge of hell. A night ago he had stood on the hill watching the lights of Islamabad below and thinking that it was the last night of his life and he would never see the Islamabad lights again. In that hysterical condition, he had been shouting at the top of his voice, ‘Once more, just once more, give me a chance! Just one chance and I promise that I will turn away from sin and never look back again.’

He had been given the chance and now it was time for him to live up to his promise. The fire had reduced everything to ashes; as it smoldered and died down, Salar washed away all traces with the hosepipe.

As he turned towards the washbasin, Salar noted that though the gold chain around his neck had been snatched away, the platinum and diamond stud in his ear lobe was intact—they had not paid attention to that probably because his long hair had concealed it, or even if they had seen it they might have thought it worthless.

Salar took off the stud and put it on the counter. Then taking a pair of clippers from his shaving kit, he began to chop off his hair—mercilessly, heartlessly. The water from the running tap was draining away the cut hair. Then he began to shave his face. It was as if he wanted to remove all signs of his former self. Then he took off his clothes and unwrapped the bandages on his arms. He stepped under the shower—for one whole hour he washed every part of his body, reciting the kalima as he did so... as if he had been brought into the circle of Islam for the first time...as if he had become a Muslim for the first time.

When he emerged from the bathroom, he opened the fridge and took out an apple. Having eaten it he lay down to sleep. He awoke when the alarm he had set before sleeping rang out. It was two in the afternoon. -----

‘My God, Salar! What have you done to your hair?’ Looking at him, Tayyba forgot for a moment that he could not speak up. Salar pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and put it before her. It said ‘I want to go to the market.’

‘What do you need?’ Tayyba looked at in surprise. ‘It’s been a few hours since you got home from the hospital and you’ve not even recovered completely....and now you want to go roaming about again.’ She reprimanded him gently.

‘I want to go and buy some books. I’m not going gallivanting.’ He wrote and passed the paper to her.

Tayyaba looked at him and replied, ‘Very well; go with the driver.’

It was past sunset when he stepped out into the market. The lights had come on, creating an ambience of color and life all around. He saw young people moving about, dressed in Western clothes, carefree, laughing, enjoying themselves. Among them, he felt—most unusually—the same sense of fear that he had experienced 48 hours ago in the Margallas. He too was one of these youngsters—laughing, joking, teasing girls, passing unsavory remarks. Head bowed and without caring to look anywhere, he entered the bookshop that lay ahead.

He took out the paper listing the books he wanted and put it before the shopkeeper. He wanted a copy of the Quran's translation and some books about prayers. The shopkeeper, who knew him well, looked at him in amazement. Salar used to go there to buy pornographic magazines and the latest novels of Sidney Sheldon, Harold Robbins, and the like. Salar had understood the man's surprise. Instead of looking him in the eye, Salar kept looking at the counter.

The shopkeeper, after instructing a salesman, turned to Salar.

‘You've come after a long time. Were you away somewhere?’ Salar shook his head and scribbled ‘Was out for studies’ on a piece of paper.

‘And what's wrong with your throat?’

‘Nothing much, just sore.’ He scribbled again.

The salesman returned with the translation of the Quran and the other books Salar wanted.

‘Oh yes! There's quite a trend these days for reading up on Islam. It's a good thing too, especially if you're abroad,’ the shopkeeper stated with a smile, in a businesslike way.

Salar was unresponsive; he began to skim through the books placed before him. a few moments later, to the right of the Quran, he saw a pile of pornographic magazines. He looked up in surprise.

‘These have just come in—I thought I'd show them to you. Perhaps, you might want to buy them.’

Salar looked at the translation of the Quran and then those magazines, lying a few inches away and a wave of fury coursed through him. Why? He didn't know. With his left hand he picked up that pile and flung it as far as he could across the shop. For a few moments there was complete silence. The salesman stood aghast.

‘Bill!’ Salar scrawled and held it to the salesman’s face. The man, without a word, began to calculate the amount for the books Salar had selected. Salar paid up and was out of the shop with his books.

‘Idiot!’ He heard someone say as he stepped out. It was a girl, and Salar did not bother to see who it was: he knew that he was the object of the remark.

His voice was restored two weeks later; although it was still quite hoarse, at least he could speak. In these two weeks he had been on a soulsearching journey—something he was doing for the first time in all his years. Perhaps it was the first time that he had realized that there was such a thing as the soul and if there was a problem with one’s soul.... He had entered a phase of silence: not to speak but only to listen. And listening was, at times, more important it dawned on him for the first time. He had never been afraid of the night before but after this incident he was terrified of the dark. He slept with the light switched on. He had recognized those two boys in police custody, but he had refused to accompany them to that place where they had left him trussed up. He did not want to go through any mental torment again. He had never experienced so many sleepless nights as he did now and was compelled to take sleeping pills. Sometimes when he didn’t take sedatives, he’d spent the entire night wide awake. In New Haven too there had been times like this, painful and tortuous, but then it was more of confusion and restlessness, and maybe, remorse. But now he was going through a third state—fear. He could not determine what fear had overcome him that night in the hills: was it the fear of death, or the grave or hell?

Imama had said that after ecstasy comes pain: death was pain. She said that after pain was nothingness: the grave was nothingness. She said that after nothingness would come hell. He did not want to reach that stage. He wanted to be saved from that ecstasy that would lead him from pain to hell.

‘If I didn’t know about these things, how come Imama did? She’s about the same age as me and comes from a similar background, then how did she have the answers to all these questions?’ he would think, astonished. ‘She had the same luxuries as I did, so what made us different?’ What was the school of thought she belonged to and why did she not want to be part of it? He read about them now and it added to his confusion. Was the Prophet’s (PBUH) finality such an important issue that a girl should want to leave home forever?

‘I didn’t marry Asjad because he did not believe in the finality of the Prophet (PBUH); do you think I’d be ready to marry someone like you who, though he believes in the Prophet’s (PBUH) station, lives a sinful life and does all that my Prophet (PBUH) has asked us to refrain from? If I

do not marry one who does not believe in the Holy Prophet (PBUH), I will not marry one who flouts his instructions either.'

He remembered each word spoken by Imama Hashim and now he was pondering over their meaning.

'You will not understand this,' she had often told him: so often that it had begun to annoy him. What was she trying to prove anyway—her superiority, that she was a great scholar or that she was very pious, and he was inferior? But now he realized that she was right. He really was not capable of appreciating her thought. How can a worm that lives in the muck know what dirt is? To such a one all others seem to be in the pits. He was like that worm then.

'I loathe the look in your eyes, and your unbuttoned shirt!'

He too now began to detest these things. For a long time, this statement had echoed in his head like a buzz word every time he faced the mirror; try as he would to shake it off or lose himself in his work, it had gone on repeating itself. Now he had started buttoning up and keeping his gaze lowered. He could not even look himself in the eye in the mirror. No one had ever told him such a thing about his eyes, and certainly not a girl. Imama was the first one to do so, and it was not his eyes but the look in them that was loathsome. Imama had identified that look. He used to talk to girls who looked him in the eye and spoke candidly—he enjoyed their company. Imama did not do so—she'd look at him but not directly, and if she found him staring, she'd look away. Salar had the mistaken notion that she looked away because she found his eyes mesmerizing.

'I loathe the look in your eyes, and your unbuttoned shirt!' Hearing her say this over the phone, he had been quite shocked. Eyes are the windows of the soul: he recalled reading this somewhere. So did his eyes really reflect the sordid depths of his soul? He was not surprised—it must be so, but to recognize this filth, there must be a criterion of purity before one. Imama Hashim was that example of purity.

'You need not explain or instruct me now. You will have no further cause for complaint,' said Salar without looking up at Sikander.

He was going back to Yale, and before his departure, Sikander—with a faint hope of change—had launched into the usual instructions and admonitions. But even before he could complete his words, Salar had assured him sincerely—for the first time—and Sikandar had faith in his son's assurance—for the first time ever.

He had been observant of the change in Salar after the incident in the hills. Salar was not the same person—his thought processes, his attitude, his appearance, his very life had changed. It was as if the flame within him had been extinguished. Whether these changes were right or wrong, good or bad, Sikandar was yet unable to comment, but he did know that there had been a major impact in Salar’s life which had brought about this change. He did not realize that this was the first time that Salar had been defeated, and the first blow in life brings stalwarts to their knees—Salar was just a strip of a boy barely into his twenties.

Sometimes in our lives we do not know whether we have emerged from darkness into light or if we are entering into the dark—the direction is unknown. But one can differentiate, in any case, between the earth and the sky. When you raise your head, it is the sky above; and when you lower it, it is the earth below—whether or not it is visible. To move forward in life, you need just four points of direction—right and left, ahead and behind— the fifth is the ground under your feet. If that were not there, it would be an abyss, hell, and on arriving there one would have no need of direction. The sixth point of direction was above and that was unattainable. That was where God was—He who was invisible to the eye but was present in every heartbeat, every pulsing flow of the blood, every breath, every morsel that went down one’s throat. To Salar, his photographic memory, his 150+ IQ level were a torment now. He wanted to forget everything, all that he had been doing till now, all that he could not forget. If only someone could understand his agony.

END OF CHAPTER 5

.....

Chapter 6

On his return to New Haven, Salar embarked on a new journey of his life. He remembered all the promises he had made, sobbing, tied to the tree that night in the horrendous and lonesome darkness of that jungle. He began to live in isolation from all the others, with the least contact or connection with anyone.

‘I don’t want to meet you.’

He had always been outspoken but none of his friends expected him to go to this extent. For a few weeks, he was the target of speculation and criticism from his group; then this changed to objections and discussion and, finally, to sarcastic remarks and distaste. Eventually, it simmered down and people got busy with their own lives. Salar Sikander was not

the focus of anyone’s life and nor was anyone the focus of his life. There were a few things he did when he came back to New Haven: one of these was to try and meet Jalal Ansar. He had brought Jalal’s address from his family while returning from Pakistan. It was a coincidence that one of his cousins worked in the same hospital as Jalal; the rest was easy, in fact, too easy. Salar wanted to meet him once and apologize to him, to confess all the lies he had spoken to him and Imama about each other. He was ashamed of the role he had played in their relationship and wanted to atone for it. He had reached Jalal Ansar and now, through him, he wanted to reach Imama Hashim.

He was with Jalal in the hospital cafeteria. Jalal looked very serious and the furrows on his brow reflected his growing displeasure. Salar had reached the hospital a while ago, and seeing him face to face left Jalal stunned. Salar asked for a few minutes of his time; Jalal obliged him after making him wait for two hours.

‘First of all, I would like to know how you traced me?’ he bluntly asked Salar, sitting down. ‘It is not important.’

‘It is very important. If you really want me to spend some time with you, I must know how you found me.’

‘I sought help from my cousin. He is a doctor and has been working in this city for a long time. I don’t know how he located you. I had only given him your name and some other information,’ replied Salar. ‘Lunch?’ asked Jalal, very formally. He had brought over his own lunch tray to the table.

Salar declined with thanks. Jalal shrugged and proceeded with his lunch.

‘What did you want to talk to me about?’

‘I wanted to make you aware of some facts.’ ‘Facts?’ Jalal raised his eyebrows, quizzically.

==I wanted to tell you that I had lied to you. I was not Imama's friend; she was my friend's sister—my next-door neighbor...’ Jalal continued eating.

==I had only a fleeting acquaintance with her. And that too, because once she had given me first aid and saved my life. She did not like me, neither did I like her, and that's why I made out to you that she was my great friend. I wanted to create misunderstandings between you two.’ Jalal was earnestly listening to him, eating his lunch.

==After this, when Imama left home and wanted to come to you, I lied to her about your marriage.’

At this, Jalal stopped eating. ==I told her that you had already married. That is why she did not come to you. I later realized that I had done something inappropriate, but by then it was too late. I had no contact with Imama, but it is by chance that I was able to contact you. I want to apologize to you.’

==I accept your apology, but I do not think that it is because of you that any misunderstanding occurred between me and Imama. I had already decided not to marry her,’ Jalal stated plainly.

==She loved you very much,’ Salar said in a hushed tone.

==Yes, I know, but in a marriage, love is not the only criterion. There are many other things,’ Jalal was saying realistically.

==Jalal! Isn't it possible for you to marry her?’

==Firstly, I have no contact with her. Secondly, if I were in contact with her, I could not have married her.’ ==She needs your support,’ Salar replied.

==I don't think she needs my support as a long time has passed and by now she must have found someone.’ Jalal spoke complacently.

==It's possible she has not done so. She may still be waiting for you.’ ==I'm not given to wondering about such possibilities. I have told you that marriage at this stage of my career is out of the question—and that too with her...’

==Why?’

==I see no need to answer this query—why. You have nothing to do with any of this business...why I don't want to marry her. I had already told her why and after all this time, you turn up, wanting to open this Pandora's Box again!’ Jalal was quite angry now.

==I'm just trying to make amends for the damage I've caused you both,’ Salar explained gently.

==No damage has been done to me and nor to Imama, I think. You are just being over-sensitive.’

Jalal popped a few morsels of salad into his mouth. Salar kept looking at him, wondering how to get his point across. ==I could help you find her,’ he said a little later.

‘But I don’t want to find her. When I don’t intend to marry her, then what’s the point in looking for her?’

Salar sighed deeply. ‘Do you know what the cause of her leaving home was?’

‘Certainly, she didn’t do it for me,’ Jalal interjected.

‘Very well, not for you, but the reason why she did so...as a Muslim were you not bound to help her, especially when you knew that she loved you deeply? She was inspired by you.’

‘I am not the only Muslim in the world and nor am I duty-bound that I should help her. I have just one life to live and I’m not going to mess it up for someone else’s sake. You’re a Muslim too—why don’t you marry her? I had told you then too, and you do have a soft spot for her, anyway.’ Jalal spoke sharply.

Salar looked at him in silence: he could not disclose that he had married her. ‘Marriage? She doesn’t like me,’ he said plaintively.

‘I can talk to her and convince her; just get me in touch with her and I’ll get her to agree. You’re a good man, after all, and from a good family too, I suppose. A year and a half ago, you had a pretty fancy car—which means that you’re quite well off. By the way, why are you here?’

‘Studying for an MBA.’

‘Then there’s no problem: you’ll find a decent job and you do have the money. What more do girls want? And Imama knows you, in any case.’ Jalal had solved the problem in a flash.

‘The problem is with her knowing me—she knows me too well,’ thought Salar as he looked at Jalal. ‘She loves you,’ Salar reminded him.

‘That’s not my fault. Girls tend to be too emotional in such matters,’ he replied, now losing interest.

‘This couldn’t have been a one-sided affair—you must have been involved to some extent,’ said Salar seriously.

‘Yes, somewhat...but a person’s priorities change with time and the situation.’

‘If you intended to change your priorities according to the times and the situation, then you should have told her before getting involved. At least, then she would not have depended on you nor expected any help. I am hoping that you’re not going to say that you had made any commitment about getting married to her.’

Jalal said nothing but glared at him angrily. Then, a few moments later, he brusquely asked, ‘Just what are you trying to imply or tell me?’ ‘When she first gave me your number and asked me to call you, she told me to ask you if you had spoken to your parents about getting married to her. I gave her my cell phone so that she could speak to you herself. Certainly, before coming

to Islamabad you must have told her that you'd speak to your parents about marrying her. You must certainly have expressed affection for her and then proposed.'

Jalal interrupted somewhat harshly. 'I did not propose to her. It was she who proposed to me.'

'Agreed that she did...so what did you do? Did you refuse?' Salar seemed to be challenging Jalal. 'I may have declined.'

Salar gave a strange smile. 'She told me that you recite naats beautifully and you have great love for Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH). She must have told you too why she loved you, but meeting you and getting to know you has been quite a disappointment. You must recite naats with passion but as far as the love of the Prophet (PBUH) is concerned, I don't think you have any. I'm not a very good being myself and don't know much about love, but I do know that one who professes love of Allah and His Prophet (PBUH) or gives such an impression to others cannot turn away from a hand stretched out for help; nor can he deceive others.' Salar stood up. 'And all I'm asking for is to help her: perhaps, she did too, a year and a half ago. However, if you insist on refusing, I can't compel you. But I'm very disappointed after meeting you and talking to you.'

Salar held out his hand to say goodbye, but Jalal ignored him. He kept glaring balefully at Salar, his eyes filled with hatred.

Khuda Hafiz,' said Salar, withdrawing his hand. Jalal just watched him walk out and mumbled to himself, 'It's an idiot's world out there.' Once again, he turned to his lunch tray. He was in a foul mood.

After the meeting with Jalal Ansar, he was finding it difficult to define his own sentiments. Should he stop being remorseful? Because Jalal had said that even if Salar had not interfered, he would not have married Imama, and after speaking to Jalal Ansar, he realized that Jalal did not feel deeply towards Imama. But this was giving rise to new questions. He had met Jalal today. Had he spoken to Jalal like this a year and a half back, the effect may have been different. Then, his feelings for Imama may have been different, and, maybe, he would not have shown such indifference towards her, as he had done today. Salar's mind alternated between relief and remorse.

The second year of MBA passed off very peacefully. Apart from studies, he did little else. He would only talk about sports or discuss other topics with his class fellows, or else spend time with them on group projects. He would spend the rest of the time in the library. His only activity at the weekend was to go to the Islamic Centre, where he would learn to recite the Holy

Quran from an Arab and repeat his lessons; eventually, he started to learn the Arabic language from him.

Khalid Abdul Rehman, the Arab, was basically a medical technician and was attached to a hospital. At the weekends, he took classes of Arabic language and the Holy Quran at the Islamic Centre. He took no remuneration for his services and, in fact, he and his relatives had donated a large number of books to the library of the Islamic Centre. One day, during one of these Quran classes, he asked Salar, ‘Why don’t you memorize the Quran?’ At this unexpected suggestion Salar stared at him in amazement.

‘IHow can I do it?’

‘Why....why can’t you do it?’ Khalid counter-questioned him. ‘It is very difficult, and for a person like me; no, no I can’t do it,’ Salar said after a few moments.

‘You’ve got a good brain. In fact, I would say that in my whole life I have not come across a more intelligent person than you. In the short time, the speed with which you have learnt short and long surahs, nobody else has been able to do it. And I am also amazed at the speed at which you are learning Arabic. When the mind is so fertile, and when there is a yearning to learn and retain things, then why not the Holy Quran. Allah also has a right over your capabilities,’ Khalid said. ‘You have not understood me. I have no objection against learning it, but it is very difficult. I cannot do it at this age,’ Salar explained. ‘But I think memorizing the Quran will be easy for you. You start it, and though I won’t vouch for anyone else, but for you I can say with guarantee that you’ll not only do it easily but in a very short time.....’ Salar did not speak further on the subject that day.

But that night after going back to his apartment he thought only of his conversation with Khalid Abdul Rehman. He had thought that Khalid would not again broach the subject, but he again posed the same question the following week.

Salar looked at him quietly for a long time and, then in a low voice, said to Khalid, ‘I feel frightened.’

‘Of what? Of memorizing the Quran?’ Khalid asked with some amazement.

Salar nodded affirmatively.

‘Why....?’

He was silent for a long time. Then he ran his finger over the carpet and looking at the lines that he had drawn, said to Khalid, ‘I have sinned a lot. So many sins, that it is difficult for me to count them – small sins, big sins, every sin that one can imagine. I cannot even think of saving this book in my breast or my mind. My breast and mind are not pure. People like mepeople like me are not worthy of memorizing it. I cannot even think of it,’ he uttered, overcome with emotion. Khalid was silent for a while. Then he asked, ‘Do you still sin?’ Salar shook his head in denial.

“Then, what is there to be afraid of? If you can recite the Quran, in spite of all your sins, you can memorize it also, and you have stopped sinning. This is sufficient. If Allah does not want you to memorize it, you will not be able to, no matter how hard you tried; but if you are fortunate, you

will,” Khalid seemed to have fixed the problem in a trice.

Salar kept awake that night. After half the night was over, he opened the first chapter—trembling—and began to memorize it. As he did so, he realized that Khalid Abdul Rehman’s words were true. He already knew a lot of the Quran by heart. The fear that he felt in the beginning, when he started, did not remain with him for long. His heart found strength and support from an unknown source—from where? His tongue rolled out the words with lucidity—who was helping him? Who had stopped the trembling of his hands? Why?

Sometime before the morning prayers, he broke into tears—an outpouring—when, for the first time, he was able to completely recite what he had memorized in the last five hours. He had faltered nowhere, nor had he forgotten anything, nor had he committed any errors of diction. Reciting the last few lines, though, his tongue faltered—his sobs made it difficult for him to recite fluently.

“If Allah wills, and you are fortunate, you will memorize the Holy Quran, otherwise no matter however hard you may try you will not be

able to,” he was recalling Khalid Abdul Rehman’s words.

After saying the morning prayers, he had recorded on a cassette the first memorization of his life. Once again, he had felt no difficulty. In fact, there was greater fluency of recital and his tone was eloquent. This was a novelty in his life: he had been blessed again but his depression had not gone. At night, he could not imagine going to sleep without sleeping pills, and in spite of the sedative, he could not put off the lights in his room. He was afraid of the dark.

Then, it was Khalid who had said it to him one day. He was reciting the lesson from the Quran, which he had memorized, and Khalid intently kept watching his face. When he had finished, he picked up the glass of water and put it to his lips.

He heard Khalid say, “Last night, in my dream, I saw you performing

Haj.”

Salar could not swallow the water in his mouth. Putting the glass down, he stared at Khalid.

“This year, your MBA will be over; you can perform the Haj next year.” Khalid’s tone was very formal. Salar absentmindedly swallowed the water in his mouth. He could not question his proposal that day. In fact, he had no question.

He had memorized the Holy Quran two weeks before the start of the final semester of his MBA. Four weeks after the final semester, at the age of twenty-three and a half years, he had performed the first Haj of his life. Whilst going there or coming back, he had no notions of superiority, pride, envy or anything else in his heart and mind. The people with him in the Pakistani camp were, perhaps, those who were fortunate. They were called to the pilgrimage because of their good deeds. But he was aware of his misdeeds and had been called to explain his actions. If he had not been memorizing the Quran, it would not have even occurred to him to perform Haj. The person who did not have had the courage to face Allah when distant from Haram Shareef, and was ready to go off anywhere else, could hardly be expected to face the Almighty at the Kaaba.

But at Khalid Abdul Rehman's suggestion just once, he had docilely acquiesced and had submitted his papers for going for Haj. Others got the chance to go for Haj when they not only had no surfeit of sins, but also had loads of good deeds. But Salar Sikandar got to go when he had nothing but his sins to present.

Very well, if I have sinned without any fear, then I should not be afraid of standing before my Maker and begging forgiveness for my sins— except that I will not be able to lift up my head, to raise my eyes...the only word on my lips will be the plea for forgiveness. I accept this punishment, for I deserve worse humiliation and scorn. Each year, there must be one such person who brings no offering except his misdeeds—if this year I, Salar Sikandar, am to be that person, then so be it,' he thought.

.....

The meaning of the term 'burden of one's sins' and how on the Day of Judgment a person would want to cast it off his back and flee from it or shove it onto someone else's back, became clear to Salar when he reached the Haram Shareef. Standing there, had he tried to trade in his sins for all the wealth he had in his present and future life, he would have found no buyer. If only one could trade in one's vices for money and buy someone else's virtues. In that horde of thousands, all clad in two simple white sheets, who knew who Salar Sikandar was or cared how brilliant his mind was? Or what he had studied and from where? The academic records he had set and broken and the challenges he would overcome with his intelligence in various fields made no difference here. Should he trip and fall and be trampled in a stampede, no one there would pause to think what an intellectual loss it would be. He became acutely aware of his insignificance, and if even a shred of doubt had remained it was dispelled.

Every remaining bit of pride, ego, self-importance, and envy had been shot out of his system. He had gone there to have these very pollutants removed.

The excellent result of his MBA surprised nobody, as his department was well aware of his capabilities. His projects and his assignments were so much better than those of his class fellows that his professors had no reservations accepting his astounding success. He was way ahead of his peers, and in the second year of his MBA he had forged even further ahead.

He had done his internship with a UN agency. Even before the completion of his MBA, he had offers from seven multinational companies, apart from this UN agency.

On learning of his MBA result, Sikander Usman called him close and asked him, ‘Now, what do you want to do?’

‘I’m going back to the States as I want to work with the United Nations only.’

‘But I want you to start your own business or join me in mine,’ Sikander Usman had told him.

‘Papa, I cannot go into business as I don’t have the temperament for it. I want to do a job and I don’t want to live in Pakistan.’

Sikandar Usman was surprised. ‘You had never before said that you did not want to live in Pakistan. You want to settle permanently in

America?’

‘Before, I hadn’t considered settling in America, but now I want to.’

‘Why?’

He did not want to tell him that his depression increased in Pakistan. He would constantly think of Imama, and everything here reminded him of her. Here, he was more aware of having done wrong and was more remorseful.

‘I cannot adjust here.’

Sikander Usman considered him for some time. ‘But I think you can adjust back here.’

Salar knew what he was hinting at, but he remained silent.

‘You want to do a job? It’s alright. You work there for a few years, but later come back to look after my business. I am establishing all this for

you people, not for others.’

He tried for sometime to win him over and Salar listened to him quietly.

After a week, he was back in America and within a few weeks he had started on a job with UNICEF. He had moved from New Haven to New York. It was the beginning of a new life, but within a few weeks he realized that nowhere could he get away from his past. Even there, he could not forget her. His guilty conscience would not let him be. He began to work 16 to 18 hour days and did not sleep more than three to four hours. This intense regimen had, to a great extent, helped to restore him to normality. On the one hand, his great preoccupation with his work had helped lower his depression, and on the other, he had begun to be considered as one of the most prominent workers of his organization. He began to visit countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in connection with the various projects of UNICEF. He was looking, for the first time with his own eyes, at poverty and disease from such close quarters. There is a world of difference between reports and the facts published in newspapers and the horrendous reality witnessed with one's own eyes. He came to understand this difference in his job. There were millions who went hungry to bed every night. There were millions also who over ate. He realized what a great blessing it was to have three meals a day, a roof over your head, and clothes to wear. Traveling with the UNICEF team on chartered aircraft, he would think about his life. He would wonder what great deeds he had done in life that he was so privileged, and what sins had they committed that they were deprived of the basic necessities of life, and, just to remain alive, had to run after packets of food.

He would be up all night making schemes and plans such as for efficient distribution of food, what improvements were possible, where more aid was required, and what projects were required where. Sometimes he would work straight forty eight hours without sleep.

His proposals and reports were so technically sound and thorough that it was not possible to find fault with them. These qualities were enhancing his reputation and stature. He felt that if Allah had blessed him with a better brain and with greater capabilities than others, he should use those capabilities for the benefit of others – to make life easier and better for them. As he worked, he thought of nothing else but this.

Whilst working for UNICEF, he thought of doing M Phil and got admission in the programme. Joining evening classes, he did not doubt for a moment that he was overstretching himself once again, but there was other way open to him. Work had become a passion for him; perhaps, even more: a mission.

Salar's first meeting with Furqan was on a flight from the US to Pakistan. He was seated next to Salar. He was returning after attending a medical conference in the US; Salar was on his way for his sister Anita's wedding. On this long flight, they began with exchanging pleasantries and then their conversation continued throughout. Furqan was older than Salar—he was thirty-five—and after specialization in London, he had come back to Pakistan where he worked in a hospital. He was married and had two children.

After talking for a few hours, Furqan and he set about retiring. Salar, out of routine, took out his sleeping pills from his brief case and downed one with some water.

Furqan watched all this in silence. When he shut the brief case and put it away, Furqan said, Most people can't sleep on a flight without a sedative.'

Salar turning, looked at him and said, I cannot sleep without one, whether I'm on a flight or not—it's the same for me.' Have difficulty in sleeping?' Furqan was suddenly mystified.

Difficulty?' Salar smiled. I just can't sleep. I take a pill and get three or four hours of sleep.'

Insomnia?' Furqan asked.

Perhaps. I haven't been to a doctor but I suppose it is that,' Salar said somewhat casually.

You should have had it checked up. Insomnia at this age? It isn't a sign of good health. I think you've become mad about your work and have upset your normal sleeping routine.'

Furqan was now speaking like a doctor. Salar smiled and listened to him. He could not tell him that if he did not work night and day he could not stay alive with his guilt-laden conscience. He could also not tell him that if he tried sleeping without the pills, he would keep thinking about Imama—so badly that his head would burst with pain

How many hours a day do you work?' Furqan was now investigating.

Eighteen hours, sometimes twenty.'

My God! Since when?' Furqan asked.

Since the last two or three years.'

And since then you must have had the sleep problem. I had thought as much. You have spoilt your own routine, otherwise for a person working such long hours, the mental fatigue itself would provide a long and peaceful sleep,' Furqan observed. It doesn't happen with me,' Salar said softly.

You must try to find out why it doesn't happen with you.' Salar could not tell him that he knew the reason. After some time of silence, Furqan said, If I were to tell you of some ayats to be recited before going to sleep, would you be able to do it ?'

Why wouldn't I be able to recite them?' Salar asked, turning towards him.

‘No, the thing is that people like you and me who have studied a lot and that too in the West do not believe in such things or else do not consider them practical,’ Furqan explained.

‘Furqan, I’m a Hafiz-e-Quran,’ Salar disclosed calmly whilst reclining in his seat.

Furqan was taken aback.

‘Every night, I recite a sipara before I sleep; with me, there is no problem of lack of belief or confidence,’ Salar continued.

‘I’m also a Hafiz-e-Quran,’ Furqan informed him. Salar, turning, smiled at him. This was, indeed, a pleasant coincidence. Even though Furqan had a beard, it had not occurred to Salar that he might also be a Hafiz-e-Quran.

‘Then you shouldn’t have this kind of a problem. A person, who recites the Holy Book before retiring, and has problems falling asleep, appears

strange to me.’

Salar heard Furqan babbling. Now, he was involuntarily slipping into sleep, and he closed his eyes.

‘Do you have a problem?’ he heard Furqan ask. If he had not been under the influence of the sedative he would have smiled and shrugged off the question, but he could not do so in his state of mind.

‘Yes, I have a lot of worries. I do not have peace of mind, I feel as though I’m constantly traveling in a desert, and I’m relentlessly pursued by remorse and guilt. I’m in search of a savior, the perfect mentor, who would release me from this misery, who would show me the road to salvation.’

Furqan was watching his countenance. Even though Salar’s eyes were closed, yet he could see the moisture escape from the corners of his eyes. He was somewhat incoherent and his voice faltered; he was speaking involuntarily under the influence of sleeping pills.

He had become quiet and Furqan did not question him further. His very regular breathing indicated that he had slipped into the realm of sleep.

Their exchange of views continued after he woke up sometime later. Furqan did not refer to Salar’s words spoken as he had drifted off into sleep. Salar himself was not aware of having said anything before falling asleep, and if he had, he did not know what it was.

Before journey's end, they exchanged contact numbers and addresses.

Then Salar invited him to Anita's wedding. Furqan promised he would come but Salar was not sure that he would. Their flight was till Karachi; then Salar had to catch the flight to Islamabad, and Furqan to Lahore. At the airport, Furqan very effusively shook his hand in farewell.

Anita's wedding was three days later and Salar had a lot of work to do in those three days, some wedding-related and some his own. The next evening, he was surprised to receive a call from Furqan. They talked for ten to fifteen minutes and, before putting the phone down, Salar once again reminded him of Anita's wedding

==You needn't remind me, I remember it very well. Besides, I'm going to be in Islamabad this weekend. I have to go look at my school in the village. The school building is being added to, and in this connection.....So this time my stay in Islamabad will be somewhat long.'

Salar heard him with interest. ==Village.....school.....what do you mean?' ==I'm running a school there, in my village.' Furqan mentioned one of the rural areas near Islamabad. ==In fact, I've been running this school for several years.' ==What for?'

==What for?' The question surprised Furqan. ==To help people. Why else?'

==Is it charity work?'

==No, it is not charity work. It is my duty. I'm not doing anybody a favor.' Furqan changed the topic. No more was said about the school, and the call ended.

.....

Furqan did come for Anita's wedding. He stayed there for quite some time, but Salar became aware that he appeared surprised.

==Your family is quite westernized.'

Salar immediately understood the cause his discomfiture and surprise. ==I had thought that your family would be somewhat conservative because you'd told me that you were a Hafiz-e-Quran and your life style appeared humble, but coming here, I'm surprised. There's a lot of difference between you and your family. I think you're the odd one out.' He himself was rather amused at his last observation. They were now near Furqan's car.

==I memorized the Quran only two years ago. And I've become the odd one out only since the last two or three years. Before that, I was even more westernized than my family,' Salar clarified.

==You memorized the Quran only two years ago? During your studies in America? I can't believe it!' Furqan shook his head in disbelief.

==How long did it take you?'

==About eight months.'

Furqan was speechless for quite sometime and kept looking at him in disbelief. Then he took a deep breath and his attitude softened. ==Allah has been exceptionally kind to you, because, from what you've told me, it is not easy work. On the flight also, I was much impressed by your achievements, because the position you are holding in UNESCO at your young age, nobody else can.'

He again very warmly shook Salar's hand. For a few moments, Salar's face changed color. ==Allah's exceptional kindness! If I were to tell him what I've been doing all my life, he would.....' Salar thought shaking hands with him. ==The other day you were speaking about some school,' Salar intentionally changed the topic. ==You don't live in Islamabad?' ==I do live in Islamabad, but I have a village, my ancestral village. There we have some land, we had a house also,' Furqan started giving him the details. ==Several years ago, my parents had shifted to Islamabad. My father, after retirement from federal service, constructed a school on his lands. There was no school in that village. He had built a primary school. I've been looking after it for the last seven or eight years. Now, it has progressed to the secondary level. Four years ago, I also had a dispensary built there. You'll be surprised at this dispensary. It has the latest equipment. A friend of mine has gifted an ambulance also. And now, not only people from my village but people from the surrounding

villages are benefiting from the school and dispensary.' Salar was listening to him earnestly.

==But why are you doing all this? You are a surgeon, how can you do all this, and then you need a lot of money for it.'

==Why am I doing it? This is something I've never asked myself. There was so much poverty in my village that this question did not ever occur to me. During our childhood, we would once in a while go to our village. This was our outing. Except for our haveli, there were only mud houses, and there was absolutely no road either. It was as though we'd entered a jungle. If we were animals, it wouldn't have made any difference to us. As in the city, we'd roam around, lording it over the others, believing ourselves to be way above these villagers. But as a sensitive being, it is difficult to ignore the fact that others are compelled to live like animals. Maybe some get comfort from the knowledge that they have been blessed far more than others who are deprived, but we're not in that category.

==So the question arose: what's to be done? I didn't have a magic wand to wave and fix things overnight nor did I have endless resources. As I told you, my father was a civil servant, an honest civil servant. My brother and I have both studied on scholarships from the very beginning so our parents did not have to spend much on us. They were not spendthrifts either so they had some savings. When my father retired, he thought that instead of spending his life in Islamabad or Lahore, reading the newspaper and going on walks, he should go back

to his village and do something to improve lives there.’ Furqan and Salar were sitting in the car, talking.

‘You cannot imagine the difficulties. In the village, there was no electricity, no potable water, nothing. Baba ran from pillar to post to have all these things sanctioned. When a primary school got eventually constructed, a road emerged, and facilities such as power and water appeared, it suddenly occurred to the government to build a school of its own there. My parents wanted the government to take over their school, to provide their own teachers and, after some time, to upgrade the school. But after only a few meetings with the education department, Baba realized, that should the government take over, all his efforts in setting up the school would come to naught. Baba used to give the children everything: textbooks, exercise books, uniforms and stuff. He had specifically allocated funds for these expenses. You can well imagine the fate of the school once it had been handed over to the government. First of all, the funds would have disappeared and then the rest. That’s why Baba himself ran the school.’

Furqan went on to inform Salar that despite the government’s setting up a school, not a single child attended it. Eventually, the authorities shut it down and upgraded his father’s school. Some of his father’s friends also pitched in and the school progressed. In those days, Furqan was studying in England and he used to save up to send money for the school. The school was being improved and children from the neighboring villages were also enrolled there. Furqan said that on his return to Pakistan he had also set up a proper dispensary there. The village population had increased but poverty was still a part of their lives. However, thanks to education, the youth could now go and earn in the cities, and acquire vocational skills too—the cycle of poverty was being eroded to some extent.

‘If not this generation, then at least the next will be able to study in prestigious institutions, like you and me, and acquire degrees—who knows?’ said Furqan, hopefully. ‘I go there one weekend each month; there are two compounders there but no doctor. The other three weekends we arrange for someone else to go, and every three months, I set up a medical camp there.’

‘And where does the money come from, for all this?’ queried Salar. ‘To begin with it was my father’s effort—his gratuity, my mother’s savings, and some from his friends. Then Mehran and I contributed and some of our friends too. I send a good share of my income to the village every month to help run the dispensary. The doctors there work gratis—its part of their social responsibility. The medical camps also function in the same spirit. The school’s funds are in affixed deposit and the returns take care of its expenses, staff salaries, etc. in the future, we’re thinking of setting up a technical institute as well.’

‘When are you going there?’

‘I’m leaving tomorrow morning.’

‘If I want to come with you?’ asked Salar.

‘Most welcome....but isn’t the valima taking place tomorrow? You’ll be busy here,’ Furqan reminded him.

‘That’s at night. I’ll be free all day. Will it be hard to get back by the evening?’ Salar asked.

‘Not at all: you can get back quite easily. It’s just that we have to leave quite early in the morning, if you want to spend time there. Otherwise, you’ll be quite tired by the end of the day,’ said Furqan.

‘I won’t be tired. You’ve no idea of the kind of trips I’ve made and the places I’ve seen with the UNICEF teams. I’ll be ready after the fajr prayers, just tell me the time.’

‘Half past five.’

‘OK. Just give me a call on my mobile when you leave home, and buzz the horn a couple of times—I’ll be out.’

Salar then bid him goodbye and went in. The next morning, Furqan was there on the dot. Salar came out at the first call and they were on their way.

‘Why did you return to Pakistan when you could have advanced much in England?’ asked Salar, out of the blue. They were half an hour out of the city, speeding along their way to the village.

‘England didn’t need me; Pakistan did.’ Furqan spoke with composure. ‘The absence of Dr Furqan made no difference there. The presence of Dr Furqan here does make a difference. My services are needed here.’ Furqan stressed the last part of his statement.

‘But there you could have advanced professionally in all these years, and succeeded financially also to send more funds for your project here. After all, you couldn’t have had the same level of success in Pakistan,’ Salar remarked.

‘If you mean success in material and financial terms, then yes—you’re right. But if you mean professionally—as a doctor—then I am saving more lives here than I would there. You cannot estimate the satisfaction a doctor derives from seeing his patients get well. Oncologists are in profusion in England, but in Pakistan they can be counted on one’s fingers. My sending huge sums of money would not solve the problem of filling the gap for a missing person. I am a person of limited needs,

Salar, and so is my family. If I’ve learnt anything it is to be of use to one’s own people. I can’t leave my people to die and go around saving lives elsewhere. There’s nothing right with Pakistan: there’s everything wrong with it. Hospitals are minus facilities, the health system is decrepit beyond description and corrupt as well—whatever ills you can think of, you’ll find them here. But I cannot leave this place, I cannot leave these people. If I have been granted the power to heal, then my people have the first right to it.’

Salar had no words in response. For a long time, there was silence in the car. Then Furqan spoke up. ‘You have asked me why I came back to Pakistan, and I answered you. Now I ask you, why don’t you return to your country?’ he asked with a smile.

‘I can not live here,’ Salar shot back.

‘Is it because of finances and facilities?’

‘No—that never was, nor is, a problem. You know my family background.’

‘Then?’

‘Then...then nothing, I just cannot live here,’ he replied with finality.

‘You are needed here.’

‘By whom?’

‘Your country needs you.’

Salar smiled, spontaneously. ‘I’m not a patriot like you—things are quite well here without me. A doctor is a different thing, but a finance manager cannot heal the sick or save lives.’

‘The service you’re rendering there can be given here. Whatever you’re teaching in your lectures in universities there can be taught in the universities here.’

He felt like telling Furqan that he would be incapable of teaching anything here, were he to return, but he kept listening to him quietly.

‘You’ve seen poverty, hunger and disease in Africa, but you’ll be shocked to see the poverty, hunger and disease in your own country.’ ‘The situation is not as bad here, as it is in those countries, Furqan! This place is not that backward.’

‘Living where you’ve grown up in Islamabad, you cannot judge the conditions in the areas around the city. Just go to any village outside Islamabad, and you’ll see just how comfortably off the people are.’ ‘Furqan, I want to contribute something to your project,’ Salar abruptly changed the topic.

‘Salar, my project doesn’t need any funding right now. If you want to do something for development, why don’t you start a project of your own? You won’t have a problem with funds.’

‘I don’t have the time. I can’t manage this while working in America. If you want to set up a school in another village, I’ll support you, but I cannot give this personal time and attention.’

Furqan did not reply. Perhaps he had realized that his insistence was irking Salar. The conversation turned to Furqan’s village, once again. It was most certainly, one of the most

memorable days of Salar's life. He was very impressed by the village school, and more so by the clinic. It would be more appropriate to call it a small hospital. Despite there being no full-time doctor, it was very organized and orderly. Furqan's visit was expected and there was a large number of patients waiting to be seen—all sorts of people, young and old, men and women, adults and infants.

Unconsciously, Salar began to pace up and down the compound. Some people, taking him for a doctor, approached him. Salar began talking to them. He had never before seen a cancer specialist fulfill the role of a physician, checking up people, writing out prescriptions. He had to admit that he had hardly seen a doctor better than Furqan: he was very professional and gentle with his patients; the quiet smile rarely left his face. A little while later, Furqan arranged for someone to accompany

Salar to the school. There, he met Furqan's parents.

They already knew of his arrival: quite likely, Furqan had called them up and informed them. They took him around the school. Contrary to his expectations, the school building was very spacious and wellconstructed. He was also surprised by the number of students there. After spending a few hours at the school, he went with Furqan's parents to the haveli. As he entered the gates, a sudden rush of joy raced through him—he had not expected to see such a beautiful garden in this village. It was abloom with myriad colors in well laid out flowerbeds. 'A beautiful garden, very artistic!' he could not help express his admiration.

'This is Shakeel Sahib's passion,' said Furqan's mother.

'Mine and Nosheen's,' added his father. 'Nosheen?' Salar asked. 'Furqan's wife: the artistic touch is hers,' his father smiled. 'Ah yes! Furqan told me his family's in Lahore,' Salar seemed to remember.

'Yes, they live in Lahore, but when Furqan comes here, he brings his family along. These slides in the garden are for his children. Nosheen's a doctor too but she's not practicing as the children are too young. She also goes to the village clinic with him, but she's not here now as her brother's getting married.'

Salar looked around as he listened to his host. He had come to the haveli for lunch and was hoping that Furqan would join them. When lunch was served, he asked about Furqan and was told that he did not take a break. His mother said that he had only a sandwich and a cup of tea, in the least time possible, as there was a crowd of people to be examined and treated—quite often, this would go on till the evening.

They continued to converse as they ate. Furqan's father was in the

Finance Division and had retired at Grade 20. When he learnt that Salar's professional interest was also finance, he became quite animated. Talking to him, Salar did not notice the passage of time. He spoke to him about the school.

