

# The Stolen Coin and Other Short Stories

**Zahid Ahmed** 

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### **About the Author**

Zahid Ahmed is a graduate of Economics from University of Pune. Being from the army background, he lived in the army hostel for 17 long years, in Pune. His debut novel 'Beyond the Barracks' is apparently based on his life's experiences and endurance he faced while living with the army ambience. He is the only writer in the world to write a novel slightly against the Indian Army.

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#### 1. The Stolen Coin

India, my beloved country had gotten independence on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947. Wow! Was I so close to those years when nothing great had been established in the country? Neither the constitution nor infrastructure! There, flowed rivers of blood on the railway tracks as India had to face the perils of partition.

During school days, I was a prized student of history and geography. Hence, instinctive veneration towards historical monuments and items was deeply trodden in my kleptomaniac nature.

It was one cold noon in January. I was seated lacklustre at my desk, facing a heavy dirty computer monitor, and no major work was available for my area of interest. The company ran by a black-money making builder; his son was the owner of it.

She came in, trying to walk straight amid the pointed out edges of the furniture. Our workplace was neither bright nor very dull; the ambience there was of like a middle class studio flat. From the ceiling hung three quiet fans in a row. She had kept them off since the morning. She smiled broadly at me and took her seat comfortably; I glanced at her disdainfully as I never liked her smile. She had an ugly smile.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Where is your tea?" she inquired.

<sup>&</sup>quot;I have gulped it," I replied, feigning heavy tone, slightly to mock her.

I wrapped in both the ends of a slumping away blazer and looked fixedly in the monitor, keenly searching about good poems on humanity. She drew herself closer to my seat, I liked it instantly, but I feared others reaction hence with squinted away eyes I checked about others position. She thrust her hand beside the monitor and grabbed my wallet in her hand; I shrank a little in little embarrassment. There was nothing enticing about the wallet content. All she could take out was that coin. Since its arrival, I had been assuming it as my financial mascot. "What's so special about this coin," she asked, focusing her wide eyes upon me.

"Can't you see the date on it?" I replied in rich condescension.

I stretched my hand and took possession of it.

"See...the date...it was minted in 1950. This coin is almost 62 years old from now. Then, many of India's freedom fighters were alive and active."

As manifested, she snatched the coin from my hand and I very much being in the office couldn't quibble with her like a school child. She grinned happily and prattled hard on her seat. Indeed, she was awed to hold that heavy coin in her hand as she had found a deity or mega cosmic energy in it. And, I sat grimaced; feared she would not return my lucky charm. I was quiet and snubbed. Then, she blurted, "I am going to keep this coin with me as a gift from your side."

"No...It's my lucky coin....rather mascot; I cannot give it to you."

"Now, it's mine....it is better if you forget this."

"Omy.....my dear it's a valued possession for me, I have never gone poor since the day I received it from an old man."

"When I was a waiter in a hotel an old man had given it to me as a valued tip. Its quite personal, return it to me, I will get something nice for you, maybe a book or some other gift."

She turned to her side, seemed unaffected by my pestering. I was pondering, how to get it back, and repented upon keeping my wallet so open for passers-by and other colleagues. I had that coin with me for more than seven years. Somehow, I had always a strong impulse that that coin was proving lucky to me gradually. I had heaped up enough veneration to make it act as a source of positivity from where Perennial River of financial success will keep flowing all my life. Now, in a moment's time this little stumpy girl ruined that entire holy endeavour. I felt crippled.

As the day wore on, foggy evening began spreading chilled streams inside our office. I huddled both my hands into the blazer pocket and thought of persuading her. Outside the office, on Bombay-Poona highway the evening traffic increased all of sudden, rattling and honking of vehicles irritated everyone inside.

The HR manager, as young as I, peered all around as she was the janitor of the company. Behind her cubbyhole - workplace, all the three major spacious cabins were empty; no authoritative dishonest person had come to the office hence the day passed away like a mild picnic day for many of the employees.

Before she could leave and forget everything about that coin, I put all my attention on her and said, "Lady, this coin hold bad energy, whosoever got acquainted with it, faces bad quirk of fate, like me as you know that I am an orphan and live a shattered life. Return it to me otherwise you may face some unusual or unpleasant things in your life."

"Ohho......now you will say all these bad things. But, I am not going to give it back......understand."

She zipped out her maroon bag and left the alley. I lost it finally. The day ended, night fell and after some warm conversation with the HR manager, I was back at home. In depression I didn't go out for dinner, I drank milk and smoked two cigarettes back to back. Whole night I remained of and on in drowsiness caused by severe chillness. I didn't recollect whether I was asleep or not. But, my mind was at work, it was mourning the loss of the coin.

Next day she came in a beautiful dress, looked charming, and her accessories made her look like a demigod. On the contrary, I was pale, my eyes expecting the return of that lucky coin. She was quite happy and chirping about. Was the coin magical that

overnight her get-up was changed; a flicker of jealousy forced me to think that her good days had started and I would be the next ruin?

I didn't disclose the loss of coin to anybody. A few days passed and obsession about that coin faded away. Our friendship and flirting continued, we came a little closer and many a time I thought to have her.

Some days later, she stopped coming office when I asked her on the phone, she wistfully revealed that her stepmother and father were seriously ill they were admitted in hospital. I tried to sympathize into her situation by some heavy inspirational poetic words. She felt good and light and I sensed that she was accustomed to sad and aloof life.

When she returned to the office after a week, she was pale, sad and weak. Her chubby face looked drained of vitality and traces of life. She was quiet, when I spurted some movie dialogues she laughed in simple peals. I reminded her story of my fate and afflictions and tried to win her favour so that I could have her soon. Such a vile guy, I was.

I was shocked to know that her father was an eighty-year-old man. It was obvious for him to be in hospital in such senility. I couldn't gather sympathy for him anymore. I laughed and made her laugh that his father was a crazy man to bring her onto the earth at the age of sixty. She was hardly twenty she disclosed as women rarely do it. Even her stepmother who was in the ICU was same age of her father.

Her attendance to the office cut down drastically due to hospital visits. Later on, she didn't turn for many days, I became worried about her continuity with the job. I talked to the HR manager and her reporting manager to consider her case seriously. Out of blue, she called me and blurted that her stepmother was no more and her father's days had been numbered out. I told her not to worry about deaths of older people as they had to die being old enough. She was very much normal and to my surprise she didn't holler like other girls. For further days, we chatted on phone, mostly by sms. I had told her to call me whenever she felt lonely or depressed.

One fine evening when I stepped out of the hotel after a sumptuous dinner, she informed the demise of her father through sms. I felt normal to her.

Next day, she met me in the office; it was late morning, she had to talk to the HR manager before joining. I sat beside her, offered her a cup of tea and with an aim of lightening up her mood I began conversation. She was quite depressed, her eyes were almost watery.

"Don't worry much it is a part of life. Things will be all right! Just hold on your self-belief," I said and tried to look in her eyes.

While sipping noiselessly she said, "You know my elder brother left his job because of their illness. He had had also burrowed lump sum amount on loan for their treatment. I don't know what will happen next. We are broke and miserable."

"Don't worry....he will get the job soon. And you continue working here to support him."

"No...that's not possible now. The HR called me to inform about my termination yesterday. Therefore, I have come here to collect meagre salary of the days I worked."

"Ohho...that's bad...I will help you finding a good job."
Our conversation was cut short by her entry, the HR manager. She was strict against girls, as she always wanted to keep all the attention in the company. Many a time, I thought she was whore, an easy available fuck but never tried to lust after her.

I took my seat at my place beside me was her seat. I didn't realize when she left the office. While staring at her empty seat I thought about that heavy coin of 1950, it brought drastic bad luck to her family, yet she didn't realize it. On an impulse, I thought of telling her to throw away that coin, as it was not gifted by anybody. Rather I had stolen it when I was a waiter in a bistro. It was an epitome of both: my kleptomaniac nature and preservation of historical things. But, I could not as it had to be passed on some or other person.

In a month's time, I lost the job and moved to a new city.

#### 2. The Smart Thief

I had a tragic ending there, with them, so unexpected, clumsy that I had never imagined while working there yearlong with them. Nevertheless, as it was life, those uncertainties were new to me. I did not mind much. Robert, his name was fabulously fascinating; I had liked it when I met him at first. However, his face was uglier than a stray dog but his name worked all the charm. When I joined the bakery, he left after working for couple of months. Then he was the manager of the shop. And in that duration, we became good friends, rather good confrere. Even after leaving, his intervention in the shop continued. His long time friend, a chirpy south-Indian girl; she was short, fair and had a wide face, no remarkable features especially, took over him as the shop manager, and interestingly, very soon I became her good companion as well a good waiter.

A year passed and we both, she and I were out of the shop because we had developed immense love for each other. Ironically, during her last days she fell in love with a rich customer. Despite that, she being so open about casual sex, we slept together in the storeroom at noon. First, she left all of sudden as she eloped with that rich customer. My heart wept incessantly in her absence. I was quite addicted to her body cravings. The lust, which I had for her derived me crazy, consequently, I became abscond from the shop. After initial hiccups and bickering, I paid sixteen hundred rupees to the company in the form of

compensation and came out with minimum stains towards my character.

