

## Heaven in Fire

(Flames of vengeance and burning souls)

Miangul Abdullah

## ***PART - I***

Journey through Terror

(Under the shadow of death)

## Turning point in my life

Hapless, I reached the school gate. It was still early, even earlier than the gatekeeper would believe it.

“You are so early”, he asked me in surprise! “There is well over half an hour left in ringing the bell for Assembly”, he added.

“It’s my first day”, I simply replied, “therefore I tried to come early.” “I thought it will take me a long time to reach the school, as I had no view of the distance in my mind”, I tried to explain.

“Where do you come from”, he asked?

“Shahi Abad”, I answered.

“Shahi Abaad”, he dragged the last word while staring at me. From his looks he seemed a gatekeeper less and detective more.

“So, you live near Imam Dherai.”

“Yes.”

“Where do you offer your Friday Prayer”, he asked to my amazement over such an irrelevant question?

“Ofcourse in the Masjid of our Mohallah”, I replied.

“But the people of your area offer their Friday Prayer in Imam Dherai Markaz under the leadership of Mulla Fazlullah”, the leader of Tehreek-e-Taliban Swat (TTS) and then Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

“Not all people”, I said, “only a small margin of people goes there.”

“Do you meet Mulla Fazlullah”, he asked.

“No, I don’t remember I have ever seen him.”

“What”, he asked in surprise!

“How it can be possible?”

“Our home is at a distance of about two kilometers from the Markaz”, I replied.

“This is really a long distance. You would have to buy a plane ticket for it”, he ridiculed. I didn’t like the joke and turned my face away from him. Perhaps, he had sensed it, that’s why he had to correct his tone. “Sorry, I was making joke”, he then added. “Actually my maternal cousin, namely *Shaukat*, goes to Imam Dherai Masjid every Friday”, he continued. “He also lives in your area. Do you know him”, he asked?

“No, maybe he lives close to the Markaz”, I answered.

“I think you live near *Hamayun* sir home”, he asked.

“Yes”, I immediately replied. Actually sir was living in our neighbor. Moreover, he was very close to my father. Therefore, I readily accepted the challenge of this question.

“He worked as examiner here during the last matric exam”, he informed. “Before going to hall, he stood with me for some time. He is really a nice person”, he explained. “Give him my best regards”, he asked.

“Sure.”

Thereafter, *Kaka* counted some dozen names around our area and asked me if I knew them. Though I hardly knew about three persons, I had fully come to know that *Kaka* would not leave me of my own.

“Where is class nine”, fed up of his frequent questions I asked him about my class?

He took me inside the gate. There, he placed his left hand on my shoulder and began to give a complete profile of the school, even with reference to the entire area. It was only accidental that he came to the topic. I took no time in availing this opportunity and left him with thanks. Unfortunately, no sooner than I had put my school bag in the class, I came out again because of dead silence that made me feared. I silently stood, fearing *Kaka* may not start up again. Nevertheless, he was not in the habit of keeping silent.

“How do you feel here”, he asked.

“What should I say about it”, I answered out of a sheer dejection. Then I felt aggrieved as well as angry at my mother. She had deprived me of the company of my friends and relatives by putting me in this strange environment.

“It is your first day”, *Kaka* began, “that’s why you are so unhappy.” “It is but only a natural thing in a strange place. Don’t worry, you would find yourself at home here. If you have got a problem, straightly come to me”, he said as if he was the principal of the school.

“What’s your name”, he asked after a little pause, as if, he felt sorry over remembering to ask my name so late?

“*Uzman Shah*”, I had hardly finished when a school bus came along to drag my attention to it. Meanwhile, my eyes fell on a young girl daintily clambering down the bus. As she got off and turned towards the gate, I felt something like a magical effect to hide every other thing from me. It was as though the rest of the world had gone dark about her and the only light available was that of her face. She had captured everything, even my breath came in short gasps and my heartbeat saw a sharp rise as she drew near. It was strange, so strange. To me all that mattered now was only this remarkable girl. Though, they soon left, there was no way to get back for me. She had already reached my soul. The deep green eyes that featured large on the horizon of her beautiful face had straightly led me into the world of fantasy.

“They are from our area”, *Kaka* had, perhaps, observed my feelings. ‘I have admitted them to the school’, he proudly added.

“Which class they read?”

“The boy is in class nine and the girl in class seven.”

“He is my class fellow”, I asked!

“Yes, ofcourse.”, *Kaka* was even more surprised! “He usually comes to me after putting his schoolbag in the class. I would introduce him with you”, he had hardly finished when the boy came out again. He introduced us. *Daral* shook hand with me and then moved his fingers to style his blond hair upward, which fell again across its forehead. With this, his sea deep eyes shone like a morning star on his lovely face.

When the school bell rang, we went together to the Assembly and then the class. We sat on a vacant bench at the back, which I soon came to know why it was abandoned and took a back place in the melancholy of squeaked shakes around the various parts of its body.

Hardly had I made myself comfortable on the deserted bench when the teacher entered. Reluctantly I stood up and then sat with even more unspeakable disappointment on the inhospitable seat. Sir looked at me with dubious eyes, as if, I have done something terribly wrong. Nevertheless, he tried to avoid me till he had reached my name during attendance. “*Uzm...an Shah*”, he took an extra time in pronouncing my name. He prolonged “*Uzman*” beyond it should have been and threw down “*Shah*” from his mouth, as though, it has burnt his tongue.

After attendance, he asked me about my area and previous school. He then began the lecture keeping in view the time factor. It was Biology period, which lasted for forty minutes after Nazira. He gave us special attention, because we were new comers. Though *Daral* had come three days before me, still he was late, as it had been over a week to the academic year after the winter holidays in 2006.

With this period, I felt a bit relaxed. Sir had, at least, given us a sense of familiarity in this new environment. “How did you take admission here”, I asked *Daral* at the end of the period?

“Our local school was middle”, he replied. “After passing class eight, my father asked *Kaka* and get us admitted here”, he added.

“What about you”, he asked me?

“My mother had heard from my maternal uncle that Udhyaana Public School has got some best positions in the Board. So, she insisted my father to get me admitted here”, I responded. “I was very sad. But now I am very happy with you”, I added.

We had a good day. *Kaka* was also happy to see us together with him at the half time. He even prayed for occurrence of such joyous days like that. Whereas, his prayers were granted. I was especially a student on the dot. For most part, I was the first to reach the school, at least, in my class. The only person that came earlier than me was *Kaka* himself. But he also expressed surprise on my routine in the backdrop of our location opposite Mingora City on the other side of River Swat. Besides, there was no school transport facility to that side. “How do you manage to come so early despite such a long distance and without a school bus facility to your area”, he asked.

“Due to my mother. She would not want to see my name in the list of late comers, for which she often goes to the extent of throwing water on my face to awaken me from the gentle slumber of the morning. It doesn’t end here, each time she gives me in her lengthy lectures the example of *Atif Shah*, who is always treated with distinction in school due to his punctuality and position in the class. Unluckily, he is my cousin and one year senior to me. Therefore, my mother leaves no stone unturned to make me a model student, even more than him.”

With the passage of time, *Kaka* became addictive to wait me and enjoyed the hypnotic effect on seeing me, which was like a tranquilizer for him. He found a new zeal in him that provided fuel to his weak bones and gave him a new impetus for duty. Therefore, he regularly waited me like an old age waiting youth. However, the case was quite different, rather opposite in background. I came out at the gate to give a warm welcome to *Daral* and thoroughly received *Kashmala* for her single look. When she set her eyes on mine, I thought myself the happiest person alive on the earth surface. Thereafter, I only thought of those sweetest moments of my life.

Although we furtively exchanged eyes, *Kaka* had come to know about our feelings. Nonetheless, he tried to avoid the topic, but how long he would keep the secret under his thin skin. “You are lucky to have got a friend like *Daral*”, he broke out one day. “He is a good boy. However, you have to be especially careful in dealing with them”, he warned after a short pause.