‘‘We really don’t need anything for the school right now. One of Furqan’s friends is getting a new block built—you may have seen it, it’s almost ready. But if you want to contribute, you can do something for the clinic. We need a full-time/permanent doctor and we’ve approached the Ministry of Health several times; Furqan has also used his contacts, but no doctor is willing to come out and serve here. We desperately need a doctor—you must have seen the number of patients. There’s a dispensary in a neighboring village but there too, the doctor goes on leave without waiting for the replacement to arrive.’

‘‘I’ll do whatever I can in this regard, but I also want to do something for the school. When I get back, I’ll try to arrange an annual grant from UNESCO, through some NGO.’

‘‘But we don’t need this. Whatever you’ve seen here, we’ve done it ourselves: our family, relatives, family friends, my acquaintances, friends of my children. We never needed any grant from the government or from any international agency. Till when should UNESCO be expected to come and end the hunger, ignorance, and disease of our people? Whatever we can do on our own, we should.’ ‘‘All I had wanted was that this project be further expanded.’ Salar tried to explain.

‘‘It will expand hugely. When you come here 20 years hence, you’ll find it a different village. The poverty that you’ve seen today will not be there then. Their —tomorrow will be different from their present,’

Furqan’s father said with great conviction. Salar watched him silently. In the afternoon, Furqan phoned him from the dispensary. After some small talk, he told Salar, ‘‘Now you should be leaving for Islamabad. I’d wanted to go drop you myself, but there’s a lot of rush here. If I don’t attend to the people who have come from the other village, they’ll suffer. That’s why I’m sending my helper. He’ll drop you back in the car to Islamabad.’ He fixed the programme.

‘‘OK,’ replied Salar.

‘‘Before you leave, come and see me at the dispensary,’ Furqan said, putting down the phone.

Salar had tea with Furqan’s parents. By then the car had arrived and he drove to Furqan’s. The morning rush had decreased, and now there were only twenty-five to thirty people left. Furqan was examining an old man. Seeing Salar, he smiled.

‘‘I’ll see him off, and be with you in a couple of minutes,’ Furqan said to his patient and got up. He walked with Salar to the waiting car outside.

‘‘How long will you be in Pakistan?’ he asked Salar.

‘‘A week and a half.’

__Then, we'll not be able to meet again, because I'll not be able to make it to Islamabad and here till next month. But I'll call you—when is your flight?'

Salar, ignoring his comment, counter-questioned, __Why can't we meet?

I can come to Lahore—that is, if you invite me.'

Furqan gave him a surprised smile. They shook hands and Salar got into the car.

Salar was not aware of what it was that brought him so close to Furqan or why he liked him so much—it was beyond him. Four days later, he went to Lahore for a day. He had informed Furqan who offered to pick him up from the airport. But Salar declined.

As agreed, he reached Furqan's place at 4 p.m. Furqan lived on the ground floor of a well-appointed apartment block. Salar rang the doorbell and waited. There was the sound of a child running up to the door; a five year old girl, held back by the security chain in the door, peeped out.

__Who do you want to meet?' she queried. Salar gave her a friendly smile but the child did not respond—she was very serious.

__Child, I want to meet your Papa.'

The little girl bore such a strong resemblance to Furqan that there was no doubt of her being his daughter.

__Papa doesn't meet anyone at this time,' she informed him.

__He'll meet me,' said Salar, enjoying this encounter.

__Why will he meet you?' came the reply.

__Because I am his friend. If you go and tell him that Salar Uncle's here, he'll come and meet me.' He smiled gently, but she was not impressed.

__But you're not my uncle.'

Salar burst out laughing. __Don't laugh,' she said, obviously upset. Salar sat back on his haunches facing her and, looking at her, said, __You look very nice in this frock.' His compliments did not affect the mood or reaction of the little madam on the other side.

__But I don't like you.' More than her words, Salar was enjoying her attitude and reactions. He could also hear someone else approaching the door.

__Why don't you like me?' he asked patiently.

__Just like that,' she retorted, tossing her head.

__And what's your name?'

She looked at him for a while and said, ‘Imama!’

The smile vanished from Salar’s countenance. Then, through that crack in the entrance, he saw Furqan emerge behind Imama. He picked up the child and opened the door.

Salar stood up. Furqan had just stepped out of the shower and water dripped from his disheveled hair. Salar made a feeble attempt to smile, and held out his hand.

‘Come, I was waiting for you,’ said Furqan, leading him in. Imama was in her father’s arms, constantly trying to whisper something into his ear and being ignored by him.

‘Have you met Uncle Salar?’ he asked instead.

‘I don’t like him,’ she said candidly.

‘That’s not nice, Imama—one doesn’t say such things about guests,’ he chided gently. ‘Now go and shake hands with him.’ He put her down and instead of going towards Salar, she ran out of the room.

‘That’s strange—her not liking you. She’s very friendly with all my friends. She seems to be a little out of sorts today,’ he clarified with a smile.

‘It’s her name,’ thought Salar. ‘I’d have been surprised if she’d liked me.’

They talked over tea and Salar disclosed, by the way, ‘In a couple of weeks, there will be a doctor at your clinic.’ ‘That’s a very good news,’ Furqan perked up

‘And this time, the doctor will live there. If he doesn’t, then let me know.’

‘I don’t know how to thank you—procuring a doctor for the dispensary has been a major problem.’

‘You don’t need to.’ He paused, then continued, ‘before going there, I had not expected to see work being done at this scale and in such an organized manner—I’ve really been very impressed by your work. My offer is still open: to help however I can with your project.’ Salar was serious.

‘Salar, I’ve told you earlier too that you should start a similar project in another village. You have more resources and contacts than we do and you can run it very successfully.’

‘You know my problem is scarcity of time—I cannot give as much time as you do, and besides, I cannot stay in Pakistan. Unlike your family, mine will not be very helpful in any such venture,’ Salar revealed. ‘Anyway, we’ll talk about this later. Finish your tea and then come with me,’ said Furqan, changing the topic.

‘Where?’

‘I’ll tell you on the way,’ replied Furqan with a secretive smile.

.....

==What will I do there?' Salar asked Furqan, getting into the car. ==The same as I do,' he said, stopping the car at the signal.

==And what do you do there?'

==You can see that when you get there.'

Furqan was taking him to one Dr. Syed Sibte-e-Ali, whom he used to meet himself. He was a religious scholar and Salar was not interested in religious scholars. In the last few years he had seen so many of them, and in their true colors, that he did not wish to waste his time on them.

==Frankly speaking, Furqan, I'm not the type you're imagining me to be.' He spoke after remaining silent for some time. ==What type?' Furqan turned and faced him.

==The same, of spiritual leaders and followers or oaths of loyalty etc....or whatever you make of it.' He spoke very candidly.

==That's why I'm taking you there. You need help.' Salar shot him a look of surprise, but he was looking at the road.

==What kind of help?'

==If a Hafiz-e-Quran, after reciting a sipara at night is unable to fall asleep without the aid of sleeping pills, then there is, indeed, something wrong somewhere. Several years ago, I had also gone into deep depression. My mind was a morass. Then, someone took me to doctor sahib and I've been going to him for the last eight to ten years. Meeting you, I realized that, like me, you also needed help – guidance,' Furqan said softly.

==Why do you want to help me?'

==Because my faith tells me that you are my brother,' he said turning the corner. Salar turned his head away from him and looked ahead. He had nothing more to say to him.

He was not interested in religious scholars. Every scholar was a genius in portraying his own sect as the loftiest. Every scholar was proud of his knowledge. Every scholar felt that only he was good and the others were bad. I am all-knowing and the others are wanting. Looking at every scholar, one felt that he had not acquired knowledge from books, but directly through divine revelation, where there was no possibility of error. To date, he had not come across a scholar who could tolerate criticism.

Salar himself belonged to the Sunni Sect, but the last thing he wanted to discuss with anyone was schools of thought and sects, and these were the first things that these religious scholars would discuss. Going to these religious scholars, he had gradually grown averse to them. Their only asset was knowledge, not its application. They would give a very long

lecture on ‘Slander: a Sin’, give references of Quranic verses and ahadis, and in the very next breath mention a fellow religious scholar by name, make fun of him, and try to prove his ignorance in matters of religion.

They would get to know the bio-data of everyone who came to them, and if the details were of interest to them, then a whole spate of demands and requests for favors would follow. And they would use the bio-data to impress others, to tell them what important person had come to them and when; who had benefited from their audience and how; which important person was for ever fawning over them; who had invited them home and how respectful and how deferential they had been. The scholars he had been to till now, he had never visited again, and here Furqan was dragging him to another such person.

They had traveled to one of the good areas of the city. The locality was respectable but not posh. There were already a lot of cars parked on that street. Furqan parked the car at a suitable place by the curb and got down. Salar also got down. After walking for three or four minutes along the row of houses, they reached a comparatively modest but impressive house. ‘Dr. Syed Sibte-Ali’ was written on the name plate. Furqan, without hesitating, entered the house. Salar followed suit.

A gardener was busy at work on the small lawn inside the bungalow. Furqan exchanged greetings with a retainer in the porch and walked on till he came to a door, where he took off his shoes. There were already lots of other pairs. Voices could be heard from inside. Salar also took off his shoes, and entering the room a step behind, in one sweeping glance, took in the whole scenario. He was in a spacious room, carpeted, and strewn with floor cushions. The room was very sparsely furnished and the walls bore calligraphies of Quranic ayats. There were some twenty to twenty-five men who were busy talking. Furqan, as he entered the room, greeted all loudly, exchanged pleasantries with a few, and went and sat in a vacant corner.

‘Where is Dr. Sibte-Ali?’ Salar asked in a low voice as he sat down close by.

‘He’ll enter exactly at eight, it’s only seven-twenty-five now,’ Furqan informed him.

Salar began to look around and observe the people. There people of all ages – some teenage boys, some his own age, people of Furqan’s age, some middle-aged, and some of advanced years also. Furqan was engrossed in conversation with someone sitting on his right.

At the stroke of eight, Salar saw a man, 60 to 65 years of age, enter the room through an inner door. Contrary to his expectations, no one in the room stood up to greet him. The entrant began by offering salutations and everyone responded. Salar noticed the change in the mode of the audience’s seating—they had straightened up in respect to the scholar.

They became alert and careful.

The man who came was none other than Dr Sibte-Ali. He took up his usual place against the wall, which had probably been set aside for him. He was dressed in a white shalwar qameez; he

had a fair complexion, and in his youth, he must have been handsome. His beard was not very long but was thick, well-trimmed and grizzled, much like his hair. His graying hair and beard gave him a mature, dignified look. He turned to enquire the welfare of a man to his right who had probably been ill.

Salar took in his appearance in a quick glance. He was sitting with Furqan at the rear end of the room.

Dr Sibte-Ali commenced his lecture. He spoke eloquently in a wellmodulated voice. There was complete silence in the room; the audience did not even stir. From the introductory sentences of Dr Ali's speech, Salar realized that he was in the presence of an extraordinary scholar. A human being passes through several ups and downs in his life. From the peaks of achievement to the depths of failure, all his life he moves on a path between these two limits. That path can be one of gratitude or thanklessness. Some are fortunate that whether they may succeed or fail, their path is that of gratitude. Some on the other hand, despite their achievements or their failures, tread the path of ingratitude. And there are those who walk both paths: grateful when they succeed and ungrateful when they do not. Humanity is just one of Allah's innumerable creations: the best of His creation yet just a creation. They have no rights over their Creator, only duties. Man has not been sent to this world with a track record that entitles him to any right or demand of his Creator. Yet Allah's bounties on man began with his very presence in Eden and have continued boundless ever since. In return, all that is asked of us is gratitude. What do you feel about this? When you do anyone a favor, do you expect him to overlook it and remind you of the times when you did not favor him instead of acknowledging your kindness? Or that your kindness is not enough, that you could have done this or that in a better way? What would your reaction be to such a person? Far from being kind to him, you would not want to have anything to do with him.

But that is how we respond to Allah—instead of being thankful for His blessings, we grumble and complain about what we do not have and we wanted. Allah is merciful; He is benevolent that He continues to shower His bounties on us. These blessings may increase or decrease according

to the nature of our actions, but they never cease.' Salar listened to him with rapt attention.

Ingratitude is a disease, one that constricts our hearts day by day, that does not allow our tongues to speak except in complaint. If we are not in the habit of thanking Allah, we fail to thank our fellow beings as well. If we cannot remember the favors bestowed by our Creator, we cannot

learn to remember the favors done by His creatures.'

Salar closed his eyes. No one knew the meaning of ingratitude better than him. He looked up at Dr Sibte-Ali again. His lecture came to an end after a full hour. Some people had questions to

ask him; others rose and left, one by one. They began to get in their cars and drive away. Furqan and Salar also got into their car and Furqan began to drive home. Dr Sibte-Ali's voice, his words were echoing in Salar's ears. A week ago, he did not even know who Furqan was; in these seven days, he had traveled many steps to build a relationship with Furqan. This surprised Salar because he was not a people's person, but...some relationships, some contacts seem to be determined from above—who, when, how, where—why people meet and what changes they bring about in others' lives, all of this is predetermined.

Salar had planned to visit Lahore for just a day, but he spent the rest of his days in Pakistan not in Islamabad but in Lahore. Every day that he was there, he went to Dr Sibte-Ali's with Furqan. He did not once meet Dr Sibte-Ali directly: he'd just go the lecture, listen and return.

The better part of Dr Sibte-Ali's life had been spent in various European universities, teaching Islamic studies and Islamic history. He had been in Lahore since the last ten or twelve years and was associated with one of the universities. That was about how long Furqan had known him. The day when Salar was due to return to Islamabad and then take a flight to New York was the day he stayed back with Furqan after the lecture. People were leaving the room and Dr Sibte-Ali stood there, shaking hands and bidding them goodbye. Furqan moved towards him with Salar.

‘How are you, Furqan? You stayed back after a long time,’ he said warmly.

Furqan offered a clarification, then introduced Salar. ‘This is Salar

Sikandar, my friend.’

Salar noticed his surprise when his name was mentioned, but he quickly regained his composure and the smile returned to his face. Furqan was giving him the details about Salar.

‘Please be seated,’ Dr Sibte-Ali gestured towards the carpet. They sat a little distance away from him. Furqan discussed about his project with him, while Salar quietly listened to them. Meanwhile, a servant entered the room and Dr Ali asked him to serve dinner. The man set out the food; apparently, Furqan had been eating there. When they washed their hands and sat down to eat, Dr Sibte-Ali addressed Salar. ‘How come you don't smile, Salar?’ Salar gave an astonished smile. In this brief meeting, how had he gauged that Salar was not in the habit of smiling? He looked at Furqan sheepishly and made a poor effort to sustain his smile. It was not easy.

‘Does my face reflect all my emotions that first Furqan and now Dr Sibte-Ali want to know the reason for my gravity?’ he wondered. ‘No, it's not like that—I'm not all that serious and sober.’ He seemed to be reassuring himself rather than answering Dr Ali's question. ‘Hopefully, it's like that,’ Dr Ali said with a smile. After dinner, he went in before bidding his guests goodbye. He returned with a book which he held out to Salar.

__You're associated with economics. Some time ago, I had written this book on Islamic economy. It'll make me happy if you read this book and learn about the Islamic economic system.' Taking the book, Salar glanced at it briefly, then turned to Dr Ali and softly said, __I would like to keep in touch with you, even after my return to the US. It's not just economics—there's much more that I want to learn from you.' Dr Ali gently patted his shoulder.

__All those who go to Dr. Sibte-Ali Sahib are involved in community work. Some are already involved prior to going to him, and those who are not, get involved after meeting him,' Furqan told him after the first meeting with Dr. Sibte-Ali.

__Most of those who visit him are highly qualified. They are attached to reputable institutions. I also started going to him by chance. I happened to hear his lecture in London and, after returning to Pakistan, I got the opportunity to meet him through a friend. I've been going to him ever since. I feel that now my views on life are clearer and I'm mentally stronger. You were asking me about the project. In this project, a lot of help has also been given by the people who come to Dr. Sibte-Ali. They provided a lot of the facilities and I'm not the only one to work on such projects. We help each other, though the nature of help is different. But the objective is the same: we all want to change this country – for the better.'

At his comment, Salar looked at him rather quizzically. __It's not so easy,' he observed.

__Yes, we know that it's not an easy job. We also know that all this will not be completed during our lifetime, but we want to lay down the foundation on which our children and subsequent generations will be able to build, and not be left floundering in the dark. At least, we would die with the satisfaction that we were not idle spectators and that, like a lot of people, we did not spend our time only criticizing others, pointing accusing fingers, and confined Islam to the mosque only... that we did not try to bring a change for the better in our own lives and that of others.'

He looked with amazement at Furqan. After Imama Hashim, Jalal Ansar, and Saad he was looking at an entirely different kind of Muslim, he was getting acquainted with another breed of Muslim – a practical Muslim. A Muslim, who belonged to both this world and the spiritual one as well, who knew the middle path between the two extremes, and who knew how to tread this path. His mind was set ablaze. __What have you thought about my offer?' he asked Furqan. __I'd told you what I wanted from you. This country needs you; its people, its institutions, need you; you should come and work here.' Salar laughed a little at his suggestion. __You can't leave this topic alone, can you? OK, I'll think about it, and what would you say about my offer?'

‘There’s another village near my village.....It’s in the same bad shape as my village was ten or fifteen years ago. These days, I’ve been trying to find someone who would build a school there. There is a government primary school, but only in name. It would be better if you started a school over there. My family and I would look after it in your absence.

We’ll also help you in establishing it, but you’ll have to run it yourself, and also, just providing the money will not be enough,’ Furqan said after some thought.

‘Can you go with me there tomorrow?’ Salar asked, somewhat pensively.

‘But your flight is tomorrow morning.’

‘I can go a couple of days later. Once I leave, it’ll not be possible for me to return soon, and I want to start this work before I go,’ he told Furqan, who nodded approvingly.

They flew to Islamabad that night and went straight to Furqan’s village the same night. After staying the night in the village, he went with Furqan at the crack of dawn to the other village. Till noon, they talked to the people there and looked around. Salar was amazed at the condition of the school there – it was anything but a school. Furqan was not shocked like Salar, as he was already aware of the conditions there. He used to have medical camps set up twice or thrice a year in different rural areas, and he was better acquainted than Salar with village life and conditions. Furqan had to return by the evening flight to Lahore, and they left for Islamabad at about two in the afternoon.

.....

Before he started this school project, he had spoken to Sikandar Usman. He had briefly apprised him of it. He had listened to him without interrupting him, and then asked him earnestly, ‘Why are you doing all this?’

‘Papa, because I feel these people need...’

Sikandar cut him short. ‘I’m not talking about the school.’ ‘Then what are you talking about?’ Salar was astonished.

‘What’s happened to your lifestyle?’

‘What happened to it?’ he was a little surprised.

‘You told us about memorizing the Quran when you had completed it— OK, fine, I didn’t comment. You wanted to go for Hajj and I had some reservations about it but I didn’t stop you. You’ve put an end to your social life—I didn’t object. You have become too interested in

religion— you go to the mosque to pray—I had nothing to say. You wanted to do a job in America instead of joining my business—I let you. And now you want to set up a school. I feel we need to discuss this matter.’ Sikandar Usman was very serious.

‘Have you any idea that your lifestyle will make us unacceptable in our social circle? You were at one extreme, first, and now you’re at the other. The kind of work you’re involving yourself in at this age—26 years or so—is unnecessary, irrelevant. You need to pay attention to your career and change your way of life. This kind of attachment to

religion will create social problems for us.’ Salar listened to him quietly, head bowed.

‘And not just for us, but for you too...just consider what impression you’re giving others. When we, or you, decide your marriage to a nice girl from your own background, this religious obsession will be a hurdle. No one will hand over their daughter just in view of Sikandar Usman’s name or your qualifications. And to top it all, when others of your age are furthering their careers, you’re involved with social work—you do enough of that with UNICEF—so there’s no need to make it part of your personal life too. The money you’re wasting on this school and the villagers should be saved up to provide a comfortable life for your future generations. Spend it on yourself—you have only one

life to live. Why have you inflicted this octogenarian outlook on yourself? You had a bad experience—it’s over; you’ve learnt your lesson, but that doesn’t mean that you stop enjoying life.’ He stopped to look at Salar. ‘Do you get what I mean?’

‘I haven’t given up life for religion,’ Salar said. ‘You talk about leading a balanced life—that’s just what I am doing. You know very well where I stand in my career; you’re aware of my performance.’

‘I know, and that’s what I mean—that if you did not get involved with these sort of activities, you can progress further still,’ Sikandar replied. ‘I cannot progress anywhere else. If you think that I’ll scale the Mt Everest of my profession by giving up all this, then you’re mistaken.’ He paused.

‘Think about your future, about getting married. Who’ll accept you if you have this sort of an approach to life?’

‘I’ve thought about it, Papa. I don’t want to get married.’

Sikandar laughed out. ‘That’s childish! That’s what they all say. You should remember your —adventure ,’ he said.

Salar knew what his father meant. For a while, he could not answer him, not even that it was the adventure that led to this decision. Then he quietly said, ‘I remember.’

‘I’m already a misfit in your social circle,’ he continued, ‘and I’m not trying to make a place for myself here. Nor do I want to set up any new relationships in this circle. I don’t care if others or my own siblings mock me or have fun at my expense. I’m mentally prepared for all of this.’

‘Let me begin this project, Papa. I have enough funds for it—it won’t throw me out on the streets. Some people are physically unwell, so they go to a doctor for treatment. Some are spiritually ill—they do what I am doing, what I want to do. I can buy all I want with the money I have, but I cannot buy peace of mind. For the first time in life, I am investing this

money to get mental peace. Perhaps, I will find it.’ Sikandar Usman did not know what to say to his son.

On his return to New York, he again became totally engrossed in his work. The only difference was that now he was in constant touch with Furqan and Dr Sibte-e-Ali in Pakistan. Furqan kept him regularly informed about the progress of the school.

This sort of work was part of his job at UNICEF and it was very well compensated too. But it was different doing this in Pakistan and that too with one’s own resources. Those who knew the Salar Sikandar of the past could not believe him now: he couldn’t believe it either that he could ever think of doing such work. Drawing money from his account for his project, he realized that it was well within his means. In the last three years, his expenses had reduced considerably. Many things on which he had spent money blindly were no more a part of his lifestyle. He was amazed to see the balance that had accumulated in his account. He was not the kind who was expected to save money. He had a scholarship to support his studies for the M Phil so he didn’t need to spend anything in that regard. Going around his apartment that day, he observed that there were no fancy, pricey things there—in fact it was rather Spartan. His kitchen was also stocked with only the basics—tea, coffee, milk, and the like, and not with all sorts of food. As it happened, he spent little time at home except to sleep there.

For going to work, he had enough formal clothes and was not very particular, either. He clearly remembered the last time he had bought anything for himself. Apart from his colleagues at UNICEF and some old university friends, he hardly knew anyone in New York. Or maybe, he consciously limited his social circle, and that too was a ceremonious sort of relationship.

The only thing he spent money on was books. So if with this lifestyle, he had a tidy bank balance, it was no surprise—office, university, apartment—there was nothing more to his routine.

Whilst doing his M Phil Salar had left UNICEF and had joined UNESCO.

After M Phil, Salar was posted in Paris. Prior to this, he was working in a field office, but now he was getting the opportunity to work at the UNESCO headquarters. In the past few years, he had been to Paris, from time to time, in connection with the projects he was working on, but now he was going to stay there for a long time. He was going from familiar surroundings to a strange place where he did not even know the language. In New York, he had a lot of friends, but here there was nobody whom he knew well.

As in UNICEF, he plunged into his work here too, but the school he had started in the rural area of Islamabad remained on his mind. Sometimes he would wonder why, in spite of being so closely attached to education in his job, he, unlike Furqan, had not thought of setting up a school. If he had thought of doing so several years ago, perhaps, today the school would have been well-established.

‘I do not have much love for Pakistan, nor do I feel great affinity towards it,’ he had told Furqan in their very first meeting. ‘Why?’ Furqan had asked him.

‘I can’t tell you why, but only that I don’t have any special feelings for Pakistan,’ he had replied, shrugging his shoulders.

‘In spite of knowing that it’s your country?’

‘Yes, in spite of knowing that.’

‘You have special feelings for America—you love America?’ Furqan had asked. ‘No, I have no feelings for America either,’ he replied with detachment. Furqan looked at him in amazement.

‘Basically, I don’t believe in nationalism,’ he explained, seeing Furqan’s amazed look. ‘Or, perhaps, I find it difficult to nurture love for the place where I live. Tomorrow, if I move to a third country, I won’t even miss America.’

‘You are a very strange person, Salar!’ Furqan exclaimed. ‘Is it possible that a person should have no feelings towards his own country or

towards the place where he lives?’

Furqan did not believe him, but he had not said anything untrue. After moving to Paris, he had not missed New York at all. Even going from New Haven to New York, he had no adjustment problems. He was a man for all seasons: he could settle anywhere.

Salar was in Pakistan attending a regional conference held under the auspices of the United Nations. He was staying at the Pearl Continental. He had to give lectures at an institute of Business Management and to settle with Furqan some matters pertaining to his school.

It was the third day of his stay in Lahore. He had an early dinner and came out of the hotel for some work. It was seven-thirty in the evening and traveling on the Mall Road his car suddenly had a flat tire. The driver got down from the car and looked at the deflated wheel. He came over to Salar's window and said, 'Sir! There's no stepney. I'll get a taxi for you.' But Salar beckoned him to stop.

'No, I'll hail a taxi myself,' said Salar, getting down from the car. He could see some taxis in a parking lot some distance away. Salar was looking in that direction, when a car suddenly braked near him. The car came from the opposite direction and Salar, walking on the pavement, immediately recognized the man in it.

It was Akif and he was getting down from the driver's seat. Some years ago in Lahore, he was very much a part of his life. Akif and Akmal: he used to hang out with them mostly, and Akif was now meeting Salar after several years. He had left them all. Even on returning to Pakistan or Lahore, he had never tried to contact them. They had repeatedly tried to contact him but, in spite of their efforts, he had been successful in avoiding them.

Now, after so many years, he had suddenly come face to face with him. Salar became very tense. Akif approached him with great warmth. 'Salar! I can't believe it's you.....where have you been hiding all these years? You had disappeared, just vanished! Where are you, pal, and what are you doing here? You've completely changed – where's your mop of hair? When did you come to Lahore? Why didn't you inform me that you were coming?'

He bombarded him with questions, one after the other. He had not noticed Salar's cold attitude. Before Salar could reply, Akif shot again,

'What are you doing on the Mall here?'

'The car broke down and I was going to get a taxi,' Salar explained.

'Where are you going, I'll drop you,' Akif said warmly.

'Oh no, I'll get a taxi—it's just here,' Salar said hurriedly. Akif would have none of it. 'Come on, get in,' and he pulled him in. Salar was perplexed but though he acquiesced, he was getting quite upset.

'You'd gone to the States to study, and then I learnt that you'd got a job there. Now, how come you're back in Pakistan?' Akif asked him, starting the car. 'Have you come to spend your holidays here?' 'Yes,' he replied very briefly so that he could extricate himself.

‘What are you doing these days?’ Akif asked, driving the car.

‘Working for an agency of the United Nations.’

‘Where are you staying here?’

‘At the PC...’

‘Why on earth at PC? You could have come to my place or called me.

When did you arrive?’

‘Yesterday.’

‘Then you’re coming with me to stay at my place. There’s no need to go to the hotel.’

‘No; I’m going back to Islamabad tomorrow.’ Salar lied with facility— he wanted to be rid of Akif. His presence was bothering him—or maybe it was the memory of the time spent with him in the past.

‘If you’re returning to Islamabad tomorrow then come home with me. We’ll have dinner together,’ Akif offered.

‘I just ate about ten minutes ago.’

‘Even so, come home with me. I’ll introduce you to my wife.’

‘You’re married?’

‘Three years ago; and you?’ Akif asked. ‘Have you married?’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘I was somewhat busy, that’s why,’ Salar replied.

‘Good! You’re still independent,’ Akif observed, taking a deep breath.

‘You’re lucky.’

Salar made no comment. Akif, whilst talking, tried to take out a cassette from the glove compartment. His attention wavered, and inadvertently, a lot of stuff fell out into Salar’s lap and at his feet.

‘Too bad,’ exclaimed Akif. Salar bent down and started picking up the things and Akif switched on the light in the car. As he was putting them back, he was shocked. He felt a current shoot through him—there was a pair of earrings lying in one corner of the glove compartment. His hands trembled involuntarily. He took out the earrings with his left hand. They were now in his palm, glimmering in the light inside the car.

He was looking at them in disbelief.

Several years ago, he had seen these earrings on somebody. He looked at them again and again, and yet again. He was looking at them for the fourth time. He had no doubt, now. They were Imama Hashim's earrings. He could draw those earrings with his eyes closed, every twist and bend. Akif took the earrings from Salar's palm, as though breaking his trance, and put them back in the glove compartment. 'These earrings.....' he stammered, 'these are your wife's?'

'My wife's?' Akif laughed. 'Come on, pal, if they were my wife's, would

I keep them here?'

Salar watched him, unblinking. 'Then?' he whispered.

'A girl friend of mine was with me the other night. She left these in my bedroom. She had to leave in a bit of a rush, because Ruba had returned. I put them in the car because I intend seeing her today,' Akif explained to him very candidly. 'Girl friend?' Salar choked.

'Yes, girl friend. She's a girl from the red light area who's now moved to Defence.'

'What.....what's her name?' he asked. 'Imama could never be the name of a girl from the red light area. Surely, I'm mistaken,' he thought, looking at Akif.

'Sanober,' Akif revealed her name. Salar turned, put back the things he was holding, and shut the glove compartment. He had, indeed, been mistaken. Akif had switched off the light inside the car. Salar leaned against the back of the seat and breathed a sigh of relief.

'But that's not her real name,' Akif continued. 'Her real name is Imama.'

Something exploded inside Salar's head—or had someone poured molten lead into his ears?

'What...what did you say?' His voice was quivering.

Akif was leaning forward on the steering wheel, using the car's lighter to light the cigarette between his lips. 'You said something?'

'You were telling me her name?'

'Yes, Imama. Do you know her?' Akif transferred the cigarette to his fingers.

'I...I...' Salar tried to reply: his voice seemed distant as though it came from a deep chasm. The Red Light Area was the last place he could ever have imagined Imama Hashim to be in. In the dimly lit interior of the car, Akif scrutinized Salar—he looked at Salar's face going pale, his clenched fist, his trembling lips, his incoherent speech. He smiled and patted Salar's shoulder in consolation.

'Don't worry, pal—why are you so concerned? She's just my girl friend, that's all. It's no big deal even if there's something between you both— after all we've shared many things in the past, haven't we?' Akif laughed meaningfully—then he tossed a flaming match on the fuel.

‘After all, she’s just a girl.’

The Mall Road was choked with traffic; Akif was driving fast. Salar was so fired by these two questions that he did not even consider the consequences of his reaction or what would happen to him if he grabbed the man at the steering by his throat. Akif’s foot hit the brake and the car jerked to a stop; they both hit the dashboard with full force. Salar did not let go of Akif’s collar.

Goaded to anger, Akif screamed, ‘What are you doing, Salar! Are you mad?’ He tried to extricate himself by pushing Salar away.

‘How dare you talk like that?’ Salar growled back. His hand was at Akif’s neck again; Akif was suffocating. In anger and fear, he swung his fist at Salar, hitting him squarely in the face. Salar moved away, his hands covering his face. Cars had piled up behind them, honking to get them out of the way as they were in the middle of the road. They were lucky that despite the sudden braking in the middle of heavy traffic, they had not been hit by any vehicle from behind.

Salar had doubled up in his seat, holding his jaw with both hands. Akif, coming to his senses, moved the car into a quiet bye lane and stopped. Salar had straightened up by then, and covering his mouth and chin with his hand, was looking straight ahead. The fury that had erupted a few moments ago had subsided.

Akif turned to him. ‘What is your problem? Why did you lash out at me? What have I done?’ While talking, he passed the tissue box on the dash board to Salar—he’d seen a few drops of blood on Salar’s shirt. Salar pulled out a couple of tissues and began to clean up the cut on his lip.

‘There could have been a bad accident...’ Akif said.

Wiping his hands, Salar was once more reminded of the earrings. He began to search for them near his feet.

‘The car could have jumped on to the pavement...’ Akif’s voice trailed off. He turned to Salar.

‘What are you looking for?’ ‘Those earrings,’ he replied, briefly.

Akif was really aggravated. ‘What’s the problem, Salar? She’s my girl friend, the earrings belong to her, and they are my problem or her, not yours.’

The realization of his stupidity dawned on Salar. He sat up, and throwing away the tissue, he looked out. He was feeling suffocated. Akif was looking at him, a frown on his face.

‘You and Sanober...’ Akif started cautiously. He wasn’t quite sure what there was in his last words that had so infuriated Salar, and he did not want to say anything that would set him off again. ‘I am sorry,’ said Salar when Akif paused.

‘OK, fine,’ Akif was somewhat relieved. ‘You and Sanober...’ he stopped again.

“You said her name was Imama.” Salar turned to look at him. The look in his eyes frightened Akif—it was far from normal. There was fear, helplessness, terror—all kinds of expressions—in his eyes.

“Yes, she told me once, when she was talking about herself in the beginning...then.”

“Can you describe her to me?” Salar asked, faintly hoping.

“Yes, why not?” Akif was a little confused. “Very beautiful, tall, fair...” he didn’t know how to go on. “She has black eyes and her hair used to be black...she dyes it now. What more can I tell you?” he was growing impatient.

Salar closed his eyes and turned his face away. He was feeling increasingly stifled. Looking out, he mumbled, “Is her name Imama Hashim?”

.....

“I don’t know. She didn’t tell me her father’s name, nor did I ask,” Akif replied.

“She is Imama Hashim,” he mumbled. His face clouded over. “This is all because of me—I am responsible for this.”

“What are you responsible for?” Akif was intrigued. Salar gazed ahead in silence through the wind screen. After a few minutes, looking Akif in

the face, he said, “I want to meet her. Right now.”

Akif stared at him for some time, then picked up the mobile from the dashboard and started to make a call. He tried for some time; finally shrugging his shoulders he said, “Her mobile is switched off. I don’t know if she is at home, because it is getting dark and she....” Akif broke off and switched on the ignition. “But I want to take you to her place.” Half an hour later they were both standing before a house in Defence. They had not spoken till getting there. Akif was now cursing the moment when he had given Salar a lift. On honking a few times, a man emerged. He was the chowkidar.

“Is Sanobar at home?” Akif enquired with urgency.

“No, Bibi Sahiba is not home.”

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know.”

Akif looked at Salar, then opening the door of the car said, “Wait here. I’ll be back in a few moments.” Akif went inside the house with the man. He returned after ten minutes.

“You want to talk to her?” he asked immediately on getting back into the car. “I have to meet her.” Akif again switched on the ignition.

They again traveled in silence. It was getting on for nine o'clock when they had reached the Red Light Area. The place was not new for Salar. Only the pain was new that he was now feeling.

‘She is here today. Somebody has booked some girls from here for some function, and she is going with them,’ Atif explained, getting down from the car.

‘You can also get down because we’ve got to go a long way in. I can’t bring Sanobar here to meet you!’ Salar alighted.

He started to tread those lanes once again with Akif. He remembered clearly the last time when he had been to such a place. Nothing had changed: human flesh was being traded in the same clandestine manner.

He remembered very well too the first time he had been there. He was eighteen—and then he had gone there many, many times. Sometimes he would go to watch a dance, sometimes to attend the performance of a renowned actress, sometimes to watch the half-naked women peeping or hanging out of the doors, windows, or rooftop balconies in these very lanes. (He would experience a strange sense of happiness, passing through these lanes. There, he could buy any of those girls, regardless of looks or age, for a few hours. The notes in his wallet would give him complete ownership of any of the girls on display. What else do you call on being on top of the world, having the universe in your grasp, as it were? He would feel elated.) And sometimes, he would go there to spend the night with these women, whom he despised—women, who would sell their bodies for a few rupees. What other sentiment, but hatred, could he have for them? But in spite of despising them, he bought them because he could afford to buy them. Even as a youth of eighteen or nineteen, he was convinced that there was no woman there with whom he could have social contact, blood relationship, or with whom he could fall in love.

His mother and sister were members of the elite class. His wife would also have to come from the same elite background and his daughter too. But the women from the Red Light Area.....they had been born for this purpose. He was convinced of this. He could not despise them enough – with his stiff neck, uplifted chin, and raised eye brows. And now.....what had fate done to him now? The woman who was once secluded in seven veils, and whom he could not countenance being touched by another man, had now been thrown in this bazaar. Walking a few paces ahead was her client and Salar Sikandar could not even open his mouth, could not raise his voice, could not protest. What could he say to anybody? Could he have asked God as to why this had happened to her? What wrong had she done? He bit his lips. How could he stop trembling? Could a man visiting these streets say with utter conviction that no woman belonging to him, or from his family would ever work in this bazaar? Would not sell herself to another man? Would his mother, sister, wife, daughter, granddaughter, or anyone from the later generations not find themselves here?

Salar Sikandar was speechless. Imama Hashim was his wife, she was married to him—an upper class woman, who could never have anything to do with this place. Salar Sikandar once again found himself tied to the tree in the darkness of the Margalla Hills. He felt utterly devastated.

‘Sahib! Come with me. I have girls of all ages. The best girls in this place and the price is also not much.’ A man started to walk with him. ‘I’ve not come here for this purpose,’ Salar said in a low voice, without looking at the man.

‘Want a drink or drug? I can supply anything you want.’

Akif halted in his steps and brusquely admonished the man, ‘You’ve been told once that we do not want anything, then why are you pursuing us?’

The man stopped. Salar quietly walked on. His mind was braving a storm. When, why, and how did Imama Hashim get there? The past unrolled itself like a film before him.

‘Please, go to him once.....just once, and tell him everything about me, ask him to marry me. I don’t want anything from him, only his name. If you beseech him in the name of the Prophet (pbuh), he will not refuse. He loves him (pbuh) so much,’ he had heard her several years ago, pleading on the phone as he reclined on his bed, eating chips.

‘By the way, what’s your connection with Imama?’ Jalal was curious.

‘Imama.....Imama and I are very close and old friends.’

Jalal Ansar had frowned. Salar felt strangely elated. He could guess very well what Jalal was thinking about him and Imama. ‘You can tell her plainly that I won’t marry her.’

He had wanted to see Imama’s face when Jalal Ansar’s message was conveyed to her. He had given her Jalal’s reply over the phone, as he was popping bubbles with gum.

‘You’ve done me so many favors, do me one more. Divorce me,’ she had later pleaded on the phone with him.

‘Oh, no! I’m tired of doing you favors, I’m not doing any more. As for this favor? It is impossible,’ he had replied. ‘If you want a divorce, you go to the court and get it, but I won’t divorce you.’ Salar began to choke badly.

‘Yes, I’d done all this, but I’d removed from her the illusions she had about Jalal Ansar. I’d told her everything; I hadn’t concealed anything from her. It was only a joke, a prank. I hadn’t wanted all this to happen to Imama,’ he was explaining to his conscience, as though he was in a court of law. ‘It is true that I’d wronged her by not giving her a divorce, but....but....but I hadn’t wished that she should be trapped here. I had.....I had dissuaded her from leaving home. I had, granted only in jest, but I had made offered to help her. I hadn’t brought her here.

‘Nobody can hold me responsible for all this.’

He was offering explanations incoherently. His mind was numb. He stopped, and began to rub his temples—he felt the onset of another bad attack of the familiar migraine. The pain subsided. He opened his eyes and saw the twisting lane. It was a blind alley – at least for him and for Imama Hashim. He stepped forward. Akif had stopped before a multistoried house, and he turned to look at Salar.

‘This is the house.’ The color drained from Salar’s face. How much further was the reckoning?

‘We’ve got to go to the top floor, Sanober will be up there.’ Saying this, Akif started to climb the dark and narrow stairs. Salar stumbled on the very first step; Akif turned to look at him and stopped.

‘Be careful, the condition of the stairs is not too good. Moreover, they can’t be bothered to provide even a light bulb.’ Salar straightened and feeling his way along the wall, he put his foot on the next stair. It was a winding staircase and so narrow that it could accommodate only one person at a time. The cement had also given way. Wearing boots, he could still feel their deteriorated condition. The cement of the wall on which he was leaning had also come off. Salar, like blind man, feeling the wall, began to climb the stairs.

The light coming through an open door on the first floor helped him see.

Akif was nowhere there. He had certainly gone ahead through the door. Salar stopped momentarily and he too went across. He was now in a balcony. On one side there were doors to many rooms. On the other side, the lane down below was visible. The corridor-like balcony was absolutely empty. Standing there, all the doors of the rooms appeared shut. He could not tell where Akif had gone. Very carefully, he stepped forward, as though the place was haunted. He felt that at any moment a door might spring open and suddenly Imama Hashim would appear before him.

‘Oh, my God! How.....How am I going to face her here?’ His heart sank.

He walked, watching the closed doors, when, from a door at the end of the verandah, Akif appeared. ‘Where were you?’ he called from there loudly. ‘Come here.’

Salar hastened, but he paused momentarily before he reached the door. He could hear the thumping of his heart. He shut his eyes, clenched his cold hands, and entered the room. He found Akif sitting in a chair, talking to a girl, who was brushing her hair.

‘This is not Imama!’ he exclaimed.

‘Of course, this not Imama—she’s inside. Come.’ Akif, getting up, opened the door to another room. Salar followed him on unsteady feet. Akif went through the other room also, and opening a door entered yet another room.

‘Hello, Sanober!’ Salar heard Akif call out from afar. His heart leapt to his mouth. For a moment, he felt like running away from there...instantly...blindly, without looking...from this

house...this area...this city...this country...never to return...he turned his head to look at the door at his side.

__Come in, Salar,' Akif called out. His face turned, he was busy talking to a girl. Salar swallowed hard, his throat was parched dry. He moved forward. Akif heard his foot steps behind him and moved out of the way. Salar was in the doorway. She stood at the end of the room.

__This is Sanober,' Akif introduced her. Salar could not take his eyes off her. She also gazed at him.

__Imama?' he looked at her, still, unmoving.

__Yes, it is Imama,' Akif confirmed.

Salar sank to his knees on the floor. Akif was puzzled. __What's wrong, what's wrong?' Salar, holding his head, was on the ground. He was the first man to prostrate himself before a prostitute. Akif, sitting on his haunches, was shaking Salar's shoulder, who, in prostration, was crying like a child.

__Water....Water, shall I get some water?' Sanober exclaimed with concern. Swiftly, she fetched a glassful from the jug next the bed, and sat down besides Salar.

__Salar Sahib! Have some water.'

Salar suddenly sat up, as though a current had passed through him. His face was wet with tears. Without saying a word, he flushed his wallet from his jeans and started laying the banknotes from it before her. In a few moments, his wallet was empty, save for his credit card. Then, without a word, he stood up and shot out of the room, tripping in the doorway. Akif, dumbfounded, went after him.