After some days, news came that Robert joined the shop to resurrect it. I started visiting the shop and him. After shop hours, we would drink, eat and sneer about that south-Indian girl. We both were vile to her, turn by turn; in spells of romance, we made love to her but never cared for her feelings, and always ignored to accept her as the profound lover. We were selfish, bit Casanova, we admitted many times. And laughed like bastards.

One night after taking a sumptuous dinner at a restaurant, I returned by bus, as Robert asked for my Yamaha bike. I had given to him blindly for the duration of a month. Meanwhile, I was busy searching a job in BPOs or call centers. After some days, with a paltry luck I got a job in one of the domestic BPOs. However, the joining date was after a fortnight. I was cashless too; I supplicated for some money from Robert and my younger brother but did not get anything. They behaved callously. Being hurt I didn't meet them, a day before joining one of mine roommates gave me some money so that I could start with that call center job. He was aware about my longing for call-center jobs.

I began serving that call center in utter destitution, at lunch I drank coffee or tea, as it was free there, and at times, I would shyly take a morsel or two from newly made friends. Upon receiving first salary, I drank beer alone and smoked two cigarettes. I was happy and

light, the dullness about having no money vanished away.

One early morning, when it was raining heavily, I called Robert and told him to return my bike as I was finding tough to reach the office by crowded buses. He did not reply positively, I felt ignored again. After a week, he called to inform that he could not return bike because he had grown very poor. The reason was ridiculous, I bawled at him. For next a few days, he did not pick up my phone calls. I knew he was lying. He played the similar kinds of tricks with her too.

At one odd weekend, I visited the shop but Robert was out on the bike. The possessiveness about the bike kept me vindictive and spiteful against him. I had to plan something to get both, the bike as well revenge. All of sudden, one evening I bunked the office and reached at the shop. I stood on the opposite road, keenly observing Robert, how magnificently he was attending and conversing with the customers. laughed watching him like that probably I was not the waiter anymore. Nonetheless, he looked funny in that disposition. Near around the closing time, the shop became empty, and no customer was inside. I stepped across the road and stood in the front yard of the shop. From the glass, he stared at me, and I smiled at him. He came confidently out and shook hand as we were still good pals. The chumming was over, I felt and there was subtle anger in my eyes.

"Boss, I need my bike back as I have to attend office 6 in the morning," I said truculently.

"Bhau, I need that bike for my next job, I have taken a marketing job. Please understand me," he replied. And innocently looked in my eyes. I was speechless for a minute or so, then I said, "Take it after a week, give me at least for this week."

"No, brother...that's not possible, please understand me."

"Ok," I said, as I never believed in argumentation.

I walked off disconcertedly, although he pestered for dinner but I refused silently. I did not have the papers of the bike; I had purchased it as a second-hand bike. Hence going to the police was not possible.

I did not think anything for that moment, I returned to the hostel silently.

After couple of weeks, Poornima accompanied me. She was my colleague. We had good understanding and I had always looked to have her. In a falsehood of a rich customer, I ordered two Dutch Truffle pastries, Robert himself served us, and in gestures, he tried to say that I got a good girlfriend. We smiled amiably and he thought that I had forgotten all about the bike. I told the girl to wait outside. Robert refused to take the bill. That seemed fine.

We talked for a while, exchanged views about love, sex and life and remembered that south-Indian lass. I pretended, as I know him since ages and there was no contention between us earlier or ever. The girl waved at me. "Robert, she lives nearby only, I have to drop her as it is quite night," I said and kept the book on the counter.

"Just give me the bike keys, I will drop her then we will go for drinking," I continued. He seemed over joyous. He handed me the keys confidently. Leaving the book on the counter, I came out carefully, and took that girl's hand in my hand and marched towards the parking.

Indeed, I dropped her at home but from there I did not go back to the shop. Robert called me all the night but I didn't pick up his phone, either from other unknown numbers. My heart sang a song upon my victory but my veins were unsatisfied yet. In the morning, when I touched my phone to see the time, the inbox was full of SMS, mostly based on betrayal and friendship, all sent by him. I had a boisterous laugh and said to myself, "Brother, still more to come."

The call-center job was going fantastic. I made many friends, and roamed about the roads for entire night on many occasions. Robert had forgotten about me. I stopped going towards that part of the city, where he lived.

It was Saturday I was on a weekly off. Still the rainy season had not retreated from the city. Throughout the afternoon and even beyond the twilight cumulous clouds hung all over the horizons, the sky was one. I lazed down the whole day and thoughts of Robert perturbed my ego and self-esteem to some extent.

In the evening, after tea, I profoundly rummaged my cupboard and found a bunch of keys. As the hostel gates were closed, I marked my attendance, and leapt over the boundary wall, where the darkness was thick and no sentry was deployed. The bike was parked inside. I was very much present in the hostel's record.

Around ten o' clock, I carefully hid behind the trunks of the rain trees, on the opposite road, opposite to the shop. I waited there for some time. The rain had started. Purely, it was an advantage to me. The shop was closed an hour ago. I optimistically believed myself that Robert and his party were not around any of the hotels or bars. It was a busy road, many shops and hotels were lined up. By this time, only restaurants, hotels and teashops were open; the rest had been closed down. I knew about the trend as I was in the opposite shop for a year. Even the people around were familiar with me. Hence, I was guite confident what I had to do tonight. When the rain increased, I crossed the road hastily and stood at the shutter, for one last time vigil. The magnanimous rain blurred everything. I took out the bunch of keys and performed my task quite carefully. I stole thirty thousand rupees. I kept the money in a plastic bag, and thrust that packet deep into my trousers pocket. I also closed the shutter of the shop carefully. Then I began running hard in the rain. As it was quite late in the night, local buses were not available. I was walking in sheer pleasure, feeling nothing against the splattering rain. I showed thumb sign but none of the call-center cabs stopped for me.

After some time, when I was fully drenched in the rain, a sedan stopped by me. The driver, an ugly man, though seemed honest and ethical asked, "Where do you want to go?"

"Holkar Bridge," I replied quickly, without wasting away time.

"I will drop you till Poona-Bombay highway as I am going straight to Bombay," he offered.

He was happy to offer me help at such a night-time, amidst heavy rain. While driving he revealed that the car belonged to an IAS officer, and he was going to take him home. To keep his heart cozy, I said, "Even I am preparing for the IAS exams." He smiled and said nothing. I put one hand on the bulged up pocket to hide its bulkiness. Moreover, I would never want him to suspect on me.

The rain did not stop. He dropped me at the roadside. He wished me best fortune for the IAS exams. In return, I thanked him from the bottom of my heart.

It was over one o' clock. There was strange blurriness all around. The lamp poles were lit but of no use. The pouring rain was quite heavy. And, I did not crave to be dry. From here, the hostel was almost 3 to 4 kilometres away. Going hostel at such an odd hour would be a grave mistake. Hence, to while away a few hours of the night I found a lonely bust stop, well sheltered. I sat there, the dampness from the rain kept me shivering but my heart was exuberantly happy. I shouted in the

air, cursed Robert for this awful revenge and laughed upon my achievement. The only worry was how to avoid police patrolling vans. If they caught me, I was sure they would snatch away the money off me. Nevertheless, thieves live on luck too. Around two o' clock, as it was the highway, a police van was rattling away slowly. I shrank and made no movement.

At five o' clock, I began walking towards the hostel. The rain had stopped; the roads were still full of water and puddles. I spotted many young and old people jogging in the raininess, I felt secured about the money. The way I was singing and imagining about shopping was exclusively chirpy. Robert could never have been a smarter thief than me. I was always sure. Next day, the shop authorities blamed Robert and he was made to pay the full amount for the theft that occurred the previous night.

## 3. The Crazy Thief

The practice was new, introduced by a junior boy, not so junior but still with reference to class, knowledge, experience and height. It could be the best way to save hell amount of money for waggishness, or probably he might buy a bat or some clothes to come up in that league. Nevertheless, he was an innate clever boy by nature, had good name in the hostel and average for English speaking teachers. Very silent, all the time was his prime composition. He would remain in a brown study, sometimes about girls, fantasizing them even while milling around the crowd or at times for studies. He knew how to pass his time without material hedonism. He was a good guy, used to say everybody, whosoever watched or interacted with him.

The silent thief never slept within him. He had seen his father stealing onions and apples from the regiment's mess. For them thieving was convenient than begging. That was the common dignity existed between both of them. Lately, he impressed many boys of his class by putting up a fervent show in a football match, which was played in the games period, after the lunch break. The impression building came at the cost of torn out shoes. He had to replace them guite soon otherwise, in the morning assemblies prefect would insult before many. His face turned pale nogu proposition. He could have not asked any favour from father. He might grunt and send money a month late. He would not bear that humiliation in the morning prayers every morning. Moreover, all prefects were sons or daughters of perfidious parents. They would

not hesitate insulting an ugly, poor chap, as sometimes they would enjoy and look for a favour or so in return from the head teachers. The principal was a nasty lady, all her life she had looked only and only for herself. The hatred began simmering in him.