“Why”, I hesitantly asked in a faint voice.

“His father is a strict person. He doesn’t want *Daral* to be close to someone.”

I would not bear this insult long. “What do you mean *Kaka*”, Therefore, I asked him? “I am not here to make ties. I come to study.”

“I think you took it ill. Actually, what I mean to say is that you have to be careful because you are different. The issue is that of...”, he stopped. However, I had guessed what he was going to say. “I know you like *Kashmala*. I have seen much unrest in you for her”, my head bowed down out of shame on hearing this. “There is nothing wrong in it, but you should be careful”, he said in view of my apprehension. “You should first see they have not given her hand to someone else. There might be nothing like such a thing. Still you know well about our society. There may be every probability, as the girl like her is often proposed by someone in their families. What I fear is that there might not be something like this. I have seen much of these things in my life. I mean if a girl is engaged to someone else, the issue often comes to honour killing and enmity. Hope you understand. I am telling you about all this, so that you may not commit a blunder that you may repent later. Don’t take my words for ill. What I am saying is for your good, because I am your well-wisher. I am sure; there might not be such a thing. However, there can be every possibility”, he maintained. “You should not mind it. Actually, I don’t want to see you in trouble.”

“Then what should I do”, I asked in worry?

“I think you should propose her. You should take your parents to them to propose her for you. This way the things will be clear to you.”

The words of *Kaka* had strongly touched my mind, so much so that I wanted to straightly go to my home. And as soon as the school was over, I straightly made my way to home and then *Atif Shah*, my cousin, to inform him about everything. At first he was angry. Nonetheless, when he looked into the seriousness of the matter, he was of the same opinion.

“*Kaka* is right. You should not take a risk. You should ask your mother to propose her for you”, he said.

“Who would convince her”, I asked.

“Ofcourse you. Only you can do it”, he responded.

“Are you crazy? How can I do it?”

“You would have to do it, there is no other way. It is the first test of your love”, he asked.

“If I do it somehow, and they denies”, I hesitantly asked.

“Then you should leave her”, he replied.

“It would not be possible for me, at least, I am there in that school.”

“You are there for study and not to make troubles for you or your parents”, he snapped.

I thought it would be useless to discuss the issue with him anymore, therefore, I got back home outrightly confused. I was in a strange situation. I made up my mind to tell about everything to my mother, but couldn’t muster courage when she looked at me. Hardly able to muster courage, when I told her about it, she explicitly denied. “I have sent you to school for study and not to like girls”, she said.

“If you are not going to propose her for me, I would not go to school”, I for the first time in my life dared to stay before my mother. She was blushed on hearing this.

“What!” “Are you mad? Do you know what you are saying?”

“Yes, I know well. And I am telling you once for all that I wouldn’t go to school until you have promised to propose her for me.”

“Are you in your senses? Do you know what would be its likely effect on your father, if he comes to know about these things?”

“That’s why I am telling you about all this, so that you inform father”, I retorted. “And if you are not going to tell him, I am myself dialing his number”, I threatened. Finding no escape, my mother agreed to discuss the issue with my father.

“Ok, I will discuss it with him”, she said in a faint voice.

“When”, I asked?

“When he has called”, she replied.

“We should not waste time. We should discuss it with him now”, I responded.

“These things are not decided in minutes. It takes a lot of time before one reaches a final decision.”

“If you are not ready, I am myself dialing the number”, saying this I dialled the phone number to my father. I wanted to clear everything before I have drowned myself. He cut the phone off and then called back after some time. I gave the receiver to my mother and stood behind to silently listen to her. Unluckily, she put the issue in a rather negative sense before him.

“This boy has gone mad, saying we should go to propose the sister of his friend for him. Look at his age and his talks”, she said. I was blushed over the behavior of my mother to despise me like this. However, I always found my father was a broad minded person.

“Follow what he says”, he asked my mother. “At least, you should see the girl”, he added.

Fortunately, the other day was weekend, so I informed *Daral* about our visit to them. When we reached there, I found myself rather happy. I was not myself when *Khanji*, whom I feared due to the stories I heard about him, embraced me to his chest. The feeling was so strange that I had to refute for the time being all that was told to me by *Daral* about the strictness of his father or what I heard from *Kaka*.

We had a nice day. The only thing that disturbed me was the thought of the fate of our proposal. “How would they react to it? If they denied how would I bear the shock.” Therefore, I only prayed for the best.

We spent a lot of time there. And when we sought permission in the evening, I looked at the sky for mercy, so that I may not hear something unwanted. “What did they say”, I nervously asked my mother on the way?”

“It all depends on *Kashmala*’s father to decide about it”, the girl’s mother said. “And *Khanji* has already clarified that he would not give her hand until she has completed her education”, she added in an uncompromising tone.

“You should have told her we would wait *Kashmala* as long as they want, but they should, at least, give her hand to me”, I asked though I recently abused the culture of giving the hand of a girl to someone before she is matured.

“I did, but she explicitly told me she has no say in these things. *Daral* father would not lesson to her”, she said. “You don’t worry; I would remain in contact with them. I would look for some proper time to discuss the matter again”, she added. “The happiest thing is that they have not given her hand to someone else, as *Khanji* is against it”, she explained.

Luckily *Khanji* loved me like a son. He regularly asked about me from *Daral*, who once joked that I have become their third brother. In short, our friendship saw momentum. It saw approval from our families. Our love, our mutual respect increased with time. There were fewer formalities between us. My mother talked to them on phone, which was rare but gave me a real pleasure. Yet, the issue of engagement still remained a far-off cry. Whereas, my feelings got intensified for *Kashmala*. I was now more than restless and would not wait longer. The growing beauty made me restless on each and every glimpse about her. So, I asked my mother to take up the issue with them again.

“I have already discussed it with *Kashmala*’s mother and she asks to wait till *Kashmala* has, at least, done her matriculation.”

“It is her decision. You should discuss it with *Khanji*.”

“What do you think; she would not have consulted him in this context. What she says is actually the decision of *Khanji*.”

“Look mother, I want her hand only. I can wait for her throughout my life. You should just tell them about this.”

“Why do you want everything done in moments”, she responded? “I have already told you these things take a time”, she asked.

“Isn’t it enough that I am waiting her for over one year”, I unconsciously explained with my head bowed down out of shame?

“Oh, I had not thought about it my majnoon (a legendary mad lover) son.”

“Okay, I am doing something, but you should wait till your father has come, as he is expected within a week or two.”

I had to take the bitter pill, yet I was happy as my mother had finally taken notice of my apprehension. When my father came, we straightly made our way to them within three days, as my parents were now more interested in *Kashmala*.

This time my mother put the issue before *Khanji* as greed upon after consultation with the girl’s mother. She had readily accepted it, when my mother told her about my apprehension. “I would not be hesitant to put the issue before the father of *Kashmala* for the sake of *Uzman*. He is like my son. His happiness is my happiness”, the mother of *Daral* said.

This was a difficult part of the scene, but my mother did it directly. Thanks, *Khanji* didn’t mind the offer despite his uncompromising nature, who loved his principles like a leech loving a human leg to suck blood from it and would never want to part ways with it. Nevertheless, he was quite different about me. He loved me like a son. So, he was quite polite to say: “Though, I have not thought about such things so far, as *Kashmala* is too young for such decisions to be made regarding her future, yet *Uzman* is like our family member. I also know you have earlier discussed it, she told me”, he pointed towards *Daral* mother. “Still, we would need a time to think as *Kashmala* is our only daughter and we would not want to take a step in hurry about her future.”

It was for the third time they deferred it, yet it was a turning point in my life. *Khanji* had, at least, expressed his silent consent. I was near my dream, which my mother also congratulated me for it. So, it didn’t matter we wait sometime more. Moreover, we (I and *Kashmala*) began to understand each other’s feelings from new depth, which we expressed through the silent language of our eyes.