__Salar! Salar! What's wrong? What happened? Where are you going?' He tried to hold Salar by the shoulder, but he fought back madly. __Leave me alone, don't touch me; just let me go!' he shouted, crying hysterically.

__You'd come to meet Imama,' Akif tried to remind him. __She is not Imama, she's not Imama Hashim!'

__That's alright, but you have to go with me.'

__I'll go, I'll go myself. I don't need you.' He wrenched himself free and fled from the room. Akif mumbled something. He was upset. He turned back to Sanober who, even now, was looking in amazement at the pile of notes.

The stairs were even now dark, but given the mental condition he was in, he needed no wall for support, nor any light. He fled down the dark stairs blindly and fell badly. If the stairs were straight, he would have fallen right down to the bottom, but the winding stairs had broken his fall. He again stood up in the dark. Ignoring the pain in his knees and ankles, he tried to run down the stairs again. After a few minutes of descent, his leap had landed him on the ground. This time, he hurt his head also against the wall. He was lucky not to have broken any bones. If there were still a lot of stairs to go down, he might have, perhaps, again tried to run down the stairs, but his second fall had brought him to the stairs below. He could see the street light ahead. He got down from the stairs, but could go no further. However, he took a few steps and sat down on the low wall outside the house. He was feeling bilious. Holding his head, he felt the vomit swell up inexorably within him and he bent over. He was crying uncontrollably as he vomited repeatedly. For the passers-by in the street this was nothing new. Here, those who had had too much to drink or those who had over-drugged themselves would be in this state. Only his dress and appearance were lending him some respectability, and his tears and lamentation were, perhaps, in response to his rejection by his lover up there. There, it was commonplace to see apparently respectable men crying their hearts out. The prostitute's den is not favorable for everybody. The passers-by would smirk as they went. Nobody had come to him. In this bazaar, there was no tradition of enquiring after another's well being. Akif had not come down. If he had, he might have stopped by. Imama Hashim was not there. Sanober was not Imama Hashim. What a burden had been lifted off him, what torment he had been spared. Revelation had not been granted to him through pain, but rather through its awareness. Not finding her there, had brought him to this state. What if he had seen her there? He was feeling afraid of God, terribly afraid. He was Omnipotent, what could He not do? How Merciful He was, what blessings did He withhold? He knew how to keep man human – sometimes through retribution, sometimes through benevolence. He knew how to keep him confined to his humanness.

Salar, never before had felt as remorseful, as regretful, as he was feeling now about this dark chapter of his life. Why? Why.....? Why did I come here? Why did I buy these women.....? Why didn't I awaken to the awareness of sin?' he lamented, sitting by the roadside, holding his head. And now.....now, when I've left all this, so why.....why now.....this pain, why am I feeling it now? I know that I have to answer for all my deeds.....But Oh! God, please don't hold me accountable here.....not in this manner. Don't render to this bazaar the woman I

love.'

He stopped crying—the revelation dawned on him and that too, where, and how!

Love?' he mumbled, unbelieving, gazing at the passers-by. Do I.....do

I love her?' He had trembled. Am I feeling this pain only because.....Is it remorse, or something else....?' he had debated. He felt as though he would never be able to get up from there. So it isn't remorse, it is love, which I'm chasing.' He felt almost lifeless. Was Imama a thorn in my heart or an obsession?' The tears were still flowing down his cheeks. And looking

for this woman in this bazaar, my feet had trembled because in the recesses of my heart I had placed her on a very high pedestal – a place, so high, that I couldn't find her myself. Check mate!

The man with the 150+ IQ had been flung face-down to the ground. He began to sob again uncontrollably. What wound was it that had been reopened? What pain was it that was suffocating him? What had his conscience given him, what had it taken away from him? He got up and started to walk, sobbing all the while. He had no control over himself. He did not care about the looks being given by the passers-by. Never had he despised his very existence as he was doing then. That Red Light Area was the darkest chapter of his life. So dark that he had been unable to scrape it off his life. It had come back and re-positioned itself in his life. The nights that he had spent there several years ago had ominously engulfed him; he was unable to escape from them, and the fear which had now engulfed him.....

==If.....What if Imama had, indeed, come into this bazaar.....? Sanober is not Imama Hashim, but someone else.....' A wave of pain arose in his head. The migraine was getting worse. He was beginning to lose his mind and was unable to see the road clearly. His head was bursting with pain and he had sat down somewhere. The lights and honking of the traffic had made his head ache worse, and then his mind had descended to some dark depths.

.....

Somebody laughed lightly and then said something.....another voice replied. Ever so slowly, Salar Sikandar was coming back to his senses. He was pitifully tired, but could recognize voices. Very slowly, he opened his eyes. He was not surprised. He had to be where he was: on the bed of a hospital or clinic, a very soft and comfortable bed. At some distance, Furqan was talking softly to a doctor. Salar took a deep breath. Furqan and the other doctor, whilst talking, turned, looked at him and then approached him.

Salar shut his eyes again. He had difficulty in keeping his eyes open. Furqan came and patted his chest lightly.

==How are you feeling now, Salar?'

Salar opened his eyes. He made no effort to smile. He only stared at him absent-mindedly for a few moments.

==Fine.....,' he replied.

The other doctor was busy checking his pulse.

Salar closed his eyes once again. Furqan and the other doctor resumed their conversation. He had no interest in this; in fact, at that moment, he had no interest in anything. The rest had not changed: his guilt, his remorse, Akif, Sanober.... Imama.....the Red Light Area—everything had remained the same. He wished that he had not regained consciousness for some more time.

__So, Salar Sahib, Shall we talk in some detail?' Hearing Furqan's voice, he opened his eyes. Furqan was sitting on a stool next to the bed. The other doctor had left the room. Salar tried to draw his legs together. A pained cry escaped him. His ankles and knees hurt badly. His legs were covered by a blanket and he could not see them, but he was aware that his knees were bandaged. He was not in his own clothes, but in hospital clothes.

__What happened?' Salar moaned as he straightened his leg.

__You have a sprained ankle, both the knees and calves are bruised and swollen, but, luckily, there is no fracture. The arms and elbows are also bruised, and again, luckily, no fracture. There is a small cut at the back of the head on the left side with some bleeding, but, according to the CT scan, no serious injury. On the chest also, due to abrasion, there are some slight scratches. But, as to your question about what happened, only you can tell,' Furqan said, speaking like a skilled doctor. Salar looked at him quietly.

__At first, I thought that that the migraine attack was so severe that you had passed out, but after checking you up, I realized that it wasn't so.

Did someone attack you?' he had asked with concern.

Salar took a deep breath and shook his head in denial. __How did you get to me? Or rather, how did I get here?' __I was calling you on your mobile, but instead of you someone else picked up the phone. He was on the footpath with you. A good man—he was trying to revive you. He told me about your condition so I told him to take you in a taxi to a nearby hospital, which he did. Then I got there and brought you here.'

__What time is it now?'

__It's about six in the morning. Sameer had given you painkillers last night, that's why you were asleep till now.'

As he spoke, Furqan realized that Salar was not interested in what he was saying. He felt a cool detachment in Salar's eyes, as if he was telling him about a third person.

__Give me something again.....' Salar started, realizing that Furqan had stopped speaking. He shut his eyes, and then broke off, trying hard to remember. __Yes, give me some tranquilizer. I want to sleep for a long time.'

__Of course, you must sleep, but tell me what happened.'

__Nothing.' Salar brushed aside the question. __Migraine as you have already guessed – and I fell on the footpath and hurt myself.' Furqan looked at him intently. __Have something to eat...'

Salar interrupted him. __No...I'm... I'm not hungry. Give me...some tablet, some injection, anything...I'm very tired.'

==Your people in Islamabad...'

Salar would not let him complete the sentence. ==No, don't inform them.

When I've rested, I'll go to Islamabad myself.'

==In this condition?'

==You said that I'm alright.'

==You are alright, but not all that good. Rest for a few days, here in Lahore. Then you can go.'

==OK; but don't inform Papa and Mummy.'

Furqan looked at him, somewhat puzzled. ==Any thing else?' he frowned.

==Tranquilizer.....'

Furqan looked at him thoughtfully. ==Shall I stay with you....?'

==What's the use? I'll go to sleep shortly. You go. I'll call you when I wake up.'

He put his arm across his eyes. His brusque manner and cold demeanor increased Furqan's concern. Salar's behavior was very abnormal. ==I'll speak to Sameer, but if you want a tranquilizer, you'll have to eat something first,' Furqan told him in a no-nonsense tone, whilst getting up. Salar did not remove his arm from his face.

When he awoke, it was almost evening. The room was empty. No one else was there. Physically, he was feeling even more tired than he had felt in the morning. He threw off the blanket from his legs and, ignoring the searing pain in his left ankle and knees, pulled up his legs. He was feeling strangely suffocated, as though someone was gripping his chest. He was staring at the ceiling when a thought struck him.

He had come back to the hotel and was packing his things, when Furqan knocked on the door. Salar opened it. He was surprised to see Furqan. He had not thought that Furqan would come after him so soon.

==You're a strange fellow, Salar.....,' Furqan started berating him straight away.

Without telling a soul, you slipped out of Sameer's clinic. You got me worried, and to crown it, you've kept the mobile switched off.' Salar did not speak. He limped back to his bag, in which he was packing his things.

'You're leaving?' Furqan exclaimed, seeing the bag.

'Yes....!' Salar gave a monosyllabic reply.

'Where....?'

Salar zipped up the bag and sat on the bed.

'Islamabad?' Furqan came and sat opposite him on the sofa.

'No,' Salar replied, looking at him.

'Then....?'

'I'm going to Karachi.'

'What for?' Furqan asked in amazement.

'I have a flight.'

'For Paris?'

'Yes...!'

'Your flight is after four days, what will you do there, going now?' Furqan started looking at him. Sameer had read him rightly. His expression was really very strange, unusual.

'I have work there.'

'What work?'

Instead of replying, he sat on the bed unblinking, staring at him. Furqan was not a psychologist, but he had no difficulty reading the eyes of the person opposite him. Salar's eyes were vacant. They were just cold, as though he did not know a soul, even him and his own self. He was in depression. Furqan had no doubt about it, but he did not know where his depression was taking him.

'What is your problem, Salar?' he could not help asking him. After a moment, Salar shrugged, 'I have no problem.' 'Then....' Salar interrupted Furqan.

'You know that I have migraine, and once in a while this sort of a thing happens to me.'

'I am a doctor, Salar!' Furqan said earnestly. 'Nobody knows migraine better than me. All this was not solely because of migraine.' 'So, you tell me what other reason there could be,' Salar counterquestioned. 'Is there a problem with some girl?' Salar was taken aback by Furqan's perception.

=Yes....‘ He did not know why he was unable to deny it.

=Are you involved with somebody?’

=Yes...‘

Furqan, for a long while, sat there quietly watching him in disbelief.

=Who are you involved with?’

=You don’t know her.’

=You couldn’t marry her?’

Salar kept looking at him. His tone was fiery, =The marriage had taken place.’

=The marriage had taken place?’ Furqan asked incredulously.

=Yes...‘

=Then ...did you divorce her?’ he asked.

=No.’

=Then...?’

=That’s it...‘

=That’s what?’

Salar looked down and, with the forefinger of his left hand, traced the life line in the palm of his right hand.

=What is her name?’ Furqan asked him softly.

He again moved his finger across his palm and was quiet for a long, long time. Then he whispered, =Imama Hashim.’

Furqan took a deep breath. Now he understood why he had bought his little daughter loads of presents. Since they had got acquainted and Salar had become a frequent visitor to his house, he had become very fond of Imama—they had become very good friends. Even whilst he was away from Pakistan, he would be constantly sending her gifts. But one thing perplexed Furqan. He would never refer to Imama by her name, nor would he address her so. Sometimes, Furqan had noticed this but he had ignored it. But now, hearing Imama Hashim’s name, he realized why Salar would not address the child by her name.

He was now haltingly and softly telling Furqan about Imama and himself. Furqan listened to him intently. When, after telling him everything, he fell silent, Furqan was also unable to speak. He did not know what to say: comfort him or say something else....perhaps, some advice.

‘Forget her,’ he said, breaking the silence. ‘Tell yourself that where ever she is, she is well and happy. It’s not necessary that something bad happened to her. Probably, she’s very safe,’ Furqan was telling him. ‘You’d helped her to the extent you could. Now, try to stop being remorseful. Allah helps. After you, maybe she found someone better.’

Why you have such misgivings? I don’t think you were the reason for her marriage with Jalal not materializing. Whatever you’ve told me about Jalal, my own feeling is that he would never have married Imama, whether or not you’d come between them, whether or not you’d tried to drive a wedge between them. As far as your not divorcing Imama is concerned, she should have approached you again. Had she done so, you would certainly have divorced her. If you’ve done some wrong in the matter, Allah will forgive you, because you are regretting it. You’ve been asking Allah for forgiveness. This is enough. Then, what’s the use of your going into depression. Try to come out of it.’ Furqan was trying very sincerely to make him understand. Salar’s silence encouraged him to believe him that he was succeeding, but after this long speech when Furqan fell silent, Salar got up and started to open his brief case. ‘What are doing?’ Furqan asked.

‘The time for my flight is approaching.’ He was taking out some papers from his brief case. Furqan did not know what to say.

He had been coming to Pakistan for the last several years. He was never upset when returning, as he was today. At the time of take-off he had felt a strange emptiness descend within him. He looked out of the window. On that vast spread of earth, there was somewhere a girl by the name of Imama Hashim. If he had been living there, he would have spotted her some time, somewhere. Or, he might have run into somebody who knew her, but where he was heading there was no Imama Hashim. There, chance could not bring them together. He was again going away for a long time, leaving ‘possibility’ behind. How many times in his life would he leave ‘possibility’ behind?

Ten minutes later, whilst gulping down the tranquilizer with water, he felt that he stood nowhere in life. That he would never be able to find his moorings, that he would never be able to feel the ground under his feet. Entering his seventh floor apartment, he had a feeling that he did not want to go there. He wanted to go some place else. But where? He locked the door of his apartment and switched on the TV in the lounge. CNN was airing its news bulletin. Taking off his shoes and jacket, he flung them aside. Then he took the remote and lay back on the sofa. Absentmindedly, he surfed the channels. The booming voice in

Urdu stopped him. An unknown singer was rendering a ghazal

My life is but a separation, though in my heart she lives

So close, so near to every pulse, yet so distant from my yearning eyes.

He put the remote on his chest. The singer's rendition was beautiful, or perhaps, he was articulating his very sentiments.

This life too will be sacrificed, somehow, some where – Feel free to hang me– if none else.

Poetry, classical music, old films, instrumental music: he had begun to appreciate their worth in the last few years. He had developed a taste for good music, but the Urdu ghazal was alien to him.

Be it the peak of Sinai or the hour of reckoning, I'll endure the wait To meet my beloved somewhere, anywhere, whenever, wherever.

He remembered Imama again. He always remembered her. At first, he remembered her when he was alone, then he would see her in the crowd. He had misunderstood love – he had, all along, thought it was remorse.

She is beyond me, but my love is pure, not base desire – To her alone I belonged, I belong – even if mine she may not be.

Salar suddenly got up from the sofa and made towards the windows. Standing on the seventh floor, he could still feel the darkness in spite of the lights. Strange was the wilderness beyond, strange was his state within.

The decision, let it be known here; save it not for the final day, Let the blow that will strike me then, be my fate here and now.

Standing there, looking at the lights blinking in the dark beyond the window pane, Salar tried descending the depths within him.

‘Me? And love some girl? The question doesn’t arise!’ He recalled his oft-repeated statement of several years ago. The darkness outside intensified, as did the torment within.....he bowed his head in defeat, and after a few moments, looked up again and gazed out of the window. Where does one’s right to take matters in one’s own hands begin, and where does it end? Another bout of depression – the blinking lights of the night were dying out.

The heart that so yearns for a glimpse, Naseer, will surely succeed Regardless of her secrecy, however veiled my love may be.

Salar turned to look at the screen: the singer was rapturously repeating the last line. Like an automaton, Salar moved to the sofa and sat down. Pulling the brief case on the table towards him, he took out his laptop.

The heart that so yearns for a glimpse, Naseer, will surely succeed Regardless of her secrecy, however veiled my love may be.

The singer was repeating the closing couplet of the ghazal. Salar’s fingers flew across the keyboard as he typed out his resignation. The sound of music in the room died down. Every line of his resignation letter seemed to thaw his spirit that was ice, as it were. It was as if he was stepping out of a magic circle, as if some spell was working to free him.

‘Only you can take an idiotic decision like this at this stage of your career.’

He listened to Usman Sikandar in silence. ‘Why on earth are you leaving such a good position and that too so suddenly? And if you have decided to leave this job, then come and join a business venture—what’s the great idea of joining a bank?’

Usman Sikandar was very critical of Salar’s decision.

‘I want to work and live in Pakistan, that’s why I’ve left this job. Business I cannot do; besides, I’ve had this offer from the bank for quite some time now. They’re ready to post me in Pakistan, which is why I’ve accepted the offer.’ Salar answered all his father’s questions in one go.

==Then don't join the bank—come and work with me.'

==I can't do that, Papa—please don't force me!'

==Then stay where you are. Why return?'

==I'm unable to stay on...'

==A fit of patriotism?'

==No.'

==Then?'

==I want to be with you all.' He changed the track.

==Anyway I am sure this decision is not solely on our behalf.' His father's tone had softened a bit.

Salar did not replay. His father too was quiet for a while.

==You've made up your mind so there's not much I can do about it. You might as well come back if you want to. See how it works out in the bank, but my desire is that you should join me in looking after the family business.' Usman Sikandar seemed to accept his son's decision. Then he remembered something. ==You wanted to complete your Ph. D— what became of that?' he queried.

==I don't want to do further studies at present. Perhaps, I'll go back to it a few years later—or maybe not at all,' Salar replied in a low voice. ==Are you coming back because of the school?' Usman Sikandar suddenly asked.

==Maybe... ' Salar did not refute the statement. If his father believed that the school was the reason for his return, there was no harm in letting him do so.

==Reconsider your decision, Salar!' His father could not resist saying it. ==Very few people get the kind of professional start that you did—are you there?'

==Jee,' he replied in a monosyllable.

==You're mature enough and can decide for yourself,' his father concluded the conversation.

Salar put the telephone down and looked around his apartment.

Eighteen days later, he had to relinquish it forever.

=====

END OF CHAPTER SIX

Chapter 7

His life entered a new phase on his return from Paris. Initially, he continued to work for the Islamabad branch of the foreign bank. After some time, they posted him at their new branch in Lahore. He had the option of going to Karachi, but he opted for Lahore as it also gave him the opportunity to spend time with Dr Sibte-Ali.

The nature of his activities changed with his work in Pakistan, but in no way were they any less than before. Here too he was busy day and night. His reputation as an exceptional economic expert traveled with him wherever he went. His name was not new in government circles, but on his return to Pakistan, he was frequently invited by the ministry of Finance for lectures to officers under training. This business of lectures was not new for him either as after completion of his studies at Yale, he had been teaching various classes there, and this continued even after he had moved to New York. He continued to participate at the seminars on human development at the Columbia University, where his attention turned to economics once again.

In Pakistan too he soon became involved in similar seminars organized at IBA, LUMS and FAST. Economics and Human Development were two topics from which he could not abstain in silence—they were close to his heart and the feedback on his lectures at these seminars was always exceptional.

He used to spend one weekend every month at his school in the village and living there introduced him to a new dimension of life.

‘We have concealed our poverty in our rural areas, just like people brush dirt under the carpet.’ Furqan had said this once while the school was still under construction. The days now spent in the village bore out the horror of this reality. It was not that he was unaware of the poverty in Pakistan:

working with UNESCO and UNICEF in Asian countries, he had read many reports on Pakistan. But he was seeing for himself, the first time, people who lived below the poverty line.

‘Step out of the ten or fifteen large cities, and you realize that people in smaller towns live not in the Third World but perhaps in the Tenth or Twelfth World—they have neither employment nor facilities. They spend half their lives yearning and half in despair. What sort of ethics advocates that a man should begin his day with a piece of dry stale bread and end it with starvation? And here we are—instead of putting an end to hunger and want; we go on building mosques—grand, expensive mosques, with walls and floor made of the best marble and with embellished ceilings. You’ll find maybe ten mosques on one road—mosques empty of worshippers.’ Furqan used to say bitterly.

—There are so many mosques in this country that if the entire population of Pakistan were to come out and pray in them, half of them would still be empty. I don't believe in building mosques in a country where people commit suicide out of hunger and where generations of some social levels are lost in ignorance. You need schools, not mosques in such places so that education and awareness will provide opportunities for employment— only then will people thank God, otherwise they'll only complain.' He used to listen to Furqan quietly. When he began going to the village regularly, he realized Furqan was right. Poverty had driven people to denial of faith. The most trivial of their needs would be on their nerves and they would be slaves to whoever could fulfill their needs. The weekend he would visit the village, people would line up to meet him for the most ordinary things. Sometimes, there would be endless queues.

—Get my son a job in the factory...even a thousand rupees per month will add to our income.'

—If I could have twenty thousand rupees, I'll get my daughter married off...'

—The rains have ruined our crops. I have no money to buy seed for the next season. Lend me some money, please; I'll repay you when the crop's harvested.'

—The police have my son in custody—they won't give any reason. They say they'll hold him as long as they want—please talk to the SHO.' —The patwari is fighting with me over my land—he wants to allot it to someone else...he says my papers are forged.'

—My son works in the neighboring village; he has to walk eight miles back and forth...if only you could get him a bicycle.'

—We need to install a hand pump in our house for water. Please help.' Salar used to hear their requests in amazement—were such simple things such an insurmountable challenge that people should waste their years trying to overcome them? When he made his monthly visits to the village, he would carry ten to fifteen thousand rupees with him. That money distributed in small amounts would meet their simple—but to them, important—needs. It would bring some ease to their lives. The few lines he wrote or the few calls he made to some bigwig on their behalf would lift their burdens and cut away the invisible shackles off their feet—perhaps, even Salar was not aware of how this worked.

----- During his stay in Lahore, he visited Dr Sibte-e-Ali with regularity. Every evening after isha prayers, people would gather there and Dr Ali would speak on a topic of interest, sometimes of his own choice and sometimes one of his visitors would ask a question which then became the topic of discussion. Unlike most speakers, Dr Sibte-e-Ali did not believe in a captive audience that only listened. His lectures were interactive and he threw questions at them to encourage discourse. He valued their opinion and took criticism in a mature and positive manner. Salar Sikandar was the only one perhaps who had not yet raised any queries nor tried to answer those asked by Dr Sibte-e-Ali. He did not join those who offered opinions nor those who criticized.

Often he would accompany Furqan and if Furqan was not there, then he'd come alone and take up his usual place, at the far end of the room.

He'd listen quietly to Dr Ali and the discussions that went on. Sometimes, on being asked, he'd introduce himself briefly, 'I'm Salar Sikandar; I work with a bank.'

As long as he was in the USA, he used to call up Dr Sibte-Ali once a week, but his conversation with him was very brief and always the same. He would call; Dr Ali would receive the call and always ask him just one question.

The first time he heard the query, he was taken aback. He had landed in America a few days ago and Dr Ali was asking him about his return—to Pakistan. Salar was surprised.

'Not soon...' he had replied, not understanding the nature of the question. Later on, it did not strike him as odd because unconsciously he seemed to know what Dr Ali meant. The last time he asked Salar about this was when he had gone to the Red Light Area in search of Imama. After returning to Paris, he called Dr Ali the next week, as always, and as always, the dialogue ended on the same question: 'When are you coming back to Pakistan?'

Suddenly Salar felt he had had enough—it took him a while to regain his composure.

'Next month: I am resigning from this job and will work for a bank in Pakistan.'

'Very well. Then we'll meet next month,' said Dr Ali.

'Pray for me, please,' Salar finally said.

'I will. Anything else?'

'No, nothing more. Allah hafiz,' he said.

Dr Ali replied likewise and these conversations ended on the same note till Salar's arrival in Pakistan.

Visiting Dr Sibte-Ali gave Salar a sense of peace. That was the only time when he felt the depression lift off him completely. Sitting silently before him, Salar sometimes felt like unburdening himself, telling him all that he had kept within himself and which corroded him like a poison. The guilt and remorse, the restlessness, the helplessness and sense of shame, the regret—everything. Then the fear of Dr Ali's reaction—what he would think—would break his resolve.

Dr Sibte-e-Ali was an expert in removing ambiguities. Salar sat in his company, silent, listening, understanding, absorbing, coming to conclusions—there was a veil that was being lowered and his view that was becoming clear. The questions that had burdened his mind all these years were being answered by Dr Ali.

‘If you study Islam with understanding, you’ll realize its scope—how open it is. It is not a faith subscribing to narrow-mindedness and meanness; there’s no place for these in Islam. It begins with I and moves on to we— from the individual to the community. Islam does not expect you to sit on a prayer mat all day, a cap on your head and a rosary in your hands, doing nothing but praying and preaching. In fact, it asks you to make your life an example of fair dealing, devotion, honesty and diligence. It asks for sincerity and steadfastness. A good Muslim convinces others not by his words but his deeds.’

Salar recorded Dr Sibte-e-Ali’s talks and listened to them later at home. He had been in search of a mentor and had found one in Dr Sibte-e-Ali.

‘Salar, come on! Come, please...how much more do you want me to beg you!’ Anita dragged him by the arm; she was getting annoyed.

He had come to Islamabad, on three days’ leave, for Ammar’s wedding, although his family had insisted he join them for a week. The wedding functions had begun several days ago. He was well aware of the

‘importance’ and ‘nature’ of these events; hence despite their insistence, he planned to stay no more than three days. And here he was at Ammar’s mehndi being celebrated jointly by both the bride’s and groom’s families. Both Ammar’s and Asra’s friends and relatives were dancing away to

Indian film songs and pop music. It was an atmosphere of wild abandon— sleeveless dresses, baring necklines, clothes clinging to the bodies, sheer dresses and silk and chiffon saris with net blouses—the women of his family were in the same kind of attire as everyone else.

It was a mixed gathering and, before all this singing and dancing started, he found himself a seat where people from the corporate and banking circles or those who knew his father and brothers were sitting. But then the mehndi ceremony began and Anita dragged him off to the stage. Ammar and Asra were there, chatting away. He was meeting Asra for the first time. Ammar introduced them. Salar tried to get away once the ceremony was over but Tayyaba stopped him.

‘It’s your brother’s mehndi and you’re sitting away in some corner! You ought to be here,’ she admonished him. So he stayed back, with Kamran and his wife. One of his cousins came up and tried to put a mehndi sash around his neck that all the others had. Salar shook him off once again, expressing annoyance. In the next few minutes, the dance music began and along with Ammar all his siblings and cousins were dancing. Anita pulled him towards the dance floor.

‘No, Anita, I can’t dance. I don’t know how to.’ He tried to disengage himself and excuse himself from participating. But instead of listening to him, Ammar and Anita brought him into the heart of the melee. At Kamran’s and Moiz’ weddings, he too had danced like this, but that was seven years ago. And in these seven years he had traveled a long way—a journey of the mind and soul. At Ammar’s wedding, standing there in that crowd, he found it difficult even to raise his arms. Quite lost and helpless he just stood there in their midst.

Bending down, he whispered into Anita’s ear, ‘I’ve forgotten how to dance—please let me go.’

‘Just begin—it’ll come back,’ replied Anita, putting her hand reassuringly on his shoulder.

‘I can’t. You all carry one, I’m enjoying the event. Let me go.’

Meanwhile, Asra had also joined the crowd and her arrival gave Salar a chance to slip away.

‘To reach the zenith is the dream of every nation, every generation; and then those communities, who have received divine revelation, consider it their right to achieve pinnacles of glory. But they do not qualify just because they have been blessed with a divine messenger and scripture; not until they prove themselves through their actions are they entitled to a status or a special dispensation or quality. The same situation has arisen in the past with the Muslims and continues to afflict them. Their problem is that their upper classes are the victims of ostentatious indulgence and egoism— these things are like an epidemic, spreading from one to another to another, endlessly.’ Standing there, watching the dancing men and women, Dr Sibte-Ali’s words sprang to Salar’s mind.

‘A momin—a true believer—is never profligate: neither when he is one of the populace nor when he is the ruler. His life is not like that of an animal or insect led by base instinct—just eating, sleeping, reproducing and dying.

This cannot be a Muslim’s way of life.’

A smile came to Salar’s lips—here he was amidst a throng of such animals and insects, and the knowledge that he had left their company long ago made him happy. Everyone there was happy, contented and at peace with themselves—rising laughter, glowing faces and shining eyes. Before him was Tayyaba, dancing with Ammar’s father in law, and Anita dancing with her eldest brother Kamran.

Salar rubbed his temples—perhaps it was the loud music or his mental agitation that he felt a wave of pain pass through his temples. He took off his spectacles and rubbed his eyes. Then wearing them again, he tried to find a way out of that chaos and succeeded.

‘Where are you going?’ Tayyaba’s voice followed him through the noise, and she caught hold of his arm. She had just stopped dancing and was out of breath.

‘I’ll be back soon, Mummy, after my prayers.’

‘Let it be today...’

Salar smiled but said nothing; he shook his head and gently pulled his arm away. He tried to find a way out.

‘He can never be normal. Enjoying life is also an art and this fool will never learn this art,’ she thought ruefully as she watched her third son walk away.

Stepping out and away from the noise and clamor, Salar breathed a sigh of relief. As Salar walked out of the gate towards the mosque, the singer was in full form. Salar was the only one from that house who was on his way to the mosque. Going past the lines of parked cars, he constantly thought of Dr Sibte-Ali’s words, and also of those hundreds in his house at present who were busy having a ball, singing, dancing. There were only fourteen people who came to the mosque for prayers.

On returning to Pakistan, Salar continued to live with his parents during his posting in Islamabad. When he was transferred to Lahore, he preferred to live in an apartment in Furqan’s block, instead of renting out a bungalow in some posh locality.

Another reason for selecting proximity to Furqan was that he would not feel insecure about leaving his apartment unattended in his absence, and secondly, living in a house meant employing servants to maintain it, whereas he spent hardly any time at home. Moving with Furqan, Salar’s social circle in Lahore also began to expand. Furqan was a very sociable being and his social circle was really quite large. Despite knowing Salar’s moods and temperament, he would drag him along to various events from time to time.

That night Salar was with Furqan at one of his medical colleague’s dinner and music party arranged on a farm. Salar had also been invited and when he heard about the ghazal evening, he could not resist. The elite of the city had congregated on the farm. Salar knew most of them, and began talking to some acquaintances. Dinner had been served and while eating,

Salar looked around for Furqan who was not visible. As Salar continued with dinner, he caught sight of Furqan, who seeing him, came up.

‘Come Salar, let me introduce you,’ he said. ‘This is Dr Raza. He’s a child specialist at Gangaram Hospital.’ Salar shook hands with him.

‘And this is Dr Jalal Ansar.’ Salar needed no introduction. He did not hear what else Furqan was saying. He extended his hand towards Jalal and shook hands perfunctorily. Jalal too must certainly have recognized Salar.

Salar had gone there to spend a pleasant evening but it was going to be an awful night he realized. A flood of memories, breaking all bounds, assailed him. Everyone was moving to where the music had been arranged. Furqan was with Salar and Jalal a little ahead of them with other doctors. Salar looked at his back with a drawn face. Iqbal Bano was singing Faiz.

In the wilderness of solitude, dear love,
Tremble the shadows of your voice,
The mirage of your lips...

In the wilderness of solitude,
Beneath the debris of distance,
Bloom the cypress and the roses of your embrace.

The people sitting around him were swaying in ecstasy, moved by the singer’s voice and the poetry. Salar, seated some tables away, looked at the man who was lost in pleasantries with his friends. Salar had never experienced envy, but he felt it now looking at that man. After half an hour, he asked Furqan, ‘Shall we make a move?’ ‘Where?’

‘Home...’

‘The programme has just begun. I’d told you that the party would be on till late at night.’

‘Yes, but I’d like to leave. Get someone to drop me off. You can stay on.’ Furqan watched his face intently. ‘Why do you want to leave?’

‘I remembered something urgent.’ Salar tried to smile.

‘How can you think of anything urgent while listening to Iqbal Bano?’ Furqan’s tone was quite accusatory.

‘Sit down, I’ll find my way home,’ said Salar instead, and got up. ‘You’re being quite odd. This farm’s in the middle of nowhere—how will you go? Anyway, if you insist on leaving early, then let’s go.’ Furqan got up too.

They took leave of their host and got into Furqan’s car. ‘Now tell me, what happened all of a sudden?’ asked Furqan as he drove out from the farm.

‘I didn’t feel like staying there any longer.’

‘Why?’

Salar did not reply; he stared out of the window. ‘Is Jalal the cause of your getting away from there?’

Salar turned around to look at Furqan who drew a deep breath. ‘So my reading of this situation was correct—you left the party because of Jalal Ansar.’

‘How did you know?’ Salar said, admitting defeat, as it were.

‘The way you both met was very strange. Jalal, unusually, did not give you any importance; although before a banker as well known as you a man like him should lay it on with a trowel. He lets no opportunity pass him by especially if his own benefit is involved. And you kept staring at him all the time,’ said Furqan very calmly.

‘You know Jalal Ansar?’ inquired Salar, once again looking straight ahead. Then after quite some time, he added in a low voice, ‘He is the man

Imama wanted to marry.’

Furqan was at a loss for words. He did not expect that there would be this sort of acquaintance between Salar and Jalal or he would never have asked any questions. For a long time there was silence in the car.

‘I am disappointed to learn that she wanted to marry a man like Jalal Ansar. He’s a very arrogant fellow. We call him a butcher. His only interest is money. Where his patients will get it or how is not his concern mark my word, if he continues at this rate, he’ll be the wealthiest doctor in Lahore in the next ten years.’

Furqan was commenting on Jalal and Salar heard him in silence. When he had finished, Salar said, ‘This is what you call fate.’ ‘Do you envy him?’ Furqan was astonished.

‘No, I cannot envy,’ Salar gave a strange smile. ‘All that you’re telling me about him, I knew this was years ago, from the time when I had gone to see him with Imama’s message. I knew what sort of a doctor he would become. But seeing him today I felt very envious. He has nothing to commend him—he’s ordinary to look at and his family’s quite run of the mill too. There are thousands of doctors like him—greedy, materialistic—but consider his fortune that a

girl like Imama Hashim should fall in love with him. She ruined her life and left home for him. Call him a butcher or what

you will but that does not change his circumstances or mine.’ Salar stopped midway. Furqan saw his face cloud up.

‘There must be something about him, something special that made Imama Hashim love no one else but him.’ Salar rubbed his eyes. ‘Had I known that you’d meet Jalal Ansar here, I would never have brought you along,’ said Furqan as they drove towards town.

‘Neither would I have come, at any cost, had I known,’ thought Salar sadly, as he stared at the dark beyond the windscreen.

They traveled some more in silence, then Furqan turned to him again.

‘Didn’t you ever try to find her?’

‘Who? Imama? It’s not possible.’

‘Why?’

‘How can I look for her? Several years ago, I’d tried, but nothing came of it. And now....now it’s even more difficult.’ ‘You can get help from the newspapers.’

‘Put in a notice about her?’ Salar said, somewhat annoyed. ‘Heaven knows if I’ll find her, but her people will certainly get to me. I was already suspect in their eyes. Besides, what do I put in the papers, what do I say?’ he shrugged resignedly.

‘Then, forget her,’ Furqan said matter-of-factly. ‘Can anyone forget to breathe?’ Salar retorted.

‘Salar! That was a long time ago. How much longer are you going to pine for this unattainable love? You should think of your life ahead – you can’t sacrifice your whole life for Imama Hashim!’

‘I’m not sacrificing anything – neither my life, nor my time, nor myself. If I have Imama Hashim in my heart, it is only because I can’t forget her. It’s not in my power. It pains me greatly to think about her, but I’ve got used to this pain. She dominates my very being. If she hadn’t come into my life, I wouldn’t be sitting with you like this today, here in Pakistan. Salar Sikandar would be elsewhere, or perhaps, he would be nowhere...non-existent. I’m deeply indebted to her. You just can’t fling out of your life the one to whom you are indebted. I can’t either,’ Salar explained tersely.

‘Suppose you don’t ever find her—what then?’ Furqan responded. Suddenly there was silence and after what seemed a long time, Salar said, ‘I have no answer to that. Let’s talk about something else.’ Facilely, he changed the topic. about 5 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

In a few years, Salar, like Furqan, had done a lot of work in the village and, in comparison, done it faster because he had more contacts and a wider social circle. He had changed the very look of the place: clean water, electricity and a tarred road that connected the village to the highway had been provided in the first two years. In the third year, there was a post office, an office of the Ministry of Agriculture, and the facility of telephone connections; and in the fourth year, with the help of an NGO, he had set up afternoon vocational classes in the high school to teach handicrafts to the girls and women. The village dispensary got an ambulance and some more medical equipment. Like Furqan, he had set up the dispensary with his own resources, along with the school, and had used Furqan's help in improving it. Unlike the problem faced by Furqan, Salar had made arrangements for a permanent doctor even before the dispensary was functional. All the expenses of the school were borne by Salar, but to run the dispensary he had taken help from his friends. The contacts and friends made while working at UNICEF were proving useful now. He had brought over many of his colleagues from UNICEF and UNESCO to Pakistan. He was now busy in planning vocational training. However, this was not all that had happened in the fourth year—there was more.

That day, while returning to Islamabad, Sikandar Usman's car tire was punctured; the driver pulled to the roadside and began to change the tire. Sikandar Usman looked around as he waited. He caught sight of a signboard and the name of the village on it attracted his attention. The name was not new for him as it was associated with Salar. When the driver got back in the car, Sikandar told him to drive to that village—he was curious, all of a sudden, about the school that Salar had been running there for some years.

The car sped along the cemented road and they reached the village within ten minutes. A few small shops came into view—the commercial area of the village, perhaps.

‘Get down here and ask someone where Salar Sikandar's school is,’ he instructed the driver. He had remembered suddenly that Salar had never mentioned the name of the school and where they had stopped there was no indication of any school nearby. For the villagers, Sikandar Usman's car would have been a source of excitement some years ago but now they were quite used to Salar and his friends driving up. However, since this car did not just pass by but was parked instead, their curiosity was aroused. The driver went over to a shop and began to ask a group of people there about Salar's school.

‘Yes, sir, his school's here. Just drive down this road and then turn right and you'll see a large building there. That's the school,’ explained one man.

‘Are you Salar Sahib's friend?’ he enquired.

‘No, I’ve come with his father.’

‘Father?’ the man asked in surprise, and hearing the word, everyone there began to look towards the car. The man got up and shook hands with the driver.

‘Salar Sahib’s father has come here, that’s an honor for us,’ he said and moved towards the car. The others sitting there also followed him. Sikandar Usman seeing this group coming was a bit perplexed. The man following the driver came to the car and, through the window, extended his hand. Sikandar gingerly offered his hand and the man warmly clasped it with both hands. Sikandar’s discomfort was quite visible.

‘It’s a pleasure to have met you, sir!’ the man said with great respect. ‘Would you like some tea...or a cold drink?’ he asked effusively. The driver had started the car.

‘No, no...there’s no need. I just wanted to know the way,’ Sikandar said quickly. The car moved forward. The villagers stood there and watched the car drive away. The man shook his head ruefully and said, ‘Salar Sahib is something else, now.’

‘Yes—he’s not like this. He’d never leave without our hospitality,’ another man concurred. The men dispersed.

Salar used to park his car near the village shops and would gladly accept the simple fare the villagers offered him. He would then walk across to his school. The village men were disappointed because far from eating with them, Sikandar Usman had not even bothered to alight from his car.

The car turned right from the road and Sikandar who was talking to the driver, suddenly fell silent. The large spacious building that came into view through the windscreen dwarfed the little house around it—it was an astonishing sight. Sikandar had no idea that Salar was running such a big school here. What left him amazed was not the size of the building and its grounds, but the signboard on the road leading towards it. In bold letters, visible from a distance, he read ‘Sikandar Usman High School’.

The driver had parked the car in front of the school. Sikandar got down and, across the gate, read his name on the school front. His eyes filled up—Salar had left him speechless once again. The gate was shut but the gatekeeper was there and seeing the car, was opening the gates for him.

‘Sahib is here from the city and wants to have a look at the school,’ said the driver. Sikandar Usman was still staring at his name on the board.

‘You’re here in connection with Salar Sahib?’ the gatekeeper asked.

‘No, we’re just visiting,’ the driver said without hesitation.

Sikandar looked away from the board and looked at the driver and the gatekeeper. _I am Salar Sikandar's father,' he said in a firm but choked voice.

The driver looked at him in surprise and the gatekeeper, somewhat confused, said, _You're Sikandar Usman Sahib?'

Without responding, Sikandar Usman moved to the gate.

He was on the jogging track that evening when Sikandar called on his mobile phone. He stopped in his tracks, and recovering his breath, sat down on a bench nearby.

_Hello, Papa! Assalaam alaikum!'

_W'alaikum...are you on the track?' Sikandar judged that by Salar's heavy breathing.

_Yes. How are you?'

_I'm fine...'

_And Mummy?'

_She's fine too.'

Salar waited for his father to continue the conversation. There was silence on the other side, momentarily, then his father said, _I've seen your school today.'

_Really?' Salar blurted out. _How did you like it?

_How did you manage all this, Salar?'

_Manage what?'

_All that there is over there.'

_I don't know...it just kept happening. If I'd known, I would have taken you there myself. I hope there were no problems,' he said with some concern

_Could Salar Sikandar's father have any problems there?' he said in reply. Salar knew it wasn't a question. _What sort of a person are you, Salar?'

_I don't know...you should know, I'm your son.'

_No...I've never been able to find out.' Sikandar replied in a strange tone. Salar drew a deep breath. _Nor have I ever been able to find out. I'm still trying to know myself.'

==You...you're an extremely stupid, obnoxious and vile fellow, Salar!'

Salar laughed out. ==You're right. I really am that way. Anything more?' ==And this...that I am indeed fortunate to have you for my son.' Sikandar's voice quavered. It was Salar's turn to stay quiet.

==Tell me what the monthly expenses are for the school. My office will send you a cheque for the amount every month.'

Before Salar could say anything, the phone had been switched off. In the dark that had spread over the jogging track, Salar looked at the glowing screen of the cell phone. When the lights came on, he just sat there and absentmindedly watched the people on the track. Then getting up, he walked back to the track with long strides.

Salar first met Ramsha a year after his arrival in Lahore. She was a graduate of the London School of Economics and had been posted in his bank. Her father had been a longstanding customer of the bank and Salar knew him well.

Ramsha was very good-looking, intelligent and pleasant natured and within a short time of her joining the bank, she had made friends with the people there. As a colleague, she was on good terms with Salar too and in consideration of her father, he respected her. Compared to the other girls working in the bank, Ramsha was more informal with Salar, but he had no idea as to when she had started taking this relationship more seriously. She had become too attentive towards him and visited his office more frequently. After office hours too she'd often call him up. Salar found her behaviour somewhat unusual but then brushed off the suspicions that arose in his mind. Albeit, his complacency on her behalf came to an end after a year.