The school was fun sometimes; the weather was of spring type. The playground grass was green but dry as it became during winters. The eleventh standard boys had been attending a computer class, it was new and exciting in that era of orthodox pedagogy; hence, students were inside without shoes, outside the lab, shoes were lined-up systematically. He, while walking stopped for a glance, just a few yards away from edges of the door. There was a teacher in; she was busy instructing them while walking around their chairs. In addition, there was continuous tipper-tapper wafting out as the students were punching tenderly on the keyboards. The principal's office was hardly a meter away; it was such a danger zone to roam about. He looked down at his tattered shoes, and an opportunity flickered across his eyes. He sat down mildly, like a crow, waiting for the prey. With sleight of hands, he removed his shoes first and quickly grabbed a new pair that seemed fit for him. He thrust his both feet into it and ran away stealthily even without lacing up the strips. The shoes he took were new and solid. Wow! He screamed in excitement and ran very fast to grab the bag from the class, which was empty almost. This was the time, when he had to be alone. As the primary kids were roaming in and out the boundary, he took the advantage of the milling students to come out of the gate. He began walking fast towards the hostel way. As he knew, something terrible would happen as soon as the last period of the school got over.

He had been crossing Deccan College ground, now nobody, from the school authority would be able to catch him. He was smiling, congratulating himself upon the achievement. And at the same time, taking care that nobody was watching him as he talked to himself very much. Mad with zeal and the result he ran fast, with a bag joggling hard on his back.

In the evening, he approached Rajnish, he too had a thieving instinct like him. Both were good dealers than friends. Rajnish was aware of his limitations hence to some extent respected him. Following dinner, he exchanged shoes with him, although his shoes were little jagged and pointy. He did not mind sacrificing a bit for some.

Next day, in the morning assembly, one of the senior teachers announced about the theft of a pair of shoes. The whole school was bemused upon the kind of theft occurred. He was unaffected and went on making the crazy thefts from the school only.

One morning, he bunked the school assembly and thieved a sanitary pad from a girl's bag. At night, he tied that pad below his abdomen to avoid waking up for toilet. In the morning, the pad was found under the cot, his bed had urine like stench and his neighbours wailed at him like anything.

One of the passing by seniors slapped hard on his black face that turned brownish instantly.

#### 4. The Balloon Chaser

What strange obsession was rippling within him? He was on the roof, as the twilight had not set for his village from the far-off edges of the horizons. The sky had still clusters of clouds, all looked untainted white in the background of deep blue. He crinkled eyes but could not find any kite fluttering around today. The previous evening, the hydrogen balloon seller held the stall in the adjoining lane but mother did not give him that coin to buy it. He was sad, had longing for one. When others had been buying it, the seller was pumping hydrogen in it through a valve, he watched at him with an aura of amazement.

He came out in the same lane, in the hope of buying one today, as he had the coin with him. He walked towards the main track. At culvert, nobody was available, who could see the sadness of missing a hydrogen balloon on his face. Often, village would face crunching loneliness during night and afternoon. Only dusty and prattling kids could fill the air with their horrible screaming and howling. And that was missing too today.

He was a silent boy, a little boy, dear to his father and a thief for his mother. Hydrogen balloons fly high in the sky, even without strings. Hence, at times some fools had lost their balloons without possessing them properly. They would run like a pack of feral dogs, throw stones and sticks to get it down but never succeeded. It was believed that once a hydrogen balloon was lost, then it was lost forever. That could

only be recovered from the skies, not from anywhere else. A few things never fall back off the skies.

The balloon seller might have been attending kids of some other village today, he thought. He could be in Madhavpur, the nearest village to his village. A bunch of boys appeared, holding fronds of banana, from the side by tracks. They were half-naked, only in underwear's, they waved at him but he refused to join them as today he had worn washed clothes. He had to keep the dress clean as long as possible that would improve his impression in her mother's sight.

One by one all the boys jumped into the water of the canal. They splashed in hard and oozed water like crocodiles. He gingerly came on another side to avoid being drenched by wild and excessive splashing. Their fleering voices piqued him.

Depressed and anxious, he walked down the soiled track towards Khamaria village. Winter afternoons were cozy and had a tantalizing spring like effect on his mood. The roadside had no trees, at times with gusts of wind dust whizzed up and then disappeared. Bored with his own dizziness, the child began walking back at the culvert. The empty afternoon was futile for him. He could have gone with the swimmers.

He stood to feel the speed of the wind as it had been increased noticeably. As he looked up, for Gods, who lived in the skies, his eyes saw a miracle just sent by his faith - stubbornness. There was, high in the sky, a blue balloon was sailing over his village territory, over the

canal, over the culvert and him. It was at a soaring height. The balloon was raving fast, its momentum increased by the speedy wind. Yet nobody had seen it, hence nobody could long for it. "This belongs to me," he thought optimistically.

He looked for the boys, who were sneering at one another. He turned again, on the same track. The balloon had gone ahead him. Just in the line of the canal. "It has to come down for me," he murmured.

A fervent current flickered across his veins. He could win that balloon. He felt so! The height and speed with the balloon was travelling did not come down. He was lagging behind, walking was not just enough. As he was naked feet, he tremulously began running under the estimation of the balloon. He was shivering, as he knew he could get that balloon without spending that coin. The canal and the soil track with it had taken, now, a curve, a bend and amazingly, the balloon drifted away from that line of direction with a slight change in the wind.

The balloon fluttered up and down, and at a time, it seemed that it might fall down like a snowflake but it didn't. That broke his heart almost. He came down the track onto the stubbly fields. The fields were barren without swaying crops. Farmers and labours had recently taken down the paddy produce, leaving the fields pointed with stubbled stalks. He trod between the gaps, on the soil, as to avoid being pricked by stalks. The balloon had gone far from him, towards west. He came over the ridge; he was staggering lest

fell down, though the grass was dry but he was not accustomed for a fast walk on these kinds of ridges. He opened up arms, wavering like a ship, and kept on walking.

In between, he would stop to see the course of the balloon. Now, it had come down, in a sloping manner but still far and high from him. As he tried to run, he fell down abruptly; he sat for a while, inspecting his body for bruises and wounds. He felt irritation just over the ankle, and when he touched that point, drops of blood smeared onto his fingers. His gaze was above, there at the blue balloon, which had become mild and seemed floating at one point only. Lest it flown away to Madhavpur, to the different village, he got up in a raging jealousy and began joggling on the green and apparent moist ridge, at times slipping slightly while pacing up his steps. There was strong soughing amongst the lined up trees up on the tracts of land, but he couldn't take that velvety grassy path to chase the balloon as it was full of thorny thicket. The chase was only possible by crossing field after field. The heart of the little child throbbed strongly as the balloon lowered around the canopies of far-off trees.

When he crossed a number of fields, he panted heavily, gasped for a still breath but that was not possible. Anytime the balloon could have gone into another's territory. And the children of Madhavpur were bloodsuckers even for insipid kites, it was clear that there would be a huge brannigan amongst the mite upon finding this balloon.

His whole little torso perspired heavily though the afternoon breeze was mild. He dropped the shirt down with an intention of picking it later on, after achievement. He realized that something had been continuously pricking under his feet. Though ignoring that proposition he crossed the tract of fields. Now, there, the grass was mossy and a small pond, well surrounded by thick layer of green grass and dodders. He sat at the edge, thrust thin legs into the water to wash off the muddiness, as he scurried off heavily, all the mud and dust got dissipated in the clean water. There was an agitation amongst the slowly sailing fragile ripples. His body being tired was resting on his arms, placed just behind his flank.

The stamina within him was still alive; he had just sat down here to relax for a while. When he looked at the pond surface, a glistening blue balloon's shadow was hovering over it, as it was uprising from the pond itself. He shouted a spew of dialects in his native language; the balloon touched the surface, the pond, exactly in the middle. The boy could not believe that the long-chased balloon had landed down for him. Though it was in the middle of the pond, he had to wait until it would come to one or other bank.

As he slapped his feet inside the water, as the agitation settled down again, film after film of red blood had been diffusing in the ripples. When he touched both of his soles, sores and wounds oozed some more blood, he screamed mildly in agony but couldn't cry. There was a gale of breeze, came from opposite direction, the balloon fluttered and circled against the ripples

and in a moment he thought that the balloon might burst out.

As the lapping water drenched his knickers, the balloon, itself approached him like a sailing boat, the boat sailed over the blood-mixed watery ripples. He grabbed it earnestly. The myth about lost balloon seemed astray to him. His self-belief had proclaimed it, and then, he murmured melancholily, "Some balloons never get lost."

When he tried to take up the standing stance, his feet ached with pain; he sat down, became careless about his lost shirt and decided to wait until evening came.