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## *Unrest on rise*

*Kaka* was gatekeeper less and record keeper more. He kept the record of the whole area with him in his mind and narrated the things with a hurting skill by adding his own predictions to it. I was especially the worst victim of his predictions, as he anxiously looked forward to my way to tumble out everything regarding the situation, which he stored for me from various channels.

The F.M Radio that was set up in 2004 by *Mulla Fazlullah*, the leader of Taliban, was his favourite channel. He regularly listened to the religious sermons aired by the station that initially carried a tinge of emotion with interpretations from the Holy Quran. The radio broadcasts gradually spread to far-off areas, which thousands of people used to listen to it with great veneration after their night prayers.

Harnessing the air waves like this brought some reforms to the society. Many disputes were resolved. Women were ensured property rights in some cases, as given to them by Islam but unfortunately denied by the people on one plea or the other. People were granted prompt justice in many cases. As such, Mullah Fazlullah became a true leader of Islam. The people gave donations to Taliban. The illiterate women of the region even donated their gold jewelry to build Imam Dheri Markaz, a religious seminary on the bank of River Swat.

Regrettably, the twitters faltered. The FM radio channels began to broadcast fiery speeches denouncing education for girls, the prophylactic anti-polio drops, music shops, and the pro-American policies of President Pervez Musharraf, especially after the Pakistan's air strike on a religious seminary in Bajaur Tribal agency on *October 30, 2006*, which the people believed was carried out by U.S forces, killing 82 people including its administrator *Maulvi Liaqat Ali*, who was reportedly a close associate of Mula Fazlullah. After the incident, Fazlullah openly embarked on a campaign arousing the people to join him in fight against the invading U.S forces and its allies.

When the Pakistan government launched Operation Silence against the Hafsa Seminary in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad in July 2007, Maulana Fazlullah seized it as an opportunity to strengthen his support base and called on the people to take arms and fight the U.S and its allies. *Kaka* endorsed the stance, saying the Pakistani Government is on the way to promote the agenda of anti-Islamic forces. He bitterly criticized the Government for attacks or allowing the attacks on the religious seminaries.

“The United States has economic and strategic interests in the region and the Pakistani Government wishes to protect these interests”, *Kaka* quoted from various sources.

The people were confused about these things, however. There was a strange situation. President Bush said Al-Qa'ida's war is against American freedom and democracy while Al-Qa'ida and Taliban said the U.S war on terrorism is actually a war against Islam. Whereas, the nationalist forces thought that the aim of the current war is genocide of the Pashtun (ethnic Afghan) people.

The ideological foundations of the crisis also led to religious political party alliance. Mutahida Majlas-e-Amal (MMA) won a landslide victory in the elections by exploiting anti-American sentiments in Baluchistan and North-West-Frontier Province.

Nevertheless, when the explosive detonations in the girls's choos, shops selling CDs, and suicide attacks on police and security forces became the order of the day, the situation rendered the area a virtual hell, where fear prevailed. Now the locals had serious reservations. The public opinions also saw drastic changes. The people said the government has proved itself unable to nip the evil in the bud.

“First they allowed Maulana Fazlullah to recruit and train people. He was a minor leader then, but the government allowed him to become a monster. Now they are not able to rein in him”, the frightened, lost, and utterly confused people of the area said. Some of the people thought the war is against the people and their resources just to promote the capitalist interests.

People were now living in tight circles, orders and commands, standing off a few paces and listening in pauses. The face up was everywhere. On one side, the dread spread with visible blood claws and teeth of the Death Circle, which was enhancing its power, even since the start of the most frantic time to have ever witnessed by the people. On the other hand, *Daral* and *Kashmala* were absent. I wrote application for *Daral*, as I knew about his mental health condition. However, on October 22, 2007, when I called him on phone as usual in the evening to enquire after his health, it was attended by *Adnan*, his elder brother. “How is *Daral*”, I straightly asked him?

“What has happened to him”, he reacted to my surprise?

“He is ill”, I responded.

“He is alright, but doesn’t want to go to school. When it is morning, he tells my mother that he is not feeling well, that’s enough. Thereafter he carries on with his routine as usual, even regularly plays cricket. What kind of illness it is? And when I say something, my mother comes to protect him, even from my father. He is not only playing with his life, but also *Kashmala*. Inform the principal about it.”

“How it can be possible”, I thought in confusion. “Perhaps, *Adnan* was exaggerating the matter or said so in emotional streak of mind.”

However, the next day in the evening his mother herself called me on phone. “*Daral* is not ready to go to school. He is spoiling his pretty mind. Ask the principal to make him understand to go to school. This way he would also have a change of mind”, she asked.

Here, I made a commitment that I would tell the principal about it. Nevertheless, the other day I was still baffled. When the teacher reached his name during attendance he stopped and began to count his absences: “So, *Daral* is absent again”, he asked.

“No sir, he is ill, he is coming”, I hurriedly responded to defend him despite all this, as if, it was a reflex action.

“Coming and ill, what do you mean”, the teacher asked?

“He was ill”, I said. “However, over the night his brother asked me that he will come from today”, I tried to explain.

“But he has not come yet”, he asked.

“Maybe there is some problem on the way.”

“Hey, the school bus has already reached. What has happened to you? Are you feeling well”, he ridiculed? And this was returned with a burst of laughter from some students at foolish remarks, so much so that I felt small and began to defend myself:

“Sir, what I am saying is due to his brother. Now, what is going on at his home, I don’t know.” The teacher was good enough to inform that he had not marked him absent. He showed me the attendance register and pointed to the dots against the names of absentees. “I will decide about their fate, when the situation is normal and I come to know that they should really be marked absent. Right now, I have sympathy for my students. I am sure they wouldn’t be absent without a reason, especially an intelligent and obedient student like *Daral*.”

“Whether, I should have said that *Daral* is coming or not”, I thought, “but there was no need crying over spilt milk.” I had already said it, and it was not for the first time. I had been telling a lie to save him since his brother clarified about everything to me and then his mother complained against him, yet I was too blind to see into the factual position. Definitely, a lie has no feet to stand. These things would be exposed one day. And if my mother came to know about it, what sort of punishment she would devise for me. Probably, she would say that I have set an example of lie for my younger. Besides, she would stick the name liar to me like a label on a bottle, which would hardly leave me. So, I was in a strange situation. Yet, I had to decide between the two extremes—to protect my friend or honour my commitment. “The salvation for me would lie in nothing but truth. I would no more protect *Daral*, no matter how dear he is to me, I would not tell a lie for him”, I thought. As such, I straightly made my way to the principal’s office at break to inform him about everything. The principal appreciated me for it. Nevertheless, the reaction from *Daral* was much more than the appreciation. At night, he called me on phone.

“Have you complained the principal against me”, he was furious to ask this?

“The fact is that I didn’t want to.....”



"I don't want to drag the topic, just tell me about what I have asked. Have you complained against me", he repeated.

"Yes, but I was forced to do so", I said after a little pause.

"Who forced you to it", *Daral* asked. I tried to change the topic, but he would not leave until I had to tumble out everything.

"And you believed them", he asked.

"I didn't at first, but then...", I stopped to think.

"Then what", he interrupted.

"Look, you should not take these things to your heart. They are our elders, what they do is only for your good", I tried to explain.

"If it was for my good, then why didn't you inform me before complaining against me", he asked.

"I, I didn't think, it would be such a serious problem for you. Otherwise, I wouldn't have dared it", I remarked.

"Nothing serious, but I thought you are different. I didn't know you would also believe in the surface of the things."

"Actually, they said you are not ready to go to school..."