No sooner had Salar stepped into his office in the morning—and he was taken aback. On his table there was a large and beautiful bouquet with a card attached. He put down his briefcase and opened the card.

==Happy birthday to Salar Sikandar — Ramsha Hamdani'

Salar took a deep breath: no doubt it was his birthday, but how did Ramsha get to know? He stood there a while, wondering. Then placing the bouquet aside on the table, he took off his jacket, hung it on the back of the chair and sat down to work. He had noticed another card under the bouquet which he opened up. Reading the contents, he put the card in his drawer—he wasn't quite sure what his reaction to the bouquet and the card ought to be. But then, he shrugged off these thoughts and attended to his work. As he was setting up his laptop and putting away the briefcase, Ramsha walked in.

==Happy birthday, Salar!' she said as she entered.

He smiled. ==Thanks.'

Ramsha pulled up a chair and sat down opposite him. Salar was busy switching on the laptop.

==Thank you for the bouquet and card too—it was a pleasant surprise,' he said, as he plugged his phone into the computer. ==But how did you find out about my birthday?' he couldn't help but ask.

==That I am not going to tell you, mister—I had to find out and I did,' she said pertly. ==And otherwise too, friends don't ask each other such questions. If friends were ignorant of such details, then what sort of friends would they be?'

Salar's eyes were fixed on the computer screen but he was listening to her with a smile.

==I've come here with a demand on behalf of all the staff—we want a party! You have to arrange the dinner tonight.'

Salar looked up at her. ==Ramsha, I don't celebrate my birthday.' ==Why?'

==Just like that...'

==There must be a reason.'

==No special reason: I just don't do it. That's it.'

==Well, you didn't do so before, but this time you have to. This time the entire staff wants a celebration,' she said very candidly.

==I can have a party for you any day, anywhere—at my place or at a hotel—any time, wherever you all wish. But not as a birthday celebration,' Salar spoke rather bluntly.

==Oh, so that means you want us to arrange a party for you,' Ramsha retorted.

==I didn't say that.' Salar was taken aback.

==If you cannot have a party for all of the staff, at least you can take me out for dinner.'

==Ramsha, I'm busy with some friends tonight,' Salar expressed regret.

__No problem—I'll join you too,' she shot back.

__No—that won't be very appropriate.'

__Why?'

__Because it's a stag party and you don't know any of them.' He made another excuse.

__I understand,' she said. __Then we'll go tomorrow?'

__Not tomorrow—some other day. I'll let you know.'

Ramsha was disappointed; she realized that he did not intend to take her out anywhere for the time being.

__OK,' she said standing up.

__I hope you didn't mind what I said,' he said, seeing her leave. __No, not at all. It's alright.' She smiled and left the room. Salar got busy with his work. He had assumed that this birthday party business was now in the past, but he was quite wrong.

A surprise party had been arranged for him in the lunch hour. His boss, Mr Paul Miller greeted him warmly. Ramsha had made all the preparations and looking at the cake and all the other accompaniments, Salar was now concerned about Ramsha's intentions. She had hinted more than once about her liking for him and this party confirmed her sentiments. After the party, he spent almost an hour in the office thinking about her: he was trying to fathom what error on his part had led her to take interest in him. There was no doubt that she was a very attractive girl and perhaps the best among those he had met in the last few months. But he did not want her to get involved with him. In the recent past, he had dismissed her attention to him as a part of her pleasant nature and friendliness. However, when he went home and opened the gifts he had received at the office party, he was astonished. He was still in a state of perplexity at the nature of these gifts when Furqan walked in.

Taking in the presents in the drawing room, he exclaimed, __Wow! You've collected quite a treasure today. Can I have a look?'

He sat down. Salar nodded. A watch, perfumes, ties—Furqan unwrapped them, one after another.

__Isn't this an adequate collection for your wedding?' Furqan remarked with a smile. __Your colleagues have really been generous!' __Just one colleague,' noted Salar.

__All this has been given by one person?' Furqan was surprised. __Who?' __Ramsha.'

Furqan pursed up his lips. __Do you really know that the value of all these put together would be in the range of 150,000 rupees?' he glanced at the items again.

—This watch alone could not have cost less than 50,000—no one would consider you just a colleague to give such costly presents. Is it that there's something between you and...’ Furqan stopped.

—There's nothing between us; at least not on my part. But today I'm worried: I feel that Ramsha is taking too much interest in me,’ said Salar, casting a look at the gifts again.

—That's very good—so someone does find you interesting after all,’ Furqan remarked as he put the gift back on the table. —You've been a bachelor long enough. Get this happy task done this year.’

—When I do not intend to get married, then why should I prolong this business?’

—Salar, why are you becoming increasingly impractical by the day? You should seriously consider settling down now. How long will you keep running away from girls? You ought to start your own family now. Ramsha's a very nice girl: I know their family. A bit too modern perhaps, but they're good people. And if not Ramsha, then marry someone else. I can help you in this regard or you can seek your parents help, but don't delay this further. You should think more seriously about this and at least have some response to what others have to say.’ Furqan stressed the last sentence, drawing Salar's attention to his silence.

—It gives one the satisfaction that one is not making a speech before a statue,’ said Furqan. —Don't you ever think about getting married?’ —Who doesn't?’ Salar spoke slowly. —But I don't think of marriage the way you do. Like some tea?’

—Instead of that last statement, you could have said —Quit your nonsense . ’ Furqan was quite annoyed. Salar shrugged, smiling wryly as he collected the gifts.

Ramsha stared in amazement at the packages lying before her. —But Salar, these are your birthday gifts!’

The next day Salar had returned everything except for one tie; he was in Ramsha's office. —I do not accept such expensive gifts from anyone. Just one tie would have been enough.’

—Salar, I give my friends such costly presents,’ she tried to explain.

—I'm sure you do, but I do not take them. And if you insist any more then I'll return the tie too,’ replied Salar, and without waiting for her answer, he left the room. Ramsha sadly watched him walk away.

That day too Salar, as usual, had come to Dr Sibte-Ali's. He had not yet started his lecture when a middle-aged man addressed him.

==Dr Sahib, when a person finds the perfect mentor, his fortunes change.' Salar turned around to look at the man: he had been coming here for the past few days.

==It enhances his generations. Ever since I started coming to you, I feel I have found a direction. My life had become chaotic. Something in my heart tells me I have found my perfect mentor—I want to accept you as my guide, my leader.'

With utmost faith, he clasped Dr Ali's hands. There was complete silence in the room. Dr Ali gently patted the man's hands and withdrew his own.

==Taqi Sahib, to this day, I have never in my life expected anyone to make such a declaration. I've heard you talk about a perfect mentor...who is a perfect mentor? Who do you call a perfect mentor? What does he do? Why is he needed?' he asked Taqi Sahib very seriously.

==You are the perfect mentor,' he replied.

==No, I am not,' said Dr Ali.

==I get guidance from you,' the man insisted.

==Guidance comes from teachers and parents too. Leaders also guide as well as friends—are they all perfect mentors?' ==You do not sin.' The man was now confused.

==Yes, I do not do so consciously because I fear sinfulness. Many people sitting here may also not sin consciously because they too may fear sin, like me. But I am not aware of what I may do unknowingly. It is very likely that unconsciously I may have sinned.' Dr Sibte-Ali smiled.

==Your prayers are answered.' The man was not ready to relinquish his stand.

==The prayers of parents are also answered as are the prayers of those who are oppressed and helpless, and many others.'

==But every prayer of yours is accepted,' he insisted.

Dr Sibte-Ali shook his head in negation. ==No. Not every prayer is fulfilled. For many years now, I have been praying daily for a Muslim renaissance, but that does not seem to be happening. Many other things I pray for daily do not materialize.'

==But whoever comes to you with a plea has his prayers answered.’

Dr Ali’s smile deepened. ==Perhaps, my pleas for you were heard but there are several others here for whom I have prayed but not been answered.’

There was nothing the man could say to this argument.

==Can any one of you tell me who is a perfect mentor?’

The people in the audience looked at each other; then one spoke up.

==Someone who is pious, devout, a worshipper.’

Dr Ali shook his head. ==There are many devout, pious people who do not fault in their prayers—many of them sitting around you. Are they the perfect mentors?

==The perfect guide is one whose worship is not just for the public, but comes from his heart, for God alone. His goodness and piety are genuine, not just an act,’ opined another.

==In your circle of friends, you must surely know at least one such person who is a true worshipper, whose goodness and devotion are completely trustworthy. So is such a person the ideal guide?’

After a quiet pause, someone else spoke up. ==It would be a person whose speech has the impact to change others’ lives.’

==The impact is there—in the words some people say, or others write. An actor on the stage, a journalist in his columns may have that impact, but does that make them the perfect guides?’

==The ideal mentor would be one who can prophesy, who has mystic powers and can predict the future,’ said another.

==Many of us have dreams that portend the future or give us some indication of what’s to come. Some people can pray to seek knowledge of the future; some have very strong sixth sense and can feel coming dangers. Who is the perfect mentor then?’ asked Dr Sibte-e-Ali. He repeated his question after a spell of silence.

==Who could be a perfect mentor?’

Salar began looking at Dr Ali in a perplexed way. ==Can there be anyone other than Dr Ali who is the perfect guide? If so, who could it be? Who was it?’ he thought.

The same thoughts echoed in the minds of others present there. Dr Ali was watching each face and slowly his smile faded.

==The perfect mentor is one who is the paragon of perfection—perfection that is the composite of all his thoughts and actions, all that you have been describing. It is one whose worship is true and pure, who is noble and devout. Every prayer of his is fulfilled to the extent

that God wills. There is an effect, an impact in his speech; he guides people too but he's not a soothsayer, he is a mystic. He receives divine revelation—something that is not granted to all and sundry. Of the 124,000 messengers of God each one was a mentor, but the perfect mentor was he who received the final message of God, who was the seal of the prophets.'

__Every human being, at some point in his life, needs a mentor. At times, life brings one to a stage where one feels that all pleas and supplications— on the lips, in the heart—are going unheard. One's prostrations, one's outstretched hands cannot turn God's blessings to oneself. One feels as though there was a link that is now lost and there is a yearning for someone who will lift his hands in prayer, whose words will reach God as he pleads before Him, someone whose supplications are heard and answered, someone whose prayers will not be rejected like his own. Then one searches for the ideal guide, the perfect mentor, pursuing this search through the world for that individual who stands at some stage of perfection.

__This search for perfection, for the perfect mentor, has been with man since his evolution to this day. It is a desire that God Himself has put in the hearts of the people and had it not been there, they would never have had any faith in the prophets nor would have tried to follow them. It was this search that drew them to the prophets who brought divine messages to the people in every era across the world. The divine revelations came to a close with God's final message to the last prophet, Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH). After him, his followers needed no other guide or mentor.

Who is there today, or in the times to come, who can be given a station higher than that of Hazrat Muhammad Mustafa (PBUH)?

Who is there today, or in the times to come, who can claim greater perfection than the prophet, Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH)?

Who today or in the future can claim to intercede for his followers, other than Hazrat Muhammad? about 5 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

__The lasting quiet response in negation raises just one issue: why do we seek an ideal guide other than the perfect mentor, Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH)? When we have professed faith in him, what is the need to declare our faith in others?

__Instead of treading the path shown by the perfect mentor, what are the other roads that attract us? Are one God, one Faith, one Quran, one Prophet and the example of his way of life not enough for the Muslims? Other than God, His word and the guidance of His prophet, who else or what else is there that will save us in this life and the hereafter? Who can fulfill our prayers and bless us with His bounties? Can anyone say what

sect the perfect mentor belongs to? No one can.' Dr Sibte-Ali spoke on.

==He was only a Muslim; a Muslim who believed that if he walked the straight and narrow path, he would be rewarded with heaven and if he diverted from it he would be punished by God's wrath.

==And the straight and narrow path is that which the Almighty, through His prophet Muhammad (PBUH), has shown us in the Quran in very clear, precise and unambiguous language. Do that which God has instructed through His prophet (PBUH) and desist from that which He has forbidden.

==There is no ambiguity about God, the prophet (PBUH) or the Quran in any way. Look up the Quran and see if you find, in clear, precise terms any reference to another prophet or perfect guide. Keep searching, and if you don't find any such thing, then beware of the quagmire you're landing yourself in. You are using the few decades of your life on earth to ruin your life hereafter—what a poor bargain! If you want guidance, seek it in the Quran; it gives you all the answers to your queries; it does not leave you simple, ignorant and clueless. It flings your reality in your face. Does God not know man, just one of the millions of His creation?

==If your supplications are not heard, then don't go searching for sources and intercessors—just raise your hands to Him and plead your own case. If He should grant your prayers, be thankful; if not, be patient; but you must make the effort yourself. If your life does not have any order or direction, then emulate the example of the prophet (pbuh) and search his guidance.

Your needs will be fulfilled.

==Respect everyone—every leader, every believer (momin), every elder and martyr, and the pious and devout. But in your life follow the example of only the prophet (pbuh) for he has not given you any instructions of his own volition: whatever he conveyed to you is only by God's will, revealed to him by the Almighty.

==Who or what is Dr Sibte-Ali? Who knows him or what he does? You and a few hundred people or a few thousand, but the Perfect Mentor (PBUH) I speak of is known to more than a billion people who accept him as their spiritual leader. I have been saying, and repeating over the last few years the same message that Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) gave us 1400 years ago. Is there anything new in what I say?'

Dr Sibte-Ali fell silent. The audience was already quiet: it was as if he had shown them a mirror and what they saw there left them frightened and perturbed.

Coming out, Salar sat in his car, pondering, for quite some time. The last veil too had been lifted from his eyes. Several years ago when Imama Hashim had left home without considering the consequences, he had been unable to understand her passion. To him it was sheer stupidity. Later it began to make sense to him. He came to know that a person could indeed hold the prophet ((PBUH) so dear and in such high esteem that they could give up everything for love of him.

As he learned more about Islam and its history, he came to know that the revered companions of the Prophet (PBUH) had also made many such sacrifices for the faith. From Hazrat Bilal (RA) to Hazrat Owais Qarni (RA) there had been countless individuals, and in every era too who had given their all for Islam. Salar Sikandar admitted that the love of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was such a powerful magnet that it could compel anyone to give up anything. He had not tried to analyze this sentiment before and today, as he sat there, he was pondering over it for the first time.

It was not just the love for the Prophet ((PBUH) that had made Imama Hashim walk away from her home: she had seen the path to goodness, the straight path, and she turned towards it. It was the same path that he had been searching all these years, the path that the companions of the Prophet (PBUH) had trodden.

Imama Hashim had found the Perfect Mentor, the Prophet Muhammad ((PBUH) years ago. The guidance she received from the love and respect for the Prophet (PBUH) had given her courage. Salar to this day had not been able to identify Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) as the ideal mentor, and Imama had done this all by herself. She did not need anyone's support or guidance as Salar did.

In the last eight years, Salar had experienced every possible emotion for Imama—contempt, mockery, regret, hatred, love, everything—but that day, he felt envy for her. What was she but a woman? An ordinary woman, not some hour of paradise. What was her worth compared to Salar Sikandar?

==Does she have an IQ level like mine?'

==Has she had successes like I have had?'

==Can she do the kind of work I do?'

==Can she acquire a reputation like I have done?'

==She was nothing, had nothing, and yet everything had been offered to her on a platter. And I with an outstanding IQ level have been unable to see what has been before me all along.'

Staring ahead into the dark, and moist-eyed, Salar was muttering to himself. ==Just gave me the capacity to step out and conquer the world: that world which has no meaning or value...that world...' He stopped. He was really angry at Imama. Eight years ago, he would have abused her, called her ==bitch' as he did; but today after this passage of time, he could not bring himself to say anything derogatory about her—he could not dare do so. How can one possibly say anything negative about a woman who stood far ahead of oneself on the path of righteousness?

He took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. He seemed defeated. ==The Perfect Mentor (PBUH)...the path of righteousness.' It had taken him eight years to reach this point, but his search had ended—he had found the answer.

They were both in a restaurant. Ramsha had dressed up especially for the occasion. She was very happy and happiness exuded from her very being. Even Salar could feel it. Salar took the menu card from the waiter but he folded it and laid it on the table. Ramsha looked at him in surprise.

‘The lunch is on me, but you will decide the menu,’ he said with a smile.

‘OK,’ Ramsha responded with a wide grin. As she looked through the menu, Salar looked around. She placed the order and the waiter left.

‘Your invitation for lunch was a real surprise for me,’ she remarked. ‘You had not done this before—ever. In fact, you refused my invitation.’ ‘Yes, but now there are some things we must discuss and that’s why I invited you here,’ he replied.

Ramsha looked at him meaningfully. ‘Some things to talk about? Just what?’

‘Let’s eat first. We’ll talk later.’ Salar tried to put it off.

‘But by the time we are served and we have eaten, it’ll be too late.

Wouldn’t it be better to talk now?’ she asked impatiently.

‘No, it’s not better. After lunch,’ he said in a final tone.

Ramsha did not insist. They engaged in small talk. Then lunch was served and they began to eat. It took them nearly an hour to finish and then Salar ordered some coffee.

‘I think it’s time we talked,’ said Ramsha, taking the first sip of coffee.

Salar appeared very serious: head bent, he was stirring his coffee. When Ramsha spoke, he looked up at her.

‘I wanted to talk to you about that card you sent me two days ago.’

Ramsha blushed deeply. Two days ago when Salar got home, a bouquet and a card awaited him. He had been away for a week to Hong Kong on official work. The flowers and card were from Ramsha.

‘You have no idea how thrilled I’ll be to see you again.’ Salar read the card, his mind stilled. His worst fears had proved true—Ramsha was expressing her sentiments for him. The next day

at work, he did not mention the card, but over the weekend, he invited her for lunch. It was necessary to clear these matters with her.

==Did the card offend you?' she asked.

==No—it was the message.'

Ramsha was somewhat embarrassed. ==I am sorry! But Salar, I just...I just wanted to tell you how much I missed you.' Salar took a sip of the coffee.

==I like you. I want to marry you,' Ramsha spoke after a brief pause. ==It's possible that this proposal may seem very odd to you, but I've wanted to discuss this with you since some time. I'm not flirting with you—whatever

I've written on the card is what I really feel for you.'

Salar let her complete her words. He had put down the cup of coffee.

==But I don not want to marry you.' He spoke frankly.

==Why?'

==Is it necessary to answer this?' he asked.

==No, not really, but what's the harm in saying so?'

==Why do you want to marry me?' he queried in response.

==Because you're different.' Salar sighed deeply.

==You're not like other men. You have a stature; you're cultured, wellgroomed.'

==I'm not like that.'

==Prove it,' she was challenging him.

==I can but I won't,' he said taking another sip of coffee. ==Every man is better than Salar Sikandar.' ==In what way?'

==In every way...'

==I don't accept that.'

==Your accepting or not accepting won't change the reality.'

==I know it. I've been working with you for the last year and a half.'

==It's not advisable to come to a conclusion about men in such a short time.'

==Nothing that you say will change my opinion about you.' Ramsha was set in her views.

__You'll find much better prospects than me in the circles you move in, considering your family background.'

__Talk only about yourself.'

__Ramsha, I love someone else,' he confessed at last. For the first time in this conversation, the color drained from her face.

__You...you never told me.'

Salar smiled softly. __We've never been that informal with each other.'

__Are you going to marry her?'

There was a long spell of silence between them.

__It's possible that I may not be able to marry her because of some problems,' he said.

__I'm unable to understand you. You love someone knowing that you cannot marry her?'

__It is something like that.'

__Salar, you're not quite so emotional. How can you say such things, being the practical person you are?' Ramsha laughed mockingly. __Supposing you do not succeed in marrying her, then will you never get married?'

__No.'

She shook her head. __I don't believe it!'

__But that's how it is. If ever I do think of marriage it may be ten or fifteen years hence—and it's possible that I may not even be alive so many years later,' he said dryly, as he beckoned the waiter.

__Ramsha, I'd appreciate if after today's discussion such an issue will not arise again between us. We are good colleagues and I'd want our connection to be confined to that. Don't waste your time on me—I am not what you take me to be.'

The waiter came with the bill; Ramsha, lost in thought, watched Salar settle the tab with the waiter.

Salar was out of the office for some work. Seeing the traffic rush at the railway crossing, from a distance, he turned the car around. He did not want to waste his time being stuck in a traffic jam.

He reversed and turned another turn. It was a by-lane and was quite deserted. He had hardly covered some distance when he saw an old lady sitting on the kerb. From her clothes and general appearance she looked as though she was from a well-placed family. He could see that she was wearing gold bangles too, and he felt apprehensive that on this quiet road she may well become a victim of someone's greed. He pulled up near her and stopped the car.

The lady's fair complexion had become flushed and she seemed breathless. Maybe she had sat down to recover her breath.

'Assalam alaikum Ammaji! What's the problem? Why are you sitting here?' Salar asked, taking off his sun glasses and looking out of the window.

'Beta, I can't find a rickshaw.'

Salar was surprised at her. It was not a main road. It was a side street of a residential area and there was no possibility of finding a rickshaw there.

'Ammaji! You won't get a rickshaw here. Where've you got to go?' The lady mentioned the name of an area of the inner city. It was not at all possible for Salar to have gone and dropped her there.

'Come with me. I'll drop you on the main road and you'll get a rickshaw from there.' Salar undid the lock of the rear door and got down from the car. Ammaji appeared quite apprehensive and Salar immediately sensed her misgivings.

'Ammaji! You needn't be afraid. I'm a respectable person, I won't harm you. I only want to help you because you won't find a rickshaw on this road now; the road is deserted and you've got jewellery on you. Somebody could harm you.'

Salar gently tried to dispel her fears. The lady, adjusting her glasses, looked at her bangles and said to Salar, 'Now....all this jewelry is imitation.' 'Fine, this is very good, but somebody might misjudge it. Nobody's going to ask you if it's real or fake,' Salar pretended, glossing over her lie. She debated, and Salar was getting late.

'It's OK, Ammaji, if you'd rather not.....' he turned back towards the car. Ammaji spoke up.

'No, no. I'll go with you; as it is, my feet are killing me.' She tried to get up, pushing down on her legs.

Salar, holding her arm, pulled her up, opened the rear door and helped her in.

He crossed the side street and quickly came on to the main road. He was looking for a rickshaw but none was to be found there. He was driving slowly, scanning the traffic for a free rickshaw.

‘What’s your name, son?’ she asked.

‘Salar.’

‘Slaar?’ she repeated, as though for confirmation. He smiled bemusedly, as this was the first time he had heard his name mispronounced.

Correction was futile, as she was a Punjabi woman who was, with difficulty, speaking with him in Urdu.

‘Yes,’ Salar confirmed.

‘What’s this name, and what does it mean?’ she suddenly asked with interest.

Salar, now speaking in Punjabi, explained the meaning of his name to her. Ammaji was pleasantly surprised at his speaking to her in Punjabi, and started to speak to him in it.

After asking Salar the meaning of his name, she said, ‘My elder daughter-in-law has had a son.’

He was surprised. It had not occurred to him that after learning the meaning of his name she would come out with this. ‘Congratulations,’ was all that he could say spontaneously.

‘Yes, thank you.’ She received his congratulations with much good cheer.

‘My daughter-in-law had called me: —Ammi, please suggest a name.

Shall I give her your name?’

Surprised, he looked at her in the rear view mirror, ‘Yes, do that.’

‘Now, that solves this problem.’

Ammaji, very relaxed, took off her glasses and started wiping them with the end of her large chador. Salar had not found a rickshaw yet.

‘How old are you?’ She resumed the conversation from where she’d left off.

He told his age.

‘Are you married?’

This set Salar thinking. He wanted to say ‘Yes’ but realized that if he did, it would lead to a string of questions. He decided to deny it and that turned out to be his biggest mistake of the day.

=No.'

=Why not?'

=Just like that—never thought of it,' he lied.

=I see.' There was silence for a while. Salar prayed for a rickshaw to come along: he was getting late.

=What do you do?'

=I work in a bank.' =What sort of work?'

Salar told her his designation—he believed it would not register with her.

But he was astonished when she replied, =That's an officer, isn't it?'

Salar laughed out—no one could have better explained his work. =Yes, Ammaji—it is an officer.'

=How educated are you?'

=Sixteen grades.' This time Salar's response was in the kind of terminology she would understand. Her reply was even more amazing.

=Sixteen grades—what do you mean? Have you got an MBA degree or an MA in Economics?'

Salar suddenly turned to look at her. She was watching him through her spectacles.

=Do you know what an MBA or an MA in economics is?' he was really surprised.

=Now, wouldn't I know? My eldest son got his MA economics degree here in Pakistan; then he went to England for his MBA. He's the one whose wife had a son.'

Salar took a long breath.

=So, you haven't told me yet...'

Salar seemed to have forgotten what she had asked him.

=About your education,' she continued.

=I have an MBA degree.'

=From where?'

=From America.'

=Very well. And your parents—are they living?'

Salar replied in the affirmative. Then she asked him about his siblings: the questions seemed to be endless. Salar could not find an escape.

‘Five.’

‘How many sisters and how many brothers?’

‘Three brothers and a sister.’

‘How many of them are married?’

‘All except me.’

‘Are you the youngest?’

‘No. I’m the fourth—I have a younger brother.’ For the first time, Salar regretted his impulsive decision to help this old lady.

‘Is he married too?’ she went on. When Salar said ‘yes’ she asked, ‘Then why aren’t you married? Was there a love affair or something?’ Salar was really taken aback. Was she some kind of psychic? He avoided her query. ‘We can’t seem to find a rickshaw, so tell me your address and I’ll drop you off myself.’ He was already late and since there was no other transport available, he could not leave her stranded on the road.

She gave him the address. He couldn’t make it out, so he pulled up near a traffic constable at the crossroads and asked him the way. The man explained the route; Salar moved on.

‘So, you didn’t tell me if there was a love affair that stopped you.’ Salar wanted to hang himself. That lady had not forgotten her last question whereas he was prepared to go all the way to drop her off just to get out of this.

‘No, Ammaji, there was no such business.’ He spoke very seriously this time.

‘Alhamdulillah!’ He couldn’t quite make out in what context this term had been used. Now she was interrogating him about his parents, wanting to know all sorts of details. Salar was really stuck in an awkward situation. The worst was when he reached the locality where she lived: he asked her to direct him to her house.

‘Well, I do live here but I don’t know the way.’

He was stunned. ‘Then how am I supposed to drop you home without knowing how to get there?’

She gave him the name and number of her house.

‘No, no. I need to know the name or number of the street.’

She began to tell him about the landmarks. ‘There’s a sweet shop at the corner of the street...It’s a very wide street....Parvez Sahib’s house is also there—the same man whose son

got married in Germany last week. His first wife is living here, and she cried her heart out when she learnt of his second marriage.' She veered off in another direction instead of showing him the signposts.

Salar pulled up by the roadside. __Ammaji, what's your husband's name? Give me some detail about your house and your street. I can't get you home this way.' He spoke as patiently as he could.

__I'm known as Saeeda Amma. My poor husband passed away ten years ago and people have forgotten about him. I told you that the street I live on is very wide. Three days ago, they replaced two of the drain covers there— absolutely new and cemented in place. Every second month somebody would make off with those covers, but now they're safe.' Salar sighed in exasperation.

__Should I be asking people to direct me to the lane with the new drain covers? Give me the name of someone there who's well known to the residents.'

__There's Murtaza Sahib whose son broke his leg yesterday morning.' __Ammaji, that's no introduction.'

She got into a huff over this. __Well, people don't break their legs every day—it's not common in every household!'

Salar stepped down from the car and walked up to the shops nearby, with the hope of locating her home using the __landmarks' she had supplied. He realized that it would be impossible at least within the span of that day. He returned disappointed.

__Do you have a telephone at home?' he asked as he got into the car.

__Yes, I do.'

Salar was relieved. __Tell me the number he said, switching on his mobile phone.

__That I don't know.'

Salar was in near despair. __You don't know your phone number?'

__Son, I hardly use the telephone. My sons call me up themselves and so do my other relatives; and if I need to speak to anyone, my daughter dials the number for me.'

__Who had you gone to visit in Model Town?' A thought struck Salar. __I have some relatives there. I went to distribute sweets to celebrate my grandson's birth,' she replied very proudly.

__Fine,' said Salar, somewhat relieved. __We'll go there. What's the address?' __I don't know.'

Salar was too distraught to say anything.

==Then how did you get there?’ he finally asked.

==You see, if I want to go anywhere, my neighbour’s children drop me off. They know all the addresses; they’ve been doing this for the last ten years. Then Bilal brings me back from there. They also used to live in our locality till about ten years ago, so everyone knows their house.’

She continued, ==What happened today was that no one was home except the maid servant. I sat there for a while but since there was no sign of their returning, I decided to go home myself. And praise be to God, I found you.’

==Ammaji, what address would you have given the rickshaw driver?’

==The same that I gave you!’ he could not help but marvel at her intelligence.

==Have you ever found your way home, with such directions?’ he asked rather morosely as he reversed the car and turned it toward the main road.

==No, never...I never needed to,’ she replied calmly. Her peace of mind was enviable.

==Where are you going now?’ Saeeda Amma could not be quiet for long.

==I’m taking you back to where I found you. The house must be on the same road. Did you take a turn anywhere?’ he asked as he looked at her in the rearview mirror.

==No, I didn’t turn anywhere,’ she replied in an upset tone. Salar didn’t note that. He was feeling better as he thought the house would be easier to locate on the main road rather than in the inner lanes.

==Do you smoke cigarettes?’ She broke the silence again. He was a little jolted. When he looked at her in the mirror, she was watching him too.

==Me? Uh, no.’ He hadn’t quite fathomed the question.

==Any other addiction, etc?’

More than the question it was her very informal style that astonished him. ==Why do you ask that?’

==Just by the way. You can’t expect me to stay quite all the way.’ She seemed to be expressing her problem.

==What does it seem to you? That I take drugs?’ he asked.

==No, not at all...I was just curious. So you don’t?’

Salar was amused by her defensive style. ==No, I don’t,’ he said briefly. They had stopped at a traffic signal.

==Any girl friend?’

Salar thought he had heard wrong. He turned around and asked, ‘What did you say?’

‘I asked you if you had any girl friend,’ she replied, stressing the last two words.

Salar burst out into laughter. ‘Do you know what a girl friend is?’

Saeeda Amma took offence at his question. ‘Why indeed! I have two sons and you expect me not to know what a girl friend is. When they went abroad for studies, my husband had warned them not to have any girl friends. They used to call home every month.’

The signal turned green and Salar, looking ahead now, put his foot on the accelerator. Saeeda Amma continued her discourse.

‘I used to tell them to swear that they had no girl friends. Till they got married, they would swear this to me—even before greeting me,’ she said very proudly. ‘My sons are very obedient; they didn’t get involved with girls there.’

‘Did you arrange their marriages by your choice?’ Salar enquired. ‘No, they married there of their own choice,’ she replied very plainly. Salar could not hold back his amusement.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked seriously.

‘Nothing. Are your daughters-in-law Europeans?’

‘No, they’re Pakistanis but they live there. They used to work with my sons. But, why did you laugh?’ she asked again.

‘It’s nothing special.’

‘You didn’t tell me...any girl friend...’

Salar interrupted. ‘No, Saeeda Amma, not even a girl friend.’

‘Mashallah, Mashallah!’ once again, Salar failed to understand the context of this exclamation.

‘You have your own house?’

‘No, it’s rented.’

‘Any servants?’

‘No live-in servants, just part-time ones to do the cleaning.’

‘And this car must be your own?’

==Yes.'

==And how much do you earn? What's your salary?'

Replying mechanically to her queries, Salar suddenly stopped in his tracks. He didn't make out immediately the direction this dialogue was taking.

==Saeeda Amma, why do you live here alone? Why don't you join your sons?' he changed the topic.

==Yes, that's what I intend too. At first, I didn't want to, but once my daughter gets married, I'll go abroad. I'm tired of living alone out here.'

Salar was now back on the road from where he'd picked up Saeeda Amma.

==I'd picked you up from here. Now tell me which house is it on this road that you were visiting.' He had slowed down the car and was looking at the houses on his right.

==Even if you don't know the number, you should be able to recognize the house.'

Saeeda Amma was peering at the houses. ==Yes, yes... I can recognize the house.'

She began to describe the house as vaguely as she had given her own address. They reached the end of the road and she had been unable to identify the house. Salar got Bilal's father's name and he started walking down the road, enquiring about him and anyone who knew Saeeda Amma. Half an hour later, he had knocked at every door but no one responded to the names he had asked.

==You do remember his name correctly?' he asked her. He was at the end of his tether.

==Yes, of course. Why should I forget his name?' she felt insulted.

==But no one by this name lives on this road, and nor does anyone here know you,' stated Salar, getting back into the car.

==Then let's look at the street there,' said Saeeda Amma, pointing to a street nearby.

==But you said it was on this road.' ==When did I say that?' she objected.

==I had asked if you had turned anywhere from this road and you said you hadn't,' Salar reminded her.

==Yes, I did say that, but what is a —turn ?'

Salar despaired of her. ==Did you come here from another road or street, did you take a turn here?'

==Oh! So that's what you mean,' she said, placidly. ==Why did I sit down here? I was exhausted, walking on and on. How could I get tired walking down this narrow lane?'

Salar started the car. It had been a horrible day. ‘From which street did you turn here?’ The car moved forward.

‘I think...’ She looked around in confusion. ‘This one,’ she claimed. Salar was convinced that it was not the one; nonetheless, he turned that way. It was confirmed that the day was going to be wasted in this fruitless search. For the next hour and a half, he kept searching the roads with Saeeda Amma, without any success. From a distance she would declare that she’d found the house. On driving up close, she’d say, ‘No, no, no— not this one.’ Finally, he left that colony and brought her back to the locality where she said her house was situated. Another hour or more were wasted searching, and it was evening now. All along, while he traipsed up and down, Saeeda Amma sat complacently in the car.

‘Found it?’ she asked as he returned.

‘No, it’s getting dark now and it’s pointless looking around. I’ll report at the police station about you. Your daughter or your neighbors are bound to contact the police if you don’t get home. They’ll come for you,’ suggested Salar as he started the car again.

‘Poor Amina must be worried.’ Saeeda Amma expressed her concern for her daughter. Salar felt like telling her that his anxiety was greater than her daughter’s, but he drove to the police station without a word. After filing the report, he got up and so did Saeeda Amma.

‘Sit down, please. You’re going to stay here,’ he told her.

‘No. Where will we keep her here? Please take her with you. If anyone contacts us, we’ll give your whereabouts,’ the inspector announced.

‘But I want to hand her over to you,’ Salar objected.

‘Look here, she’s an old lady. Should no one contact us for her, where will we put her up for the night? And if more days should pass...?’ explained the inspector.

Saeeda Amma did not let him complete his words. ‘I don’t want to stay here. Son, I’ll go with you. Where do you expect me to sit around with these men?’ she turned to Salar, who looked at her apprehensively.

‘But I live alone...’ he was about to say, when he thought of Furqan’s place. ‘Very well, let’s go,’ he said, with a sigh.

He came out to the car and dialed Furqan’s mobile number. He wanted to arrange for her to stay there for the night. Furqan was still at the hospital;

Salar apprised him of the situation. ‘Nosheen’s away at the village,’ Furqan informed him. ‘But that shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll be there in a while and I’ll take her to my apartment. She’s an old lady, not a young woman, so no need for concern. You’re being too cautious.’

‘No, it’s not that—I was concerned about her comfort. She shouldn’t feel awkward,’ Salar replied.

‘No, she won’t, pal! Ask her—if she’s uncomfortable, I’ll put her up with Alam Sahib’s family next door.’

‘Anyway, you get here, then we’ll see,’ said Salar and switched off the phone.

‘No problem, son—I’ll stay with you. You’re like my son; I trust you.’ Salar smiled in response. He stopped at a restaurant on the way and picked up some food. He was ravenously hungry and he suddenly felt a pang of guilt that Saeeda Amma had been with him since afternoon and hadn’t eaten. On the way home, he got some fresh apple juice for her. It was his first experience of spending time with an old person—it was not easy.

He was having dinner with Saeeda Amma at his apartment when Furqan arrived. He introduced himself to her and joined them for dinner. In no time, he was happily chatting with her in typical Punjabi. Salar envied him—he had yet to see such a good conversationalist as Furqan—there was something in the way he spoke that the other person would take him into confidence in next to no time. In spite of his long friendship with Furqan, Salar had yet to learn the art of conversation from him.

Ten minutes later, at dinner, he was a quiet spectator while Saeeda Amma and Furqan talked away. Learning that Furqan was a doctor, she was busy consulting him on various medical problems. By the time they had finished eating, she had persuaded Furqan to bring his bag and check her up.

Furqan had not told her that he was an oncologist. Very patiently, he brought his bag and checked her blood pressure and then listened to her heartbeat with his stethoscope; then he checked her pulse and convinced her that she was in perfect health: there was nothing wrong with her heart or blood pressure. Saeeda Amma looked suddenly rejuvenated. Salar heard them talking while he washed the dishes in the kitchen. They were on the sofa in the lounge.

Shortly, the telephone rang and Furqan picked it up. It was Dr Sibte-Ali. After the usual greetings, he asked, ‘Did Salar file a report about a lady called Saeeda?’

Furqan was surprised. ‘Yes, she’s right here with us.’

‘Thank God,’ said Dr Ali, spontaneously. ‘She’s my relative and we’ve been searching for her for the past few hours. When we contacted the police, they gave us Salar’s name and phone number.’

Furqan told him about Saeeda Amma and then gave her the phone to speak to Dr Ali. Salar also joined them in the lounge. Saeeda Amma was busy talking.

‘She’s Dr Ali’s relative,’ whispered Furqan to Salar.

‘Dr Ali’s relative?’ Salar was amazed.

Furqan confirmed that she was, and Salar breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Bhai Sahib would like to speak to you.’ Saeeda Amma handed the phone to Furqan. Furqan quickly took the call and began to note some details on a piece of paper. Dr Sibte-Ali was giving him Saeeda Amma’s address.

Saeeda Amma turned in surprise to Salar, standing in the doorway. ‘And what have you been doing?’ she asked, looking at his apron.

‘Washing the dishes,’ he replied, diffidently. He went back to the kitchen and took off the apron. The work was almost done.

‘Salar, come on! Let’s go and drop her home.’ Furqan was behind him.

‘This can be done later.’

‘Get the car keys—I’ll wash my hands and be with you.’ Shortly afterwards, they were in Salar’s car. Furqan sat next to him and Saeeda sat at the back, but he continued to talk to her animatedly. At the same time he was directing Salar.

In the next twenty minutes, they were in Saeeda Amma’s locality, on her street. They parked the car at the entrance of the lane and then accompanied her to her house which was further in. She needed no direction now as she knew the street she lived on. In a rather superior tone, she pointed out the landmarks to Salar. ‘The sweet shop...the cemented drain covers...Parvez Sahib’s house,’ she said triumphantly. Salar smiled in appreciation. He didn’t tell her that her directions about the road were all correct—but she had taken him to the wrong locality.

‘Amina, poor girl, must be so worried,’ she said for the umpteenth time as they stopped before the red brick house. Furqan stepped out and rang the bell. Salar was looking appreciatively at the haveli before him. It must be quite old but had been well maintained and gave an air of elegance to the street.

‘I will not let you leave till you’ve had some tea,’ Saeeda Amma said very firmly. ‘You’ve had such an anxious time on my accord, especially Salar. The boy drove me around all day,’ she said, stroking his shoulder. ‘Thank you Saeeda Amma, but not today. We’re getting late, so we’ll come some other day.’

‘Yes, Saeeda Amma—no tea today. We’ll come some other time and have dinner with you too,’ Furqan added quickly.

‘Be sure you remember,’ she said.

‘How can we forget? And that recipe you were giving me for palak gosht—you must cook that for us,’ added Furqan.

They heard footsteps inside: it was Saeeda Amma's daughter coming to open the door; she had heard Saeeda Amma talking to Furqan. Without saying anything, she slid the bolt and opened the door ajar.

Furqan bid Saeeda Amma goodbye as she ascended the stairs. Salar had already turned back.

They got into the car and while starting it, Salar said to Furqan, 'Your most disliked dish is palak gosht and yet you were asking for it?' Furqan laughed heartily, 'What's the harm in saying that? But she may cook it so well that I may be compelled to eat it.'

'You'll go to her house?' Salar asked astonished as he turned the car on the main road.

'Of course, I will. I've promised her. And you?'

'I will not go,' Salar refused. 'I don't know her from Adam; how can I go to her house for a meal?'

'She is a first cousin of Dr. Sibte-Ali, and you know her better than I do. She is your find,' Furqan replied.

'That was another thing. She needed help and I helped her. Period. It would have been different if her sons were here, but I would never dream of visiting women who were living alone,' Salar stated gravely.

'I'm not going to go alone. I know it won't be proper for me to go alone to her place. I'll take my wife and children with me. Nosheen will also be pleased to meet her.'

'Yes, you go with Bhabi, that'll be alright,' Salar observed, satisfied.

'Only me....? You'll also have to come. She's invited you too.'

'I won't go, I haven't the time. You go, that'll be enough,' Salar said offhandedly.

'You are her special guest. It won't be much fun without you.'

His tone appeared somewhat strange to Salar. He turned and looked at Furqan, who was smiling.

'What do you mean?'

'I think she would like you as her son-in-law!' 'Don't be stupid!' Salar looked at him annoyed.

'You mark my words—she'll send you a proposal. Saeeda Amma likes you in every way. She's asked me all about you. And also if you had any plans to get married, and if so, when? I've told

her that you'll marry as soon as you find somebody nice. Then she started telling me about her daughter. Now even if we discount fifty per cent of her daughter's virtues, the girl.....now, what was she saying her name was? Oh, yes, Amina..... would be excellent for you.'

='You should be ashamed of yourself. She's a relative of Dr Sibte-e-Ali, and you're talking about her like this,' Salar scolded him. Furqan turned earnest.

='I'm not being flippant—it should be an honor for you to marry into the family of Dr Sibte-e-Ali.....'

='Just stop it, Furqan, this problem has been discussed enough,' Salar exploded.

='OK, we'll talk about it some other time,' Furqan responded coolly. Salar turned and stared at him.

='You're driving, concentrate on the road,' Furqan patted him. Salar somewhat annoyed turned his attention towards the road ahead.

Their association with Saeeda Amma did not end there.

A few days later they were at Dr. Sibte-e-Ali's one evening when, after the lecture, he held them back.

='Saeeda Apa wants to meet you. She was asking me to take her to you. I told her that you would be coming here in the evening and that she could meet you here. You had promised go see her but, probably, you didn't.' Furqan looked meaningfully at Salar, but he averted his gaze.

='Yes, we were thinking of going but being preoccupied, we couldn't,' Furqan tried to cover up.

The two of them went with Dr. Sibte-e-Ali to his dining room, where, after a little while, Saeeda Amma also appeared and immediately launched into a barrage of complaints. Furqan tried to cool her, whilst Salar sat by silently.

Furqan had told Salar that they would be going to Saeeda Amma's the next weekend, but Salar had to go to Islamabad and thence to the village.

He disclosed his schedule to Saeeda Amma and got out of it.

After the weekend, on his return to Lahore, Furqan told Salar about his visit to Saeeda Amma's. He had gone there with his family.