#### 5. Refused Funeral

He could not speak with a simple tongue to anyone. He would shout in aggression, in strange affliction. He cared nought for either caretakers or parents. He lived in complicated enmity with himself, perhaps with God too. The only boy in the entire hostel whose fees and pocket money never lacked, his parents were punctual than punctuality. Without any intimidation, the warden had been receiving money orders from his father's current posted location. The warden never fell in argumentation with him; he lived in a different room, in a special room, not in a barrack. He rarely mingled with other boys, who lived and performed in barracks because of their fathers' ranks, they were children, or sons of non-officer fathers'.

In the evening, he would come out directly, rides on bicycle outside the hostel gate, where he often saw other officers' children roaming and riding bicycles, they looked upon him with a pity, although he was not looking for both, the pity and sympathy.

"Hey Dhruv, how you doing in that hostel," said Akshat, his classmate, but there was difference in their ongoing grooming and behaviourism. Akshat was quite polite; he lived with parents in the army bungalow. He kept on riding, paddling profoundly and rarely looked straight, on a straight and free road. Dhruv was going to school with other hostel boys in a stinky huge school bus while Akshat was dropped by his father or mostly by his parents in a jeep every day. That privilege kept Dhruv away and almost cut off from him.

On the contrariety, Akshat believed that Dhruv was his friend; however, Dhruv never gave any active response to him. He always sounded being selfish for many, even the hostel boys' maintained safe distance from him because of his father's high rank. They feared that causing him disturbance might expel them out of the hostel. Hence, they lived in their own community, circle and in a society of non-officer children and literally enjoyed a lot but secretively and lustily gossiped a lot about officers and their lifestyle, behaviourism and would often lustily mock about their daughters and wives. Their joking and ribbings were devoid of basic shame and unveiled every aspect and element which gave them immense pleasure and fun.

Akshat and Dhruv were equally talented in sports as well as academics; however, Dhruv was very much introvert unlike other officers' children. And that was the mystery that he carried all the time and other officers' children would ponder over his attitude and behaviour.

His attitude and behaviour was a matter of chat and concern for many officers' children, who knew him, or study in the same school. Monika liked him a lot; even her friends said the same, including Akshat. She cared for him, and sees a future man of her dreams in him. Dhruv rarely spoke to her. If he found her cycling on his way, then he would return to the hostel or try to change his route.

Akshat asked him, rather tried to know more about the hostel life from him, especially the freedom, which was

entitled to him, as he was living without his parents. He did not reveal anything to him or anybody. No one could instigate him, other than himself.

Teachers never scolded him: he seldom made focused about mistakes. SO studv and other domesticity. It was strange that every moment he looked angry. He did not like the design of God, the way he created and made this world. He would not feel for anyone, either for friends or for other beings, but he loved bird watching and gazing at the hostel's stray dogs. He would sit under the trees, the row of huge and dense banyan trees, alone for hours and hours. He believed that he was connected to some other world. In this hostel, he arrived three years ago, just after passing his primary schooling. His parents would come or send someone to receive him during summer vacation. Last year, he didn't go for summer vacation and preferred to live in the hostel, and joined swimming club, there it was seen that he would lay in the pool from morning to afternoon. His parents could not come, and the reason remained arcane and he unfazed.

He advanced to ninth grade, his parents often called and inquired about him and his academic performance by the hostel warden, who was a fair old man; he was immensely positive and afraid of officers. As expected, his replies were straight and positive, full of hopefulness. In fact, he liked Dhruv very much but never dared to reveal his caring feelings to him.

Rain had been passed; autumn forced trees to shed leaves. The climate of the city was pleasant and days

were passing like normal days. He was living a simple and silent life, not indulging everywhere, very contented to himself. The routine was maintained, unperturbed a student should live. He was perfect as a student. Today, he didn't come out of his room, otherwise everyday he would sit under the row of banyan trees after school. Out of habit, or out of blue, today he slept and woken up by the disturbance of rattling jeeps, parked in a particular row. He didn't care to look out of his window nor did he open his door till he washed and dressed up for evening bicycling.

After some time he came out with a bunch of keys in his fingers. The playground was empty, to his consternation none of the boys was playing or seen seated around it. He thought that they might have remained inside their barracks because many officers had come in many jeeps. He was unaware of their presence, neither he wished or greeted any of the officers. The hostel warden stood silent quite far from the bunch of officers, who were busy in mild discussion, even women were present but their group stood on the edge of playground. He gazed upon the phone receiver, polished phone on a tiny iron stool.

The senior officer approached him very politely before he could diminish from their sight. Dhruv knew the senior officer, who was once a good acquainted with his father. He knew other officers but he was reluctant to greet them that falls under mugging and forced respect category. He was not false. Neither supported that.

"Son....there is some urgency, you have to come with me," the officer said, and put hands around his shoulders.

"Where.....?" he asked quite politely.

"To your parent's place, where your father is posted."

"You mean Shillong, Sir, I am not interested."

"But son......your presence is indispensable. You have to be there as soon as possible. We have arranged everything please come with us. It is a matter of procession, which will not be completed without you."

"It is a matter of your parents."

"What do you mean?"

And the officer understood the need to reveal the fact of the situation. "Son, unfortunately your parents have passed away in an accident last night. Many families from our Centre and relatives have gone there. You have to come with us for the funeral." Dhruv walked a few steps ahead and then stopped. He understood the reason of swarming crowd of officers and their wives. None of his classmates was present today, neither Akshat nor Monika. Tears didn't pop out of his eyes. His face became wistful. Was this the real time of his test, or God has brought this episode to break him? He walked to the officer and said, "Sir, I am not interested for any sort of funeral. I am fine alone, without my

parents, I don't need them to live here in this world, and I live somewhere else."

He went inside his room and slammed the door loudly, and did not come out.

## 6. Dreaming beyond Reveries

He was working in a BPO, where his salary and selfesteem was as unsatisfactory and disconcerted like his trampled dreams. He was a graduate in Economics. With a reluctant heart, he passed M.A first year with distinction, the second academic year was on the run, but he could not attend the college regularly as he used to attend a year ago. However, he was quite determined to get a postgraduate degree to secure himself tightly in the ruthless society.

Being common had always piqued him, as the age was at the highest peak of youth, decisions needed to be placed behind dreams and the orientation about social security could not tame him. Young age and distant dreams could do magic for him. He was special with many aspects and remained abreast from the common folk his age since early days. However, for a few months he was living a depressed kind of life. Despite being a graduate, he was still working in a BPO, that too in night shifts. The energy and furiousness about him was depleting, as it was quite evident on his dull face. Every day, his set dreams, which he had set when he was a kid, came to him to get the accounts of his endeavours. Invariably, he had to convince them by showing a great self-belief within himself. Those dreams were his own, of his own blood, that reminded him where he was lagging and what was the thing that was wrong in him. He had to hear that out.

Thankfully, he cloistered himself from the peer and social obligations. Now, there had been no one: officers, wardens, poor soldiers and teachers, who

could pass out their judgments about his career. And in fear of losing his image and years-long-built reputation, he had always admitted that his career was wholly dependent on academic abilities, he might opt for an MBA, or PhD in Economics.

At Range hills quarters he was living with his younger brother and a friend. He would wisely chat with them and openly accepted that he had to become an actor to answer his soul; his life had to be purposeful, not ordinary like others, who had have chosen mediocrity with many convenient options. Time to time, he was being ignored by many just because he was taciturn, not loud and false like others but there was something miraculous about his self-belief that he himself was proud of it. They were up and ahead when he was distraught and pathetic by time and situations. He would be the face of Bollywood, as most of the Khan Series stars had been fading. He had the chance to make his way over there, as most of the current actors were star sons and devoid of acting and other charming skills. His disposition was best suited to become an actor.

He proudly loved his voice, the tone; the dialogue delivery was his strongest skill as well most appreciated too.

He believed a little bit of acting tips and classes would definitely chisel him. He was confident that he would be the next super star. His confidence brimmed up to the maximum level that an actor needed before appearing on the screen.

After a few months, he began searching acting classes in Pune, and found a single through the newspaper. He paid the amount to be paid for the class. After ten sessions, he would get a chance to work in a short film, which would help him to find work in Mumbai's production houses. The deal sounded good and beneficial, his confidence boosted up, acquainted people didn't say anything to him, neither praised nor teased him. He attended all the weekend batches. Before he could do with all the classes, he got an opportunity to work in a short movie as a protagonist. He liked the role, as he had to play a robber's character, the dearest character to his soul. He was greatly influence by Amitabh Bachchan, hence, angry and silent roles he preferred at any time. Everything worked as per his dream plan. After the shooting, the remaining classes continued and eventually he came in acquaintance with Suraj Nair, an independent shortfilm maker.