"Yes, it is true, but why I do so. Because, I am fed-up of the bloody incidents, armed patrolling, frequent checking, traffic jams, the rush and crowds of people. The things have made me sick. Whenever, I see a crowd of people, I fear there might be some bloody incident. The strength seems to ebb from my legs and I feel myself being torn into two. Then there is a nauseating effect on me. You see what is going on around us. Nearly fifty persons have lost their lives and over one hundred injured around our area so far since the month of July. Why such inhuman things, while the perpetrators are let go unpunished. Why is there so much inaction? What is our future", he asked?

"Why do you bring these things to your mind? Why don't you try to forget them", I tried to console him?

"How should I when I feel unsafe, when the things have its adverse effects on my mind, how should I close my eyes."

"It is not only you; we are all facing the situation. But, life doesn't end here", I explained. You should resume your classes. You should not think of you only. What does your family want from you, think of them too? You should, at least, think of your mother."

"It is not only me; what I am worried about the most is my sister. I thought you would understand me, but I was wrong. Therefore, I would not let others decide my future", saying this he cut the phone off. I tried to dial the number, but he kept the receiver engaged.

The other day, I awoke with a cloud of depression. The first thing I did was to dial the number to *Daral*. The call was attended by *Adnan* and I didn't hesitate to explain about everything to him. He was very sad to hear it and informed me that he would tell about it to his father.

"No, no..., I have already committed a big mistake to annoy *Daral*; I don't want to drag the issue anymore."

"It was not a mistake, what you did was for his good."

"Probably, I went a step ahead. I should not have told the principal about all these things."

"You don't worry, I will manage everything." He also assured to inform me about everything. I kept on waiting for his call till the night. Now I was bored and contacted him in restlessness. Thanks, he attended the phone, saying he was going to call me, but it was late. "My father was much angry when I told him about it. Nonetheless, I requested him not to be strict with *Daral*, but to make him understand with love, as you desired. He told him that he doesn't make any difference between him and you. That he wouldn't tolerate any misbehavior on the part of him with you. He also told him that so far he didn't force him for school because of the situation, but now he wouldn't want him to stay away from school. Finding no escape, *Daral* had to surrender. He assured him that he would go to school from tomorrow. You don't worry; he will not be rude with you again. My father has explicitly told him that you are like a son to him.."

For me, the words were so encouraging that my eyes welled-up with tears. I began to wait for the next day with thumping heart. I even asked my mother not to forget to awaken me on time, though she knew better about her duty and was not in need of reminders in this regard.

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## *The strife*

Though strongly resembled in appearance, *Daral* and *Kashmala* were quite different in temperament. *Daral* was sensitive and emotional, while *Kashmala* an embodiment of patience.

The last few days were especially remarkable about *Daral*. During this particular time, he had undergone revolutionary changes. Therefore, it was only a bad experience to annoy him, as he was in need of attention. ‘I would apologize; I have already had enough.’

The punishment was severe, even more than the sin. *Daral* was related to me in many ways. He made the things easy for me. Above all, he led me to *Kashmala*. As such, I would explain to him about everything. I would tell him that what I did was always in his favour.

To the surprise of my mother, I had laced my shoes, when she came to awaken me as usual on six o'clock. Within half-an-hour I had prepared myself and seated in the vehicle for Mingora. In a little more than fifteen minutes, I found myself clambered down the vehicle at Nawakalay and rushing up to the Upper Swat terminal. It was still early, even earlier than my routine, when I reached the terminal. However, there was no vehicle on the stand against the thinness of traffic. So, I had to wait, which took me some time, before I had found a flying coach, directly on the way up to Matta from Green Chowk, stopped at the terminal's mouth to pick-up commuters on the vacant seats.

We were now on the way against the silence of the day. I was thinking of all those days I spent in lost faith and broken loyalty. I would come to school broken hearted, with my feelings were ill like the disease of my friend. Under such circumstances, it was but only natural for me that I looked at the disruptions—the most taxing time during which the Red Thin Lines, emerging out of the Death Circle, had spread fast to the North-Western and South-Eastern hemispheres from Imam Dherai. The Taliban's ranks had swelled up. Their important pivot was gathering massive public support by evoking sentiments. Whereas, the state of governance put a spotlight on the longest running insurgency.

“Which school do you read”, an elderly person sitting beside me asked.

“Udhyana Public School”, I hesitantly replied.

“Where do you come from?”

“I come from Shahi Abad.”

“Don't you find it hard to come to school in the situation like this”, he asked.

I was a bit confused over this. Thanks, another fellow beside us intervened. “What can the poor boy do. The schools are open, while there is no way out to control the situation. The state accuses the external forces are using Taliban to punish Pakistan, while Taliban blame the state for supporting US and its allies. In the worst scenario, the situation is to be fixed in a state of bloodletting, with neither side is ready to talk but depending on increasingly brutal tactics to win the dirty war. Both sides appear unwilling to break the deadlock.”

“If the government wants, it can fix the problem within two minutes”, another fellow jumped.

“Is it a joke? Sit aside the swelling Taliban ranks, the decades old deprivations of people are not only adding to the problem, but leading to a class war and deprived mindsets. It is due to these deprived mindsets that the Taliban are finding shelter in public minds.”

“The mind boggles how fast the fire is spreading. We had not seen such an aggression, where it comes from”, an elderly fellow asked?

“We have made the ground for it. We are equally responsible for all this. First we welcomed TNSM by Maulana Sufi Muhammad. And now Tehreek-e-Taliban Swat (TTS). We accommodate a thing very soon, without thinking about its consequences for us.”

“Is there any wrong in demanding Sharia. We can't be Muslim, until we don't believe in the totality and supremacy of Islam.”

“Indeed *Chacha*, but the excessive use and unusual practice of this system is resulting into growing local dissatisfaction.”

“Then what should be done, when the Govt is not ready to implement Shariah”, the elderly fellow busted out. “In stark contrast, we were always exploited, even since the inception of Pakistan, which came into being in the name of Islam, and then the merger of the Princely State of Swat with it, but where is Islam. We were even deprived of the Princely State, which practiced the system of Sharia to some extent, but there was peace, progress and prosperity. Can there be a system better than the one given by our Lord, the Creator of the universe.”

“You are right, but the abuse of the system may cause only unrest”, the young fellow responded. “That’s why, it has led to appeal to the Government to expel Taliban from Swat”, he added. “And if there is a military operation, you would see the devastations of it”, he remarked.

“Nothing is clear to us. On one side, there is the issue of Islam. On the other hand, there is such unrest. We don’t know, what is going on. O’ Lord, have a mercy on us. We are poor, we don’t know what is going on around us”, hearing it the elderly fellow sought mercy.

The mountains were visible. They appeared to be engulfing the parts around it. Whereas, the North-Western mountains ranges seemed to have been shoved apart during a vicious cyclone season, when the fierce river torn it distant away to make a widespread bed for itself. Moreover, the furious water hacked away the South-Eastern Mountain, close to its strong currents on the left with a razor blade to produce a massive defensive wall for its sudden swollen torrents roaring down the base. In the early morning this cliff looked like a vast black wall, but towards afternoon, when the sun shone upon it and shadowed the vertical indentations, it looked like an enormous stick of chocolate.

Beneath in valley a dull life was busy under the shade of death instruments. Weapons of mass destruction brandished among barbed wires and hideouts. Maneuvering their reluctant bodies to follow directions from their bewildered minds, people ventured through the sleeping cells of the Death Trap, with their legs unwilling to act against the wishes of their unmoving hearts. Pulling ahead, the scholastic community, services class, workers, farmers, businessmen and traders dragged them with visible signs of distress on their pale fearful faces. Similar to the atmosphere, the uncertainty prevailed among the people grew, since the day progressed the still morning light and they crossed the sleeping cells of the Death Trap undisturbed towards the upper and lower parts of the death valley. Moving slowly, they kept the wheel of life going on, though against their wishes. Some of them might still have had some hopes, but against the mandate, as everybody there was out of compulsion. They were not for making good fortunes, but venturing through the Death Valley for their businesses concerns.