==Salar! I also met Saeeda Amma's daughter,' Furqan suddenly sprung it on Salar, whilst relating about the visit. ==She's a very nice girl. Unlike Saeeda Amma, she's quiet. Just like you. Both of you will hit it off very well.

Nosheen also liked her very much.'

==Furqan! It would be better if you limited yourself to the visit,' Salar chided him.

==I'm very serious, Salar,' Furqan persisted.

==I'm also very serious,' Salar countered. ==You know something, Furqan? The more you insist on marriage, the less inclined I get, and all this because of you,' Salar accused as he leaned back on the sofa. ==No, it's not because of me. Why don't you come clear and say it's because of Imama that you don't want to get married.' Furqan turned dead earnest.

==OK....I'll come clean. I don't want to marry because of Imama.....then?' Salar stated coldly.

==This is childish,' Furqan came back, looking at him hard.

==OK, fine, it's childish, so?' Salar shrugged.

==Then you should get rid of it,' Furqan counseled gently.

==I don't want to get rid of it.....so?' Salar shot back.

Furqan, dumbfounded, looked back at him for a few moments. ==Don't ever mention Saeeda Amma's daughter to me again, and if she broaches the subject, tell her that I'm already married.'

==OK, I'll not speak to you about it, but you needn't lose your temper,' Furqan submitted, raising his clasped hands in surrender.

==I have to speak to you about some important things, that's why I've called you.' Sikandar smiled and gestured Salar to sit down. He was sitting in the lounge with Tyeba, and Salar had come to Islamabad on their behest.

Sikandar Usman looked at his third son appreciatively. A short while ago, he had had dinner with them, and now, having changed, had joined them. Even in an ordinary white shalwar gameez and ordinary black slippers, he looked very presentable. Perhaps, it was the dignity of his countenance, or perhaps, it was the first time after many years that he was taking a good look at him, that he was admitting to himself, that his son had become a man of substance and stature.

He had never thought that it was because of Salar that he would, in his circle, gain social prominence. He would be introduced with reference to Salar Sikandar, and he would be pleasantly surprised. In all his teen years, Salar had badly embarrassed and bothered him, and at that time the future of this son of his had appeared dark, in spite of his extraordinary capabilities. Sikandar's fears and misgivings had been proved wrong. Tayyaba pushed the platter of dried fruits towards Salar who took some cashew nuts.

‘I want to talk to you about getting you married.’

He stopped suddenly from popping the nut in his mouth; the smile from his face vanished. Sikandar Usman and Tayyaba had not noticed and remained elated.

‘It's time you got married, Salar,’ said Sikandar. Salar involuntarily put back the cashew nuts on the platter.

‘Tyeba and I are surprised at the number of proposals that are being made for you. None of your brothers had ever got as many,’ Sikandar announced happily. ‘I thought we'd broach the subject with you.’ He looked at them silently.

‘You know Mr. Zahid Hamdani?’ Sikandar Usman had mentioned the name of the local head of a prominent multinational company.

‘Yeshis daughter is my colleague.’

‘Ramsha's her name, probably.’

‘Yes.’

‘What's she like?’

Salar observed his father: the question was very obvious.

‘She's nice,’ he replied after a pause.

‘Do you like her?’

‘In what way?’

‘I'm talking about Ramsha's proposal,’ Sikandar said in all seriousness. ‘Zahid has been on it with me for the past several weeks. He has visited us along with his wife once or twice. We've also been to their place. Last weekend we met Ramsha too. Your mother and I found her very nice— she's very well-mannered and, also, she's quite good friends with you. They very much want, in fact they are insistent, that through you a relationship is established between the two families.’

‘Papa! I am not friends with Ramsha,’ Salar said quietly. ‘She is my colleague, I know her, and there is no doubt that she's a very nice girl, but I don't want to marry her.’

==Are you interested in some other girl?' Sikandar asked him.

He remained silent, he did not reply. Tayyaba and Sikandar exchanged glances.

==If you are interested in some other girl, we have no objection. In fact, we'll be happy to take your proposal, and would not pressurize you otherwise,' Sikandar assured him gently.

==I have already married, a long time ago,' he said softly after a long silence, hanging down his head.

Sikandar did not find it difficult to understand what he was saying. His countenance turned dark. ==Are you talking about Imama?'

He remained silent. Sikandar looked at him unbelievably for a long time. ==Is that why you've not married for so long?' Sikandar was shocked. He had thought that he had forgotten her. After all, that had happened a long time ago, some eight years or so back.

==By now she must've married and is leading a peaceful and comfortable life. Your marriage to her ended ages ago,' Sikandar tried to persuade him.

==No, Papa, my marriage to her has not ended,' he said, lifting his head for the first time.

==On the marriage deed, you'd given her the right to divorce.....I remember you had wanted to find her, so that you could give her a divorce,' Sikandar said, as though trying to remind him.

==I had looked for her but couldn't find her, and she does not know that she has the right of divorce. Wherever she may be, she is still my wife.'

==Salar! Eight long years have passed. It's just not one or two years. Maybe she realized that she had the right to divorce. It is not possible that she is still your wife,' Sikandar countered, in a disturbed manner. ==Nobody except me could have told her of this right, and I did not disclose this to her. Till such time that she remains married to me, I will not marry again.'

==Do you have any contact with her?' Sikandar asked in low tones.

==No.'

==There's been no contact with her for the last eight years, and if this remains so all your life, what would you do?'

He remained silent. He had no answer for this question. Sikandar Usman waited for his reply for some time.

==You'd never told me that you were emotionally involved with her. All that you'd said was that you'd wanted to provide her momentary help, and that she had wanted to marry some other boy, etc., etc.' He remained silent this time also.

Sikandar Usman quietly watched him. He had never been able to understand his third son. He could never reach him. The depth of his feelings for the girl for whom he had sacrificed eight full years of his life, and for whom he was now prepared to sacrifice the rest of it, needed no words for expression. A long and uneasy silence gripped the room, when Sikandar Usman got up and went to his dressing room. He came back a few minutes later. After sitting back on the sofa, he pushed an envelope towards Salar. He looked at him with enquiring eyes and took the envelope.

‘Imama had contacted me.’ Salar could not breathe.

‘It was five or six years ago. She’d wanted to speak to you. Nasira had picked up the phone and she had recognized Imama’s voice. At that time you were in Pakistan, but instead of you, Nasira had given me the phone. She had asked me to get you on the phone. I told her that you had died. I did not want her to get in touch with you, because I didn’t want to be again dragged into the mess from which we had gained relief. I was certain that she would believe me because you had tried to commit suicide several times. She was Waseem’s sister and knew everything about you. In fact, she was herself witness to one such attempt. I couldn’t tell her about the clause of her right to seek divorce in the marriage deed nor about the divorce papers, which I had got prepared on your behalf. When I’d sent you to America, I’d got your signature on a blank sheet, so that, if the need arose, I could myself have the divorce deed prepared. Whether it was legal or not, I do not know, but I had this ready, and I wanted to tell Imama about it, and I had wanted her to have all the papers, but she hung up. I had the number traced out but it was of some PCO. A few days later she sent me twenty thousand rupees in travelers’ cheques through the post. There was also a letter with them. Perhaps, you’d given her some money, and she’d returned it. I hadn’t told you about this because I didn’t want you getting involved in this problem again. I was afraid of Imama’s family. I feared reprisal from them, and I wanted you to concentrate on your career.’ Holding that envelope, his face drained of blood, he watched Sikandar Usman. Someone had quietly sucked away his very lifeblood from him. He put the envelope on the table. He did not want Tayyaba and Sikandar to see the trembling of his hands – they had, indeed, noticed it, but his senses had left him momentarily. He gazed for some time at the envelope under his hand on the table before him. Then, without taking the envelope off the table, he pulled out the paper from it.

Dear Uncle Sikandar,

I am very sorry to learn of the death of your son. Some years ago, your family was put to a lot of trouble because of me, for which I am truly sorry. I had to pay back Salar some money, which I am enclosing.

Allah Hafiz

Imama Hashim.

.....

Salar felt as though he was really dead. Ashen-faced, he put back the piece of paper in the envelope. Without a word, he stood up, clutching the envelope. Sikandar and Tayyaba watched him with bated breath. As he passed by, Sikandar stood up.

‘Salar.....!’

He stopped. Sikandar put his hand on his shoulder. ‘Whatever happened.....it was unintentional. I didn’t know that you.....if ever you had told me of your feelings for Imama, I would never have done all this. I would have handled this whole affair differently, or else, I would have put you in touch with her. I ask you not to harbour any ill feelings for me.’

Salar did not lift his head, he did not look him in the eye, but there was a faint indication of a nod. He held no grouse against him. Sikandar removed his hand from his son’s shoulder.

He quickly left the room. Sikandar wanted him to make an exit. He had noticed the trembling of his lips, like a child’s, and he was repeatedly trying to purse them to gain self-control. If he had remained there a few moments longer, he would have burst into tears. Sikandar himself also did not want to heighten his own remorse.

Tayyaba, all the while, in this whole conversation, had not interfered, but after Salar left, she tried to console Sikandar.

‘There’s no need to regret. Whatever you did, it was for his good. He’ll understand.’ Looking at him, she could gauge Sikandar’s mental state. Sikandar, lighting a cigarette, was pacing the room.

‘This was the biggest mistake of my life. Without getting Salar’s consent, without telling him, I should never have done all this. I shouldn’t have lied to Imama....I....’ Leaving the sentence incomplete, clenching his fist and drowned in remorse, he went to the window and stared out.

The car was sliding ever so cautiously down that road. Salar, after several years, was driving on that road at that time of the night. That bygone night was unwinding like some movie before his very eyes. He felt as though the past eight years had just vanished. Everything was the same; everything was exactly where it had been.

Someone quietly slipped in besides him. He allowed himself the dream. He did not turn to look at the seat next to him. He, with open eyes, let illusion turn to reality. Someone was crying quietly next to him.

Dear Uncle Sikandar,

I am very sorry to learn of the death of your son. Some years ago, your family was put to a lot of trouble because of me, for which I am truly sorry. I had to pay back Salar some money, which I am enclosing. Allah Hafiz

Imama Hashim'

The contents of the letter echoed in his mind.

After leaving Sikandar Usman, he had gone to his room and sat there a long time with the letter. He had not given any money to Imama, but he knew what debt she had repaid: the price of his mobile phone and its bills. Sitting on the bed in his semi-dark room, he stared absent-mindedly out of the window at her house – as though the whole world had been suddenly emptied of all things mortal.

He read the date on the letter. It had been sent approximately after two and a half years of her leaving her house. If she was sending twenty thousand rupees after two and a half years of her leaving her house, it meant that she was alright. At least his worst misgivings about Imama had not been proved correct. He was happy on this account, but he feared what it meant if Imama had truly believed that he was dead and was, thus, out of her life.

He sat there in limbo for several hours, then heaven knows what went through his head, he packed his bag and left the house. And now he was on this road—in the same fog, the same season. Everything seemed to have turned to smoke or disappeared into a mist as a few hours later he found himself at the same café-like service station. He stopped the car. The building, swathed in the mist, had changed considerably. He turned the car around and brought it into the service station. Then he stepped out. Silence still reigned there as it did eight years ago; it was better lit up, though. He hadn't blown the horn so no one came out. There was no water-filled drum in the veranda. Salar crossed the veranda and was going in when someone came out. Before he could say anything, Salar said, 'I want to have some tea.'

The man yawned and turned back. 'Step in, please...'

Salar followed him. It was the same room, but the interior had changed. They were more tables and chairs than before and the set up was better too.

‘Just tea or would you like something with it?’ the man suddenly stopped and asked Salar.

‘Just tea.’

Salar pulled out a chair and sat down. The man was behind the counter, busy lighting a stove.

‘Where have you come from?’ he asked, turning around. There was no response. The man who had come to have tea had his gaze fixed on one corner of the room—he sat still and motionless like a statue carved out of stone.

She had said her prayers and then joined him, sitting right across the table. Without saying a word, she had taken the cup of tea from the table and started drinking it. The boy serving them had brought and put the burgers before them. Salar looked askance at the plate being put before him. He lifted up the top half with his knife and looked critically at the filling. Then he addressed the boy.

‘This is a shami kabab.’ He was removing the upper layer of the filling. ‘And this is an omelet.’ He slightly lifted the lower layer. ‘And this is ketchup—so where’s the chicken? I had asked you for a chicken burger, hadn’t I?’

He spoke brusquely to the boy. Meanwhile, Imama had started eating her burger.

‘This is a chicken burger,’ said the boy, somewhat confused. ‘What sort of a chicken burger, when there’s no chicken in it?’ Salar challenged him.

‘We call this a chicken burger,’ said the boy nervously.

‘And that plain burger, what do you put in that?’

‘That has a shami kabab, but no omelette.’

‘So you add an egg to make an ordinary burger a chicken burger? Because the chicken comes from the egg and thus indirectly if not directly, you’ve added chicken to it?’ Salar spoke very seriously. The boy giggled in embarrassment. Imama continued to eat her food without paying any attention to this conversation.

‘It’s alright, you can go,’ said Salar.

The boy, as can be expected, heaved a sigh of relief and vanished from the scene. Putting down the knife and fork, Salar picked up the burger with his left hand. Eating her burger, Imama, for the first time, noted with amazement, the journey of the burger from the plate to Salar’s mouth, all the while held in his left hand. But this amazement ceased immediately, as she again got busy eating her own burger. Salar took just one bite of the burger but instantly banged it back on the plate.

‘This burger’s no good. I don’t know how you can eat it,’ Salar exclaimed, as he forced down what he had bitten off.

‘It’s not as bad as you think,’ Imama countered calmly.

‘Your standard for everything is very low, Imama – be it a burger, or be it your choice of husband.’

Imama stopped eating her burger. Salar saw her fair complexion turn red, and he broke into a sarcastic smile. ‘I’m talking about Jalal Ansar,’ he ventured to remind her. ‘You’re right; my standard is, indeed, very low,’ she confirmed placidly and continued to eat.

‘I’d thought that you’d fling the burger at me,’ he smiled mischievously. ‘Why ever would I waste God’s bounty?’

‘You call this awful stuff God’s gift? What other great gifts do you have at the moment?’ he jeered.

‘You cannot thank Allah enough. This sense of taste, what a great blessing it is. When I eat something, I can taste it. There are many who are bereft of this blessing which we take for granted.’

‘And on top of the list of such people would be the name of Salar Sikandar, right?’ he interrupted her loudly.

‘You can’t expect Salar Sikandar to eat such stuff and enjoy it!’ he remonstrated.

The man brought the tea and put the cup before him. Salar was startled. The chair opposite him was now empty. ‘You want something with it?’ the man asked as a matter of course.

‘No, just the tea is fine,’ Salar replied, drawing the cup towards himself. ‘Have you come from Islamabad?’ he asked.

‘Yes.....’

‘Going to Lahore?’ he persisted.

This time Salar replied with a nod. He was now taking a sip of the tea. The man suspected that his eyes were wet.

‘I’d like to be left alone for sometime,’ he said, putting down the cup, but without looking up. The man, looking at him with some surprise, returned to the kitchen and busied himself in small chores – all the while, keeping an eye on Salar from the distance.

After a full fifteen minutes, he saw Salar rise and leave the room. The man very quickly made it from the kitchen to the room, but before he could pursue Salar outside, the note under the empty cup stopped him. He was surprised and kept looking at it. Then he stepped forward, picked it up and quickly came out of the room. At that time Salar’s car was reversing onto the

main road. He looked in surprise at the departing car in the distance, then looked at the thousand rupee note in his hand in the glow of the tube light.

==The note is genuine, but the man is stupid.....' he muttered happily as he pocketed the money.

Salar was on his mind when Sikandar Usman came to the breakfast table. ==Where is Salar? Call him,' he ordered the servant.

==Salar Saab's gone. He left last night.'

Tayyaba and Sikandar looked at each other in consternation.

==Where's he gone.....? To the village?'

==No, he's gone back to Lahore. He was saying that he had something important. He'd asked me to inform you in the morning.'

Sikandar immediately made for the phone. He dialed Salar's number. The mobile was switched off. He rang his flat. The answering machine was on. He hung up without leaving a message. Worried, he returned to the breakfast table.

==You couldn't get him on the phone? Tayyaba asked.

==No, the mobile is off. The answering machine is on at the flat. Heaven knows where he has gone?'

==Don't worry.....have some breakfast,' Tayyaba tried to comfort him.

==You go ahead.....I don't feel like it.'"

He got up and went out. Tayyaba sighed in despair.

Salar opened the door of his apartment; Furqan was outside. He turned back in.

==When did you come back?' Furqan asked, astonished, as he followed him in

==This morning.....' Salar responded, going towards the sofa.

==Why....? Didn't you have to go to the village?' Furqan asked, looking at his back.

==I saw your car in the parking lot. One informs friends when one returns.' Without a word, Salar sat down on the sofa.

==What happened?' Furqan noticed his countenance for the first time and was overtaken by concern.

==What happened?' Salar repeated the question in reply.

==I'm asking you, what's happened to you?' Furqan said sitting on the sofa opposite him.

==Nothing.'

==All's well at home?'

==Yes....'

==So, then....have you got a head ache? Migraine?' Furqan was now watching his face intently.

==No.....' Salar did not try to smile. There was no use either. He rubbed his eyes.

==Then, what's happened to you? Your eyes are turning red.'

==I didn't sleep the night before; I've been driving,' Salar said as a matter fact.

==You could have slept when you got back here to your flat. What have you been doing all morning?' Furqan enquired.

==Nothing.'

==Why didn't you go to bed?'

==I couldn't sleep....'

==You take sleeping pills to sleep, then how come you are unable to sleep?' Furqan wondered.

==It's just that I didn't feel like taking them today, or you could say that I didn't want to sleep today.' ==Have you eaten?'

==No, I wasn't hungry...'

==It's getting on for two o'clock,' Furqan remonstrated. ==I'll send something for you. Have it.....then sleep some, we'll go out in the evening.'

==No, don't send me food. I'm going to bed. When I get up in the evening, I'll go out and get something to eat.' Saying this, Salar lay on the sofa and put his arm across his eyes. Furqan sat a while watching him, then got up and left.

‘Are you OK?’ Ramsha asked, entering Salar’s room. Going towards the reception, she had looked in through the blinds, some of which were open. She had stopped, instead of just walking through the corridor. Salar had his elbows on the table and was holding his head in his hands. Ramsha knew that sometimes he suffered from migraine. Instead of going towards the reception, she had opened the door and walked in.

Seeing her, Salar sat up and started looking at the open file on his table.

‘Are you alright?’ Ramsha asked with concern.

‘Yes, I’m perfectly well.....’

He did not attempt to look at Ramsha. She, instead of turning back, came forward.

‘No, you are not looking well,’ she said studying Salar’s face. ‘Can you please take this file.....deal with it....I’m unable to....’ Salar closed the file and pushed it towards her.

‘I’ll look at it, but if you aren’t feeling well, you better go home,’ Ramsha said with concern.

‘Yes, it’s better that I go home.’ He opened his brief case and started to put his things in it. Ramsha watched him intently.

He had returned home at eleven o’clock. This was the fourth day of his continuously distraught state. Suddenly, he had lost interest in everything: his job at the bank, the lectures at LUMS, the sessions with Dr Sibte-Ali, Furqan’s company, the village school, the plans for the future—nothing seemed to attract him any more.

That possibility for which he had left behind everything and returned to Pakistan, that possibility was now over. He had never estimated that the end of this hope would mean the end of everything for him. He was trying hard to pull himself out of this state but without any success.

Just the thought of Imama living in someone else’s home as his wife was as torturous for Salar as the earlier fear of her having fallen into the wrong hands and living a life of sin. In that state of mind, he decided to go for Umra—it was the only act that could give him peace and relief from the meaninglessness that had entered his life.

END OF CHAPTER SEVEN.

Chapter 8

Wrapped in his Ahram, he was standing in the courtyard of the Kaaba. He was alone: there was not a soul in sight. It was late into the night and the light from the moon and stars reflected off the marble floor, bathing the entire scene in a milky glow. There was no other light except for starlight. The ayaat embroidered on the black covering of the Kaaba seemed to give off a strange light of their own. There was a deep stillness all around broken only by a voice—his voice...his own voice. He was standing at the Station of Multazim, his eyes fixed on the entrance of the Kaaba, and looking up, he called out aloud.

==Labbaik Allahumma labbaik ; labbaik la shareeka laka labbaik; innal hamda wa al ne'mata, laka wa'l mulk; la shareeka laka'

==Here I am, my Allah, my Lord, here I am! Here I am and there's no equal with You! Doubtless, all praise is for You, all blessings are from You, and Yours is the Kingdom, the Power! You have no equal.'

Resonating at full strength, his voice filled the empty courtyard and corridors of the Masjid-al-Haram, rising into space it seemed.

==Labbaik Allahumma labbaik!' Standing there barefoot, half dressed, he could recognise his voice.

==Labbaik la shareeka laka labbaik!' Yes, it was his voice...== innal hamda wa al ne'mata, laka wa'l mulk.'

The tears pouring from his eyes flowed down his face on to his feet. ==La shareeka laka.'

He raised his hands to the sky. ==Labbaik Allahumma labbaik.' The ayaat on the kiswah became suddenly very clear, very bright—scintillating, as it were, and the celestial light too shone more brightly. He kept staring at the ayaat, mesmerized, transfixed. Like a prayer rotelearned, he repeated the talbiyah: Labbaik Allahumma labbaik. Then he saw the door of the Kaaba opening slowly, very slowly and his voice rose, calling out in one breath, one cadence.

==Labbaik la shareeka laka labbaik!' This time, he felt another voice join him in prayer.

==Innal hamda wa al ne'mata, laka wa'l mulk.' That voice was not as loud as his—it was more like a whisper, but surrounding him. He knew it was not his voice—it was someone else. For the first time since he had been in the Khana-e- Kaaba, he felt the presence of another there.

==La shareeka laka.' The door was opening wider.

‘Labbaik Allahumma labbaik.’ He knew that feminine voice.

‘Labbaik la shareeka laka labbaik!’ She was repeating the words with him. The voice came from his left, from behind him, a few steps away. He looked at his feet, now completely wet. Then he looked up at the Kaaba—the door had opened and the interior was filled with a glowing white light. He fell to his knees in prostration, his forehead touching the ground. The light began to fade and when he lifted his head off the ground, the light had paled further. When he stood up, the door of the Kaaba was closing and once again, he heard the feminine voice whisper near him, and this time he turned around to look.

Salar woke up. He had fallen into a trance-like sleep, sitting in the verandah of the Haram Shareef, resting his head against a pillar. That was Imama—without a doubt, it was Imama—standing behind him in a white ahram. He had seen just a glimpse of her but even that fleeting glimpse was enough to convince him that it was none other than her. Sitting there, absentmindedly watching people move around the place, he felt his heart brim with emotion.

It had been more than eight years since he had seen that woman who now appeared to him in a dream in the precincts of the Kaaba. A wound seemed to have been scratched afresh. He took off his glasses and hid his face in his hands. Rubbing away the warm tears, he had a thought: this was the Haram Shareef—he had no need to hide his tears from anyone. People came here to cry out their hearts. He removed his hands from his face as a fit of weeping swept over him. For a long time, he wept, his head bent low.

He remembered then that he had been coming here for Umra every year and he used to perform one round of the pilgrimage on behalf of Imama Hashim. He prayed for her long life, for her safety. He prayed that she may be protected against all anxiety and woes. In all those years, he had prayed for all that he could think of for himself and for Imama Hashim. But standing there, in that very holy place, he had never asked Allah for Imama Hashim for himself. It was quite strange that he had never prayed that she may be granted to him. His tears ceased and he stood up.

After the ablutions, he wore the ahram to perform the Umra. As he went around the Kaaba, he incidentally found a place near the Station of Multazim—where he had found himself in his dream. He lifted his hands in prayer.

‘Your messengers and prophets stood at this spot and prayed to you. There’s a world of difference between my prayers and theirs.’ He was pleading. ‘I am no prophet to pray the way they do. I am an ordinary human being with very human failings. My desires and my aspirations are all very ordinary. No one must have stood here and wept for a woman—how lower can my

position, my debasement be, that standing in this pristine and sacred place, I should beg and plead for a woman? But I have no control over my heart nor over my tears.'

==It was not I who gave her a place in my emotions, in my heart—it was You who put her there. Why have You so filled my heart with love for her that even though I stand in Your presence, I miss her? Why have You made me so helpless that I have no power over my existence? I am that being who was created with all these failings. I am that being who has no guide but You. And that woman—she stands at every turn that my life takes, preventing me from making any move, going ahead. Either completely erase all thought of her from my heart, take away my love for her, or grant her to me. If I cannot have her, my entire life will be wasted mourning for her. If she should be mine then my tears will only be for You— grant that purity to my tears. Standing here, I beg you to grant me one of the pure and noble women—I ask for Imama Hashim.

==For my coming generations, I ask for that woman who cannot include anyone in her love and reverence for your Prophet (PBUH), who left all the ease and comforts of her life for the love of the Prophet. If ever I have done any good in my life, then in return I ask for Imama Hashim. If You wish, it is possible—even now.

==Please lift this misery from me! Make my life easy. Please release me from the anguish that has gripped me since the last eight years. O Allah, please have mercy on Salar Sikandar once again, for mercy is the highest of Your attributes.'

Head bowed, he wept for a long time, standing at the very spot where he had seen himself in his dream—but Imama was not standing behind him now. After a long spell of crying and pleading, he moved away. The starlight was fading but the Kaaba was scintillating with light. Despite the late night, there was a vast crowd of pilgrims. Unlike his dream, the door of the Kaaba was not open. Yet as he moved away, Salar felt lighter and relieved as if a burden had been lifted off him.

He was emerging out of this state in which he'd been for the last one month. It was an unknown peace that washed over him when he finished praying. And this feeling of peace and relief stayed with him as he returned to Pakistan the next week.

==I am going back to the US next year to complete my Ph D.'

Struck by his words, Furqan looked at Salar. ==What do you mean?' Salar smiled, surprised. ==What do you mean by —what do you mean ? I want to work for a Ph D.'

==Out of the blue?' asked Furqan.

==Well, not exactly. The Ph D was a part of my plans. It's better I do it now,' said Salar with equanimity. They were on their way back from Furqan's village. Furqan was driving; Salar suddenly told him of his plans for the Ph D.

==I've informed the bank—I was thinking of resigning, but they want to give me long leave. I haven't yet thought about that—whether I should accept their offer or resign.'

==You've done all your planning.'

==Yes, pal. I'm not joking. I really intend to join the Ph D programme next year.'

==A few months ago, there was no such intention.'

==What's there about a decision—a decision can be made in a trice.' Salar shrugged as he looked at the fields speeding by.

==Otherwise too, I've wanted to write a book about banking, but I've been so busy for the past few years that I couldn't work on it. I want to write this while working on the Ph D and have it published too. Since I'll have some respite, I'll be able to do this comfortably.'

==And what about the school?'

==No problem—it will continue to function as it's doing now. The infrastructure will also improve. The Board of Governors is there, they'll visit. You're there too, and I've spoken to Papa...he'll be visiting the school regularly. My being or not being there makes no difference. For a long time now, the school has had no need of the crutches provided by Salar Sikandar, nor will it need them in the future. besides, I'm not abandoning the project—I'll look after it, and I'll be there when it needs me. I've been managing this way in the past too.'

He began to pour himself a cup of tea from the thermos flask.

==What will you do after the Ph D?' asked Furqan with serious concern. ==I'll be back, and like before, I'll work here. I'm not going away forever.' Salar smiled and patted his shoulder.

==Can't you go some years later?'

==No—what can be done today must be done today. It must not be put off.

Right now I'm in the frame of mind for further studies. Perhaps, my mood may change later.'

Salar sipped his tea and tried to tune the car's radio. ==The Rotary Club has organized an event next weekend. I have an invitation. Would you like to come along?' he enquired of Furqan.

==Why not? I'll be glad to—their events are always interesting,' replied Furqan. The topic of the conversation had changed.

It was a Sunday. Salar woke up late. Picking up the newspaper, he glanced at the headlines as he prepared his breakfast. He had just brushed his teeth and had yet to shower and shave. A loose pullover had been put on over his pyjamas.

He had barely put the kettle on the stove when the doorbell rang.

Newspaper in hand, he came out and opened the door—to a real surprise. It was Saeeda Amma standing at his door. He let her in.

__Assalaam Alaikum. How are you?' he asked, trying to overcome his astonishment.

__The Lord be thanked, I'm very well. And you?' she asked warmly, stroking his head.

__I'm fine, thank you. Please come in,' he replied with a smile.

__You don't look fine. You've lost weight and you're looking dark too.' She peered at him through her glasses.

__I haven't lost my complexion—it's because I haven't shaved.' Salar tried not to show his amusement as they went in.

__Now, now! And why haven't you shaved? Planning to grow your beard, I suppose. Well, it's a very good thing, very noble. It's good of you,' she said as she sat down on the sofa.

__No, Amma, I'm not planning to grow a long beard. It's Sunday and I woke up late—just a short while ago—so I haven't shaved as yet.' __Why did you wake up late? That's not a good habit, son. You should wake up early for the fajr prayers—it gives radiance to the face. No wonder you look so tired and drawn. A person should get up early, say his prayers, read the Holy Quran, and then go for a morning walk. This is good for your health and also pleases Allah.'

Salar sighed deeply and said, __I went to sleep after saying my prayers. I sleep late only on Sundays, otherwise my routine is exactly as you have described it.'

She seemed quite pleased with his explanation. __Very good! Very good!

No wonder you have such a radiant glow on your face!' Her perception had undergone a change.

__What would you like to have?' Salar switched the topic—he did not want to hear any more observations on his looks. __Would you like some breakfast?'

__No, I've already eaten. I have my breakfast around six or seven in the morning. In fact, my lunch is around eleven or eleven thirty,' she informed him of her routine.

__Then have some lunch. It's already half past ten,' said Salar.

__No, I'm not hungry. Come here and sit by me.'

==I'll be with you,' said Salar as he returned to the kitchen.

==I've been waiting for you since six months and not once have you come to see me,' she called out.

==I was very busy, Amma!' he replied. He was making tea for himself.

==What could it be that kept you so busy? Those who are married and have families are kept busy and involved. You are neither married nor do

you live with your family, and yet you say you were busy...' He smiled at her words as he made some toast for himself.

==Now look at you,' she chided as she saw him bringing the tea tray. ==This is not your job.' Smiling silently, he put the plates and cups on the table. ==Had you been married, your wife would be doing all this. It doesn't

behoove a man to do such chores.'

==You're right, Amma, but what else can I do, since I don't have a wife?' he said, passing her a cup of tea.

==That's no answer—what can you do—son, the world is full of young women, and your parents are also alive and around, so tell them to find you a nice match. Or if you want, I can try.'

Salar promptly realized that the situation was critical. ==Oh no, thank you. Please have some tea. I'm quite happy with my life. And as far as housework is concerned, then our Blessed Prophet too attended to his own chores.'

==Now you've gone off on a tangent—I was talking about you,' she said, a bit confused.

==Won't you take some biscuits...or perhaps some cake?' he tried to veer her attention.

==Oh yes, I quite forgot the reason why I'd come here,' she said, suddenly remembering something as she opened her capacious bag and started fumbling around in it.

==Your sister's wedding has been fixed.'

Salar suddenly choked on his tea. He was puzzled. ==My sister got married about five years ago,' he informed Saeeda Amma.

Meanwhile, she fished out a card. ==Oh, I'm talking about my daughter, Amina—she's like a sister to you, isn't she?'

She looked at him with some disappointment as she handed him the card. Salar was thoroughly amused. Till a day ago, she was trying to get her daughter married off to him and

now suddenly, she had become his sister! Nevertheless, he was enormously relieved: at least now he was in no peril from her or her daughter. He gladly took the card from her.

==Congratulations! When is the wedding taking place?' he asked as he opened the card.
==Next week.'

==That's good, Ammaji, at least your worries are over.' He had stressed the word ==your' in stead of saying ==mine'.

==Yes, Allah be praised. It's a very well-placed match. My responsibility is over now and once she's settled, I can join my sons in England.' Salar glanced cursorily at the card.

==I came here especially to give you the invitation. No excuses this time— you must come to the wedding. You're a brother, and you must see her off to her new home.'

Salar held back his smile as he sipped his tea. ==Don't worry; I'll be there,' he assured her as he buttered a toast for himself.

==I've got a card for Furqan too. I have to go and give it to him.' the thought began to bother her.

==Furqan had to go to his in-laws today with his wife. He must have left. You can give me the card, I'll deliver it.'

==And if you should forget?' Saeeda Amma was not convinced.

==I won't forget. Why don't you speak to him? I'll call him up now.'

She brightened up. ==Oh yes, that's fine. Call him up for me.'

Salar brought the telephone to the table, dialed Furqan's cell phone number and flicked on the speaker switch, while he continued with his breakfast.

==Furqan, Saeeda Amma's here with me,' he said. ==Talk to her.' He kept quiet as Furqan and Saeeda Amma spoke. By the time their conversation ended a few minutes later, Salar had done with his breakfast. As he was putting away the stuff in the kitchen, a thought struck him.

==Who did you come with?' he enquired.

==With my son,' Saeeda Amma complacently replied.

==Oh, so your son's here? Which one—the older one or the younger?' Salar asked with some interest.

==I'm talking about my neighbor's son, Rashid,' she elaborated, with some annoyance.

Salar realized that for her every boy was her son, every girl her daughter—she built up relations with great facility.

‘So where’s he?’

‘He went back. I came with him on his motor bike—he drives like the wind! We started at nine and he got me here at exactly half past ten. I kept telling him to slow down but he wouldn’t listen. When we got here he said it was the last time he’d give me a lift on his motorbike. —The next time, I’ll walk you down he said...’

Salar was amused. He could well understand the frustration of the young man at having taken an hour and a half to complete a journey that would not be longer than half an hour. It was not easy to spend time in the company of old people—this had become quite clear to Salar when he had first encountered Saeeda Amma.

‘So how will you go back? Will Rashid come for you?’

‘Yes, he did say he’d come after the match was over. Let’s see when he turns up.’ She then continued to add to his knowledge about her daughter and her in-laws. Salar listened patiently though he could have had no possible interest, but he realized that after all she could not be discussing banking issues with him. Whatever she was saying made little sense to him but he pretended to be most interested.

She also had lunch with him. He didn’t try to warm up something from the freezer as he did not want another round of advice on the benefits of marriage. So he ordered some food from a takeaway. When Rashid had not yet arrived, Salar offered to drop her home. She gladly accepted saying that he’d also get to know where she lived.

‘I know your address,’ he reminded her as he looked for his car keys. Half an hour later he was at her house. He walked her to her door, but when she asked him to come in, he declined politely saying he had a lot of work at home. He regretted saying that as her admonitions began again.

‘Oh, child! That’s why I’ve been telling you to get married. Your wife would look after the housework and you could go out instead of spending your weekend in domestic chores.’ She looked at him pityingly. ‘Yes, of course, you’re right. May I go now?’ Salar said, surpassing himself in obedience.

‘Very well, but remember, you must come for the wedding. And also remind Furqan once again and give him his card.’

Salar rang the doorbell and then turned away. He heard the door open behind him and then Saeeda Amma in conversation with her daughter. about 5 months ago

Umera Ahmed Official

==Then what's your programme? Are you coming along?' Furqan queried as he came to collect his card the next day.

==No, I'm going to Karachi this weekend for an IBA seminar. I'll be back on Sunday and plan to sleep the rest of the day—nothing else. You can go. I'll give you the gift envelope for her; do remember to give it with my apologies.'

==That's shameful Salar. She came all the way to invite you with such affection,' Furqan chided him gently.

==I know but I can't just go there and waste my time.'

==We won't be there too long—we'll be back soon.'

==Furqan, my return is not confirmed...I may not return by day, it might be Sunday night.'

==You're really useless! And she's going to be very disappointed.' ==That makes no difference—my not being there won't stop the wedding from taking place. Maybe she's got an inkling that I won't attend. Besides, you and I are not such important guests,' Salar stated carelessly. ==Anyway, my wife and I will attend, regardless of how unimportant we may be,' Furqan replied angrily.

==I'm not stopping you—you're most welcome to go there. Otherwise too you have a more comfortable and informal relationship with Saeeda Amma.'

==But she still cares more about you,' Furqan claimed.

==It's out of kindness,' Salar brushed him off lightly.

==Whatever it is, she does feel concerned. If nothing else, you should attend out of regard for Dr Sibte-Ali because she's his next of kin.' Furqan tried this angle to persuade Salar.

==Dr Ali himself is out of town; and had he been here, he wouldn't be forcing me to attend the wedding, the way you're doing.'

==Fine, you can do as you please. I'm not forcing you.' Furqan gave up. Salar resumed working on his laptop.

It was a lush green place, a garden as it were, and they were together there among the trees and flowering bushes. It was quiet all round. They were sitting in the sunshine by a bush in full bloom. Imama sat with her arms wrapped around her knees while Salar lay supine on the grass, his eyes closed. Their shoes lay some distance away. Imama was wearing a beautiful white

shawl. They were in deep conversation and Imama was looking at something as she spoke to him. He had taken a corner of her shawl and covered his eyes with it, as if to keep out the sun. That shawl seemed to bestow peace, a sort of elation on him. Imama made no effort to pull it back from him. The sunshine refreshed him and eyes shut, he could feel the soft touch of the shawl on his face. He began to feel drowsy and was soon in the grip of a deep sleep.

Salar suddenly opened his eyes. He was lying flat across his bed. Something had broken his slumber, and he looked around uncertainly. This was not where he wanted to be—another dream...another illusion...he closed his eyes again. His attention was then drawn by the ringing of his cell phone by his bedside—that was what had pulled him away from his dreams. Thoroughly annoyed, he reached out for the phone. It was Furqan calling.

==Where were you Salar? I've been calling for hours...why weren't you attending the call?' said Furqan the minute he heard Salar's voice.

==I was sleeping,' replied Salar, as he sat up in bed. He caught sight of the clock—it was four in the afternoon.

==Get to Saeeda Amma's at once!' Furqan told him.

==Why? I'd told you that I ...'

==I know what you told me,' interrupted Furqan, ==but there's an emergency here.'

==What sort of emergency?' Salar was anxious.

==You'll find out when you come here. Now get here at once; I'm hanging up.' Furqan switched off.

Salar looked at the phone, worried. Furqan's voice, his tone, expressed his anxiety but what could be the nature of the concern at Saeeda Amma's? Within fifteen minutes, Salar had changed and on his way.

Furqan's next call came as he was driving.

==At least, tell me what has happened? You've really got me worried,' Salar asked again.

==No need to get worried—you're coming here, you'll get to know. I can't go into the details over the phone.' Furqan hung up again.

Driving fast, Salar covered the distance of half an hour in fifteen minutes. Furqan met him outside Saeeda Amma's house. Salar had expected there would be much noise and celebration here, but that was not the case. There was no hint whatsoever of any wedding party or procession at the scene. He accompanied Furqan into an old-fashioned drawing room to the left of the main door.

==What was it that you had to summon me like this?' Salar was getting irritated

==There's been a big problem with Saeeda Amma and her daughter,' said Furqan as he sat opposite him. He looked very worried.

==What problem?'

==The young man who was going to marry her daughter has backed out and he has gone and married a girl of his own choice.' ==My goodness!' Salar exclaimed.

==Those people just called up Saeeda Amma some time ago to inform her and expressed their regrets. They are not going to come here. I went to their place a while earlier—they really have no choice. They have no information about their son or where he could be. He just called to tell them about his decision.' Furqan disclosed the details.

==If he was not interested, he should have told his parents honestly. If he had the guts to elope then he should have had the guts to refuse his parents too.' Salar found the whole affair very distasteful. ==Saeeda Amma's sons should have been here to handle this situation.'

==Yes, but since they're not here someone has to deal with this.' ==Doesn't Saeeda Amma have any other close relatives here?' Salar queried.

==I spoke to Dr Sibte-Ali a short while ago,' Furqan informed him. ==But Dr Ali's not here—it would have been a different story if he were present,' noted Salar.

==He told me to have you speak to him on the phone.' Furqan's tone was a little slow this time.

'Me? How can I help?' Salar was suddenly alert.

==By marrying Amina.'

Salar couldn't believe what he had heard—he stared at Furqan dumbfounded. ==Are you out of your mind?' he could barely get the words across.

==Yes, I'm quite sane.'

==Then you don't know what you're saying.' Salar's face was an angry red. He shot up to leave but Furqan blocked his way.

==What made you say such a thing?' Salar could hardly control his voice. ==Whatever I said was on Dr Ali's instructions.'

Salar's face was a kaleidoscope of emotions. ==Why did you suggest my name?'

==I did not suggest anything, Salar! He himself suggested it. He told me to ask you to help Saeeda Amma at this juncture by marrying her daughter.' Salar felt as though the ground had been pulled away from under his feet, or the sky from over his head. He turned and slumped down on the sofa.

__Furqan, did you tell him that I'm already married?'

__Yes, I did—that you'd been married years ago, but the girl just disappeared and you never found her.'

__Then?'

__Despite this he wants you to marry Amina.'

__Furqan...I ...' he stopped, then asked, __and Imama? What happens to her?'

__Imama has been out of your life all these years. God knows where she is—or even if she's still around or not.'

__Furqan!' Salar stopped him harshly. __Just leave her alone or whether she is or isn't. What happens if she should turn up tomorrow?' __You'd better speak to Dr Ali about this,' advised Furqan.

__No. You should tell Saeeda Amma and her daughter the truth. It could be that they will not accept an already married man as their son-in-law. If that were so, she would also have accepted the man who went off and married of his own choice.'

__Had he turned with his family, she would have accepted him too, but the problem is that he's not ready to have Amina as his second wife.'

__He can be traced.'

__Yes, he can be traced, but not this time.'

__Dr Ali has not made the right choice for Amina—what could I possibly give her? I'm worse than that man who walked out on her.' Salar spoke like a defeated man.

__Salar, they need someone now, and at a time of need only that person is valuable who can be trusted. You have been helping so many people through your life—can you not do something for Dr Ali?'

__I have helped others monetarily,' he said. __Dr Ali doesn't need my money.'

Before Furqan could say a word, his phone began to ring. He looked at the number on the screen and held the phone out to Salar. It was Dr Sibte-

Ali.

With a somber look on his face, Salar took the call. Sitting there, the phone held to his ear, Salar realized that not everything can be divulged to anyone at random. Whatever he had told Furqan could not be repeated in a loud and angry voice to Dr Sibte- Ali. He could not say __No' to him. He could neither argue with him nor give any justifications or excuses. Dr Ali spoke to him in his typical soft tone.

‘If you can get your parents’ permission, then marry Amina. She’s like my own daughter. Consider that I am requesting this for my daughter. I am putting you to much trouble, but I am compelled—I have no choice.’ ‘I’ll do as you say.’ Salar spoke in a low voice. ‘Please don’t request— just convey your orders,’ he found himself saying.

Furqan returned to the room about ten minutes later. He found Salar seated on the floor, cell phone in hand, looking lost and quiet.

Furqan pulled up a chair and sat opposite him. ‘Did you speak to Dr Ali?’ he asked gently

Salar looked up and without a word handed back the cell phone. After some time, he said, ‘I will not take her home yet. The nikah alone will be quite enough.’