He was eagerly waiting for his film. Every day he hoped dreamt about the movie and aftermath appreciation, which he ought to get from the known people. In between Suraj Nair offered him a movie. The classes were over. His contacts with Suvadhan diminished but he still hoped for the release of that movie. Because it was his movie, in that first time he professionally faced the camera. Suvadhan had asked him for some money for the completion of his portfolio but financial limitation; moreover, he grew leery about the proposal. Therefore, the deal ended with silent ego clashes and he became certain that by now he

wouldn't get the CD of that movie. Money was the solution for it, more than money it was greed, which pulled him away from that not so known director. He joined Suraj Nair's group, he had been visiting him almost every week to discuss the script, story and characterization of the coming movie. On Suraj's behest, he checked Suvadhan's short films YOUTUBE and the quality and sound of the movies completely disgusted him, disgraced his veneration for that director. The more he watched his movies the more he laughed and mimicked about him. Soon, he developed good understanding with him. Surai directed almost a dozen short movies and it clearly showed his keenness towards the cinema. He began appreciating him although he did this very rarely. Even for his dearest friends, he was a sheer critic of whatever came in form of art but at the same time if something enticed his heart then he tend to appreciate that work all his life.

The coldest months of the season - November and December ended but he didn't get the CD from Suvadhan, and the movie on which Suraj decided to work on hadn't started yet. Its script and story were reviewed repeatedly. Every day he would wait for an opportunity and hoped things would go as per his plan and he would be the star soon. He was exuberantly ragging for stardom. As he was destined to it. Lately, he was thinking of going to Mumbai forever to achieve his dream, to start his life as a dream. But, he, at the same time also believed that he didn't need any recommendation and references of short films; alternatively, he could go and deliver his strength and

charm on the auditions, on the casting directors. He too would have a destiny like an SRK. He compared himself with him at all the stages, the prominent similarity was that they both were orphan. Even SRK had lost parents before entering Bollywood. Now it was his turn. But, comparisons wouldn't work alone, he had to be a fighter all the time, he should have been into mental preparation, an actor never ceases, his imagination and observation should never halt.

He was a unique person altogether. The bigger risks, the bigger gains!

He was quite young, almost 23, if he were not go to Mumbai at this age, then probably he could never be an actor all his life. His subconscious had always supported him for the big roles. He could not resist this plain life anymore, he had to stride to go ahead for his dreams, and he had to do it at this age only, at this time, when there was no one who could question his decision. And a fit of rage, madness worked upon him to an extent that he left the current BPO job without serving notice period and one afternoon left for Mumbai without informing to any of his friends. He had to find a non-BPO job so that he could get time for gym, theatre, acting class and auditions.

The night had begun falling swiftly; he pressed head hard against the windowpane to notice the glittering evening life of Mumbai. The bus was about to reach Dadar. It was already night, he felt restless, first time in his life he had come to Mumbai. Beside Dadar station,

edged a busy road, there he found the accommodation very cheap to pass the night off.

He was instructed to leave the accommodation place at 7 am to avoid the next day's charges. He slept late the previous night. He woke up in dizziness and thought of sleeping for a few hours more but the thought of paying a day's charges for the sake of two to three hours extra sleep disturbed him. He lamented his silent planning and in a rage, he woke up, rather reluctantly, and shunned the protocols of the accommodation place. He had to take support of his willpower, and considered it as part of the basic struggle that an actor needed to go through, especially if he were from a poor and isolated class. The structure of the Indian society does not help or support a dreamer who has been on the verge of real decline. Only God, who seldom blitzes miracle, was the only source of him - the faith of his life. He washed off face, and grisly moved ahead from that long cottage and after a cup of tea and smoke, he sat at Dadar station, waiting for Malad going local.

It was foggy and chilly morning, and the interviews would often start late in the morning. He enquired about the local, which was due shortly. It relieved him that the distance between Dadar and Malad would take more than an hour. By nine, he was at Malad, broodingly walked out of the station. Due to lack of sleep, he gathered dizziness; consequently, he was looking frowzy. His head had been dizzying; he reproached himself for not sleeping well the previous night. He had to go back to Pune today but with a job

in hand; he could not go empty handed. And in a day's time it was absolutely difficult to find a non-BPO job.

Being a wise man, he opted to go for a BPO job just to start his life in Mumbai, and suited well for the instant. But the job should be of good remuneration, plus 20 thousand. Then, only he could save and manage other chores for his dream. Now, the dearest aspect of his life remained was none other than his dream. He had a brother but love of goodwill lacked because the younger one didn't earn anything deliberately and left his education just after the metric upon a fool's insistence. He never interfered or shouted at him, he was so indulged with himself that he rarely cared about others, neither in benevolence nor in care. He believed in different ideology that nobody could alter other's life just by showing false carefulness.

Those who wanted to go somewhere in life they hold a different shadow altogether since very early age. They not needed any push from anybody, he firmly believed that he was a player of that league, but his friends and others didn't agree with his tenacity. Nevertheless, he rarely spoke about his high-aimed plans and dreams. However, there were some kind-hearted and people of same likeliness, who believed in him and often quoted that he would reach beyond the stars one day. And he would partially smile and wouldn't fall into any false argument or highness. He wanted his action and performance to speak for him; he wanted to be a famous person among all those who had forgotten him, his zeal.

He was seated on the horizontally stretched long steps attached to a store, which was closed, and he anticipated that it might open around ten o' clock or so, as per the market timings. Just opposite to him, a local cinema stood tall, the toile design and crafts on the walls indicated its era, might be an old cinema hall, coming since Amitabh Bachnan's era. Now seemed in cheap maintenance unlike multiplexes the huge poster of the movie that was hung on the front wall was its prime attraction for the passers-by.

Many students swarmed around the ticket window and soon it was deserted, as the show might have been started, the morning show, especially for the truants. His eyes fixed on the poster, and in a flash, he imagined his movies' poster over there. It was a healthy imagination and his dizziness back seated, he hadn't bathe, his tousled and unkempt hair spoiled his favourite disposition and he knew that he would be counted amongst less favourites ones once he would appear for the interviews. It was an embarrassing proposition. Nevertheless, he considered himself a fighter. He had to overcome and defeat this outlook for this day so that he could return to his city with a satisfactory heart. And he wouldn't also repent upon leaving his job without getting another in hand. He smoked a cigarette, as the morning was favourable for it. He took an autorickshaw for some distance, and then began walking towards the city's best BPO buildings, most of the buildings were apparently wrapped by black glass. Sophistication security check, clean ways, commodious lifts; glowing lights lit up everywhere, even in the daylight. Altogether, a pleasing ambience! Dust-free cabins and floors.

He was seated in the candidates' waiting room. After sometime, he went to the washroom, stripped his bag from the back and kept it in one of the corners. He began washing face, drenched his hair, at the same time keeping an eye on the bag from the mirror. He tried to look fresh, splashed water into his eyes to efface the basic reddishness, which always lurked and portrayed an image of mentally disturbed young man. He wished his eyes could be white before the interview. The interviewers had always rejected him because his red eyes had always dropped his confidence through his tone. He had come to Mumbai without any solid preparation. Entirely dependent on his luck and the faith that he carried towards his God, but he was an agnostic. Rarely went for namaaz or other meritous purposes. Alternatively, his education and dogmatism said something else, it only and only insisted on faith and honest actions. God is to everyone, he does not demand any false formality from his believers.

His partial ablution was completed, he put hands under the drier machine and rubbed dry tissue papers in succession on his unshaven face, cleaning eye sockets and dried up his thick eyebrows. He hadn't brushed teeth hence he gurgled noiselessly to avoid bad breathing. But, still his long hair looked messed and tousled, he attempted to comb with his fingers and succeeded but a hint of laziness and dizziness had been reeking, his day without bath goes very

unpromising and especially when life was on a stake, it wasn't a simple day where he could compensate the morning bath with the evening. He had to present himself, his future hopes and the dream to become a star would be tested today, in some time.

He hadn't prepared anything, or any speech of self-introduction, neither worked on basic grammar, he was confident enough and determined not to fumble in this city at interviews. Winter was the season when he looked pale and dry without basic cosmetics such as hair oil, lip balm and moisturizing cream. A shade of white patches appeared on his face and he had to jute his lips repeatedly to keep them moist so that the tone of voice shouldn't portray hoarseness or imply any grief and grievances.

He pretended himself fresh and groomed enough for the upcoming interview hence he came out of the washroom with a very high confidence. He sat on the chair, lying just outside the number of adjoining cabins. It was one of the most sophisticated and amiable place in the world, a satisfaction diffused within his veins upon sitting there under the mild gushes of cold air from the AC. It soothed his mood and dizziness tried to go away, he stretched jaw and blinked eyes in quick succession to get the confident countenance.

As anticipated the HR, a female of medium height in Indian attire, extremely beautiful, came out with a pen in one hand and collected all the resumes from all the seated candidates. Though his turn wasn't the first, he relaxed. He splayed legs out and thrust hands on the

both empty seats beside him. Then, in a fear of indiscipline, quickly regained his old position and sat in a very serious disposition like Amitabh Sir was in his early movies. A testing negativity hovered around him, but he was obstinately positive for his efforts.