Untiring in its endless search for death nominees, the day was gathering people to the Death Circle. Wild in its chase, it was knocking at their doors, breaking their contacts with beds, pursuing them till the last name written in the list of dead was brought to the spot in unrest. The wild chase was going on since earlier flashes of morning, when the Death Circle received the daylight with a strong note and waited for dawn to get full. Its face was blemished with every touch of light. The sunlight parted the ferns and the haze vanished from ranges, left and right, as the cloudless sky changed to a blue, then became lighter and more brilliant the higher the sun rose above the barren, splintered summits of the mountains and hills. The morning light was strong now with a mixture of rose and purple and growing warmer. It spilled over the barrier reefs of the mountains and flooded the walls of the houses merging with dull browns and reds of the plains.

All the preparations were complete. The fingers were on the triggers, and the eyes at aim. The planes were circling above, and it seemed they were flying up the road, heralded by a rattle of bullets glancing off the road surface in search for us. No doubt, the day was heavy. There was a high depression, which swayed around the ground, the mountains, and the sky. The glistening surface of the water was like a glossed sheet of silver in the early sunshine, so bright that it was impossible to rest a gaze on it. Everything had become a part of a new disastrous reality, disastrous because the people did not want it and they could not control it. Thus, they were simply baffled.

How near I was to my dream, I had strong feelings. Suddenly, the driver stopped the vehicle and asked us to get off. It went so wrong with one of the commuters that he had to meet the leftover deficiency. “Get back, what do you mean”, he asked?

“Didn’t you hear”, the driver responded? “The situation is not good, and I want to get back”, he repeated.

“But what about us”, he asked.

“You should hire some other vehicle”, the driver replied.

“Why to hire another vehicle, when we have already paid you up for Matta.”

“I am giving you all of your fare back.”

“The matter is not of fare, how we would go if you leave us here in the middle of the way like this.”

“Wait here for some other vehicle, but now get off, so that we may leave”, the driver snapped.

“It isn’t fair; you have a commitment to take us to Matta. If you weren’t coming, you should have decided about it at Mingora.”

“I am not in the knowledge of unforeseen things. I was not aware the situation would be so serious today.”

“Hey, the situation is worse here for the past many days, but the road is open. You can get back after taking us to our homes.”

“Look, don’t disturb me; I don’t want to argue with you. I am not going, that’s enough. Now get off”, the driver snapped.

“Is it a joke? How can you leave us in the middle of the way”, he explained with a silent approval from other people.

“Who are you to force me for going”, the driver asked.

“Don’t waste your time in useless talks, take a turn and go”, the conductor who was attentive to the quarrel said at this.

“Who are you to interfere, when I am already talking with your driver”, the commuter asked.

“I am the owner of this vehicle and it depends on me if I am going or not”, the conductor broke out.

“Right now, we are the owners. We have given you a fare and you have the commitment to take us there to our destinations.”

Over this, the enflamed conductor stood up, got hold of the arm of the commuter, tried to pull him out, when he, the young man of about thirty years came forward with such a devastating blow that it seemed literally to lift him into the air. Then, it came to the conductor leveling the first moved forward with a singular speed, a sharp jab to the side of the commuter’s face which imbalanced him. The driver jumped down to the help of the conductor. However, another young man got to the support of the commuter and held the driver.

The two barbarians were out now and continued to circle one another. They resorted to pummeling with blows after blows, until they fell backward onto the granite body of the earthen floor, with the blood spelling their noses and mouths. They no more revealed resemblance to humans. They were rather like half butchered animals in a slaughter house. Exchanging blows of equal devastation, they had exhausted them and could scarcely stand; yet summoning energy from some place not sparing a chance to land blows over one another, even among the intervening people till their movements were so erratic that they appeared inebriated. The drama continued, till the elderly person had gone out of temper and cried out in hypertension. “Shame on you”, he said in anger. “Look at the situation and your acts”, he added. “Instead of seeking the mercy of Allah Almighty and weeping for your sins, you are resorting to quarrel in the situation like this.”

Fortunately, another vehicle from Matta was back from Mingora, with only three passengers in it. Seeing the crowd of the wane looking people, the driver stopped it. The people were crammed into it, except we four as the vehicle was full to the brim. The other three, including an elderly fellow, were colleagues and I was alone. However, I found a special attraction in the elderly person and closely followed him.

Unknown to each another, we tramped on and on, as we didn’t expect vehicles being almost on a walking distance from there. Drowned in deep thoughts, I closely followed the strangers. They didn’t give me a slight attention, however, till we felt a bit relaxed after crossing the dangerous bend and the furtive glances were over. The elderly fellow drew even to introduce him with me. His name was *Mamjan*, popularly known as *Mamo*. He had contracted a building in the vicinity of our school. Though Friday was off but due to the worsening law & order situation he had sped up work on the building to complete it well in time, so that he may get his money in full from the owner at the completion of the contract, as agreed upon between them. I also introduced myself, not knowing we would be a company in the vilest fate.

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## *Deaths on the way*

It was eight twenty two that I reached the school. To my surprise, I saw *Kaif* had come earlier than me, probably for the first time I could recall that he had challenged the writ of my mother, because he never came before me, despite the fact that his home was situated at a walking distance. Either he had come early or I was late due to the tragedy, but if my mother had come to know about it, I would have rather serious consequences to face for this unforgivable crime, inappropriate to her nature. She would think of some other extreme step, more severe than just throwing water on my face to awaken me from the gentle morning sleep, as she would not tolerate any lapse in my timetable.

Typically, I reached the school well before the bell rang for assembly. But in those days, there was no assembly, nor were the students punished for late coming. The situation had led to remarkable change in the behavior of schools managements. They tried to create a semblance of organization, favourable environments in schools. For that purpose, they had given the assembly time as a sort of relief to students and dragged the morning time to half past eight. Moreover, they had reduced the school timing by reducing the duration of the periods from forty minutes to thirty minutes. For many students, who were in the habit of late coming, the situation was a good excuse for them. They would simply tell the teachers that either the roads were blocked or there was checking.

Here, it is worth mentioning that despite these efforts, the number of absentees/deserters kept on increasing in each class, with only a marginal attendance reported in the hypertension. The students could clearly see that they were nervous and on the edge. They stared blankly at books and replied to questions in random, yes or no; lasting only to the sound of their voices. The teachers were no less behind. To their surprise, the words the books contained were not explicit enough to express the meaning it stood for. So, they were least concerned of whether the students were doing well in their studies or not and more concerned about their safety. Similar was the case with parents. They sent their children to schools due to the fear of being struck off. But when they they thought about their safety, they regretted over their decision, as if, they had done something terribly wrong. Thereafter, they only waited for their safe return. To them every inch of the earth between their homes and schools was a risk, which they feared until their children have not turned up safe homes.

Turning to the point, I straightly went to ask *Kaif Ali* Khan if *Daral* has come or not. He was a bit confused, as if, I had asked for a loan from him. “Is he coming”, he probed in surprise?

“Yes, his brother had told me that he would come today”, I responded.

*Kaif* was so pleased to hear it that he went out of the front gate to receive him on the road, without even bothering to wait for me. Yet, I also followed him in the same speed. *Kaka* was already on the lookout for me. “You are late today”, he asked.

“Vehicle problem”, I simply replied.

My heart was thudding fast, as I began to wait for the school bus at the gate. The wait was usual, but the feelings were unusual.

“Are you sure, he is coming”, *Kaif* asked me again.

“His brother had told me.” Our fruitless wait was ended by the ringing of the school bell for the first period, and when we saw sir was coming. I was outrightly confused and knew nothing ahead. *Kaif* asked me to come, but I denied. “You go, I am not feeling well.”

“Are you crazy”, he asked, “let’s go.”