Salar began to look at the lines on his palms. Furqan felt very sorry for him—this was not the first time that a person had fallen victim to circumstance.

The traffic on the road was almost non-existent as the night deepened.

The fog was slowly engulfing everything in sight.

The streetlight seemed to reach out through the fog to relieve the dark in the balcony where Salar was sitting on a stool by the railing. The steam from the mug of coffee before him rose in strange shapes against the dark night: he sat with his arms folded across his chest, staring at the deserted road below. It was a weird sight, wrapped in the foggy dark.

It was ten and he had reached home a few minutes ago. After the nikah ceremony, he left immediately and spent several hours driving around aimlessly. He had switched off his mobile as he wanted to be left alone. He wanted no contact with the world outside. He did not want to speak to Furqan who would have certainly called and tried to clarify matters. He did not want to speak to Dr Sibte-Ali who would have called to thank him. He just wanted absolute silence.

Watching the wraiths of steam from the hot coffee, he relived the events of a few hours ago that evening. It was all like a dream. He wished it was a dream. Sitting there, he remembered his prayer at the Kaaba.

‘So is it a divine decision to remove her from my life?’ he reflected, painfully. ‘Then this torture should also have been taken away, for I had asked release from this pain, escape from her memory.’ He wrapped his cold hands around the hot mug and poured its bitterness into himself. ‘So,

Imama Hashim, you’re out of my life forever.’

Salar ruminated over all the possibilities that could have prevented the situation he now found himself in. If only he had not run into Saeeda Amma and offered to drop her home; If only he had found her address and had not brought her home—neither would the connections have built up, nor would she have invited him to the wedding. If only he had stayed back in Karachi instead of returning to Lahore or slept with his mobile switched off, and his phone off the hook, or not responded to Furqan’s call. If he had not known Dr Sibte-e-Ali, he would not have felt obliged to concede to his request. ‘Imama is not destined for me,’ he thought sadly as he drew his hands across his face. Then he reached for his wallet, as if remembering something, and pulled out a small folded paper. He opened it and read it.

Dear Uncle Sikandar,

I am so sorry to learn of the death of your son. Some years ago, your family was put to a lot of trouble on my account, for which I am very sorry. I had to pay Salar some money which I am enclosing.

Allah Hafiz

Imama Hashim’

He could not remember how many times he had read this in the last nine months. When he touched the paper, he could feel Imama’s touch on it...his name, written by her, yet there was no familiarity in these few lines written on paper. He was also aware that the news of his death had not pained her. That news had come as a release for her after two and a half years, so how could it be a source of distress for her. Yet, in spite of all this, those few lines on a piece of paper had become very important for him. He ran his fingers over those lines lingering over her name, Imama Hashim, at the end. Then he folded it up and put it back in his wallet. The mug was still out there with a few mouthfuls of cold bitter coffee—he swallowed it in a gulp.

Dr Sibte-e-Ali was returning to Pakistan from England in a week’s time. Salar awaited his return. Whatever he had been unable to disclose to him about Imama Hashim, he wanted to tell him all now—all that he had been unable to reveal about his past, he wanted to tell Dr Sibte-e-Ali all about it. He no longer cared what he would think.

It was the fourth of Ramazan when Dr Sibte-Ali came back. He had returned quite late at night and Salar did not want to disturb him. He had planned to visit him the next evening but unexpectedly, Dr Ali called him up in the afternoon when he was at the bank. This was the third time he had contacted Salar after the nikah. After the customary inquiries, Dr Ali said,

‘Don’t come later at night. Come earlier and join me for iftar.’

‘Very well, I’ll be there,’ agreed Salar. They spoke a little longer and then Dr Ali called off.

He left the bank a little earlier than usual. He went home and changed and reached Dr Ali’s place about an hour before iftar. Dr Ali’s servant, instead of seating Salar in the assembly hall, led him straight into the lounge. Dr Ali greeted him warmly, embracing him, and gently touched Salar’s forehead with his lips.

‘You used to come here as a friend, but toady you are here as one of the family.’ Salar knew what he was implying.

‘Come, be seated.’ Dr Ali gestured towards the sofa, and took a seat at the other end. ‘Congratulations! Now you are finally settled down.’ Salar looked him with quiet eyes and a wan smile. Dr Ali was smiling broadly. ‘I’m very happy that you have married Amina,’ he continued. ‘She is like a fourth daughter for me and you are thus a son-in-law.’ Salar lowered his gaze. If the Imama Hashim chapter had not been a part of his life, he would have felt very proud to hear this. But she made the difference—she was the one who made all the difference, she who was and was not there.

Dr Sibte-Ali observed Salar for a while and then said, ‘You have been coming here for so many years, but you never disclosed that you were married. Not even when the subject was broached once or twice.’

Salar looked up at him. ‘I had wanted to tell you, but.....’ he broke off.

‘What could I tell you, every thing was so strange,’ he thought to himself.

‘When did you marry?’ Dr. Sibte-Ali was now enquiring softly.

‘Eight-and-a-half years ago, when I was twenty-one,’ he said resignedly, and then, ever so slowly he disclosed every thing to him.

Dr. Sibte-Ali had not interrupted him even once. He had held his peace for long time even after Salar had fallen silent.

Eventually he had said, ‘Amina is a very nice girl and she is lucky to have got a virtuous man.’

His words hit Salar like a whiplash.

‘Virtuous? I’m not a virtuous man, Dr Ali! I ...I am the most despicable of the despised. Had you known me, you would not have used this word to describe me, nor would you have selected me to marry this girl who’s like a daughter to you.’

‘In our lives, we’ve all passed through this ‘Age of Ignorance’ at some stage. Some of us go through it while some are stuck in it all their lives. You have passed through it—your regret and remorse indicate that. I will not stop you from regretting your actions nor from seeking forgiveness—it is incumbent upon you to do so all your life—but also be grateful that you have been rid of a diseased ego.’

‘If the material world no longer attracts you, if the fear of Allah brings tears to your eyes, and the vision of hell frightens you, if you worship Allah as you should, if goodness draws you towards it and you repel evil, then you are virtuous. Some are born virtuous, some become virtuous. To be good by nature is indeed fortunate but to become good is like walking on a double-edged sword; it takes a longer time and is more painful. I still hold that you are a virtuous man because you have worked towards it, and Allah has destined greater deeds for you.’

Salar’s eyes had moistened. Dr Ali had again neither said anything about Imama nor questioned him. Did it mean that she was out of his life forever? Did it mean that she would never, in the future, be a part of his life? Would he have to spend his life with Amina? His heart seemed to sink at the thought. He wanted to hear from Dr Ali some consoling words, something to give him hope.

Dr Ali was quiet. Salar looked at him in silence.

‘I’ll pray deeply for you and Amina. In fact, I have prayed earnestly at the Kaaba and at the tomb of our dear Prophet (PBUH).’ On his way back from London, Dr Ali had gone to perform the Umra. Salar lowered his head. From a distance, the call for prayer could be heard. A servant was laying out the iftar. With a heavy heart, he broke his fast with Dr Ali, and then accompanied him for the maghrib prayer, to a nearby mosque. On his return, he had dinner with Dr Ali and then drove back to his flat. about 5 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

‘Can you come with me to Saeeda Amma’s tomorrow?’ Salar called up Furqan on his return from Dr Ali’s place. It was about 10:00 p.m. Furqan was on night duty.

‘Yes, why not—anything special?’

‘I need to talk to Amina about some things.’

Furqan was unable to respond: Salar’s tone was very even, with no hint of bitterness in his voice.

‘What sort of things?’

‘Nothing to worry about,’ Salar tried to calm his fears.

==But all the same,' Furqan persisted. ==Do you want to tell her about Imama?'

==First, answer my question: will you come with me?' asked Salar, instead of replying to his query.

==Yes, I will.'

==Then I'll tell you tomorrow what I have to say to her.' Before Furqan could say anything, Salar had hung up.

==You want to talk to her about Imama?' Furqan asked as he was driving. ==No, not just about Imama, but many other things too.'

==For God's sake, Salar, don't try to rake up issues that are dead and buried!' Furqan was visibly annoyed.

==She should know my priorities and my aims in life, if she has to spend the rest of it with me,' Salar said, taking no notice of Furqan's agitation. ==She'll get to know—she's a sensible girl and she'll understand once she comes and lives with you. You can tell her then instead of going there and opening a Pandora's Box.'

==What's the point in telling her after she comes to my place, and has no path of return? I want her to listen to what I have to say, to understand it, think over it, and then take a decision.'

==She can't take any decision now, she's already married to you.'

==Yes, but the marriage has not been consummated.'

==What difference does that make?'

==Why not? If she has any objection to what I have to say, she can review this relationship.' Salar replied very seriously.

Furqan fixed a piercing gaze on him. ==And what sort of facts and justifications do you propose presenting her with for this review?' ==Just a few things, knowing which is necessary for her,' Salar brusquely replied. ==They are Dr Ali's relatives and, as such, I hold them in high regard. If he had not told me, this relationship would not have been established either. But I'

Furqan intervened without letting him complete. ==Fine, say whatever you have to, but just tone down the Imama bit, because if anything will hurt her, this is it. Maybe, she won't mind about the other things, but it is not easy to be, and be known as, the second wife.' He tried to make Salar understand. ==And I want her to feel and think about this. You say she's beautiful, welleducated, from a good family, etc....'

Furqan cut across again. ==Quit it, Salar! Go and tell her whatever you want to...'

‘I want to speak to her in privacy.’

‘I’ll tell Saeeda Amma. She’ll arrange it for you to meet Amina alone.’ Furqan shook his head in frustration.

Half an hour later, they were at Saeeda Amma’s. She opened the door and was beside herself with joy at seeing Salar and Furqan at her doorstep. She took them to the sitting room.

‘Saeeda Amma, Salar wants to speak to Amina in privacy,’ Furqan announced as they entered the room.

Saeeda Amma looked a little flustered. ‘Speak about what?’ She now looked at Salar, who was standing with Furqan.

‘There are some things that he wants to tell her himself. It’s nothing to worry about,’ Furqan tried to allay her fears. She looked at Salar again: he looked away.

‘Very well...Come with me, Amina is indoors. You can meet her there.’ Saeeda Amma went in, and giving Furqan a look, Salar followed her. The sitting room was to the left of the entrance and to the right was a staircase going up. Ahead of them, raised by few steps was a big, oldfashioned wooden door that was ajar. Beyond that, a spacious red-tiled courtyard could be seen. Saeeda Amma was moving towards that door. Salar was a few steps behind her. As she entered the courtyard, Salar was on the stairs, a little hesitant.

There were flower beds along the boundary wall of the courtyard: the greenery of the shrubs and creepers on the red-brick wall looked beautiful. Sunshine filled part of the courtyard, making the red of the bricks and tiles, even more brilliant. Salar suddenly stopped in his tracks. There was a charpai in the sunlit portion of the yard and a girl, who must have been sitting there, now stood with her back to them. She was dressed in a white kurta and a black shalwar, and must have just showered as her hair hung in wet locks down to her waist. Her white dupatta lay across the charpai.

Rolling up her sleeves to her elbows, she turned to face Salar.

Salar stood still, his breath taken away. Never in his life had he seen a more beautiful girl, or perhaps no one had ever appeared as beautiful to him as this girl. Certainly, this must be Amina. Who else could it be—there was no one else in this house except her? He stood rooted to the spot, unable to take his eyes off her. Someone had his heart in her grip and he could not say if its beat had stopped or raced on.

There was much distance between him and Amina. As she had turned, her glance first fell on Saeeda Amma.

‘Salar is here.’ Saeeda Amma was close to Amina, who craned her neck to look beyond at the entrance to the courtyard. Salar noticed her surprise; then she turned again, her back to Salar. He saw her bend and pick up her dupatta from the bed and wrap herself up in it, covering her head too. He could no longer see her hair spread out on her back. However, he was surprised by her composure—there was no anxiety, no haste, no amazement in her mien.

Saeeda Amma turned towards Salar, and finding him still standing in the doorway, said, ‘Come in, son! Why are you still standing there? This too is your home.’

Amina, having covered herself with her dupatta, looked at him again. He was still staring, at her, without batting an eye, motionless, as though turned to stone. A look crossed Amina’s face: Salar had moved forward.

‘This is Amina, my daughter,’ Saeeda Amma introduced her. ‘Assalaam Alaikum,’ Salar heard Amina say. But he was unable to respond. She was a few feet away and it was hard to keep looking at her. He was getting nervous; Amina sensed his anxiety.

‘Salar wants to talk to you,’ Saeeda Amma informed Amina.

Amina looked at Salar again. Their eyes met and they looked away. Amina looked at Saeeda Amma and Salar looked at Amina’s hands, covered with hennaed patterns to her wrists. He felt he could not bring himself to say anything to this girl.

‘Salar, let’s go into the room, son. You can sit there and talk to Amina.’ Saeeda Amma was addressing him now. She moved towards the veranda and Salar saw Amina follow her, head lowered. He stood where he was, seeing them go ahead. Saeeda Amma opened the door and went in. Standing in the door, Amina turned to look at Salar. He swiftly lowered his gaze. Amina looked at him again, perhaps surprised—why wasn’t he coming into the room? Without looking at her, Salar moved forward, and relieved, as it were, Amina went in.

Saeeda Amma was already seated there when Salar came in. Amina switched on the light. Stepping from the sun, Salar could feel the coolness in the room.

‘Sit down, son,’ gestured Saeeda Amma. Salar took a seat on a chair and further way, Amina sat across him on a couch.

Salar was waiting for Saeeda Amma to leave in a while. Furqan had told her quite clearly that Salar wanted to be alone when speaking to Amina. But after a while, Salar realised it was futile to expect her to leave them alone. Either she had forgotten that they needed privacy or she had thought that it meant simply that Furqan would stay away, or perhaps, she did not yet trust Salar alone with her daughter. Salar was inclined to agree with the last possibility. Whatever he had wanted to tell Amina could not be said in her mother’s presence. He tried to search his mind for something to say—after all he had to say something! But his mind was blank. In the semi-dark and cool room, there was complete silence. His fingers intertwined, Salar kept looking at the floor.

Amina switched on a decorative light in the room. Perhaps this highceilinged room, crammed with furniture, was once a sitting room. It had many doors, all of which were shut, and the solitary window in the room, opening into the veranda, had curtains over it. The floor was covered by an elaborately patterned maroon carpet and that fancy light fixture failed to light up the room.

Salar found the room dark—or perhaps, it was his sentiments. ‘I should go and see my optician today. My distance vision seems to be getting weaker along with my nearer vision,’ he thought, wistfully. He was unable to clearly see Amina who was seated across the centre table. He fixed his gaze on the carpet, again. Then he saw Amina get up and switch on another light. In the white glare of the tube light, the room suddenly brightened up. Why had she not done that before, he wondered, as the fancy lamp was turned off—perhaps, she was nervous too. She came back and sat down, but not opposite him: this time she took a chair near Saeeda Amma. Salar didn’t try to look at her this time—he focused his attention on the carpet. Saeeda Amma’s patience finally gave way. She cleared her throat to attract Salar’s attention.

‘Son, say what it was that you wanted to discuss with Amina,’ she reminded him very affectionately. ‘You’ve been quiet so long that I’m getting really worried.’

Salar took a long, deep breath and looked at Amina and then Saeeda Amma. ‘Nothing more—I just wanted to see her.’

He tried to keep his voice as steady as possible. Saeeda Amma’s face lit up.

‘So that’s all, is it? Furqan scared me to the core. Yes, of course, you may look at her—after all, she’s your wife.’

He stood up. ‘Please ask her to pack her things. I’ll be waiting outside,’ he told Saeeda Amma as he moved towards the door. Startled, Amina looked at him and so did Saeeda Amma.

‘But, son, you came here just to talk to her, and now you want to take her along...I wanted to give her a proper send-off...’

Salar interrupted her gently. ‘Consider this the send-off...that I have come to take her home.’

Saeeda Amma looked at him intently, and then said, ‘Very well. If this is how you want it, then this is how it will be, but at least wait till iftar. It’s a matter of a few hours—you can have dinner and then leave.’

‘No, thank you. Furqan and I have some work to do. I had asked him to give me an hour to come here—I won’t be able to stay too long.’ ‘But, Amma, it will take me quite some time to pack my things.’ Imama spoke up, joining the conversation for the first time. She was still

seated on the chair. Without looking at Amina, Salar addressed Saeeda Amma. ‘Please tell her to do her packing comfortably—as long as it takes. I’ll be waiting.’

He left the room.

Furqan looked at Salar in surprise as he entered the sitting room. ‘You’re back so soon? I thought you’d take more time.’

Instead of replying, Salar just sat down. Furqan watched his face intently.

‘All okay?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you meet Amina?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then?’

‘Then what?’

‘Let’s go?’

‘No.’

‘Why

‘I’m taking Amina with me.’

‘What!’ Furqan was stunned. ‘But you had come to talk to her. What made you change your mind all of a sudden?’

Salar gave him a strange look. ‘I simply thought I should.’ Furqan gave him a troubled look.

When they reached Salar’s apartment two hours later, there wasn’t much time left to the iftar. Salar had bought some eatables for iftar on their way home. Furqan wanted to take them home to break the fast with him, but

Salar did not agree. Furqan asked his wife to come over to Salar's. She set the table for iftar. Amina tried to help but Furqan and his wife declined the offer. Salar did not intervene—he went to the balcony, cell phone in hand. Sitting in the lounge, Amina saw him through the window panes, pacing up and down, in serious conversation with someone.

All the way from Saeeda Amma's house to his own apartment, he had not spoken to Amina even once. From time to time, Furqan had tried to make small talk. The same was happening now. Salar did not break his silence even at the iftar table. Furqan and his wife served Amina with different snacks. She keenly felt Salar's cold attitude and his silence.

After breaking the fast, he came out with Furqan for the maghrib prayers. Furqan had to go back to the hospital after the prayers. As they left the mosque and walked towards the car park, Furqan said, 'You are very quiet.'

Salar glanced at him, but walked on without a word.

'Don't you want to say something?' Furqan was trying hard to break this spell of silence. Salar looked up at the sky. After sunset, a fog seemed to be descending towards the ground. He sighed deeply, then looked at Furqan.

'No, I have nothing to say.' As they walked along, Furqan heard him mumble, 'I am not up to saying anything today.'

Furqan felt a rush of pity for him. He patted Salar's shoulder in sympathy.

'I can understand your feelings, but such things happen in life all along. Whatever you could do for Imama, you did. You waited for her as long as you could—eight or nine years is no joke. If this girl is the one destined for you, then we can do nothing about it.'

Salar looked at him with expressionless eyes.

'It was not Imama's fate to come into this house. It was Amina's fate and she did. It has been just seven days since you married her and she's in your home on the eighth day. It's been nine years since you married Imama and she has not been able to come to here as yet. Can't you understand that Imama is not your destiny?' He tried his best to convince Salar.

'We have many wishes, many desires—Allah fulfils some and He does not fulfill others. It's possible that not getting Imama is in your best interest. Possibly, you were marked for Amina.'

Maybe a few years down the road, you'll never tire of thanking Allah for the same thing.' They had now reached the parking lot. Furqan's car was in the front row.

== I have yet to see a person whose every wish in life has come true—so why should one complain? Try to make your life with Amina a good one.' Furqan unlocked the car door, but before getting in, he placed his hands on Salar's shoulders and gently pecked him on both cheeks. == You should remember this: that you have done a good deed, and you will surely be rewarded, if not in this life, then in the next.'

He was still holding Salar's face. Salar tilted his head slightly and smiled a little. Furqan sighed with relief—it was the first smile he had seen on Salar's face that day. He smiled in return and warmly patted him on the back. Then he got in and switched on the ignition. As he was about to move, he heard Salar tapping on the car window. Furqan rolled it down.

== You were saying that you had never seen a man whose wishes had been granted,' Salar said with a certain calm in his voice as bent down to the window. He looked very peaceful and content.

== Then look at me... because I am that person who has been blessed with whatever I asked for to this day.'

Furqan thought his mind had been affected by his despair and distress.

== What you call my —good deed is actually my recompense. It is my reward, in this life; I shall not have to wait for the hereafter and my fate is the same as it was nine years ago.' He was speaking slowly, in a deep voice.

== I have been granted the same woman for whom I had prayed—Imama Hashim is in my home now. Khuda Hafiz.'

In stunned silence, Furqan watched his back as he walked away. He could not fathom what he had said. == Perhaps, I did not hear him right...or perhaps he has lost his mind, or perhaps he has reconciled himself with the situation...'

Salar was now a distant figure.

=====

END OF CHAPTER EIGHT

Chapter 9

Having reached Lahore, the next step was to seek help—but from whom? She could not return to the hostel nor could she contact Javeria or her other friends since they were the ones her family would first suspect. It would not be long before her family would be in Lahore, conducting a search. For all she knew, perhaps the search had already been initiated. Going to a friend's house would only mean putting herself in danger. The only option open to her was Sabiha. But she was not sure if Sabiha had yet returned from Peshawar.

As she feared, the family was still in Peshawar. ‘When are they expected back?’ she asked the chowkidar who opened the door to her and recognized her from her earlier visits.

‘I do not know for sure, but they should be back in a couple of days,’ he replied.

‘Do you have the phone number for Peshawar?’ Try as she might she could not disguise the disappointment she felt.

The chowkidar replied that indeed he did have the phone number. Relief flooded through her being as she followed the domestic into the house. She waited in the drawing room till the man fetched the phone number. She dialed from her cell phone. A gentleman answered the number and on her query told her that Sabiha was out but would return in a little while. ‘I have been unable to talk to Sabiha,’ she told the chowkidar. ‘I will wait here till I can talk to her.’

An hour later she was able to get through to Sabiha. Her friend was surprised to hear from her. As briefly as she could, Imama told her the full story of her leaving her house but she did not tell her about her marriage vows to Salar. She was not sure how Sabiha would react to that.

‘Your best bet would be to approach the courts,’ Sabiha advised Imama after hearing the whole story. ‘The law should provide some protection since you have changed your religion.’

‘I don’t want to do that.’

‘Why?’

‘I had thought about approaching the courts, Sabiha,’ Imama replied, ‘but that is a course I don’t want to take. You know my father and the position he has in society. The press would have a field day. My family would have to put up with much harassment; I do not wish that because of me my family should have to face hostility and embarrassment. In any case, Sabiha, you know what happens to girls who seek protection from the courts after changing their religion. They are sent to the Dar ul Aman—one might as well be in prison as at the Dar ul Aman. On top of it, the court case can drag on for years on end. The family can bring about one charge after another and thus prolong a final decision forever. And even if the court allows one to live freely according to one’s beliefs, social pressure can still compel girls to return to their families.’

‘I have no desire to spend my life in the Dar ul Aman nor do I wish to become the eye of the storm. I have left my house quietly and I wish to live my life in the same silence.’

‘I understand your point of view, Imama,’ Sabiha answered, ‘but whether you like it or not you will have to face the storm you have raised. Your family will make every effort to trace you. And once they start looking for you it will not be long before they reach me and my family. While I would love to help you, and my family will too, but I know they will wish to do so openly and not in secret. My father will say what I am saying: you need to approach the law. I have no doubt that the courts will decide in your favour.’

‘In any case for now, stay in the house; I will speak to Abu about this. I’ll also see if I can persuade him to return to Lahore tomorrow. Now let me speak to the chowkidar.’

Imama gave the phone to the chowkidar and after speaking to Sabiha, he put the phone down and said, ‘Sabiha Bibi has asked me to prepare her room for you. You are to please stay here till they come back.’

Imama went to Sabiha’s room, but she could not rest. If anything, her conversation with Sabiha had only served to further agitate her. She could understand Sabiha’s concerns; she herself did not wish to be a cause of worry to Sabiha’s family but she, for sure, did not want to approach the courts. She had no doubts that once her father, Hashim Mubeen, were to find out that it was Sabiha’s family that had helped her escape, he would regard them as an adversary and would deal with them as such. Perhaps this was why Sabiha was so adamant that she should approach the law. But for Imama approaching the law was the tougher path to take. That the daughter of such a prominent figure of the community should forsake her religion would be akin to a slap in the face for the entire community and they would react—what the reaction would be she did not know; but surely it would not be pretty.

She was still pondering over these issues when she thought of Syeda Mariam Sibt-e-Ali. Mariam Sibt-e-Ali was a friend and class fellow of

Sabiha’s and Imama had met her a couple of times in Sabiha’s house. In fact, she was the only one Sabiha had told of Imama’s conversion to Islam. Mariam had been surprised and delighted at the news. Shaking her hand warmly, Mariam had told Imama that if she ever needed any help she should approach her without any hesitation. Whenever they met again, Mariam would always renew her offer to help.

Imama did not know to what extent Mariam would really help, nor did she know why she thought of her at this moment, but contacting Mariam seemed the right thing to do. She picked up her mobile to call but the battery was dead; she plugged in the mobile to recharge it and coming into the lounge picked up the diary to look for Mariam’s number.

Dr Sibt-e-Ali answered the phone when she dialed. ‘Could I speak to Mariam please? I am her friend calling,’ she said. This was the first time ever she had called Mariam on the phone. Dr

Sibt-e-Ali asked Imama to hold while he called his daughter. In a couple of minutes Mariam was on the line.

=Hello Mariam, this is Imama.'

=Imama...Imama Hashim?' Mariam sounded surprised.

=Yes, Mariam, I need your help.'

Imama poured out the whole story of her leaving home to Mariam who listened in total silence while she spoke. Finally she said, =Where are you now.'

=I am at Sabiha's house but there is no one here. Sabiha and her family are in Peshawar.' Imama did not tell her of her conversation with Sabiha.

=You stay right there. I am sending the car right away to fetch you. You are to come here with all your belongings. In the meantime, I am going to talk to my parents about what can be done.'

Imama put the receiver down. She had not realized what a lucky coincidence it was that she had not used Salar's mobile phone to talk to Mariam. Had she done so, surely Salar could have traced her through the phone company to Dr Sibt-e-Ali's house. Lucky too, that she had not once used the mobile since reaching Lahore.

Another lucky coincidence was that Dr Sibt-e-Ali sent his office car and driver to have her picked up, otherwise the servants would have recognized

Mariam's car as she was a frequent visitor. Since neither the office car nor the driver was known to Sabiha's chowkidar, no one would be able to trace her movement from Sabiha's house.

Half an hour later, the servant came to tell her that a car had arrived to pick her up. Imama picked up her bag to leave. =Are you going?'

=Yes.'

=But Sabiha Bibi said that you would be staying here.'

=No, I am leaving. If Sabiha calls tell her I have left.' She got into the car without letting the man know where she was going.

She had never been to Mariam's house before and was unsure of the reception she would get. However, she was sure she would have to face a barrage of questions and in the car Imama prepared herself. But this did not happen.

‘We have already had breakfast; but you must be famished,’ Mariam said as she came out into the driveway to greet her. She took her in and introduced her to her parents. Dr Sibte-Ali and his wife greeted Imama warmly. The sorrow and stress on her face moved them to pity.

‘I'll set the table for breakfast, Mariam, why don't you show Imama to her room so she can freshen up,’ Mrs Sibte-Ali said to her daughter.

By the time she had changed and come out, breakfast was ready for her. Imama ate in silence. When she had finished Dr Sibte-Ali said, ‘Imama, go and get some sleep, I am off to the office now; when I get back from work we can sit and discuss your problem.’ He left the room instructing his daughter to take Imama to her room.

In the room Mariam said, ‘You are exhausted Imama, try and sleep. I'll get you a sleeping pill to help you rest. Take it if you feel the need for it.’ Mariam left the room.

She came back shortly with the sleeping pill and a glass of water. ‘Try and rest,’ she tried to reassure Imama. ‘All will be well. Just think you are in your own home.’ She pulled the curtains, switched off the light and left the room.

Although it was nine in the morning, it was a foggy day and with the lights off and the curtains drawn, the room was fairly dark. Imama took the sleeping pill; she knew well enough that she would not be able to sleep without this aid. She was far too fretful to rest otherwise.

As she lay in bed she felt the tablet taking effect as drowsiness swept over her and in a short while she was lost to the world.

When she woke up the room was in total darkness. She got off the bed and groped her way to the wall and the light switch. She switched on the light; the clock on the wall showed it was 11:30 at night. She could not make out whether she had slept so long because of the sleeping pill or simply out of sheer exhaustion over the last few days. Whatever the reason, she felt refreshed after her long rest. She was also famished. Not knowing if the household was asleep or awake, she tiptoed to the door and softly opened it. Dr Sibte-Ali was sitting in the lounge reading a book. He heard the door open and looked up.

‘Did you sleep well?’ he asked with a smile.

==Yes...’ she tried to smile.

==Now this is what you have to do,’ Dr Sibte-e-Ali continued pleasantly. ==See that door? It leads to the kitchen. Your dinner has been kept for you in the fridge. Take it out and heat it. When you have had your dinner, make two cups of tea and bring them here so we can chat.’

Without a word Imama did as she was told. Having eaten, she made two cups of tea and came back to the lounge. Dr Sibte-e-Ali had put his book aside and was waiting for her. She handed him one cup, and with the second cup in her hand, seated herself on the sofa opposite him.

==This is very good tea,’ he said, taking a sip.

Imama was so nervous that she neither smiled at the compliment nor thanked him. She just sat there and stared at him.

==Imama, the decision you have taken is the right one. There are no two opinions about that. A decision like this requires a great deal of courage but sometimes it requires even more courage to stand by the decision one makes. As time goes by you will be more aware of this.’ Dr Sibte-e-Ali was speaking in calm measured tones as he regarded Imama thoughtfully.

==I would like to know,’ he continued, ==if your decision to change your religion is based solely on religious grounds or is there any other factor involved.’

Imama looked at him without replying.

Since Imama did not reply, Dr Sibte-e-Ali continued. ==Perhaps I should make myself more clear. My question is that are you by any chance interested in a boy and has he influenced you in any way to change your religion and leave your home?’

Without waiting for Imama to reply, Dr Sibte-e-Ali spoke on. ==I would also like to make it clear that if such is the case I will not have an ill opinion of you. The only reason I am asking this is that if it is so, it will be necessary for me to meet the boy and his family.’

For the first time, Imama regretted that she had not thought of contacting Mariam and her family before she took the drastic step of marrying Salar.

Had Dr Sibte-e-Ali talked to Jalal...she dismissed the idea from her mind

and shook her head in the negative in reply to Dr Sibte-e-Ali.

==No, there is no such thing,’ she replied.

==Are you sure?’ Dr Sibte-e-Ali persisted in his calm way.

==I did not embrace Islam for the love of any man,’ Imama replied truthfully for indeed she had not accepted Islam for the love of Jalal Ansar.

==Are you fully aware of the difficulties you will face?' Dr Sibte-Ali asked next. ==I am.'

==I am acquainted with your father, Mr Hashim Mubeen. He holds a very prominent position in your community. Your changing your religion thus and leaving the house will be a great blow to him and he will do everything possible to find you and persuade you to return home.'

==I will not return home under any condition. I have thought about this very seriously and I have made up my mind,' Imama replied firmly.

==You have left your house...but what is your next step to be?'

Anticipating that Dr Sibte-Ali would suggest that she approach the law for protection, Imama pre-empted him. ==I will not go to the courts. I do not wish to be made a public spectacle. I am sure you will appreciate the problems that will confront me if I decide to take my case to court,' she said.

==In that case, what is it that you wish to do?' Dr Sibte Ali asked looking at her intently. ==You know you will not be able to complete your medical degree if you remain in hiding?'

==Yes I am aware of that,' she replied forlornly putting her cup down. ==In any case, I will not be able to pay the tuition fee on my own.'

==What if you transfer to another medical college in another part of the country?'

==No, that will not be possible. My family will anticipate that as my first move and they will contact all the medical colleges in the country. In any case, there are few such schools and it will not be difficult for them to track me down.'

==Then...?'

==I would like to take admission in B.Sc. in some college in the country...not in Lahore; and I wish to change my name.'

Dr Sibte-Ali did not reply immediately. He remained lost in thought for a while; then with a deep sigh he spoke. ==Imama for now you must remain here. Let's wait and see what steps your family takes. In a few weeks we shall know. Till then I suggest we wait. You are completely safe here. You do not wish to approach the courts, and I respect your judgment in that. Stay here, till we figure out what to do next. Your family will not be able to trace you here and, even if they do, they cannot force you to leave against your will. No one will make you do anything against your will; please be assured of that.' Dr Sibte-Ali tried to reassure Imama that she was safe and had sanctuary in his house.

Looking at him, Imama was reminded of her father Hashim Mubeen and she went back to her room with a sad heart. about 5 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

It was five in the evening the next day when Dr Sibte-e-Ali came back from the office and summoned Imama to his study. The servant came to the kitchen where she and Mariam were to say that Dr Sahib was asking for her.

She knocked on the door and entered.

Dr Sibte-e-Ali was riffling through some papers in a drawer. ‘Come Imama sit down,’ he said. She sat on the chair opposite him.

‘I have made some inquiries today regarding your family and the search they are conducting to find you,’ he said. Shutting the drawer, he abruptly asked, ‘Who is Salar Sikandar?’ He was watching her intently.

Imama was taken aback. She felt her heart drumming in her chest. The color drained from her face— a fact that was not lost on Dr Sibte-e-Ali.

‘Salar...he is our neighbor...he helped me...escape from home...he...he helped me come to Lahore...from Islamabad...’ she stammered.

‘Should I tell him about my marriage vows with Salar?’ she wondered. ‘Your father has filed an FIR (First Investigation Report) against him accusing him of abducting you,’ Dr Sibte-e-Ali informed her.

Imama paled further. ‘Has he been caught?’ she cried out. She had not reckoned on her family tracing Salar so quickly, but that they had done so meant that they would soon find out about Jalal Ansar and then they would trace her to this house.

‘No. But they do know that he came to Lahore that night with a girl. He has admitted as much but denies that the girl was you. He claims to have come with a girlfriend and has already provided the proof.’

Dr Sibte-e-Ali deliberately omitted the fact that Salar claimed to have come to Lahore with a prostitute.

‘No. His family too is not without resources and the police could not pick him up; but your family is convinced that he is the one who helped you run away.’ Abruptly changing the subject he asked, ‘What sort of a person is Salar?’

‘He is bad...’ Imama spoke impulsively. ‘He is very bad.’

‘But you just said he helped you...’

‘Yes, but he is not a good person. Perhaps he helped me because once when he had tried to commit suicide I had helped save his life; or perhaps he did it because he is my brother’s friend. But he is not a nice person...he has a mental problem...he says odd things...does odd things.’ Imama was recalling in her mind the drive from Lahore to Islamabad and how Salar provoked her the entire way.

==The police have contacted all your friends, including Sabiha,' Dr Sibt-eAli continued. ==Sabiha is back from Peshawar but Mariam has not told her any thing about your being here. You are not to contact her in any way not even by telephone. Her house is under surveillance and the phone will be tapped. In fact, for now your best bet is to lie low and not contact anyone at all.

==Can I contact them through my mobile phone?' Imama asked. ==You have a mobile phone?' Dr Sibt-e-Ali was startled.

==It belongs to Salar.'

==They have tracked Salar down; it will not take them long to trace the mobile phone. When you called Mariam from Sabiha's house did you call from the mobile?' Dr Sibt-e-Ali sounded worried now.

==No, I had used Sabiha's home phone to call.'

==You are not to use that mobile at all—neither to call nor to receive calls.' He was somewhat relieved.

For the next few days Dr Sibt-e-Ali would come home in the evenings and tell her about the development regarding her family's quest to find her. The police were questioning everyone she could have been in touch with and going to all places where she may have sought refuge. Medical colleges, hospitals, hostels, friends, colleagues...Hashim Mubeen left no stone unturned. The only thing he did not do was approach the media. He knew that was a route that would lead to disgrace and disappointment. To whatever extent he could, he was trying to keep his daughter's disappearance a secret. He had contacted the police; his own community was aware of his predicament and was doing its best to help in the search.

The police had contacted Sabiha's family but they were not aware of the fact that she had sought refuge in her house on her arrival from Lahore. The fact that Sabiha and her family had at that point been in Peshawar threw them off the scent. Mariam too had not confided in Sabiha and continued to play the part that she too was confounded by Imama's disappearance.

Having lived some weeks in the security of Dr Sibt-e-Ali's house, Imama was convinced that she was safe; that no one would be able to follow her to this place. She decided to call Salar and

ask for the marriage certificate. It was now that she was horrified to learn that Salar had neither allowed her the right to ask for divorce nor was he prepared to divorce her. She felt the ground slip away from under her feet.

This was the first time that she had used the mobile phone since her arrival in Dr Sibte-e-Ali's house; that too to call Salar and without informing anyone. She began to be aware of her folly. She should never have trusted a man like Salar. At the very least she should have read the nikahnamah or kept a copy of it for herself.

As the realization grew that Salar could become a real problem in her life, she began to rue all her earlier decisions. Had she ever imagined she would meet a man like Dr Sibte-e-Ali, she would never have committed the folly of getting married—and that too to a man like Salar.

Had she known that Dr Sibte-e-Ali would help her regardless, she would have told him the truth about Salar. Surely, he would have found a way out for her. But now that she had so convincingly lied about the fact that there was no man involved in this enterprise, how could she back out of it? And then, that she was married to the very man she had badmouthed about...the very man against whom her family had filed an FIR with the police on charges of abducting her. Should she now come clean and confess everything to Dr Sibte-e-Ali? She feared if she did so she may lose the only refuge she had; and at this moment she did not want to do that. In her worry and apprehension, Imama lost all appetite; she could neither eat nor drink. The future seemed bleak and dark. As for Salar

Sikandar...she had developed such a hatred for him that if he were before her she would have shot him. A myriad of fears and anxiety began to prey on her mind. Earlier, she was afraid of her family; added to that fear now was her dread of Salar. She did not know which way to turn. Always quiet by nature, she now slipped into complete quietude. She began to lose weight and became listless and lethargic. The change was not lost on Dr Sibte-e-Ali and his family. One by one, they spoke to her to find out what was worrying her but she managed to fob them off.

‘What is the matter Imama? You have always been quiet, but now you look as if a great worry is pressing down on you.’ Mariam was the first to approach her.

‘It's nothing Mariam. Just that I miss home,’ Imama tried to make light of the situation.

Mariam was not to be misled so easily. ‘Why now? You have been here for sometime now but it is only over the last few days that you have stopped eating. You are looking pale, you have circles under your eyes as if you have not been sleeping well and you have lost weight. If this goes on you will soon fall ill.’

Imama could not deny Mariam's observations. She knew that anyone looking at her could gauge the extent of her anxiety and perhaps also that it was due to recent developments. But she was helpless—she could not confide in Mariam about Salar, nor could she confess to her marriage with Salar.

Again she tried to put Mariam off. I have been thinking more of my family lately. The more time passes, the more I seem to miss them,' she said softly; nor was this a complete lie because she was missing them intensely.

She had never been separated from her family for such a length of time. True, she lived in a hostel in Lahore but she made it a point of going home at least once a month. Her father or brother would also often drop by to see her; and then there was the telephone; she spoke to her folks nearly every day. But now she felt as if she was adrift on an endless sea with no one in sight. Those beloved familiar faces were now hers only in her mind and in her imagination.

Mariam, seeing that Imama was not willing to share her fears with her, changed the subject and began to prattle on about other things, hoping to distract her from whatever it was that was worrying her.

Dr Sibte-e-Ali was blessed with three daughters. Mariam was the youngest of the three and was completing her medical studies. The two older sisters were married and living in cities other than Lahore.

Incidentally, soon after Mariam came to Dr Sibte-e-Ali's house, the sisters came home one by one to visit the parents.

Mariam found in both sisters the same love and kindness that she had come to associate with Dr Sibte-e-Ali and his family, but on both occasions she was greatly reminded of her own sisters and the love and affection they had lavished on her. She thought of her home, her father, her older brother,

Waseem, and Saad...Saad who was not related to her by blood. Saad had been adopted in keeping with her community's practice of adopting homeless boys and by giving them security and love, creating a new member for the community. In keeping with this principle, Hashim Mubeen had adopted Saad when he was very little and Imama was in her last year of school. The coming of a stranger into her house had been a new experience for Imama.

We have adopted Saad as an expression of our gratitude to Allah, who has given us so much; by doing this we hope to establish a chain of kindness,' her mother had explained to Imama on the day she brought

Saad home. You should regard him as your younger brother.'

Imama was very proud of her parents that day; that they were willing to share the blessings God had given them with those less fortunate than them. She did not stop to think that her

uncles had done the same as had some other prominent families she knew. It was only much later that the true nature of these adoptions came to light.

Saad and Imama shared a bedroom and, from the very beginning, Saad became attached to her. Once Imama joined medical college and accepted Islam, she began telling Saad stories about the Holy Prophet (PBUH) on her trips home for the weekend. Since Saad was too young to reason, she would simplify her rationalization by saying ‘As God is one, our Prophet (PBUH) too is unique. There is no one like him and there can be no one like him.’

While talking to Saad she would always ask him to not repeat their conversations to the rest of the family, but she well knew that that would not happen. She was aware that Saad was already deeply influenced by the family and the community, and by the regular religious gatherings he attended. She had also thought that once she completed her education and started living her own life, she would take Saad with her; though again she was well aware that that would not be an easy thing to do.

When leaving home, she had contemplated taking Saad with her, but she knew that such a step would increase the danger of her getting caught. Albeit many times since she had found shelter in Dr Sibte-Ali’s house, she wondered if she could have brought Saad along. Although she had broken off ties with her family and was determined to pursue the path she had chosen for herself, this did not in any way diminish the love she still felt for them or for Jalal Ansar.

All night in the privacy of her room she would cry for them. Initially, no one knew how unhappy she was. When she would appear at the breakfast table with swollen eyes, she would shrug off the hosts’ concern by saying she had had a sleepless night. However, one night Mariam came into her room unexpectedly. Since it was very late, Mariam, assuming that Imama would be asleep, did not knock on the door. Imama was in bed but not asleep; wrapped in a blanket she had been crying with a deep anguish born of hopelessness. As Mariam turned the handle to enter, Imama quickly covered her face with the blanket. The movement alerted Mariam to the fact that Imama was not sleeping.

‘Imama?’ No reply.

‘Imama, are you awake?’ Mariam walked to the bed and pulled the blanket off Imama’s face. She was horrified to see Imama’s tear-stained face. ‘Imama! No wonder you look so exhausted.’ Making up her mind in a minute, she pulled Imama off the bed. ‘No more sleeping alone and worrying! You are to sleep in my room from now on,’ she said determinedly. Quietly Imama followed Mariam to her room; she was too ashamed to say anything. From that day on Imama slept in Mariam’s room. As a result, she stopped crying in the nights but she still had no control over sleep; and there were still nights when she lay sleepless till the early hours of mornings.

When she would look at the medical books in Mariam’s room, Imama would be filled with a deep melancholy. She knew she had left that life far behind and there was no return to it.

In the mornings, once Dr Sibte-e-Ali would leave for work and Mariam for college, Imama would go and spend time with Mrs Sibte-e-Ali whom she called Aunty. Or perhaps it was the other way around. Perhaps it was Aunty who would not leave Imama alone; she kept her busy all day so she would not have time to brood. Despite Aunty's efforts, there were times when Imama would fall into a reverie oblivious to the world around her. She made no effort to get in touch with Salar again. She knew nothing would come of it except an increase in her worries.