Upon her calling, he went inside and sat in the chair opposite her, and a round table, between them, made of glass, he gazed on his resume, and his face reflected on it as he leaned little forward and backward to sit like a gentleman. Upon her polite command he briskly introduced himself and also mentioned his orphan hood to gain sympathy, the trick worked, she showed excessive sympathy to him and immediately confirmed his job in the BPO, but she gave package of 12 thousand, 8 short of his expectations. He promised joining to her. There wasn't much discussion but the HR looked and gazed at him profoundly and said, "I think you are not well, your eyes are red too."

"Yes ma'am," he replied softly.

"Actually I have come down from Pune, hence, due to traveling I am looking tired and exhausted but I am perfectly fine ma'am!"

"Ok, that's great, now you have a job in hand you will be perfectly fine," she concerned. Her concerning attitude pleased him, her politeness dazed him and he liked the HR as a good human being. He asked her permission and came out of the cabin.

He had three days' timeline to join that BPO, and in those three days, he had to seek accommodation in

Mumbai and needed to get his luggage from Pune. While walking towards Malad station, this time he was walking, not taken the autorickshaw and saved money. He profoundly got into dilemma with that decision. His attachments to Pune and friends were compelling him to reconsider his decision about shifting to Mumbai, for a BPO job. He had nothing today, no-good physique, no sharp looks, only hope and confidence that he would make it big one day. But he was not happy with the offer; he needed a job of big amount, so that life and the preparations for the dream could go hand-in-hand. Now he was feeling the importance of parents, importance of financial support, importance of moral support from his loved ones. And he had none of those, completely void, orphan, only God, and the self-belief, which kept his dream alive.

From Malad he took a local, an overcrowded local, not like an early-morning local, which was fairly empty. One hour tussle amidst the crowd, and he controlled his reactions towards the odour and safely got down at Dadar Station. There, he sat broodingly for an hour or so, peered and searched his eyes for a stall of food but couldn't find any reasonable stall. He walked out of the station and stood under the flyover, the same flyover, underneath he had arrived last evening. He didn't know what to do exactly, the time had come to make a decision. And he had been pondering for a few hours. He was hungry now; at one of the stalls, he reluctantly ate veg-viryani. He was replete, then crossed the road and inquired about the next bus for Pune; it was around 3.30 p.m. He secured the ticket, although it was win-win situation for him but he was uneasy, not

mentally relaxed and at peace. He was disturbed, his luck worked for him, and in a rage of uneasiness, he didn't apply to any other BPO for better remuneration. He confessed that his efforts were lazy, not like a great man, he lacked vitality although he had an ocean of patience but extra patience lazed him. He took a glass of tea and a cigarette from the adjoining cigarette tapri and began smoking in a very carefree manner though something was going inside his head. He sensed hastiness in his decision, told himself to wait for some more time in Pune, and cursed himself for not keeping himself in a good physique. He instantly decided to join the gymnasium as soon as he would get a job in Pune. Moreover, he hadn't enough money to take a shelter in a crowded city like Mumbai within three days. To find a very cheap accommodation, he needed time and if he were take time then he would definitely lose that BPO job. Thus, at this time, he declared himself a wise man and decided that he would come to Mumbai with a better name and abundant money to survive the struggling days, and the most importantly with a good physique, which would make him favourite during the auditions.

He stubbed the half-smoked cigarette and expelled the thoughts pertaining to Mumbai and BPO job and entered the bus, which had began rattling away, it had come on Mumbai - Pune Highway.

## 7. A Soldier's Puberty

Army's transferring protocols gifted him the hearthealing valleys of Kashmir. His allotted tenure at the center ended dramatically. A soldier stays in the army center twice throughout the career, first, just after the enrolment and at the last just a few months before the retirement.

Jharan Singh, Milkeet Singh, Ram Kumar, Omkarnath and Vijay Nair and a few more barrack mates were sent to 102 Regiment. That time 102 Regiment was hoisting nation's flag at mountainous Udhampur. Full of green and blue hills, a beautiful town in Jammu and Kashmir, the scenic beauty epitomized paradise, Jharan Singh was certain and had confidence in the breeze, that this town would never hurt him in dreams like enigmatic Congo. The memories and wounds of Congo were still wet in his heart.

Despite change in climate, the life was still in barracks, in regiments the officers and JCOs were more liberal, co-operative, and avuncular by nature. Other than twelve hours duty, scarcely there was any work or task like center. Although physically life was almost like in center but mentally, there were limited confinements. Married officers, JCOs and soldiers had army quarters to live with their siblings, parents and cozy wives. He often lay on the cot, thought, and sometimes imagined that the whole Kashmir was known for honeymoon events in the valleys and romantic life. Almost every second Bollywood movie would shot romantic songs in

green valleys. He often thought that soldiers who lived in chill quarters with their cozy wives, every night would be full of romance; they would be making love every night. Officers were the most fortunate beings in this state because their wives seemed romantic and callipygian.

He slyly enquired a lot but could not find any brothel valley or hill full of smiling and lusty Kashmiri girls, like the center city - Poona. Udhampur was famous for pilgrims, ancient temples, and blue lakes. On many Sunday afternoons, he would go to the lakesides by local transport. He had always wished to be deployed nearby lakes so that ripples of blue lakes could always keep him close to Gullar pond's ripples. He had bonding with Gullar pond, he unending appreciated Mother Nature and often thought that one day he would depart from this world, his existence would diminish but the soft ripples of Gullar pond would remain for many centuries. In his childhood, it was the only place, where he used to sit alone for longer time. Then, he was a reticent. At most, he preferred to be solitude, away from the street children his age. It was the freshness of Gullar pond that lured him over the upheaval and noisy streets.

In Udhampur, he had gone for boating many a time. Tourism was the prime business of Udhampur. There, he came into the acquaintance of many shopkeepers, cloth merchants and boat owners. Due to the frequent visits to their shops, he came into the contacts of a few sylph Kashmir girls too, mostly the daughters or sisters of shopkeepers and boat owners. They were as

beautiful as paradise. He took the advantage of being a Muslim, hence, on occasion of Eid he instantly fell in love with Nazia—the florid daughter of the owner of the snacks center. She often used to come to meet him near the ancient temples in a form of pilgrim. Her eyes were wide and full of strange beauty; her voice was softer than melting ice cream. She had a figure like fish, thin but chiselled. On the hired bicycles he often used to go to blue lake banks, when she used to hold his hand, a gush of temptations shivered in him. They had often gone for boating. He was determined to marry her without informing his parents and relatives. Nazia's parents had no objection but they fixed one condition for him. They told him to settle down in Kashmir after the marriage forever.

Initially he agreed on the condition but later when he discussed his love affair with Milkeet, Vijay Nair and Omkarnath and with a few more barrack mates. They laughed on his innocence and immature terms and condition. The thought of leaving his village soil, the ever blessing tomb of Hazrat Mazaar, mango groves, childhood friends, and his newly expanded kingdom and glory, Joni Punjabi's farmhouse, and the ripples of Gullar pond for the sake of one beautiful girl, something shuddered him and he had been prosing and coining the decision for many days. He grew anxiety and felt low on dignity. He stopped meeting Nazia for a few days.

Prematurely, one evening Milkeet Singh departed for his village on contingency leave. After a weak, he reappeared in the valleys of Udhampur with a fair lady. She had sharp nose and eyes. He married a widow, to late Jaspal Singh's wife. Milkeet Singh's intelligence and benevolence dazed him. He felt guilty on the thought of leaving his village for the sake of a snowy woman.

Milkeet Singh was out of the barrack life, and he had been living in the army quarters with his wife. Jharan was still lingering in the long empty barracks, whenever there was a heavy snowfall, Milkeet Singh would not come for the roll call and tiny tasks. He often anticipated Milkeet Singh and his beautiful wife and love making imagination inside the quarters whenever snow fell tenderly on the outer world. He was sick of sexual imagination and love making illusions. Many times, when he found difficult to curb his temptations, he felt like to going back to Nazia.

Five kilometres away from the housing barracks, white residential officers' quarters were located in a row. Every officer quarters was bestowed with a limited lush green garden. Behind every quarters there was a servant quarter attached. He was appointed as a helper to Major Ramcharan Singh. He was a middleaged man of hard face; her wife was a teacher in the nearby kindergarten. He had two obstreperous sons both were school goers. His basic duty was to coordinate in household chores with Nanda - the young Kashmiri house cleaner, she had dappled face, she was spinster. Initially, they remained reticent to each other. He was afraid of Major Ramcharan's hard looks. Rarely, he used to speak to her by reasons of household chores. But, deep in his heart he had been lusting after

her. He wanted to have her in hush-hush, without falling into any marriage promise or social commitment.

In the evening, they had the assigned task to play with the two mischievous little boys; soon their eyes started talking to each other.

After breakfast, the house became empty. Major departed for the office, wife and sons had to attend the kindergarten and school respectively.

He often discussed with her his village life, riverside folks, and Congo tour and about his motorcycle. In return, she disclosed her family background, destitution and primary school days and favourite ornaments as well as favourite actors.