“No, I can’t, you may leave”, I simply replied as I found myself at the lowest ebb. Humiliation had heaped upon me. *Kaka* drew his chair for me. When I sat on it, he was very pleased over this, as if, I have done a special favour on him.

For me, the things had only ended in hostile thoughts and maladaptive behavior. I didn't know what to do. Little after, *Kaif* came out to ask that sir is calling me. I was angry to hear this, as I didn't want to face the teacher. "What he says", I asked him in worry.

"I don't know, but he had already seen you. He asked me to call you, when I told him about you." Hesitantly, I followed him to the class. Fortunately, sir was good enough to politely ask about my health only and then gestured me to sit in.

My mood was still off, when I sat on the bench with *Kaif*. I didn't want to continue the class. I thought of making excuses for leaving it. Finding none of such one, I kept silent in a frenzy mood, with all my hopes were gone.

It was English period, but only in name. For the past many days during which it had been turned into a history period. The interest of the teacher had faded away from English and turned into history. In fact, we learned more English in Pak Study period than this particular one. Maybe it was also an historical mistake that *Wajid Khan* sir had done his masters in English Literature instead of history and *Wadood* sir in History instead of English. As such, the English teacher was more interested in history and the history teacher in English.

After attendance, the teacher came to the topic: "History of aggressive campaigns in our Country." It is not a new phenomenon, but can be traced back to decades' long negligence on the part of past governments, which ever strained the true concept behind the creation of Pakistan, paving way for establishment of extensive networks and injecting various ideologies into virtually every aspect of public life."

"Why it is so in Swat Valley", one of the students asked.

"Because of the system. Soon after its merger with Pakistan in 1969, the people of Swat were introduced with a system, based on economic instability, lack of political empowerment, violation of public socio-cultural rights, corruption and inefficient judicial system. They were especially tired of the legal and judicial system that swept aside the system of Sharia law, which remained in force to some extent during the princely state. Failure of the Pakistani state to tackle the various issues in a timely manner created a political confusion, which became an unhealthy precedent, as with these gaps, the religious groups found an opening for their agendas.

*Sufi Muhammad*, an activist of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), followed the situation closely. After returning from successful Afghan Jihad in late 1980s, he was more convinced of his religious ideals. He decided to quit JI in 1981, while issuing a decree declaring that religious political parties and politics of votes are unlawful and contrary to Islamic principles. With the objective of enforcement of Sharia, the TNSM started gathering strength in the suburbs of Mingora and Matta. Its leadership tapped the much cherished desire of the people for instant legal relief by promising promulgation of Sharia law. The outfit while rejecting democracy as 'un-Islamic' demanded the enforcement of Islamic judicial system. The organization operated primarily in tribal belt, such as Swat and the adjoining districts. Though well established in NWFP, it had limited success in expanding its activities beyond the tribal areas. It had a substantial support in Malakand and Bajaur and included the activists that fought in Afghanistan. Its first major action was its strident demand for introduction of Sharia law in Malakand Division.

Within a couple of weeks, it took control of the area, including the government offices and the local airport, through sheer force and announced imposition of Sharia law. The movement spun out of control, when it clashed with the local Administration in early nineties to bring the whole administrative structure of Swat to a standstill. That saw an end in successful negotiation between the govt and TNSM for implementation of Sharia. Peace was restored after a deal. The TNSM sustained its support base during this period, however."

"When the US forces invaded Afghanistan, the TNSM chief changed its direction towards armed struggle against them. The TNSM organized a protest procession in Mingora on September 20, 2001, where the speakers called for raising a voluntary army in order to extend support to Taliban militia against the then impending US strikes. Thereafter, the organization sent thousands of armed cadres to Afghanistan to fight alongside Taliban militia. They were reportedly armed with Kalashnikovs, rocket launchers, missiles, anti-aircraft guns, hand grenades and swords. However, majority of them were either killed or arrested. Some of them, including Sufi Mohammed, managed to return to Pakistan and arrested. Whereas, the organization was banned in early 2002."

“Still having a support base in Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas, the organization resurfaced with Mula Fazlullah, the son-in-law of Maulana Sufi Muhammad, who came to the front in 2002. He established a support base for Tehreek-e-Taliban Swat (TTS) in 2004 by starting FM Radio from his native land and found approval in the long pent up emotions of the silent majority”, the teacher continued...

I was drowned in my private thoughts and couldn't remember what he said thereafter, even the bell went for the second period. I was physically present in the class, but mentally absent. Luckily *Kaif* alerted me that it was physics period—the period of *Nekzada* sir, the most dangerous period during which the students were not allowed even to take a breath high. We immediately took out our books, notebooks and kept attentive to his coming, because sir did not like a lazy student who stood up late. Very soon we found ourselves standing up with welcome to him, though he was the most unwelcomed teacher, as he never gave us our due right as grown-up students of class-10. But it was the temperament of private schools here to control students through strict discipline. Why should I complain it, when my mother was not ready to give me my due right as a grown up child. Sir gave us a coarse command to sit and begun the lecture as soon as he had taken the chalk and met the blackboard, which was cleaned so neat that one's picture or the reflected rays of light could be seen in it—because he did not like a single line on the black board. If he found the one, he took the stick first instead of chalk for sure punishment to the proctor.

I was at the end of endurance. I could not dare to suppress my feelings, so I put my head down on the bench. “What's this *Uzman*”, a severe command was followed. Thanks; sir didn't look at the stick for the punishable crime, because when he looked at it once, no power on the earth could stop him from taking it, which was in a way a miracle for other students.

I tried my best to forget about all those bloody things, which I endured so far, but the bereavement was there. Unluckily, I again found myself in darkness and closed eyes to regain some peace, when *kaif* whispered in my ear with a push on my arm. “What are you doing?”

“I am not feeling well...”, I had hardly finished it, when another command was followed:

“What are you doing, *Uzman*?” This time, the punishment was sure, but to my surprise, he again did not look at the stick. It was the second miracle, as sir couldn't be tamed by the situation, which had shaken things. He was an exceptional case in teachers, like me in students, as my mother would not allow me to be late or on leave, no matter what the circumstances were like. The difference was only that this fellow was like a dry twig, which couldn't be bended but broken by force and the principal would not want to force it to break, though he tried his best to bend the unbendable. While I was like a green twig and my mother bended me with little effort, whichever way she liked.

Here, I would like to mention the quality sir possessed and perhaps lacked in any other teacher and more fascinating to the principal, even for many outstanding students, was that he was punctual and industrious to the last point. He gave the best result about his subject, due to the fact that he forced the students' minds to accept what he thought, even if they were not ready for it. Nevertheless, the brains of the students had also submitted to the force of this particular person. They had come to know that they have no way out other than to swallow everything that was given to them by this particular person, no matter they are willing or not. That was also the reason as to why the principal was not ready to take disciplinary action against him, despite frequent complaints he received about him, especially from the senior students for his sternness and expertise in lashing, regardless their age factor.

At last the bell rang. The long period was over at 9:30 am to give way to Urdu period, which was our favourite period, not only because of the subject, but also by the easy going teacher. We were at ease now and I found myself a bit relieved.

*Rehmat* sir began the class with an Urdu verse. Then, he began to joke with us. The students participated with him and thoroughly enjoyed them until the unfortunate news, when the principal entered our class and deprived us of the joyous period. “The situation is not good. There have been two deaths reported on the way. Straightly go to your homes, and try to be careful on way.”

How the news went through me, but its effect was like a poison, when it came to join hands with the thought of *Daral* and my beloved.

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## *Panic & confusion*

Panicked, I was unable to think logically or act reasonably. Not only me, we were all so confused that we could not take a decision, till we had a reference point in our bewildered minds from *Rehmat* sir. “Hurry up for your homes. And try to be a whole on the way.”