Three months had passed since she had come to stay with Dr Sibte-e-Ali and family. One day he called her to his study.

‘Imama, it has been a while now since you left home. Your family, while not having given up the search, has lessened their efforts to locate you. Have you given any thought as to what you would like to do next?’ he asked.

‘I would like to continue my studies,’ Imama replied quietly.

Dr Sibte-e-Ali considered her reply; overlooking her answer he asked, ‘Have you given any thought to your marrying?’

‘Marry...? I do not understand...’ Imama stuttered, completely taken aback by the question.

‘Given your circumstances the best way out of this situation would be marriage. If you were to marry into a nice family, it would provide you with the security you so lack now,’ Dr Sibte-e-Ali broached the subject that was obviously on his mind. ‘I know a few boys from very good families; I wish for you to marry one of them.’

All colour drained from her face, Imama watched Dr Sibte-e-Ali. It was the same conclusion she had come to so many months ago, the thought that had led her to Salar Sikandar and to folly.

Had she not been married to Salar, she would have accepted Dr Sibte-e-Ali's proposal with alacrity. She understood that marrying into a well established family would give her sanctuary from many problems she now faced. She had always lived a sheltered life depending on her family for all her needs. It frightened her that now she had no one to turn to. How long could she go on like this? But her hasty marriage to Salar was like a bone stuck in her throat—she could neither spit it out nor swallow it.

‘No, I will not marry.’

‘Why not?’

She had an answer to Dr Sibte-Ali's question but not the courage to give it. What would Dr Sibte-Ali think of her if she said the truth? That she was a liar and had been living in his house for so long under false pretences. Or, perhaps he would think that she left her house in order to marry Salar and all the rest of it was a pack of lies. And what if, on knowing the truth, he refused to help her any further...or asked her to leave the house...then what? Or what if he decided to contact her parents? She had lived for three months in Dr Sibte-Ali's house and she had realized he was a good and kind person, but she herself was too scared, too intimidated by her circumstances to put implicit trust in anybody; she could not afford to run the risk of trusting anyone so completely.

She had reached a conclusion; she could not let anyone into her secret. I would rather finish my studies first. I do not wish to be a burden on anyone; I want to stand on my own feet. If after getting married there are issues, I want to be able to support myself. There is no way of knowing how things will be after marriage; I may not have the opportunity to study. Imama spoke at length after a long silence.

Imama, we will always be there to help you. We do not plan to cut ties with you if you get married. We are not trying to get rid of you. For me you are like my own daughter, my fourth daughter.

Imama's eyes welled up.

I am not putting any pressure on you Imama. This was only a suggestion.

Let a few years pass and I will marry whoever you tell me to. But not now, not immediately, Imama spoke aloud but in her mind she was thinking, For now, I have to get rid of Salar. I must find a way to get a divorce.

Which city would you like to study in? Dr Sibte-Ali dropped the idea of marriage.

Anywhere—I have no preference, Imama replied.

about 5 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

When she had left her house, Imama had taken all her documents, plus as much of her jewellery as she could. When Dr Sibte-Ali called her a few days later to inform her that he had decided to admit her to a college in Multan she went to her room and fetched a small bag from her suitcase. She returned to Dr Sibte-Ali's study and opening the bag took out the envelope containing the necessary documents and handed it to Dr Sibte-Ali. Then she took out another small container from the bag and put it on the table.

This is some of my jewellery that I have with me; it is not much, but if I sell it, it can cover the cost of my education for some time, she said. No. Don't sell the jewellery; you will need it when you get married. As far as your education goes, I am responsible for you and it is my responsibility to take care of your needs... About to say something more, Dr Sibte-Ali stopped suddenly startled by something he saw gleaming in the open bag in Imama's hand.

Slightly ashamed of herself for hiding it from him, Imama pulled out the little pistol out of the bag and put it on the table. _This belongs to me. I

brought it from home. As I had said earlier, I needed Salar's help and he is not a good man...'
She was unwilling to give more information than this. _Do you know how to use it?'

Imama gave a sad smile. _Yes, I had trained with the NCC in College. Also my brother Waseem used to go the Rifle Shooting Club regularly and I would often go with him. I had begged my father to buy me this pistol. It is gold plated.'

Dr Sibt-e-Ali picked up the pistol. _Do you have a license for this?' he asked.

_Yes, but I did not bring it with me.'

_In that case, leave it here with me. Do not take it with you to Multan. As for the jewellery, let's put it in a locker.'

Imama nodded her head in agreement.

A few months later Imama found herself in Multan. A city she had never even given a second thought to in her life. But then so much had happened to her that she never imagined could happen. Could she ever have imagined that at the age of twenty, she would be restarting her studies; this time with a view to taking a B.Sc. degree...at an age when most girls have completed their B.Sc...?

Could she ever have imagined that she would have willfully abandoned her desire to be a doctor...?

Could she ever have imagined that she would be the cause of so much hurt and humiliation for her parents...?

Could she ever have imagined any other man in her life other than Jalal...? And that she would be so desperate to marry that man...? Could she ever have imagined, given her failure to marry the man of her choice that she would end up marrying a man like Salar Sikandar...? And that too of her own volition...?

Could she ever have imagined that having given up the security and comforts of her own house she would end up with a family as kind and caring as Dr Sibt-e-Ali's?

She had no experience of the outside world, and she had had no need of it, either. When she left home, she had prayed earnestly for her own safety—that she may not need to go from

pillar to post in her struggle for survival. She was not bold enough to fend for herself and take on the odds. She really did not know that she would now have to manage everything on her own or how she would deal with strange men and all kinds of people— and that too when she had no family to fall back on.

It was a different matter to study in a medical college in Lahore and dream of going abroad for higher studies, when in the protective shade of one's family. There were no financial issues, and Hashim Mubeen's name and reputation were sufficient to ward off unwanted attention, persuading people to approach her with due respect.

She was lucky that on leaving home she did not have to face the kind of problems she had feared. Salar Sikandar had dropped her to Lahore and

Dr Sibte-Ali's family had given her sanctuary. Since she had been at Dr Sibte-Ali's she was fortunate that all concerns, big or small, were taken care of. Her change of name, admission in college in Multan, a place to stay in the hostel, the expenses involved with her education—all had been handled by Dr Sibte-Ali—and she was profoundly grateful to God for it. At least she did not have to face the daily strife for survival in a hostile world.

She left for Multan. This was the beginning of a new life for her. A difficult life. She felt herself all alone in the hostel. Sometimes she would miss her family and the home in Islamabad with such intensity that it took all her willpower to stay where she was and not run back to them. Often she would cry for no reason at all. Sometimes she thought of getting in touch with Jalal Ansar. She still longed for him.

A number of girls who were studying with her were those who wished for admission in Medical colleges but who failed to get the required grades in their F.Sc. exams. They were now sitting for their B.Sc. in the hopes of doing better and entering the field of their choice.

‘Medical college...doctor...’ For a long time these words were like daggers twisting in her heart. She would look at lines etched in her hands in amazement. What was it in her fate that was turning to dust all that she cherished? Often she would recall her conversation with Javeria. ‘If I cannot be a doctor, I have no wish to live...I will die,’ she had said. But she had not died. She continued to live.

‘I will be the country's most renowned eye specialist,’ she had declared. It had all remained a dream. All that she was so close to achieving had remained so far.

She had no home.

She had no family.

Asjad was not hers.

She was not going to be a doctor.

Jalal was not hers.

In one sweep, she had lost all the comforts of life that she was used to, yet she lived. Imama could never have imagined that she had or could ever have had the courage to live thus of her own will and yet she had proved herself at every moment.

As time passed, the sense of loss decreased. She was finding in herself strength to bear the tribulations in her life. After God, it was Dr Sibte-e-Ali and his family who did all they could to help her recover. Once a month, she would visit them on a weekend. They regarded her as part of their family. _What would have happened to me had I not met them?' Imama often wondered.

Imama was unable to get Salar out of her mind during her long stay in Multan. She wanted to call him and again ask him to divorce her and, if he still refused, she resolved to reveal all to Dr Sibte-e-Ali. Thus, once her B.Sc. exams were over she went to a Public Call Office (PCO) and rang up Salar. It was long since she had stopped using the cell phone Salar had given her; since that was Salar's own number she wondered if he had restarted using it for himself, or whether he was using the new number he had given her to call him those two years ago. With great trepidation, she rang both numbers in turn but got no reply to either. He obviously had a new number for his cell but since she did not have it she could not contact him. Having no choice she called his home number. The bell rang, then somebody picked it up and a woman's voice said, _Hello.'

_Hello. I wish to speak to Salar Sikander,' Imama said.

_Salar Sahib....Who is this calling?'

Imama realized that whoever was on the other end was suddenly suspicious. The voice was familiar but she could not place it. Before Imama could speak the woman at the other end spoke with great enthusiasm,

_Imama Bibi...is that you Imama Bibi?'

Imama felt a thrill of fear run through her. Inadvertently, she dropped the receiver into the cradle, disconnecting the line. Who could it be who had recognized her so quickly merely by her

saying those few words? And that too in Salar's house? She remained rooted to her spot in fear. Her hands were trembling. Sitting in the inner booth of the PCO she tried to reassure herself.

‘I have nothing to fear. I am so far from Islamabad, no one can trace me here. I have nothing to fear.’ Gradually she recovered her composure. Having convinced herself that she had nothing to fear she gathered her courage to call again. She asked the owner of the PCO to connect her to the same number again.

Somebody picked up the phone immediately; a man's voice greeted her. It was not Salar; she would have recognized his voice.

‘I wish to speak to Salar Sikander,’ she said.

‘Is this Imama Hashim?’ the voice at the other end was gruff and unfriendly.

‘Yes...’ Imama remained unruffled this time.

There was complete silence at the other end.

‘Can I speak to him please?’ Imama repeated her request.

‘That is not possible,’ the man finally replied.

‘Why not?’

‘He...is no longer alive.’

‘What? Is he...is he dead?’ Imama could not stop herself asking.

‘Yes...’

‘When...’

There was a prolonged silence at the other end. Then the man spoke,

‘When was the last time you were in contact with him?’

‘Some years ago...about two and a half years ago.’

‘He died a year ago. You...’

Imama disconnected the line. There was no need to hear any more. She was free. She knew that it was wrong to rejoice over the death of any human being, but she could not help it. Had Salar divorced her when she had asked him to do so, she would undoubtedly have mourned his death. But now, two years later she felt remarkably light—a sense of relief. The sword of Damocles which had been hanging over her head had been removed. There was no need to broach the subject with Dr Sibte-Ali—she was free in the real sense of the word. It was her last day at the hostel and that night she prayed for forgiveness for Salar's soul. As it was, she had

forgiven him when she learnt of his death; but she could not mourn his death--she was immeasurably relieved over the turn events had taken.

The woman Imama had spoken to was Nasira who worked both at Salar's house as well as at Imama's. She had recognized Imama's voice the minute she spoke. When Imama cut off the phone line, she went to Usman Sikander in a state of great excitement. It was just a quirk of fate that Usman Sikander was home that day. He had been unwell in the morning and had not gone to work.

‘A girl called a little while ago...she wanted to talk to Salar...’ the maid said to Usman.

‘Well, tell him.’ Usman was indifferent. By yet another twist of fate, Salar was there too—he was visiting from America, and was home at the time.

The maid was flustered. ‘Saab jee, it was Imama Bibi calling,’ she said.

Usman Sikander almost dropped the cup of tea he was holding. ‘Imama Hashim? Hashim Mubeen's daughter?’

Nasira nodded her head in confirmation.

‘So has Salar been lying all this time when he says he has no connection with Imama...’ he thought, his mind a whirl.

Aloud he said, ‘Did she say she was Imama calling?’

‘No Saab jee, I recognized her voice. And when I asked her, she put the phone down on me.’

The phone rang again. Before the maid could pick up the phone, he reached for the extension in his room. The girl on the other end confirmed she was Imama; she also said that she had not been in touch with Salar for over two and a half years. While there was no way he could confirm what she was saying was the truth, his instinct told him the girl was not lying. ‘If only I can keep her away from contacting Salar, we will have rid ourselves forever of a great deal of trouble,’ the thought ran through his mind. And so he told her that Salar had died.

For Usman Sikandar the year Imama had disappeared has been a difficult one. Suspecting Salar in the disappearance of his daughter, Hashim Mubeen had brought all sorts of pressure to bear on Usman Sikandar. The bills for his firms that had always been easily passed through in Government offices were now inexplicably delayed; he began to receive threatening letters and phone calls from anonymous callers; near strangers would talk to him threateningly telling him to assist in the return of Hashim Mubeen's daughter; for a long time Salar had been shadowed

and this harassment had not stopped even after he had been sent abroad. Even in America, Salar remained under surveillance until Hashim Mubeen was finally convinced that Imama and Salar were not in contact with each other. With no proof of Salar's involvement in Imama's disappearance the harassment finally ceased. Numerous attempts made by Usman to reestablish good relations with Hashim Mubeen were rebuffed but at least the threat to him and his family had ceased. And now two and a half years on this girl was trying to get in touch with Salar again. He did not want to go through all those hassles again nor did he wish that for Salar. Had he himself not been a man of means, just as Hashim Mubeen Ahmed was, the latter could have caused him even more problems than he had faced in the first few months. He was anxious to send Imama a copy of the divorce deed he had prepared on behalf of Salar: that the deed was a forgery and that Salar had no knowledge of it was of no consequence—he just wanted to make it clear to Imama that she had no connection to the family and nor could she expect one. Had there been a connection— however tenuous it may have been—it was now snapped with the news of Salar's death. It was a coincidence that Imama had put down the phone before hearing him out. He tried to trace the call and learnt that it was from a PCO in Multan.

There was still a week to go before Salar left for the United States.

Usman Sikandar decided to keep a strict eye on all his movements. Without his knowing it, Salar was continuously watched for the last week of his stay in Pakistan. All his phone calls were monitored and the servants were instructed not to let any calls through to him no matter who had called. The maid was strictly warned not to let Salar know that Imama had called. When Salar left for America a week later, Usman Sikandar breathed a sigh of relief. The danger had passed.

On her return to Lahore, Imama sold the cell phone (since there was no way she could now return this to Salar). To the cash she received she added some more money to cover the costs of the phone bills she would have incurred two and a half years ago, plus the amount Salar must have spent on her, driving her to Lahore and other miscellaneous costs. All this cash she posted to Usman Sikandar in Islamabad along with a short note explaining why she was sending the money; thus she paid off any money she may have owed Salar and put herself out of an obligation to him. Usman Sikandar was relieved at receiving the small packet. It convinced him that Imama was cutting off all ties with him and also that she did not doubt his story.

On finishing her B.Sc. Imama returned to Lahore from Multan. It was now three years since she had left home. She was convinced that the search for her was now not as intense as it may have been some years previously. At the most her family would still be watching medical

colleges. Her assumption was correct. Although more sure of herself now she did not lower her vigilance. She took admission in the Punjab University in the Chemistry Department and registered for her M.Sc. In Multan, she had only worn a chador to and from college, but now she took to wearing a veil which covered her face too. After all, this was Lahore and somebody could recognize her.

On her return to Lahore she did not take stay with Dr Sibte-e-Ali; instead she started living with Saeeda Amma.

Dr Sibte-e-Ali had introduced Imama to Saeeda Amma before she went to Multan. The reason was that Saeeda Amma had many relatives living in Multan and Dr Sibte-e-Ali felt that Imama would be able to contact them in any emergency.

An extremely garrulous and active woman of about 65 to 70 years of age, Saeeda Amma lived alone in a large house in the inner city of Lahore. She had been widowed some years earlier. Both her sons had gone abroad to study and on completing their education, they had married and opted to live abroad. Numerous attempts to persuade their mother to shift in with them had failed and now the sons took turns to visit her each year and be with her for some time. Saeeda Amma was related to Dr Sibte-e-Ali in that she was a cousin.

Before bringing Imama over Dr Sibte-e-Ali had told her all about Imama. Saeeda Amma greeted her warmly when she came and proceeded to tell her in great detail about each and every relative present in Multan. And as if that was not enough she even volunteered to accompany Imama to Multan and drop her off at her college—an offer that Dr Sibte-e-Ali refused, gently but firmly.

‘No, sister, that will be too much trouble,’ he said.

‘Perhaps a better idea would be for Imama to stay with one of my brothers.’ Saeeda Amma was beginning to doubt the advantages of being in a hostel. ‘She will be well looked after there and will have all comforts of a home life.’ She began to recount the many problems and discomforts Imama would have to face in a hostel. Imama was relieved when Dr Sibte-e-Ali remained firm in his stance regarding the hostel. Imama herself felt that was the best option.

Her next meeting with Saeeda Amma was in Multan in the hostel she was staying in. She had been at there for a couple of months when was told a lady had come to see her. Imama went numb with fear. Who could have come to meet her and that too a woman? She was surprised to see Saeeda Amma waiting for her in the meeting area. Saeeda Amma greeted her with the same warmth and kindness she had shown her in Lahore. She was on a fortnight's stay in Multan to catch up with her relatives there; and in those two weeks she often came to see Imama. On one occasion she even took Imama to see her brother and his family at their house.

about 5 months ago Umera Ahmed Official

This then became the routine. Every few months Saeeda Amma would visit Multan and would come and see Imama in the hostel. When Imama would go to Lahore on her monthly visit she too would pay a visit to Saeeda

Amma's. If she was on a longer stay she would, on Saeeda Amma's insistence, sometimes stay overnight at her place. Imama loved the old brick house Saeeda Amma lived in. Without verbalizing it, the two felt at peace with each other because both suffered from the same sense of loneliness although Saeeda Amma, unlike Imama, had friends and neighbors to temporarily alleviate this feeling. Because of her own situation, Saeeda Amma could empathize with Imama. Once Imama confided in her that she planned to do her M.Sc. from Lahore, Saeeda Amma began persuading her to come and live with her when she returned to Lahore.

It was around this time that Dr Sibte-Ali's eldest daughter shifted back to her father's house. Dr Sibte-Ali's son-in-law, who was also his nephew, was going abroad to complete his PhD. It was decided that for the time he would be abroad his wife and children were to stay with Dr Sibte-Ali.

Although Dr Sibte-Ali's house was big enough to accommodate all, Imama felt uncomfortable staying on. In any case she was already far too indebted to Dr Sibte-Ali for all his kindness and she wanted to stand on her own feet as soon as it was possible. If she continued staying with Dr Sibte-Ali, he would insist on paying for her education and would probably also continue supporting her even after she started working. Living with him she would never be able to assert herself. An independent life was the best solution, she felt. And living with Saeeda Amma would suit her perfectly. Once she got a job she would also be able to insist on paying a small rent to Saeeda Amma—a thing Dr Sibte-Ali would never agree to if she continued living in his house.

For Dr Sibte-Ali, her decision to move out came as a shock.

“Why Amina? Why will you not stay in my house?”

“Saeeda Amma insists I stay with her.”

‘I’ll speak to her.’

‘No, that is not it. I wish to stay with her. If I live with her she will not be so lonely’

‘That is no reason. You can visit her every day if you like. Why must you stay there?’

‘Please, let me stay there. I will be happier doing so. I wish to start becoming independent,’ Imama pleaded.

‘I do not understand what you mean by that,’ Dr Sibte-Ali replied. ‘I do not wish to be a burden on you. As it is I owe you so much. I don’t wish to be indebted all my life...’ Imama’s voice trailed away. She realized she had hurt Dr Sibte-Ali with her words. She regretted them.

‘I have never thought of you as a burden Amina. Never. Daughters are never a burden and for me you are my daughter...what you say has hurt me very much.’

‘I am sorry Abu. That is not what I meant. I was just expressing my feelings. Being dependent on someone is a painful reality. Living with Saeeda Amma will give me peace of mind. I’ll pay for stay. That I cannot ever do with you. I owe you so much that if I were to live ten lifetimes I would not be able to repay you for all you have done for me. But now...for now...I wish to learn how to live life on my own. Please let me do so...’ Dr Sibte-Ali did not insist any further. For this too Imama was grateful to him.

For Imama living with Saeeda Amma was starting life all over again. This was not the same as living with Dr Sibte-Ali and his family; nor was it the same as living in the hostel. She felt a strange sense of happiness and independence for the first time in her life.

Saeeda Amma lived by herself. She had a maid who would come in the mornings and do the housework and leave by evening. She had a large social circle and was often out meeting friends and relatives and also receiving many visitors of her own. She introduced Imama to everyone as her sister’s daughter. As time passed, she began referring to her as her daughter. So while her old acquaintances knew Imama as Saeeda Amma’s niece her newer friends all thought she was her daughter. Nobody gave the relationship much thought. They all knew what a loving heart Saeeda Amma had. Her sons and their families too began to accept Imama as part of the family and every time they called Saeeda Amma they would also talk to Imama. When they would come to Lahore on their annual vacation, they would treat Imama as a sister and Imama too began to feel she was part of the family; she would often feel that she was in reality Saeeda Amma’s daughter, a sister to her sons, and an aunt to their children.

Once she completed her M.Sc. at the Punjab University, Dr Sibte-Ali helped get her a job with a pharmaceutical company. It was a good job and for the first time in her life, Imama was financially independent. This was not the life she had lived in her parent’s house; nor was this the life she had once envisaged in her dreams; but it was not also the nightmare she had feared her life would become when she had fled her home all those years ago. She could not talk to anybody about it but she felt her life was a series of miracles. To have sought the help of a man

like Salar Sikander...to have found sanctuary with Dr Sibte-e-Ali's family...to have found a new family with Saeeda Amma...to have completed her education...and now this job. The only regret in her life was Jalal Ansar. If she could have married him she would have considered herself the luckiest person on earth. The eight years that had passed since her flight from home had transformed her completely. On leaving home she was well aware that she was losing the affection and devotion of loved ones; that she should have no expectations from anyone; that when people let her down she should not feel hurt or rejected. She had hardened in these years on her own; she no longer cried at the slightest hurt. She was no longer the Imama Hashim she had been at 20—timid and fearful; she was now more confident, more self-assured. But these years of independence had taught her caution; she was now careful in her speech and careful about how she conducted herself.

She had received inestimable love from both Dr Sibte-e-Ali's and Saeeda Amma's families and she was very careful not to say or do anything that would upset them or cause them to scorn her. This is something she had never had to do living with her own family. Being discreet and tactful was a new trait she had learnt.

The day Saeeda Amma disappeared Imama was at work. The house was locked when she got home. This was not worrying since Saeeda Amma, being as social as she was often out visiting when she got home.

Imama unlocked the door and went in. This was around four in the evening.

But when the late evening call for prayers was sounded from the mosque,

Imama began to worry. It was Saeeda Amma's habit to come home by sundown. Imama went to the neighbour's house to inquire. She was told the neighbour's son had accompanied Saeeda Amma to Bilal's house.

Since Imama was well acquainted with Bilal's family she rang them up to ask about Saeeda Amma. She was told that Saeeda Amma had come but that she had left around noon. She rang up all her neighbors and friends to find out where she could be. She drew a blank everywhere; now she was really worried. She rang up Dr Sibte-e-Ali and told him that Saeeda Amma was missing.

What really caused her worry was that Saeeda Amma was completely unfamiliar with the city. She was used to her own neighborhood and the confines of the inner city; but once out of familiar surroundings, she was lost. If she wanted to go outside her neighborhood she would ask either one of the neighborhood boys or Imama to take her.

Salar, on the other hand knew the entire city of Lahore with the exception of the inner city. Had he even some idea of the inner city, he would have been able to help Saeeda Amma home despite her vague directions.

It was late in the night when Dr Sibte-e-Ali rang up Imama to tell her that Saeeda Amma had been traced through an acquaintance and that she would be home soon. Imama breathed a sigh of relief.

An hour later when the bell rang, Imama went rushing to the door. She opened the door. A good looking man greeted her and turning around said goodbye to Saeeda Amma who was standing behind him. She hardly noticed the other tall man, with his back to her. The two men walked away as Imama hugged Saeeda Amma fervently.

The next few days Saeeda Amma spoke often of the two young men who had come to her aid—Furqan and Salar. Imama did not connect Salar with Salar Sikandar. Dead men do not come back. In any case, Salar Sikandar was not the type to aid anyone nor did he have any of those glowing qualities that Saeeda Amma was so enthusiastically extolling. A few days later Furqan came with his wife to visit Saeeda Amma. Imama got to meet him for the first time. She liked both Furqan and his wife. Over the next few months the two would often come over and they became quite good friends.

It was now two years since Imama had been working. Perhaps life would have continued like this, had she not one day passed a street on which Dr Jalal Ansar had built his hospital. His name was emblazoned on the outside. Imama stopped involuntary. She stood there for a while looking at his name, then she determinedly walked away. She promised herself that she would never come down this street again. Jalal was married; that she had learnt when she left her house. She did not want to ever be a part of his life again. But as fate would have it, this decision was not to be a lasting one.

A fortnight later she bumped into Rabia while at work. Rabia was there on an errand. Seeing her standing before her, Imama fell into confusion. She did not know whether to greet her or not. Rabia solved her problem. Embracing her warmly she said, ‘Imama where have you been? Your disappearance created quite a stir both in the college and in the hostel.’ Imama smiled weakly. ‘I left home; why I did so must be known to you.’ Imama did not wish to elaborate. ‘Yes, I have an idea why you left but I have not discussed it with anyone. We really got into trouble when you disappeared. Me, Javeria, Zainab...the police really grilled us but we had no idea where you were. There were many rumors though about you and much gossip in the hostel and the college.’

Rabia rambled on, sitting in the chair in front of her. ‘Did you go alone?’ she asked suddenly.

‘Yes.’ Imama switched on the intercom to ask for tea.

‘But where did you go?’

==No where. I was here in Lahore. But tell me more about yourself, and Javeria...and the rest.’
Imama was eager to turn the conversation away from herself.

==I have my practice here in Lahore; Javeria is in Islamabad. She is working there. She is married to a doctor. I got married to Farooq. You remember Farooq? He was in our college.’

Imama smiled. ==And Zainab?’ Her heart began to beat fast.

==Zainab is in London these days, doing her residency with her husband. My husband Farooq has his practice in her brother’s hospital.’

==In Jalal Ansar’s hospital?’ Imama could not stop herself from asking. ==Yes. In Jalal’s hospital. Jalal set up his hospital after completing his specialization. He is such a nice person but unfortunately he has his troubles. He got divorced recently.’

==Divorced...why?’

==I don’t know why. Farooq did ask him but he only said that he and his wife could not develop an understanding with each other. She was very nice too—a doctor. We got very friendly with them and would often go to their house. I could never have imagined there was any friction between the two of them. He has a three year old son who stays with him. His wife has gone back to the US.’

Changing the subject in the same breath, she continued, ==But now tell me about yourself. I can see you work here, but what about your studies?

Did you complete your degree?’

I did my Masters in Chemistry.’

==So, are you married?’

==No, not yet.’

==And your parents? Have you patched up with your parents yet?’

==No.’ Imama spoke in a soft voice.

Rabia sat for a little more and then left. For Imama the rest of the day was tedious. She could not stop thinking of Jalal Ansar. She had never really forgotten him—it was just wishful thinking. She could not really put him out of her life; today she once again realized how much she really cared for him. She had put him out of her life only because she did not wish to cause any complications in his life, nor did she want to be a source of trouble in his marital affairs. Now, he was single again. She thought of her life those eight years ago when she had cried like a baby because she could not marry Jalal. There were too many obstacles in the way—hurdles that she could not overcome and obstacles that Jalal had no power to remove.

Now, time had intervened. Those barriers no longer existed. That he had been married and was now divorced was of no concern to her; nor the fact that he had a three year old son.

‘I should go and see him,’ she resolved. ‘Perhaps he still thinks about me. Perhaps he has recognized his error.’ Imama was ready to forgive him for the hurt he had caused her the last time they had talked on the phone. Anybody would have done the same. After all one does not risk everything for the sake of a girl. He had his career to think of; and his parents who had so many hopes and dreams associated with him. How could he have abandoned all? Like me, he too was helpless, she reasoned to herself. The sharpness of his words those many years ago was forgotten now; they did not cause her to pause and rethink her decision to go see Jalal Ansar.

‘I should go and see him. Perhaps Allah is giving me another chance. Perhaps all my prayers are finally being answered. Perhaps Allah has had pity on me now. Otherwise why would Rabia have popped up in my life so suddenly now? Why would I have found out that he is now divorced?’

Perhaps, if I were to meet him again... ‘She had made up her mind. She was going to meet Jalal Ansar.

‘I wish to see Dr Jalal Ansar,’ she said to the receptionist.

‘Do you have an appointment?’ the receptionist asked.

‘No.’

‘Then I am afraid you cannot see him. Dr Ansar does not meet patients without an appointment.’ The receptionist was dismissive.

‘I am not a patient. I am a friend.’ Imama spoke softly putting both hands on the receptionist’s desk.

‘Does Dr Ansar know you were coming to see him?’

‘No.’

‘Let me just ask him then,’ the receptionist said picking up the phone. ‘Your name please.’

When Imama did not reply, she repeated her question. ‘Can I have your name please?’

‘Imama Hashim.’ Imama could not recall the last time she had said her name aloud.

‘Sir, there is a Imama Hashim to see you,’ the receptionist spoke on the intercom. Then turning to Imama with a smile she said, ‘You are to go in.’

A patient was just leaving the doctor's room. Imama walked in. Jalal was standing behind the desk, astonishment writ large over his face. She could feel her heart beat in her ears. It had been more than eight years since the two had met, when exactly she could not recall.

‘Imama, what a pleasant surprise!’ Jalal greeted her warmly, coming forward to meet her. ‘I can hardly believe it. How are you?’

‘I am well. And you?’ She was staring at him—at the face she had been unable to forget in eight years. She was listening to the voice she had not forgotten in eight years.

‘I am just fine,’ he said indicating the chair in front of his desk asking her to be seated. He went and sat behind the table.

She had always known that meeting Jalal again would be a cause of great happiness but this excitement that she felt...she had not anticipated it would be thus. ‘What will you have? Tea? Coffee? A soft drink?’ he was asking.

‘Whatever you wish.’

‘Right then we will have coffee. You always liked it.’

He spoke to the receptionist to ask her to send out for some coffee. Imama saw the changes wrought in him through the years. He no longer sprouted a beard; his hairstyle and changed and he had put on some weight. On the whole he looked far more confident and self contained than he had before.

‘So what are you doing nowadays?’ he asked putting down the receiver.

‘I work in a pharmaceutical company.’

‘Did you complete your medical studies?’ he inquired.

‘No. I did an M.Sc. in Chemistry.’ ‘Which company are you working for?’ She told him.

‘That is a very good firm.’ He spent the next few minutes praising the company. She watched him intently.

‘I went abroad to specialize...’ He was now telling her about himself. She sat quite happy just to be looking at him. Sometimes it is enough for a person to just be there she was thinking to herself. ‘It has been a year since

I started this hospital and I have a good practice going.’ He was still talking when the coffee was brought in.

‘How did you find out about me?’ he asked picking up the cup of coffee. ‘I saw your name outside on the panel of doctors. And then Rabia also told me. You know Rabia? Zainab knows her well.’

==Rabia Farooq? Yes I know her well. Her husband Dr Farooq is my colleague here.'

==Yes...so I came.' Imama had not yet touched the coffee. It was still too hot for her liking. She watched Jalal Ansar, the man she had once idealized. She believed he had all those qualities that a man should have; all those qualities that she would want in a husband. She was sure he was the same man still. That he did not have a beard could not mean that he did not revere the holy Prophet (PBUH) as much as he had before. He was still singing praises of his hospital and Imama could recall the voice that had so many years before made a difficult decision easy for her. She was happy to hear him talk of his success. It was for this very reason he had rejected her eight and a half years ago. Now he had achieved all his desires. There should be no more obstacles to his marrying her now. There should be no difficulty now.

==Are you married?' He had suddenly changed the topic of conversation.

==No.' Imama replied softly.

==So where do you stay? Are you with your parents?' Imama could now sense the concern in his voice.

==No.'

==Then where...'

==I live on my own. How could I return to my parents?' She was still speaking very softly. ==And what about you?' she continued, ==Are you married?'

==I was. I am divorced now. I have a three year old son. He lives with me.' Jalal's tone betrayed no emotion.

==I am sorry to hear that,' Imama commiserated.

==Don't be. It is a good thing it ended. It was not a marriage, it was a mess.' Jalal put the coffee cup back on the table. For a time silence engulfed the room.

==Many years ago I had asked you to marry me,' Imama broke the silence at last.

Jalal looked at her without saying anything.

==I had then requested you to marry me. Can I make that request again?' She looked at him as his face changed color.

==Circumstances have changed since then. You are no longer dependent on your parents, they cannot object to your marrying of your own free will, nor can my parents interfere in any way.'

Imama stopped to wait for Jalal to answer. There was no reply. The silence stretched on straining her nerves. ==Perhaps he is worried I might object to his son living with us.' She tried to rationalize his lack of response. ==I should clarify that I have nothing against his first marriage nor having his son with us.'

==Jalal, I have no problems with...'

==This is not possible, Imama...'

Jalal cut her short.

==Why is it not possible? Don't you love me?'

==This has nothing to do with love, Imama. Much time has passed. In any case, I do not wish to marry again so soon after the failure of my first marriage. I want to concentrate on my career.'

==Jalal, you should have no concerns about our marriage failing; you know

I will not let that happen.'

==Still, I do not wish to risk it.' Jalal was curt.

==I can wait...'

==It will be of no use Imama,' Jalal said with a deep sigh. ==I am not in a position to be able to marry you.' She looked at him sadly.

==I married of my own free will last time. It was a failure. I do not wish to make the same mistake twice. This time I will marry where ever my parents tell me to.'

==Then tell your parents of me. Perhaps they will approve,' Imama spoke with a sinking feeling in her heart.

==No. I cannot tell them. Look Imama, there are some realities both you and I must face. I respect your feelings towards me and I will admit that there was a time when I was interested in you. Or, to put it more correctly, I was in love with you. Even today you have a special place in my heart and you will always have that place in my heart. But Imama, life is not based on emotions alone.'

He stopped speaking for a moment. Imama watched his face through the haze of the smoke steaming from the cup of coffee.

==Those many years ago I had begged you not to leave your house. You did not listen to me. You did as you pleased. Instead of trying to convince your parents to allow you to marry me, you put pressure on me to marry you on the sly. I could not have done that nor would it have been the right thing to have done. Religion was one factor, but it is not the only factor. We cannot discount the society we live in and the obligations social life puts on us.'

Imama could not believe it that Jalal should be saying these things to her.

==You disappeared; but do you have any idea of the scandal you created by your action. Your parents were careful to not allow the news to reach the press but everyone in the college knew about your disappearance nevertheless. The police carried on a thorough investigation and questioned most of your friends. Zainab too was interrogated. Luckily we came out unscathed.'

He got up in agitation. _I have worked hard to reach where I am now. I am not brave enough to marry you and have people pointing fingers at me. I move in the community of doctors and marrying Imama Hashim will mean reopening the scandal that rocked the medical community eight years ago. If I marry you I will have to avoid everyone. Where were you all these years? How did you live? These are pertinent questions. My parents will not believe what you say and I have my reputation to safeguard. You may be a very nice girl but you have a sullied reputation. I cannot marry a girl with a tarnished reputation. I will not have people say my wife is a woman of ill repute. I am sorry Imama I hope you can understand my position.’ The coffee in the cup had turned cold. There was no more smoke through which she could view Jalal Ansar’s face, yet his face was clouded as if behind a smokescreen; or perhaps it was her eyes misting over that caused Jalal Ansar’s face to cloud over and disappear. Holding the arm rests with both hands Imama forced herself to get up. _Yes, I understand.

Goodbye’ she said leaving the room.

_I am sorry Imama...’ Jalal was trying to apologize. Without looking at him Imama left the room.

It was past seven in the evening. Darkness had fallen. The street lights were on and neon signs flashed their advertisements. The traffic on the street was heavy. This was a street that had clinics and hospitals on both sides. She recalled the time when she had hoped to have her own clinic on this road; to have her name precede her qualifications on hospital boards— like Jalal Ansar’s; like so many others on this road. All was possible; all had been possible, all was within her grip had she not left her house eight years ago.

For long she stood outside the hospital watching the flowing traffic, her mind a blank. She could not think clearly; what should be her next step? She turned around to face the hospital again. She saw the flashing neon sign advertising Dr Jalal Ansar’s name in the centre of the building’s facade.

_You may be a very nice girl but you have a sullied reputation.’ Jalal’s words rang in her ears.

For the first time she realized that she had lived her life in an illusion. Her love for Jalal had been one-sided. Jalal had never loved her—not eight and a half years ago, not now. He had needed her, he had needed all the things she could have given him—her family background, the position and influence her family had in society, the connections, and the wealth— all he would have achieved overnight had he been able to marry her. In one leap he would have crossed the borders to mingle with the elite in the city. And she...she had been living with the illusion that he was in love with her. She did not expect him to cast aspersions on her character. She was so sure that he would believe that whatever she did, she would not choose the wrong path; but again she was wrong in her assumption. For him she was a girl with a sullied reputation, one for whom he had no words to defend her in front of his family and friends.

When she left her home eight and a half years ago she knew that people would cast aspersions on her character. She knew she was choosing a path that would be thorn-strewn, that would be full of poisonous tongues and sarcastic looks but she had never imagined that Jalal Ansar would have been one of those accusing her. She would not defend herself before Jalal Ansar or present proof of her innocence. How could she? His words had for the first time in eight and a half years truthfully turned her into an outcast. He had thrown her out onto the burning sands of the desert.

‘So this is what you are Imama Hashim. A stigmatized woman of ill repute. What illusions did you have of yourself?’

Slowly she began to walk down the road reading each hoarding, each neon sign. She knew many of the names here. Some were her class mates, others her juniors, and some her seniors. And where was she? Nowhere!

‘Wait and see Imama what will become of you. You will get nothing; you will gain naught,’ her father, Hashim Mubeen, had warned her. She felt tears carousing down her cheeks. The bright lights were beginning to hurt her eyes. Jalal Ansar was not a bad man, but he was not she had thought him to be. He was not that which had attracted him to her. What an illusion she had been living in despite the fact that she had her eyes opened wide. He had a materialistic outlook, completely materialistic. But this was the first time she had realized it. He was not a bad man; that was simply his outlook and he lived by those rules. Today he had just exposed his outlook to her. For the first time since she left her home had she faced such humiliation and mortification—and that too from the one she had idealized. And what was she in the eyes of that model of perfection? A girl who had fled from home...a woman of ill repute!

It was a flood of tears that was pouring from her eyes and that flood was washing everything away. Everything... severely she rubbed her eyes dry with her hands and then wiped her tear-drenched face with the end of her chador. She hailed a passing rickshaw and got in.

Saeeda Amma opened the door; she ducked in quickly so that Saeeda Amma should not see her tear-stained face.

‘Where were you Imama? It is so late. I have been worried. I was just about to go next door to ask the neighbour’s boy to go to your office and find your whereabouts,’ Saeeda Amma said shutting the door and following her to her room.

‘No where Amma. There was work at the office and so I got delayed.’ Imama replied without looking back.

‘You have never been late at the office before so what happened today that makes you come home so late in the night. What was the work that delayed you so late in the night?’ Saeeda Amma was not satisfied with Imama’s explanation.

==What can I say to that, Amma? I'll be careful not to be so late again,' Imama replied still keeping her face averted. She moved towards her room.

==Should I heat the food or do you want to eat later?'

==I don't wish to eat now, Amma. I have a headache; I want to sleep for a while.

==Why is your head hurting? Saeeda Amma followed her into the room really worried now.
==Shall I get you some medicine? Or make you some tea?'

==Amma! Please let me sleep. I don't need anything; if I do I will ask you for it.' Imama did have a splitting headache by now.

Saeeda Amma finally realized her concern was only causing Imama more trauma. ==Very well; you rest then,' she said as she turned to leave. Without switching on the light, Imama shut the door to her room. Pulling the blanket on her she lay down on her bed and covered her eyes with the crook of her arm. She wanted to sleep. She did not wish to recall her conversation with Jalal Ansar, nor did she wish to think of ought else. She did not want to cry. She did not want to think about her future prospects.

She only wanted to sleep.

Her wish was granted. She did not know when or how but soon she was in a deep sleep.

=====

Chapter 10

He was just three steps ahead of her. So close that were she to stretch out her hand she would be able to touch his shoulder. There was no one else except them. Over his shoulder she could see the doors of the Khana-e-Kaaba opening. She saw the glowing light flood the surroundings. She could easily read the words of the Quran inscribed on the covering of the Khana-e-Kaaba.

She felt the stars in the sky were suddenly shining brighter than before. The man in front of him was reciting the talbiyah, the initial verses that all pilgrims recite at the start of a pilgrimage. His was the only voice reverberating around the place...a beautiful, resonant voice. She found herself repeating the verses after him, but under her breath. Then her voice took on the same cadence as his...but silently. Then she too began to recite loudly ...till she realized she could not raise her voice higher than his. She stopped trying. She was satisfied harmonizing her voice to his.

The doors to the Kaaba were now open. She saw the man go and stand close to the doors. She saw him raise his hands to the sky. He was praying. She watched him till he finished his prayers and lowered his hands. Now he was prostrating before the doors of the Khana Kaaba. She watched him. He was getting up and was turning around. She wanted to see his face. His voice was

familiar...but his face? Now he was about to turn.

She got up with a start. The room was in total darkness. For a few seconds she felt she was living her dream, that she was still in the Khana-e-Kaaba, then she was back to reality. She got off the bed to switch on the light and then she came and lay down again. She could recall her dream in totality; it was as if she had seen a movie. But she had not been able to see the man's face. She had woken up before he turned around.

Who could have such a beautiful voice other than Jalal Ansar?' she wondered.

The man in her dream had been tall, and his shoulders and hands—the only parts of his body out of the ahram were fair, whereas Jalal Ansar was dark.

But the voice was so familiar. Was it Jalal Ansar's voice or someone else's? She could not make out.

The dream was strange; her headache was gone and she was wondrously at peace. She looked at the clock on the wall; it was past 1 a.m. She remembered that she had not read the Isha

prayers before sleeping last night. She had neither changed her clothes, nor had she performed her ablutions before sleeping. She changed and came out of her room. Saeeda Amma's room was in darkness. She was asleep. The house was completely still. A light was on in the courtyard and its rays showed a soft mist forming. The green creepers climbing the red brick wall were still.

She had come out to perform her ablutions in the bathroom on the other side of the courtyard; instead she sat down by the pillar in the verandah. Pushing up the sleeves of her sweater, she unbuttoned her shirt sleeves and rolled them up. It was a cold night that sent a shiver through her. She sat there looking at the creepers. She thought of Jalal Ansar and all that had happened that evening. She could hear his voice echoing in her mind, but now it no longer moved her to tears.

It was none but you who supported me in my loneliness— Were it not for you, I would have died long ago.

When darkness, layer by layer, descends on the soul, Your light then does with greater brilliance glow.

There is naught that your worshipper would beg from kings His wealth lies in the sands of your footprints.