He often giggled with her, scoff at her casually, and indulgence in pride conversation to impress her. His sense of humour was his strength throughout.

In a month's time, their strangeness decreased and proximity increased. She often would wait for his touch on the name of friendship and jests. He won her trust and he was mentally prepared to have her. Invariably, he grew libertine.

One of the brusque JCOs Karamveer Singh, was the frequent visitor of Major Ramcharan, rather he was a sycophant. It was his religious duty to keep an eye on his house because they both came from the same district.

One afternoon, when house was empty as usual Nanda was brooming the kitchen floor. Jharan had been staring at her boobs and was continuously passing the comments in a jest. She was laughing without protests. Karamveer Singh — the sycophant, silently, had been watching inside the intangible foreplay drama through the mesh window. His heart filled with jealousy and mirth also because he got something for Major Ramcharan.

His dallying with her was quashed up. Next morning, he was sent back to the barrack, and he got a week's uninterrupted night duty as a reward.

## 8. A False Belief

Here nights were as invisible and intangible as universal spirits, the tribe of this island had never experienced the darkness, except in their sleep and dreams, the pitch darkness that would often fall after evening and rattle away gradually through the spells and strokes of the night. Amid that darkness, myriad stars lit the sky, making it a shimmering net full of specks of illuminations. And at daylight, only the skies pervaded their spirit and chores. Horizons over horizons would overlap, sometimes making the skies grey, into hazy layers, spread all over and around their world and beliefs. At odd days, when the wind would sough hoarsely through the rifts of the coconut and other trees, the sky over the silhouetted canopies would turn crimson and purple just to fill their heart with stuttering horror. As sort of redness in the sky had always portended shadows of danger and anger among them.

The sky was a vast canopy for them, and the sun, the only god of theirs. They treated themselves blessed and privileged to receive her blessings. The day was gala; daylight a source of energy and nothing beyond existed after the sunlight, after the sunny or bright day. The world, which was limited to them goes back into the universe and merged into the flow of infinite Ocean, greater and imperial than imponderable oceans. The tribe had been moving on a set of beliefs, set by ancestors since the dawn of their origin. They lived, ate and slept in wigwams amidst the dense forest for centuries.

A few days ago, a young girl died of excessive weeping, screaming and miserability. pregnant and the entire tribe people prayed for her delivery at daylight but she was unfortunate, she fell into the trap of night, the darkness, between evils and ghosts that roamed about and took away the humans if found awake. So, she was. She was buried into the deep mud south of the island before afternoon lest ghost and the shades of darkness from twilight spirited away her and her dead infant. The tribe didn't mourn over her death. Their ancestral beliefs could not be transgressed over a young, pregnant woman's death. Now, it didn't matter that once, till some daylights ago she was a part and wife of someone. She was destined to die during night hence it was confirmed that she had been taken away by the devils of the night. This incident caused furious outrage all over the tribal island and they humiliated the sun - their god.

Xenubo was the latest victim of this juggernaut. The entire tribal people would catch fish, hunt and gather food and even faggots but that preparation was not for the night. It was either for the next morning or at maximum for a day's later part — late afternoon. Mostly in late afternoons, the tribe would gather, put the fire in the faggots and pour a drink made of coconut, fish oil and salty water.

Still the daylight shone brightly through boughs and branches of lofty trees. They were safe till the day was there, so their beliefs and race. The oldest man of the tribe had raked the fire. The children, partially naked

would gaze in memorization and then suddenly began jumping and prancing in high jerks. The women danced around the fire while singing a tribal song and the men would not sit but hover around the drink container, made of wood and bamboos. Children were obliged to go inside the wigwams after devouring bellyful of roasted fish and meat. Children did not have access to drink.

The more flames leapt and cracked, the more loudly the women would sing and smile at their men in pursuit of lust. When the fire descended, the women would begin drinking that drink from the bowls of their just chosen or settled men. The oldest man of the tribe considered the wisest on the island, he had blown a conch as the fire died out and the sunrays began fading. The couples would begin entering and before they could retire just at the end of the day, and lest night or darkness confronted their eyes, they would seek pleasure from each other, they would drown in lovemaking and then untimely sleep ascended over them.

Xenubo's two little children had been sleeping with greater snoring. He had not drunk today; the premature death of his wife kept him disturbed. As he was so depressed that he didn't care for his life anymore. He was becoming outrageous, he longed to sleep now, and the sun might have sunk down in one of the horizons of the far-off sea. If he failed to sleep, he would not be alive by morning, certainly taken away by the ghost and evils of the darkness. The beliefs of

ancestors could never have misled. The entire island was alive on this particular belief only.

In the island there was no night, nobody had the right to stay awake. Being awake meant sacrificing life needlessly, succumbing to evils prematurely. But, it was the labour pain that caused her to remain awake in the middle of the night and no one could help her, not even he. The entire tribe was fast asleep.

Xenubo was a skilled angler, well known all over the island, after his wife's death he hadn't been ostracized but as per the beliefs her wife was victimized and poorly fell prey to labour pain at night and that caused the death of both. Xenubo had never seen the moon, and allied moonlight, and he believed that those who see do not survive till the morning to tell the experience to the rest of the tribe. He grew obstinate against that belief of daylight and darkness. He began sensing a strange morbidity in the outer environment, he heard an immense howling, perhaps of a boar, it was very horrifying, at daylight, even he had hunted many boars but he never came across of such a wild howling. Such a terrifying howling was it clearly suggesting, rather carrying the winds of death and decay. The howling grew more intense but at the same time, a pain added to it as if someone was chasing it and wanted to kill her for fun and meat. He assumed another animal; these activities of hunting poaching were quite common in the island's jungles. The overlapping tides stroked mercilessly against the shore. The intensity was so terrific that it was causing terror. The door was tightly shut from inside. He gained a sitting position, there was a groping darkness inside his hut, and his both children were fast asleep, in a comatose way. A dreadfulness caught his veins. Ironically, while shuddering terrifically a sensation of insurgence against the ancestral beliefs galloped fast through his head. He couldn't understand what he could do in next moments. He mustered up all his courage and stood up vehemently; unknowingly tears trickled down his rigid cheeks. A path lay ahead was death. The belief was weighing him down, knocking his thoughts as hammer would burst the skull of a boar. He longed to see the outer world, where the night was well established, over the boughs, trees and spirals of the clustered wigwams.

What could have been happened to that fire which was an epitome of gala and gay celebration just before the evening? He pricked into the thatch wall, and was able to make a hole through it. He fixed one of his eyes through the hole, peeped, and saw the illuminating brightness outside. Of the rustling sound he could make out that the frenzied wind was sweeping through the trees, the boughs were oscillating to and fro over joyously, suddenly he became frantic when a heavy branch cracked down and banged just over the littered dried fire log, a few hours ago which was part of an active fire. He shuddered but keen and curious equally too. The wind increased its speed and a few more boughs tumbled down. He thought that devil might have entered in their territory. The pack of devils might take up or kill the awakened ones? He thought of his children, if a devil would enter, then it would also kill and took away his children's soul too; hence, he had to stand by temerity and it became mandatory for him to go out in order to leave his children in the protected shelter.

He was out; awake, in full conscious, he swivelled eyes and began studying the things and items of importance to them in the daylight, all lay cold and silent. He had broken the oath of the island and trampled over the ancestor's belief of daylight. He would be dead soon like his wife and half-born infant. With a gust of courage, he furtively walked a few yards ahead and stood nearby a barn. The dark clouds were scudding by and the moon was shining in utmost youthfulness. It was a splendid feeling to be beneath the sky, which was pleasant and mild, and in glances looked magnificent at night. What necromancy kill tribesmen who remain awake at night, he thought. What could be the mystery behind it? While pondering, he was walking towards the seaside, there the entire shoreline was basking in the exquisite moonlight, and the roaring tides were overlapping and tumbling down at the beach line, though the tides had silent and placid serenity. He loved it, this part of the universe, or nature. He didn't find anything horrid about night and darkness. The shore was empty, white and splendid to his sight and senses. He sat down in trepidation and still thought that he might be dead by morning.

The last spell of the night had been traversing; it could be felt by seeing at the sky, there was lightness around the edges of the horizons. He had to wait for the dawn, for the early sun, its rays, and the morning and the liveliness of the tribal people. Still, the fear had not shredded off him, hence, he didn't attempt to sleep, as he also wanted to see what could come next. He remained seated on the shinning shore. First, the dawn cracked and his heart filled with greatest hope. Then, the first ray of the sun, subsequently, he had seen the sunrise too. The morning was around him, over him. Nothing happened to him, he was alive, and nobody touched, tortured and haunted him. The night came and passed over him. The tribal activities resumed in the morning, nobody astonished at him as nobody even had the faintest of faintest notion that he was all awake in the just departed night. He found a few anglers; he greeted them dejectedly and sauntered away towards the densest part of the island, in search of solitude where he could weep and mourn over his deceased wife and half-borne infant who died because of a false belief.