Though my sense of betrayal had softened over time, I still had a mix of fear and guilt, when we left the school at 9:45 am. *Kaif* accompanied me to the spot. He was trotting shabbily, with one strap of his schoolbag had loosened free on his left shoulder and the other was crying over his right shoulder due to the burden of the books. Thus, his bag was jumping up and down behind him.

Reaching the barricade, which had been placed on the road to block it for traffic, we stood beside it. It was at 10:00 am. Suddenly, my face turned towards the Death Trap. “It must be there, the incident would have occurred”, I said in anguish.

“How do you know about it”, *Kaif* asked me?

“I had seen the situation in the morning”, I replied.

“Then why you came?”

“How should one know.”

“Why don’t you come with me, until the road is reopened?”

“My parents will be worried about me. Here, at least, I can think of escape.”

“The situation is not good, you must come with me.”

“Still hope is there. I am going to try my best to reach home and if there was still a problem, I will straightly come to you.”

“You should not repeat the mistake that led to the unfortunate deaths of the *Babozites*.”

“They would have given in to death in sheer dejection. Feeling thoroughly demoralized, they would have stiffly moved their heads to the left feeling with their arms extended towards their homes. Their lungs would no more shriek for oxygen. Leaving the world, blue drops would have tattooed on their cheeks for their families. Beyond the waves these spluttering men would have groaned, choked and yelled for help. Nobody would have noticed them as they groped their way in the dark. Unrecognizable they would be to one another now.” The cruel shots had chiseled away their small joys and pains. They had put a full stop on their movements. Their dead bodies remained hunched up in the dark corner of the rock, where they had gone to find shelter. The mercenaries had given them the punishment for crossing the Red Thin Lines of the Death Trap. The bullets shot, the river flew, the waves slapped against the hull of the river witch, the air caressed the mountains, the sounds continued. However, there were no more screams, no more shouts. They had met their end. “They would no more be awake on the granite body of the earth, with impatient and inquisitive eyes of a hunter, afraid of the power drawing life from them. They would no more think about safe exit from the Death Valley, which had now got a cruel Death Trap and grown-up Death Circle. They had now been added to the dead of the Death Valley, where the fear transferred to everyone stranded around them.” Remorse flooded through my mind.

The sun was well up. It felt more like summer than winter. The sun streamed in uninvitingly. Its yellow rays no more slanted downwards, but straightly fell on us. I was drowned in these when *Kaif* turned my mind to *Nekzada* sir. “Look sir is coming.”

“Oh no! What should we do now.” *Kaif* was going to say something, but then stopped as sir was nearing. Reaching the spot, he changed from love to hatred. Meanwhile, his eyes unexpectedly fell on us in such a way, as if, he were looking for guidance from us, instead of guiding us. But, he didn’t take notice of our presence. It was on the second glance that his eyes fell on *Kaif* and that was enough.



“Come here”, we hurriedly followed his command.

“What are you doing here”, he asked *Kaif*, who instead of reply looked at me in such a way, as if; I had forced him to the spot.

“Look at me, you the tail of dog, you would never be straightened”, another strict command was followed, with sir eyes were fixed on him.

“I..., I have come to drop *Uzman*”, *Kaif* hesitantly replied.

“Is he going to America that you have come to drop him at the airport”, sir ridiculed.

“No sir, I also wanted to see what is going on around here”, he replied hesitantly.

“Is it a thing to behold? Go to your home at once.” *Kaif* looked at me with searching eyes, hiding many questions in it and left.

How easy I felt in his company, but sir had deprived me of him at that critical time, when my mind was closed like the road. Full of anger, I left sir in protest and stood with two youngmen behind. The name of one was *Rohail* and the other *Bacha*. I found special interest in them. There seemed they had brought their whole lives with them. Their questions were simple, but the replies were strange and conveyed more than what they carried.

“What brings you here”, *Rohail* asked?

“Bad luck”, *Bacha* replied.

“I know, but what made you come here.”

“Come, not at all”, *Bacha* replied, “I was forced.”

“Forced, what do you mean”, *Rohail* asked?

“I am working in a Medicine Distribution Company. I have my orders from Khwazakhela up to Madyan, usually on Friday. Today, I was not feeling well and called my employer on phone for casual leave. He plainly denied, saying today's orders are important and I must go to take them. When I reached Fizagat, I found the situation was not good. I again called to inform him about it. Perhaps, he thought I am making excuses, as he had already decided there would be no slipups in the schedule, therefore, he he asked me to go ahead”, he aggrieved.

“I was still on my way to Khwazakhela, when my employer called me and asked me to get back at once. When I asked him about the reason, he tried to put me up, saying he will tell me, when I have got back to office. However, I had guessed the hurricane has finally hit; yet I didn't think the situation would be so grievous. It was here I found why he was so impatient in calling me back. Maybe, someone had informed him about the situation and he was regretted over his decision of sending me here. But what use calling me back. I had already crossed to the other side. Although I immediately got back after receiving the warning, it made no difference. You see I am back, but what can I do now. How pity to be poor and born in this area.” Thereafter, he added nothing more, although his long pent up emotions had come to outburst. Probably, he thought it better to keep silent. I could see rage in his large red-rimmed brown eyes, fiercely looking at the Death Trap. From his looks, it seemed he would have killed his employer, if he were only here. Maybe, *Rohail* had also noticed his anger, that's why he couldn't dare to ask further questions, but turned his face towards two other fellows, who hastened their steps to us as they crushed along to the spot.

The name of one was *Jawad* and other *Tahir Khan*, which they soon revealed. They were from Kabal. *Jawad* had told his colleague to go through Matta, but he was not ready due to dozens of check points on that side. But who can meddle with fate? He was now regretful, not only by his mistake, but also due to *Jawad*. He knew about his nature and tried to prepare him for his criticism, who squarely blamed him for his misfortune. From this, he reminded me of my mother. To me *Jawad* was now like my mother and *Tahir* like my father, silently absorbing of what he was told.

Luckily, the graceful arrival of *Mamo* drove his attention towards him. He was looking at him with such curiosity, as if, he was coming to a function and he were assigned with the task of receiving him, being honourable guest. Seeing me *Mamo* smiled and arranged his cap on a new angle, trying not to expose his bald head. He came along to shake hand with me in such a way, as if, I was his childhood friend. Arranging his cap from one angle to another, *Mamo* tried to smile and traded glances with people, like a politician on a voting campaign in his constituency.

Meanwhile *Bacha* asked *Rohail* about the reason for his coming to the spot—the question that I tried to put, but I was yet to take a decision on it. Hardly had *Bacha* finished, when *Rohail* jumped into his story, as if, he already expected it and was impatiently waiting for it. “I have a shop”, he began, “and Friday is off for us. “I thought of many things for the day, but man proposes and God disposes”, saying this he looked at me. I was attentive to him, as this was the demand of the time to engage you in some activity—to listen to someone or talk to someone—in order to push behind the thought of being stuck from mind. There was disintegration among people on the basis of attraction.

“With nightfall, my condition began to fall. Feeling irritated, I got out of bed, sometimes between six and seven o'clock. Seeing me, my mother began to prepare breakfast for me. Anyhow, at breakfast, she told me that my sister was still ill. I tried to console her that she is under treatment and it takes time in recovery. But she would not be satisfied and wanted me to take her here for specialized treatment. Hearing this I was simply confused, but I couldn't dare say it to my mother, seeing her worried face. Hence, I had to accomplish this task.”

Reaching the terminal, I saw the traffic was thin. I sat in a Suzuki pickup, which started off much after its scheduled time. When we reached Fizagat, there was dead silence. I was so hysterical. Thanks, the vehicle had snaked up the painful journey through Fizagat and reached Sangota. To my disappointment, when I reached my sister's home, I found my niece was at school. I kept waiting for her. Meanwhile, my brother-in-law received phone call from school, informing him of deteriorating law & order situation and requested him to come to the school and get his daughter home. He was much upset; so much so that I could see the changing colours in his face. The school was near, so I kept waiting for his return. When he got back, he was so terrified that I feared he might not fall.”