Imama smiled a sad smile. For the last eight and a half years, a single voice and these very words had echoed in her mind...and then last night...that dream and that voice reciting the talbiyah. She recalled it, once again. Here I am at Thy service O Lord, here I am. Here I am at Thy service; Thou hast no partner. Thine alone is All Praise and All Bounty, and Thine alone is The Sovereignty. Thou hast no partner.

That voice was familiar, a known voice...but whose? She knew no voice other than Jalal Ansar's. She closed her eyes and recalled all the details of the dream. The Station of Multazim, the open doors of the Kaaba, the luminous Quranic verses on its covering of the Kaaba, the peaceful, starlit night, the incandescent glow through the doors of the Kaaba and the man—prostrating in prayer, reciting the talbiyah. Imama opened her eyes. She sat in the mistfilled courtyard, pondering the mystery of the man.

She could recall seeing a healed wound on the shoulder of the man in her dreams. She was astonished that she could recall a dream in such detail— something she had never been able to do earlier. It was the first time in her life that she had seen the Kaaba in her life and sitting there, she wished she could be in the Masjid-e-Nabvi also, standing before the tomb of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and that the mosque should be empty of people except for her. She had no idea how long she had been sitting there in her reverie till Saeeda Amma came out from her room to wash up for the tahajjud prayers. She was surprised to see Imama sitting thus in the courtyard.

‘How is your headache?’ she asked coming close. ‘It’s gone.’ Imama kept her head lowered.

‘You fell asleep without any dinner last night.’ Saeeda Amma sat down on the cold floor besides Imama.

Imama kept quiet. Saeeda Amma was wrapped in a warm shawl. Imama leaned head against her shoulder. The warmth of the shawl against her cold, numb face gave her an unusual feeling of peace.

‘You should get married Amina,’ Saeeda Amma said.

Imama kept her face hidden in the shawl. This was not the first time Saeeda Amma had broached the subject. Earlier she had always kept quiet; today she broke the silence, ‘You arrange it, Amma.’ Saeeda Amma was astonished. ‘Really?’

‘Yes.’ Imama lifted her head off Saeeda Amma’s shoulder.

‘Do you care for anyone?’ Saeeda Amma asked.

Imama stared at the floor of the courtyard. ‘Do I care for anyone? No. I care for none,’ Imama said hiding her face in Saeeda Amma’s shawl again. Saeeda Amma heard the tears in her voice.

‘Once you are married, I will go to England to be with my sons,’ she said patting her head. She realized Imama was crying. Before she could say anything, Imama covered her face with the shawl.

‘What’s the matter Amina? What is wrong, child?’ she asked with concern. Imama did not reply. She clung to Saeeda Amma and wept her heart out. ‘What is it Amina. Say something for God’s sake.’ Saeeda Amma was really worried now.

‘It is nothing Amma; it ...is ...just a headache.’ Saeeda Amma forced her to look up. She got up and wiped her face with her sleeve. She refused to look Saeeda Amma in the eye. Leaving her staring at her with concern, she made her way to the bathroom.

Saeeda Amma was not the first to approach her regarding marriage. Dr Sibte-Ali too had raised the subject soon after she had finished her studies. Despite the fact that she was free to marry she had shaken him off. ‘Let me work for a while then I will get married,’ she had told Dr Sibte-

Ali. At the back of her mind was the fact that her marriage would be an added expense for Dr Sibt-e-Ali. She had thought she could do a job and collect enough for her own expenses; but she did not disclose any of this to him when she asked for permission to work.

She would have worked a couple of years more before deciding on marriage but the hurt caused by Jalal Ansar's words caused her to cave in. Imama did not know whether or not Saeeda Amma discussed her change of heart with Dr Sibt-e-Ali, but she herself immediately got busy finding a suitable match for Imama. Her choice fell on Fahd.

Fahd worked at a senior position in a company; he was of good repute. His parents came to see Imama and immediately liked her. It was only after they had sent a proposal for her that Saeeda Amma informed Dr Sibt-e-Ali about it. He was not too pleased about the proposal. Perhaps he still hoped to marry Imama off into his own family but Saeeda Amma praised Fahd and his family sky-high and finally Dr Sibt-e-Ali was persuaded. He met the family and Fahd himself, and also carried out some investigation about Fahd. Satisfied with what he saw and heard, he gave his consent to the marriage.

Once the proposal was accepted, Fahd's family said they would wait a year before solemnizing the marriage; however a few months later they began to insist that the marriage take place immediately. Dr Sibt-e-Ali happened to be in England in connection with some work when on Fahd's family's insistence, Saeeda Amma agreed to a date for the marriage. She kept Dr Sibt-e-Ali informed of all developments but though he advised her to wait a bit before fixing the date, she went ahead with it. Dr Sibt-e-Ali was disappointed that he could not be there for the wedding because of his commitments abroad but he sent his wife, Kulsoom, back to participate in the festivities.

All preparations for the wedding were done by Aunty Kulsoom and Mariam, who came from Rawalpindi where she was now married and settled. After the date had been set, Dr Sibt-e-Ali had called Imama from London and had a detailed conversation with her. All three of his daughters had been married into his own extended family; none of the in-laws had asked for a dowry. However, Dr Sibt-e-Ali had, for each of his daughters, handed over a substantial amount of cash as a wedding gift in lieu of the dowry.

‘When you came to my house eight and a half years ago, and I called you my daughter, I had put aside some money for your marriage expenses. That money is yours. You can take it as a cash gift or I can hand it over to Kulsoom and Mariam so that it can be used to purchase whatever you need for your dowry. Because Saeeda Amma has so insisted, your wedding is taking place from her house, although it was my wish that you be married from my house— from your own house.’

He continued, ‘I am very sad that I should not be there for my fourth daughter's wedding, but perhaps it is for the best. I will try my best to somehow make it and even if I can come at the eleventh hour I will do so, but I doubt it if I can do it.’

Imama stayed quiet while Dr Sibte-Ali spoke. She did not protest about the money he was offering, nor did she insist that she be allowed to spend her own money on the wedding. Perhaps today she wanted someone to be responsible for her. That day she wanted to accept another favor from him. He had been so kind to her that she seemed to have become used to his favors. Her only complaint was that he was not going to be there for her wedding.

Fahd's family insisted on the wedding being a simple one. Imama had no objection to that; in fact, it was what she herself wanted. What she did not know was that Fahd's family had an ulterior motive in wanting a simple wedding.

The wedding vows were to be taken on the eve of the mehndi. A few hours before the actual nikah ceremony, Fahd's family informed Saeeda Amma that the vows would be taken on the day of the wedding itself. This change in plans did not perturb Saeeda Amma. They had no idea that something was wrong at Fahd's end. The mehndi ceremony itself was not an elaborate event and was attended only by close relatives and neighbors. The dinner prepared for the nikah was enjoyed by those who came for the mehndi.

The wedding itself was to be held in Saeeda Amma's house. The groom's family was to arrive at 4.00 p.m. and the rukhsati was to take place at 6:00

p.m. However, an hour before the marriage party was to arrive, a messenger came from the groom's house to inform them that Fahd had been missing for some days and that they regretted the marriage could not take place. Till that afternoon Imama had no clue as to what was happening. The wedding dress had arrived earlier from the groom's house and Imama had changed and was almost ready when Mariam walked into the room. She looked upset. She asked Imama to change back to her usual clothes since there had been a death in Fahd's family and they had asked to postpone the wedding. She did not want to tell Imama that the wedding had in fact been cancelled outright. Having spoken to Imama, Mariam hurried out of the room. Imama changed out of her wedding dress. For a few moments, she

accepted Mariam's story but instinctively she knew something was not right. When she came out of her room, a glance at the consternation on the faces of the guests gathered there told her the whole story. She went into Saeeda Amma's room. A large number of people were gathered there. Kulsoom

Aunty, Maimoona, Noor ul Ain Apa, other ladies from the neighborhood, Mariam and Saeeda Amma...Mariam was giving a glass of water to Saeeda

Amma who looked as if she was on the verge of a collapse. Imama panicked for a moment. Was Saeeda Amma alright? All the ladies in the room had turned to look at her. Maimoona Apa

moved swiftly to her side. _Come Amina. Come outside for a moment,' she said taking Imama by the hand. _What is wrong with Amma?' Imama brushed Maimoona Apa aside. She sat down next to Saeeda Amma. _What is wrong with Amma?' she asked Mariam agitatedly.

Mariam did not reply. Saeeda Amma's face was drenched in tears. She looked at Imama with an uncomprehending glance. Then putting the glass aside, she hugged Imama and broke into loud sobs. The room had emptied. Only Dr Sibte-Ali's family remained.

_What is the matter Amma? Tell me,' Imama gently urged Saeeda Amma to speak.

_Fahd, without telling his family, has married of his own free will. His family came to tell us that a little while ago. They have called off this whole affair,' Mariam replied quietly in place of Saeeda Amma.

For a couple of seconds Imama remained immobile...the blood in her veins, her heartbeat, her breath...all stopped for a heartrending moment. _Was this too fated to happen to me?' she wondered.

_It is alright Amma. Don't cry,' Imama spoke gently, wiping away Saeeda Amma's tears. Her heart had begun to beat again, the blood was coursing through her veins, she could breathe again...only the color had not returned to her pale face. _Don't worry Amma. It will be alright.'

Imama's words made Saeeda Amma cry even more. _All this is my fault...all my...'

Imama did not let Saeeda Amma complete her sentence. _Let it be Amma. It is alright. Please don't worry... why don't you lie down...get some rest...'she was trying her best to console Saeeda Amma.

Saeeda Amma was not to be consoled. _I can understand how you feel...I feel your pain, my daughter. Forgive me Amina. It is my fault...'

_I am alright Amma; I am fine,' Imama smiled trying to calm Saeeda Amma down.

Still crying Saeeda Amma left the room.

Without saying a word to anyone, Imama too left the room. She went to her own room; all her things were spread out as she had left them. Quietly she began tidying up the room. Any girl in her place would have broken down given the circumstances, but Imama was strangely calm. _If I can lose Jalal and accept it, why should I let this affect me? I had no emotional or physical attachment to this man,' she said to herself, folding her wedding dress and putting it away.

_What is the worst that can happen to me? People will talk, they will make fun of me; I will avoid them, I will bow my head to avoid their glances. So what is new about that for me?'

Mariam entered the room and began cleaning up too. _We have called Abbu,' she said.

For the first time Imama got irritated. _Why? Why bother him. Let him be at peace.'

‘This has been such a disaster and you...’

Imama cut her short. ‘Mariam, I have had to face so many problems in my life that I have gotten used to hardship. What is this compared to what I have had to undergo? Go console Saeeda Amma. I am alright. And don’t bother

Abbu unnecessarily; he will be pointlessly upset.’

Mariam looked at Imama calmly putting things away; she felt Imama’s behavior was abnormal. Before she could reply, Kulsoom Aunty and Saeeda Amma entered the room. The girls were astonished to see their faces glowing with happiness in contrast to the tears of a few minutes earlier. Before they could react, Kulsoom Aunty began talking about Salar. ‘If you have no objection, you could marry Salar.’ Imama was stunned. ‘Sibt-e-Ali knows him very well,’ she continued. ‘He is a very nice boy.’

‘If Abbu approves then it is alright by me. I have no objections,’ Imama replied.

‘His friend would like a few words with you first,’ Kulsoom Aunty made the strange request.

Though surprised at such an odd demand, Imama made no objection to seeing Furqan.

‘Some eight or nine years ago, Salar had married a girl of his own free will,’ Furqan told Imama. ‘He is willing to marry you but he says that you should know that he will not divorce his first wife. There are some reasons why the girl does not live with him, yet Salar himself wishes to have her live in his house. Salar wants me to ask you if you have any objection to this. If so, we should end the matter now. I would also like to say that it is highly probable that he may never find his first wife again. For the last eight or nine years she has made no contact with my friend. He has this nebulous hope that they may meet again. Dr Sibt-e-Ali regards you as his daughter; by that token you are my sister. I would advise you to marry Salar as the best way out of this situation. It is very unlikely that Salar will meet that girl again; she does not wish to live with him; she has not made any attempt to get in touch with him in all these years—in any case nine years is a long time.’

Imama had heard Furqan out quietly. ‘A second wife...so Imama Hashim, this is your destiny,’ she thought cynically. ‘But if Dr Sibt-e-Ali knowing this has proposed that I marry this man, there must be some good in it. In any case I was willing to marry Jalal and be the second wife,’ she reasoned to herself, ‘and I loved Jalal. So why should I not be a second wife to a man for whom I have no emotional attachment?’

‘I have no objection,’ she said aloud. ‘If his wife were ever to return, I would have no objection to their being together. I agree happily to the circumstances.’

Fifteen minutes later she got the first shock when the priest said Salar

Sikandar's name. 'Salar Sikandar son of Sikandar Usman...' She heard the priest intone. A shiver ran through her spine...these were not common names; and in that order...it was too much of a coincidence for both names to be associated with another being. Was it possible that Salar was alive? She felt the world collapsing around her. Had her face not been covered by her bridal veil, her perplexity would have been visible to all. The priest was repeating his words. Imama's mind was in a whirl. 'If he is alive then that would mean I have been married to him all this while...Oh dear God! What is all this? How does Dr Sibte Ali know him?' Questions poured forth with no answers. She heard Saeeda Amma gently nudge her, 'The priest is waiting for your answer; say —yes '.

'Say —yes to a man like Salar Sikandar?'

She felt her heart was being squeezed as fear gripped her. What could she say but 'yes' at this moment? In a state of shock and confusion she signed her name to the nikahnamah. 'Oh God! Let there be a miracle. Let this not be the same Salar Sikandar,' she pleaded with God. Everyone had left the room. She was alone with Mariam. Mariam removed the veil off her face and saw her ashen face.

'What's wrong Imama? Are you alright?'

'Mariam, just do me a favor,' Imama did not even know what she was saying.

She grabbed hold of Mariam's hand in agitation. 'I have married him but tell Saeeda Amma that I do not wish for the rukhsati to take place today. Go tell Saeeda Amma that,' she pleaded.

'Why?' Mariam looked at Imama; she could not understand her anxiety.

'Please, don't ask me any questions now; just do as I ask, please. Tell Saeeda Amma not to send me off today.'

Mariam left the room and returned shortly. 'The rukhsati is not taking place today. Salar too does not wish it so,' she informed Imama. Imama felt some of the panic subside.

'Abbu will be calling you in a while,' Mariam told her.

A little later, when Dr Sibte-e-Ali called, Imama went to the next room to talk on the phone.

Dr Sibte-e-Ali congratulated her on her marriage. 'I had wanted you to marry

Salar, but since you were living in Saeeda Amma's house I felt it only proper that her choice be given pre-eminence,' Dr Sibte-e-Ali was saying.

Imama found it difficult to breathe; it was all she could do to not cry. 'I did not, however, know of his previous marriage. Furqan has just informed me of it. It was a marriage of convenience, but I do not know the details—neither do I think it is necessary for me to know the details. After hearing of Salar's previous marriage, I thought, had I known someone better than Salar, then I

would have recommended him to you to marry, but I know of no one. Why are you so quiet Amina?’ He finally realized that Imama was unnaturally quiet.

‘Abbu, when are you coming back?’

‘In another week or so.’

‘There’s a lot that I need to tell you. I have much to talk to you about.’ ‘Is everything all right?’ Dr Sibte-Ali felt alarm bells go off.

‘I will talk to you when you come back,’ Imama spoke with finality. She did not wish to discuss any more over the phone.

.....

That night she performed the ablutions, as usual, before going to bed. Then, instead of retiring, she came and sat down on the steps of the courtyard. There were no guests in the house. Saeeda Amma and she were alone as usual. Exhausted by the day’s events, Saeeda Amma had gone to bed early. Imama and the maid had stayed up late cleaning and tidying up after the guests. Because of the wedding, the maid had been staying in the house overnight. It was half past ten in the night before most of the cleaning up had been done and she had sent the maid off to sleep. Imama herself continued with completing the odds and ends left to do.

It was past midnight when she finished her chores. She was exhausted. Crossing the courtyard, she felt a sudden aversion to going into her room and sat down in the verandah. In the soft glow of the lights in the courtyard, she looked at her hands, covered half way up to her elbows in beautiful deep red filigree. Imama had always been fond of henna. Before she left her father’s house eight and a half years ago she would often apply henna, not only on festive occasions but whenever she felt like it. But since leaving her own home she had never applied it. Without meaning to she had lost interest in such activities. Now for the first time in eight and a half years, she had joyfully had her hands and feet covered in these beautiful patterns.

Wrapping her shawl tightly around herself, she covered her hands and feet with the shawl and pulled it close around her.

‘From Asjad to Jalal...from Jalal to Fahd...from Fahd to Salar...one man I rejected, two rejected me...and the fourth, who has become a part of my life...is the worst of them all...Salar Sikander.’ She felt a fog envelop her soul; she could imagine him standing before her. The same image— shirt open down to the waist, chains hanging from his neck, hair tied back in a ponytail, the cold arrogant stare, the cynical smile which brought a dimple to his cheek, bands and bracelets dangling from his wrists, those tight jeans—it was as if the world’s most beautiful dream had turned into a nightmare. She had not the slightest bit of respect for Salar Sikandar.

‘I know I have committed many errors in my life, but I am not such a bad human being that I should be castigated by having a man like you in my life.’ She had said this to Salar on the phone many years ago.

==Perhaps that is why Jalal refused to marry you; good men are meant for good women, not for women like you,' Salar had retorted. She clamped her lips together remembering Salar's unsympathetic attitude.

==Whatever may happen Salar, I will not live with you. It would have been so much better had you died,' she muttered.

She had completely forgotten that there was a time when Salar Sikandar had come to her aid.

The night Dr Sibte-e-Ali returned from England, Imama was at his house but she did not find an appropriate moment to talk to him. Mariam was still in Lahore and the time passed merrily in small talk.

The next morning too passed much in the same way. Dr Sibte-e-Ali was telling Imama of the gifts he had brought for her and Salar when Mariam piped in,

==Let's call Salar bhai over for iftar,' she said.

Dr Sibte-e-Ali thought that was a good idea and immediately called Salar, extending the invitation. Imama still did not say anything.

In the afternoon as Dr Sibte-e-Ali was leaving for the mosque for prayers, Imama followed him out. ==I need to talk to you, Abbu,' she said softly. ==Right now?' Dr Sibte-e-Ali sounded surprised.

==No, later when you come home from your prayers.'

Dr Sibte-e-Ali watched her intently; then without saying anything he went off to the mosque.

==I wish to take a divorce from Salar.'

Dr Sibte-e-Ali had come back from the mosque and Imama had followed him into the study. Without any preamble or explanation she said what was on her mind.

==Amina?' He could not believe his ears.

==I cannot live with him.' She was staring at the floor refusing to meet his eyes. ==Amina, I know this is his second marriage but the first does not count. Furqan has told me that his first wife disappeared some nine years ago and has not been in contact with him since. In any case, it was

not a real marriage; they had only taken their vows.' Dr Sibte-Ali had assumed her concern was Salar's first marriage. _Who knows where she is. Nine years is a long time.'

_I know his first wife.' She still refused to meet his eyes. _You know her?' Dr Sibte-Ali was astonished.

_It is I,' she lifted her eyes off the floor and looked him in the face. Dr Sibte-Ali was struck speechless.

_You remember nine years ago I came from Islamabad to Lahore with a boy; later you told me that my family had filed a case with the police against him.'

_Salar Sikandar...is this the same man?'

_Yes. The same'

Imama nodded her head in affirmation. Dr Sibte-Ali looked like a man in shock. He had first come in contact with Salar through Furqan. This had happened four years after Imama had come to stay in his house; he could not have imagined that this man had any connection with Imama. A name casually heard four years ago could not be connected to a man met four years later. In any case this man was religious: he had learnt the Quran by heart. Neither in speech, nor in his mannerisms, nor in his character could one find those weird characteristics that Imama had described when talking about Salar. He had been deceived by Salar, but was that a genuine mistake on his part or was it something that was _fated' to be?

_So nine years ago you had married him?' Dr Sibte-Ali still found the whole situation unbelievable and was reconfirming what he had just heard.

_We just took our wedding vows,' Imama spoke in a whisper.

Then in a rush she split out the entire story. Dr Sibte-Ali listened quietly. He stayed quiet for a long time then he said, _You should have trusted me Imama. I could have helped you.'

Imama's eyes were wet with unshed tears. _You are right. Yes, I should have, but you cannot even imagine the mental turmoil I went through in those days. Perhaps this trial too is fated for me.' She pondered over her statement for a while then she lifted her tear filled eyes to Dr Sibte-Ali. Smiling timorously she said, _But now all is right. You will help me with the divorce.'

_No. I cannot help you with a divorce, Amina. I am the one who arranged this marriage.'

_That is exactly why I am asking you to arrange for a divorce.'

_But why? Why should I help you get a divorce?'

_Why? Because...because he is not a good man...because I do not wish to spend the rest of my life with a man like Salar...we are people from two different worlds.' She was losing heart. _I

have never complained to Allah, Abbu. I have always accepted my fate, but now I do have a complaint against Allah. I have been given the worst man on earth.'

She broke down in tears. 'Most girls want so much...I have never asked Allah for anything except a —righteous man and he has not granted me my wish. Am I not worthy of such a man?' Imama was crying uncontrollably now. 'Amina, he is a righteous man.'

'Why do you say that? I know he is not. I know him well and he is not good.'

'But he is Amina, I also know him well.'

'You do not know him as closely as I do. He drinks alcohol, he is psychologically ill, and has tried to take his own life many times. He walks around with his clothes unbuttoned to the waist and stares rudely at women instead of lowering his gaze—do you call that righteous?'

'Imama, I do not know of his past. What I know is his present and he does none of the things you have described.'

'Abbu, how can you say that he doesn't behave this way? He's a scheming liar, a cheat—I know him.'

'He's is not like that.'

'But he is, Abbu!'

'It is possible that he loved you and that love has transformed him.' 'I do not need a love like that. His looks repulse me. The way he dresses repulses me. I cannot love such a man. Such men never change; they simply disguise their true selves.'

'That is not true of Salar. He is not pretending.'

'Abbu I cannot live with a man like Salar. For him everything is a joke— religion, life, women— what is it that he can't be cynical about? He thought my change of religion was a silly thing to do; for him talking about religion and religious issues is a waste of time. He is a person for whom attempting suicide was simply an experiment to gauge the next level of ecstasy. For him the only meaning of life is materialistic. Suppose he is in love with me, am I supposed to base my marriage only on love? No I cannot do that.' 'Imama, he has maintained this accidental relationship for eight and a half years. Despite knowing your religious inclinations he has remained true to you and is still waiting for you and wishes to spend his life with you. Is it not possible that this desire may have brought about a change in him, in his thinking?'

'I do not wish to spend my life with him. I will not live with him,' Imama was stubbornly insistent. 'I am within my rights in asking for a divorce.'

'But have you considered, Imama, that God has brought this man before you twice? You have taken your vows twice and both times with the same man.'

‘Perhaps I have sinned and am being punished for it.’ Her voice was heavy with tears.

‘Amina, I have never known you to be stubborn before so what has happened to you now?’ Dr Ali was really surprised.

‘If you force me to remain married to Salar, I will obey you; you have been so kind to me that I cannot but obey you. But I will not, and cannot, of my own free will agree to living with Salar. I am not interested in how educated he is or what position he holds and how much he can give me. Had you asked me to marry an uneducated man but one who is right-minded, I would not have objected....but Salar... he is the fly I cannot swallow. You only know that of Salar which you have heard. What I know of him is what I have seen.

For fifteen years he was my neighbor; you have only known him a few years.’ ‘Amina, you know I will never force you to do anything against your will. If you wish to maintain this relationship of your own will and volition, then it is fine. But if it’s only to please me, then there’s no need for that. My only request is that you meet Salar once; after that if you still feel that you wish to end this marriage, it will be so.’ Dr Sibte-Ali spoke softly and seriously. The bearer came into the room to say that Salar had arrived. Dr Sibte-Ali looked at his watch, then he told the bearer to send Salar in. The bearer was surprised. ‘Here?’ he questioned.

‘Yes, here,’ Dr Sibte-Ali replied.

Imama stood up hurriedly. ‘I do not wish to talk to him in this state.’ She was referring to her tear stained face and disheveled condition.

‘You have not seen him yet; I want you to see him,’ Dr Sibte-Ali spoke gently.

‘Not here. I can have a look at him from inside my room.’

She turned around and went to her room. The room was in semi-darkness. She left the door half open so that she could look into the well-lit lounge without being seen herself. She sat down on the bed. She rubbed her hands across her eyes to clear them. After nearly nine years she was to see the man she despised, the one she thought of as one of the worst men on earth, the man who she thought was dead, the one to whom she had been married all these years. What else could this be but fate?

Imama rubbed her eyes once again. The man whom Dr Sibte-Ali was now greeting had his back to her. Before embracing Dr Sibte-Ali, he put a bouquet and a parcel he was carrying on the centre table. Having greeted Dr Ali, he now sat down on the sofa. Imama got her first good look at Salar.

The gaudy look with the shirt open down to the waist, chains hanging from his neck, hair tied back in a ponytail, bands and bracelets dangling from his wrists, tight jeans—all was gone. He was clad in a simple cream colored shalwar kameez and waistcoat.

‘Yes he has undoubtedly undergone a change—at least as far his outer appearance goes,’ Imama thought. ‘Nobody would believe that this man...’ her thoughts were interrupted. Salar was talking to Dr Sibte-Ali who congratulated him on his marriage. She could hear them clearly from her room. On Dr Ali’s firm persuasion, Salar was telling him all about his earlier marriage and the circumstances in which it had transpired. He spoke of his regret at his treatment of Imama, how he had lied to her about Jalal Ansar’s marriage and how he had tricked her into believing that he had not granted her the right to file for divorce.

‘When I think about how I treated her I am filled with remorse,’ he was saying in a low tone. ‘I cannot even express how sorry I am about my behavior; I can’t get her out of my mind. For long I was in a state of anguish. She had asked me to help her in the name of our beloved Prophet (PBUH).

She trusted me because I am a Muslim and I believe in the finality of the Prophet. And look at me—I betrayed her; despite the fact I knew it was her love for our beloved Prophet (PBUH) that caused her to leave her home and all its comfort. Instead of helping her, I just made fun of her; I thought she was crazy and told her so. The night I dropped her to Lahore she said that one day the other side of life would be clear to me and then only would I learn humility.’ He laughed bitterly. ‘She was right; I have learnt much. In all these years, I have begged God for forgiveness over and over again...’ he had stopped speaking. Imama watched him as he ran his finger over the edge of the centre table. She knew he was trying to suppress his tears.

‘At times I felt that God had accepted my prayers and had forgiven me...’ he stopped again.

‘But that day when I signed the papers solemnizing my marriage to Amina, I realized my worthlessness. Had my prayers been accepted I would have been marrying Imama not Amina. God grants desires that seem as if only a miracle could make them come true. What was my desire? What had I prayed for? A girl who loves someone else, who thinks I am the scum of the earth, a girl who I have been searching for the last nine years but whom I have not been able to trace.’

Salar continued to speak, ‘As for me...I live life in the hope I will find her. As though I will be able to live the rest of my life with her; as though she will agree to live with me; that she will have forgotten her love for Jalal Ansar. Had I been capable of praying with the fervor and devotion of those whom God favors, perhaps my prayers would have been heard and God would have

created a miracle for me...for a sinner like me. People go to the Khana-e-Kaaba and pray for the forgiveness of their sins; I went there and prayed that I may be reunited with Imama. Perhaps that is what God did not like.’ Imama felt a shiver run up her spine as she heard Salar’s voice and recalled her dream.

‘Oh God!’ She put both her hands to her lips. In a state of disbelief she stared at Salar. In the dream she had not seen the face of the man. Was it possible...? Was that the same man as this

who sits before me? Then she had thought the man in her dream was Jalal; but Jalal was not tall—the man in her dream had been tall and Salar was tall. Her hands began to tremble. Jalal was dark complexioned. The man in her dream was fair—Salar was fair. There was one more detail of her dream that she recalled—the man had a strange mark on his shoulder. That mark...She covered her face with trembling hands. In the room Salar was talking about miracles not happening. Dr Sibte-Ali sat quietly listening. Why was he so quiet? Only he and Imama knew the answer to that question; Salar had no inkling. Imama rubbed her eyes and uncovered her face. With tears streaming down her face she looked at the man on the sofa. He was no saint, nor was he a holy man; he was just an ordinary man who had repented sincerely for his sins. Looking at him, for the first time she realized what it was that stood between her and Jalal Ansari; the reason why her prayers for Jalal were not realized; what it was that turned Fahd away from her at the last moment. There must be something in the man that God accepted his prayers and not hers; and that at every twist in her fortunes she had been turned towards him.

With tearful eyes she looked at Salar. Dr Sibte-Ali was speaking now; he was calling Salar a righteous man. She knew why he used those words. It was not to comfort Salar but for Imama to hear. It did not matter, however. Even if Dr Sibte-Ali had not used those words she was compelled to admit that Salar

was a righteous man.

She needed no witness to testify to the fact; the witness she had was greater than any witness that man could provide. She needed no proof for the proof that she had for it was greater than any proof that could be given by man.

What she had been told, what she had been brought to understand, she knew...only she could know.

The tea was laid out. Afterwards Dr Sibte-Ali took Salar to the mosque for the late evening prayer.

Imama washed her face and hands and went to the kitchen and with the help of the staff, laid out the dinner before Dr Sibte-Ali and Salar returned from the mosque. After having dinner Salar left. When Dr Sibte-Ali came into the kitchen, Imama was seated at the table having her dinner. Her eyes were moist with unshed tears but her face reflected tranquility.

I have not spoken to Salar about you but I am sure you would like to meet him, Dr Sibte-Ali said.

Imama put down the glass of water she had been about to drink. There is no need for that. God has chosen him for me and who am I to reject what God has chosen for me. He says he has repented of his sins. Had he not done so, had he been the same man he had been before, I would still have accepted him had I known this is what God wants of me. She picked up the glass of water again. Tell him I am ready to go with him

.....

By the time Salar came back from the late evening prayers, Imama with the help of Furqan's wife, Nausheen, had laid the table. Despite Nausheen objecting to her doing any work, Amina had insisted that she help with the dinner.

When Salar returned Nausheen was ready to leave for her apartment. 'The children will be waiting for dinner,' was the excuse she gave. 'Bring them over they can have dinner with us,' Salar said

'That is too much trouble. And you know my daughter Imama, she will refuse to leave once she is here,' Nausheen was insistent on leaving. 'Salar loves Imama very much,' Nausheen told Imama by way of explanation.

For an instant Salar and Imama's eyes met; Salar quickly turned away and poured himself a glass of water from the jug lying on the table. Nausheen looked with wonder at Imama's reddening face; she could not understand why her innocent remark should have caused such discomfiture.

'You guys go ahead and have dinner; don't do anything for sehri; I will be sending it,' she said as she left the room.

Salar shut the door behind her. He came back to the dining table and pulling out a chair sat down. He did not address Imama nor did he start eating. Imama hesitated for a few minutes and then she too pulled out a chair and sat down. Only then did Salar put some rice onto his plate. She watched him quietly as he took a spoon in his right hand and began to eat. He knew she was watching him but he did not look towards her nor did he speak to her. The dinner went on in silence—a silence that was now beginning to irk Imama. After all why would he not talk to her?

'Is he really shocked to see me or is it something else?' she wondered. Her appetite had disappeared; she was finding it difficult to finish the food on her plate. Salar on the other hand was eating heartily. By the time dinner was over the call for the night prayer was sounding from the mosque. Without waiting for Imama to finish, Salar got up from the table and went into the bedroom. Imama pushed her plate aside, her dinner half-eaten. She started clearing the table. Salar came out of the bedroom having changed his clothes; still not speaking to Imama, he left the apartment to go to the mosque. Imama put the leftover food in the fridge; she picked up all the dishes and piled them in the sink preparatory to washing and having wiped the table clean, laid out the prayer mat and began her prayers.

On his return from the mosque Salar let himself in with his keys. Passing through the lounge he saw Imama busy in the kitchen, washing dishes at the sink. Her back was to him. She had left her doppatta on the sofa in the lounge. The first time he had seen Imama without a doppatta was in Saeeda Amma's house. He was seeing her again without it. Nine years ago he had watched Imama at her ablutions and had desired to see Imama without her chador. Nine years later, his wish had been granted. In the nine years he had often felt her presence in his house; today when he could actually see her there, he was finding it difficult to believe she was really here. Her hair was tied in a loose chignon, looking extremely attractive against the white sweater she wore.

Signing the marriage contract, Salar had not for a moment suspected that Amina Mubeen daughter of Hashim Mubeen Ahmed could be Imama, or that the father was the same Hashim Mubeen Ahmed. As far as he knew, she was Saeeda Amma's daughter. Had her name been Imama Hashim, he still would not have suspected she was the same Imama. But seeing her standing in the courtyard in Saeeda Amma's house he had no doubt about whom he had married.

'Do you have any idea Imama, how many days, how many hours, how many minutes there are in nine years?'

The silence had been broken. His voice has a coldness to it that would freeze a body. Clamping her lips together, Imama turned the tap off. He was standing behind her; so close that if she turned she would bump into him. She did not turn. She could feel his soft breath on her neck. He was waiting for an answer. She had no answer. With her hands still gripping the sink, she watched the last droplets of water dripping from the tap.

Did you, even once, in all these years ever think of me? Of Salar?'

The question was a difficult one; she kept quiet. Without waiting for a reply, he asked the next question, What is next to ecstasy? You had said it was

—pain . You were right it is pain.'

Salar was quiet for a moment. I have seen you so often in every corner of this house, that now that you really are here, I am finding it difficult to believe it.'

To stop the trembling in her arms, Imama clung more tightly to the corners of the sink.

I feel I am dreaming; that if I open my eyes...' He stopped. Imama shut her eyes. ...everything will still be here...everything except you...and if I close my eyes again...'

Imama opened her eyes; her cheeks were wet with tears.

==...I will still not be able to return to my dream. You will not be there. I am too scared to touch you; I feel that if I extend my hand towards you the image will shatter like a reflection in water.' He was so close to her that were he to bend a little, his lips would touch her hair; but he did not bend. He was too scared to see the image disappear. _And who are you? Imama or Amina? An illusion or a miracle? Should I tell you that I...that I...' he stopped. The tears flowing from her eyes had drenched Imama's face and were now dripping down her chin. Why he stopped speaking she did not know. But never had she found silence so unwelcome as she did now, at this moment. He was quiet for so long that she was compelled to turn around. Then she knew the reason for his silence. His face too was drenched in tears. For the first time in their lives were they so close to each other; so close that they could see their reflection in the other's eye. Then Salar moved away. Furtively he wiped his face with his hand.

_What will you hide from me Salar? And what can I hide from you? We both know each other so well,' she said softly.

Salar lifted his face. _I am not hiding anything. I was just wiping away the tears in my eyes so that you do not appear in a mist again.' He was watching the earrings dangling from her ears. Those earrings that had so many years ago tantalized him; they were tantalizing him even today...with every movement they changed from reality to illusion...from illusion to reality. Imama felt all his concentration on her earrings.

_I could never have imagined that one day I will be so close to you, talking like this,' he said. He smiled, his eyes still moist. Imama saw the dimple in his right cheek—the dimple that had aggravated her so at one time now seemed to attract her to him in a strange way.

_I would never have imagined that I would be so close to you; that I could touch your earring...' He paused and took hold of the earring swinging in her ear, _...and that you...you would not slap me for doing so.'

She looked at him in astonishment. He was in all seriousness. The next moment she had burst out laughing, her face still wet from tears. _Do you still remember that slap? That was just a reflex action.' She wiped the tears off her face with the back of her hand. He smiled, the dimple deepening in his cheek. Very gently he took both her hands in his.

_Do you want to know where I have been all these years? What I have done?

All about these nine years?'

He shook his head to say _no' and put both her hands on his chest.

_No, I need to know nothing. Nothing at all. I have no questions for you. That you are before me is enough. That you are here is enough. In any case, what can a man like me ask anyone?'

He was still holding her hands, hugging them to his chest. Her hands were cold from having been in the water so long. She knew why he was holding her hands in this way. Subconsciously or otherwise he was warming her hands the way an adult would for a child. Under the sweater, she could feel his heartbeat—irregular, fast, exuberant, telling her something...or trying to tell her something...her hands on his heart had created the link to him...of this she had no doubt.

This man loved her...why? She did not know. This man before her would himself be unable to tell her why he loved her. Salar was standing before her, eyes closed in contentment but even if his eyes had been open, it would not have bothered her. What had been in his glance nine years ago was there no longer. What was in his eyes now had not been there nine years earlier.

‘What are we? What is our love? What do we want? What do we get?’ Imama felt her eyes filling up with tears again. ‘Jalal Ansar and Salar Sikander...the dream and the reality...and reality turned into a dream....Is life much more than this?’

Slowly Imama pulled her hands away. Salar opened his eyes. The emotion in his eyes that flashed for a second only could be deciphered only by her—worry, anxiety, fear—it was a bit of all three. Imama looked at the black sweater and the white collar peeking out of it. She put her arms around his neck and rested her head on his chest. She inhaled the soft cologne he was using—nine years ago he used strong, pungent perfumes...and nine years later?

Salar was absolutely still as if he could not believe what was happening. Then, gently, he embraced her. ‘I am honored,’ she heard him say. He kissed her softly on the eyes.

She was in the courtyard of the Khana-e-Kaaba with Salar. He was seated to her right. This was their last night there. They had been here since the last fortnight. They had just finished offering their tahajud prayers. As a rule, they would leave after offering the tahajud. Today they did not do so. They remained seated where they were. There were a great many people between them and the Kaaba. Despite that, they could see the doors of the Kaaba clearly from where they sat.

Sitting there, they each thought of the same dream. They were now seeing that night before them—they were living that dream. Sitting on the floor of the Khana-e-Kaaba, with his legs folded under him, Salar was reciting the Surah Rahman. Instead of sitting next to him, Imama found a place for herself a little to the left and behind him. Still reciting from the Quran, Salar turned to look back and taking her hand motioned to a place besides him. Imama moved forward to sit besides him. Salar let go of her hand. His entire focus was now on the Kaaba. Imama too was looking at the Kaaba, at the same time she was listening to the beautiful

recitation from the Quran that her husband was reading in a melodious voice—Then which of the favors of your Lord will ye deny?

Nine years ago Hashim Mubeen had taunted her saying, ‘What you are doing Imama you will regret one day...you will have nothing left.’ Hashim Mubeen had slapped her on the face as he said these words.

‘You will have nothing but lamentation and grief, disgrace and humiliation. God punishes girls like you; you will not be fit to show your face to the world’ he had slapped her a second time.

Imama’s eyes filled with tears. Hashim Mubeen’s words rang in her ears. ‘There will be a time when you will come back to us. You will beg to be taken back. You will plead and grovel to come home and we shall shun you. Then you will cry to be forgiven; then you will acknowledge that you were wrong...’ Imama smiled sorrowfully.

‘Baba, my wish is...’ she spoke softly to herself, ‘that one day I may come before you and you may see that there is no mark of shame on my face, no sign of dishonor. Allah and his beloved Prophet (PBUH) have protected me. They have protected me in this world and I will face no disgrace on the Day of Judgment; and if I am present here today it is only because I am on the right path, and sitting here I once again reaffirm that our holy Prophet (PBUH) is the last in the line of prophethood. There has been no prophet after him nor will there ever be one. I affirm that he is the Perfect Mentor. I confirm that there can never be a man more perfect than our holy Prophet (PBUH). None of his descendants or relations is equal to him nor will there ever be any from his lineage equal to him. I pray to God that I may never equate anyone with him nor ever have the audacity to equate anyone with our beloved Prophet (PBUH). May God always guide me on the right path. Indeed, I can never deny any of His bounties.’

Salar completed the recitation of Surah Rehman. For a few minutes, he paused and then he prostrated himself. Rising, he was about to stand up, but he stopped. Imama was sitting with her eyes closed, both hands spread out in supplication. He sat down again waiting for her to finish.

Imama finished her prayers. Salar wanted to get up but could not do so.

Imama took hold of his right hand . He looked at her in astonishment. At this late hour of the night, with a face wet with tears but beaming with happiness, Imama said to Salar ‘It is said that one doesn’t get the person one loves—do you know why that happens? It is because there has to be sincerity in love; in the absence of sincerity there is no love. When I fell in love with Jalal, nine years ago, there was complete honesty in my love for him. I prayed and did everything I could to make my dream come true...and yet I did not achieve my desire.’

She was sitting on her haunches. Salar’s hand, held lightly in her own, rested on her knee. ‘Do you know why that happened? Because by then you had already begun to love me and your love was truer than mine.’

Salar looked at his hand. Her tears were rolling down on to his hands. He looked at Imama.

“I now feel that God created me with great care. He did not wish to give me to someone who would not acknowledge or appreciate me; who would not respect me. And that is what would have happened with Jalal. He would never have respected me. In these nine years, God has shown me these realities. He has revealed the good and bad in all men in these nine years, and then He gave me in marriage to Salar Sikander, knowing that he alone loves me truly. Who else would have brought me here except you? You were right when you said that your love for me was pure and true.” Salar looked at Imama silently. Imama took Salar’s hand in hers and softly kissing it, she put the hand up to her eyes.

“To what extent I will love you, I do not know. That is a matter of the heart and I have no control over my heart. But this I do know that as long as we are together, I will be faithful and obedient to you. That is within my purview. I will be with you at every difficult point in our lives; no matter what life throws at us, I will be there with you as your support. I have become a part of your life in good times; if things change and we face adversity I will be by your side.” She let go of his hand as gently as she had held it. Her head was bowed and she passed her hands over her face.

Without a word Salar stood up. He looked at the doors of the Khana-e-Kaaba. He had indeed been blessed with one of the most righteous and wonderful women created, for a wife—the woman for whom he had prayed, fervently, for nine years that he may find again. Was there any blessing that he had not been given by God? As she stood with him, he realized what an enormous responsibility he had been given: to provide for this woman—this woman who in her goodness and piety was far ahead of him.

Imama stood up. Salar too got up and held her hand. They were ready to leave. He had been given the responsibility to protect this woman who, unlike him, had made a conscious choice to avoid a life of transgression and sin. Who, despite her physical and emotional frailties, unlike him, did not allow the desires of the self to overcome her body and soul. Holding her hand and slowly moving through the crowds, Salar, for the first time in his life, comprehended the meaning of piety and virtue. She was a few feet behind him as they made their way through the crowds milling around this holy site. It was as if he was watching his whole life roll by as if on a screen and he felt a tremendous fear within himself. Despite a life of sin and wrongdoings, he had only seen the blessings of Allah and yet no one was more afraid of His displeasure as he was now. He whose IQ level was 150+; he who had been blessed with a photographic memory had now realized that even with these gifts one could completely be stumbling in the dark. He too had stumbled, many times...and in many ways...and his inherent skills had then been of no use to him—not his high IQ; not his photographic memory.

This woman walking next to him had neither of these two advantages. Instead she had in her palm a tiny firefly of guidance, and in the burst of its light, she had made her way through every dark alley of life without ever stumbling.



THE END