## 9. The Flight

Sometimes, mythological quotes can mislead or equally have the ability to confound any dogmatist. I have heard and read that life's biggest enemy is fear, the constant fear. Now and then, we move, walk, run or play but the fear factor does not leave us at any moment, although it can be faded and vanished away temporary, as the situation arise the fear surfaces without any prior hesitation. Faith and fear are the two paradox beliefs; surprisingly exist at the same time, and in the same heart. I have gone through a word list, fear list, the words which aptly describe the specified humans among nyctophobia, fear such as hydrophobia, claustrophobia and so on.

Well, I didn't know since when an unnecessary fear settled in my subconscious mind. I am afraid of airplanes, when I am matured to travel alone in the flights. I am afraid being in the air, without surface for many hours. Among all forms of journey, I have categorized air journey the most convenient, aptly fast and risky too. I had meagre knowledge about the airplanes until I completed schooling. And, then journeying through airplanes attributed huge wealth and royal class, once my father's allotted guarters was quite near to a huge airport. Every day, I would spot silver shining huge airplanes over my head. So close that I could count their tyres. And, could clearly felt the chilling sound of sideway engines which would cause rattling in our quarters' windows. I learned their frequencies and would often go on the roof and wait for huge airplanes to pass over my home's roof. But, then I wasn't aware of the term called *air-crash*. And interestingly father had substantial knowledge about planes and routes and related topics but he never spoke on *air-crash* or *plane crash*.

I traveled by bus and train all my life. The air planes once were objects of fancy and curiosity now become a horrid topic for my thoughts and I often imagine a plane crashing and instantly killing all the passengers without leaving any trace of their identity and soul. And I know that in coming time, when I have to travel to the world's most places for work or other purposes then I have to take long flights, the flights which fly more than 8-9 hours continuously. I often think that no matter how serious is the accident by a bus, train, or car I have the ability to survive and escape but when it comes to planes, no option at all. Still I think that that depends upon the situation too. If a plane is going to crash while landing or takeoff then I would never die, my spirits would never allow me for a cheap and immature death but if the plane is thousands of feet above the earth and vertically stalling to the surface then only soul could be released not the body. I heard and read that there were cases in which planes had been crashed onto the jungles and ocean and a few managed to survive. I am dispassionate about those sorts of accidents though it adds a star on the destiny if one manages to survive but I am least interested. I would live on a simple destiny, free from accident oriented tales.

In an utmost urgency, the day had been fixed for me by myself. I had had to reach Delhi; I crippled a lot for

the same day's train for Delhi but couldn't find a single on the track. I didn't inform anyone about the journey that had been decided. I sneaked out of the flat secretly and took the late night bus and reached Mumbai airport at wee hours. I hadn't slept last night. It was very much different from railway or bus station. However, it was crowded, the crowd, the mass was well dressed and liberty had been lurking from them. Many of the youngsters were lying on the floor and earphones were plugged into their ears, connected to different sorts of pleasure giving gadgets, such as laptops, iPods and radios.

To ease myself, to get the experience of being there, first time in my life, I drank tea in a disposable cup. Many airhostesses had been sophisticatedly walking with a rolling luggage suitcase in one of the hands. It was a domestic airport, hence, the complexion and quality of airhostesses wasn't of that beauty standards. Without make-up and attire, they could be easily faded away among normal girls. I had been looking at my ticket repeatedly and the focus was on the departure time that was at 6.45. Hence, I could not sleep at all. I was awake all night to reach at this airport. And, eagerly waiting for my life's maiden flight. Like a bird sure of her status and wants to fly in the sky to feel the god's most gifted power. God is a multi-faceted creature himself that is why he has created creatures for every atmosphere, climate and place. He has birds for air, reptiles and fish for water, and animals, beasts and humans for land. Every invention is inspired by nature, which is god's creation after all.

I was excited not for fun but for fear, the fear excited me. I persisted myself to think positive, to remain unfazed by the past news and photos of air crashes. The sun rises and the sunlight spread outside, outside the glass boundary, on the runway, where plans were parked like unattended cars. Along with other passengers, after the basic security and transactional check-ups I was in the bus, it was devoid of seats, steel handles hung overhead, attached to the ceiling and passengers were standing still, some of them had tightly holding the silver handles, not me, very arrogant in disposition I stood. Like an iron man of Hollywood movies, but it was sure that I was the only person who had constant fear of air crash while the rest were normal people. The bus journey ended in less than five minutes. Stood in front of the plane, it was a domestic plane, not so huge in length but height was unreachable, a ladder opened up and become staircase for the passengers to board on the same plane.

Inside the plane, it was a hollow structure, like a pipe, a broad pipe of water supply. The airhostess located my seat number. I took the window seat. The middle seat was empty and on the third seat, a fat girl available. She was quiet and seemed regular by flights: I sensed. The flight was half-an-hour late because of a delayed businessperson. The flight waited for thirty minutes for that man, the stairs closed upon his arrival. The airhostess insisted for tying up seatbelts, to cover up the window with an attached opulent sheet. I did the same as per her instructions, so did others. The plane began running on the runway, I felt the speed,

but I held my instinct, a strange easiness rose up in my stomach as the plane left the surface, elevated, and gained an angel in the air. The elevation ended soon, the plane was straight in the air, normalcy in the plane's ambience, and airhostess disappeared. The speakers welcomed the passengers and wished everyone a pleasant scenic journey.

I lifted the opaque sheet from the window glass, and profoundly read the emergency exit points. The seat upon which I was seated was a buoyancy seat, which can be used as a snail or tube in the water to float. However, I was busy finding something else; I gazed here and there, in and around but couldn't find any sign of parachutes. I couldn't believe that I am thousands of feet above from the earth and I don't have parachute. I assumed faith is power; hence, all the planes fly high around the clouds, in the sky without carrying parachutes. I put my head upon the window and gazed down at the earth from I had come. Nothing was structured below, only colours were forming and changing as the gaze was constant. The plane was at great height, the milky white clouds swarming together in charming cohesive way, all lustrous and pure in whiteness, even some of them had vanilla and tundra appearance too. The plane's side wings were cutting and jostling the clouds, unharmed clouds. I was seated at the wing-side seat, the direction changes, the wings tilted and the movement in the plane felt. I was mesmerized to find myself at such a height. I was afraid of height since my early days, I feared while peeping down from the tall roofs. Here, I was enjoying, a captain's voice comes

into life, and he informed that we have been flying 5000 feet above. The weather outside is pleasant: clear sky, full of healthy and charming clouds. I didn't know when my eyes get closed while observing one of the layers of the sky. What speed the plane was racing ahead I couldn't guess.

After an hour or so, I woke up and surprisingly found myself in the airplane in a safer flight. Till now nothing has happened, no turbulent, no disturbed movement felt by plane. Now, the plane was over the landscapes of Ahmadabad, brown hills, connected hills, a faded patch of greenery, but it was very short; however, the other landscape was brown and seemed deserted, devoid of forest and buildings. And among the absolute brown territory I found a serpentine structure of blue and it was a river, although visible from plane hence I assumed that it was a broad river, capable to support any emergency landing. I had often heard that during emergency most of the planes land on the water bodies. If this plane may crash just over this territory then there are chances that pilot land on that river, or may land at Ahmadabad airport. Hence, here is the solution for this flight and I was certain that death couldn't trap me. It was nothing but fear. The plane wasn't full of passengers, the heads were countable. The plane landed at Ahmadabad airport, I was shifted to the other plane, which was flying to Delhi, and it was very much full unlike the previous plane. This time also lucky to get the window seat, the plane took off soon, in the plane the passengers were chirping about. The passenger who was seated ahead me, got involved in a trifle confrontation with a

beautiful airhostess. The plane achieved great height, no river; any specific landmark could not be seen on the earth. However, the clouds were same and still charming. Racing all the time, like vapours, running hurriedly and carelessly. The sunrays were still slant but grown sharp, it was a day in summer; I covered the window with the opaque sheet. I felt the stall, and sensed that plane is going down, its movement can be felt, there was little turbulence but I had grown enough positive till now. The journey was about to end, the plane has to come to the lower height. Now, I removed the opaque sheet and the visibility was very clear and the plane was circling over Delhi, I spotted a very dirty river and I named it as Yamuna River, the slum dwelling around it. From overview, from the plane the city was a vast cluster of buildings and homes, the buildings weren't even tall, it were in variations. Huge dissimilarity but as the plane fall more down, a very tall building caught my attention and I instantly thought what would happen if the plane collided with that tall building. Certainly mind is a place of random thoughts, I laughed at myself and on my negative instinct. Nothing such happened the more I long for life the more I fear. After a few rounds of the city, the plane headed towards the runway and everything came into effect the real world, the surrounding world, and it was also the movement when I felt the speed of the plane inside which I was seated. The plane was running at high speed on the runway and at this phase I was the most relaxed and passenger in the airport. I was very sure and certain that even though if plane goes off the runway or collided with any standing plane I would survive with a

few injuries. The plane landed and I came out with a strange experience and thought to overcome my air crash fear, as I have to travel a lot in planes.