“What happened, is everything ok”, I asked him?

“The worst has befallen”, returned *Akram* taking a deep breath to control his emotions. “What the public feared about would happen has finally come to happen to them.”

“What has happened”, I impatiently asked?

“The hell has come about. There has been two deaths reported and the road is closed for all kinds of traffic. Those who have crossed the Death Circle are stuck on either side.”

“I tried to get up, hardly able to help me to my feet. I am going, I asked as soon as I stood up.”

“How can you, when the road is closed”, *Akram* asked.

“I am going on foot”, I answered.

“Are you mad, how can you go in such a situation”, my sister intervened? “I would not let you to go, until the situation is normal and the road is reopened for traffic”, she asked.

“I cannot stay, you know well about mother, she would be anxiously waiting for me”, I responded.

“I will tell mother on phone about everything”, she asked.

“She is a heart patient, and you know well about her nature. Try to understand, I would be careful. I just want to see if I could cross on foot to the other side or not. If there was some problem, I would come back, you don't worry. Leaving the home of my sister, I rushed to the spot. Reaching here at about quarter to ten, I saw the barricade had been placed on the road, with a policeman on duty.”

“The situation is not good. Two deaths have been reported. Don't cross to the other side or let others to go, saying this he left. Since then, I am standing here to perform his duty.”

“Why don't you get back”, *Bacha* asked him?

“How can me”, *Rohail* replied. “I am the only responsible person of my family. Suppose, I got back and trapped, my mother would be looking forward to my way. Moreover, my shop will remain close. Hence, I would not be at rest for a single moment”, he remarked.

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## Wrong turn

With the burning sun, the heat of this particular day was mounting up. The flickering light fought the peaks to reach us. Moreover, it enhanced the severity and the mystery of the Death Valley by changing the sight and colour of the earth to make it a heaving plain of dull reds and browns that was sweeping from the ground like a tide until it poured into the hot wastes of the sun. Everything was blinding, the sky, the water and the sand. Each drop of water and each grain of sand magnified the rays of the sun by acting like lens.

The vast area between the cliff and the surrounding mountains ranges had been turned into a Death Circle, which was burning with hot pursuits going on it. The cruel spears of flame leaped around the Red Thin Lines and engulfed the adjoining areas, heating up the sleeping cells to vitalize the Death Trap. The riverbed that was stuck between them clung to the southern flank to keep itself cool against the coming disasters and provide a breathable air to the living bodies on its vast surface. On the other hand, the hot air, which flew around the valley, choked up the river mist, till it had lost its coolness and there was hardly a breath of wind left. The people of the area had also felt the pull of the sleeping cells, when they crossed the Death Circle for their various accomplishments. They saw the blood shot eyes of Death Circle, infuriatedly looking at them for traversing the sleeping cells of the Death Trap, when they crossed it to the upper and lower parts of the valley. It not only observed the movements they made, but chased them, until they were out of view along the rims of its spectacle and disappeared behind the rocky overhangs on the bends of the road at the lower and upper hands. That's why every twig that cracked, every rustle that made, and every bird call heard, made them thrill with terror to their fingertips, like an unexpected sight of a snake.

Like the humans stuck around in Death Circle, the imperceptible mountains ranges and impenetrable jungles on the summits of hill-topped lands—all were hiding behind each other from the bloodshot eyes of Death Trap. Probably, they had felt the heat of the coming disasters. They had felt it on the mountains crests, they had felt it on the grown up bellies of the mountains, where the hot pursuits were going on it. That's why, the anxious forests, covered by an array of trees, which were hectic in persuading the churlish currents of the winds to give up its nature and trying to add an element of softness with it to milden the severity of life on the canyons and the ground at the base, where the fierce water of River Swat had turned violent, showing its anger over the massive rocks, barren and savage and forced its way forward by fighting back the threat of the Red Thin Lines in its way. The throwing splinters of water by persistent striking and crashing against the mighty rocks revealed the story of struggle—the unyielding and vigorous struggle that was going on among the various forces.

It was Friday, indeed. Friday, October 26, 2007. However, I may simply call it a doomsday in miniature, as the day the dogs had stopped barking, the frogs had stopped chirring, the morning birds had stopped singing and the bells of the sheep had stopped ringing. They had seen the red eyes of Death Circle, which accumulated the heat produced from bullets and blades around in the region, till it had matured into a full-fledged body of visible size and shape from the scrambles of the past few days that had embarked on the beginning of disaster in the once fascinating valley of Swat, known for its natural beauty, past grandeur and historical charms, was now under the grip of destruction.

I was standing beside *Rohail* and *Bacha*. They were brooding over some misfortune, which their unpleasantly pale rather than colourless and skinny look in the ghost light revealed their agony. The trials had exhausted them. So, *Bacha* asked for exit from the spot in unrest. “I am not feeling well. I want to be off this bloody place.” *Rohail* seemed reluctant, however. Hearing this, his legs trembled and his bright alert eyes that were now sunk under its sockets glinted and his straight delicate nose above his pretty mouth grew tougher as though he were harboring a secret. Yet, he was thinking over the option, being anxious about it in the chain of shocks he had to consecutively suffer.

What a bad luck! Perhaps, he thought he would be back home soon. That's why he had a hasty breakfast, so that he might get back well in time before Friday prayer. As such brooding over his misfortune, he felt self-pity. Then he thought life is cruel. Self-pity would not pay to him, because it never pays to anyone. He has to be independent. He has to make his own way for him. He has to decide of his own. Having lost all hopes, the idea of going creased his mind. It was a turning point, which made him take the decision on the spur of moment.

"I think we should go", emboldened by anger *Rohail* said. The decision had lifted his spirits. It was like throwing him a lifeline, which stirred his interest and lifted his melancholy. Mutually agreeing, they could not wait longer. So, without consulting anyone else, even me close at hand, they began their journey to cross the barricade for the other side at roughly around 11:00 am. Strangely, I began to follow them despite knowing about the situation, which I had already gone through it. Whereas, the two deaths were enough to prove its gravity.

In fact, I didn't want to be left behind, especially when sir was there. Moreover, I heard two boys beside me reasoning over the issue. The one said to his other friend that why they should stop when they have already intended to go. He was still confused, when their third friend interrupted: "How long we will stay here. It is the best opportunity, don't waste time in thinking. Let's go", with this he reached out his hand to his other friend namely *Kaki* and dragged him by force with them. Seeing this, I mustered courage and began to stealthily follow them like a thief to hide myself from the furtive glances of sir. Soon, I found myself behind them. I drew near, as if, they were my time tested friends. Whereas, they were so absorbed in their thoughts that they didn't turn to look back. I silently followed them, with the thought that I had bypassed sir, the person we couldn't dare to breathe loud before him. He had separated *Kaif* from me that too with rebuke. I had avenged him. My feelings changed from weakness to boldness. I had succeeded in my attempt, which was to me an act worth congratulation.

In order to confirm my success, I again jerked my head back. A crowd of people was behind us and my boldness was gone, taking its place was that old fear of the cruel scrutiny, which was washed away by my escape. So, I looked back again to make sure sir was among them or not. Fortunately, my eyes fell on *Jawad* and *Mamo* with a crowd of wane looking people was following them, but sir was not among them.

Trudging along the river bank that bordered part of the black cliffs below, we were gazing hypnotically at the brilliant strip of the river bank. The waves were breaking against the neighboring cliffs and the sound produced was like a distant thunder, when the surf hurled the invisible rocks under it just below the water surface. Apart from the waves that beat, foam flecked, against the cliffs. The scene was silent, almost sleepily so, beneath the harsh burn. On the stretch of the road, along the pacific thundering against the cliffs carved by the river, pale and tempting, stretched endlessly waiting to carry us away to that spot of terror, where the outskirts were not visible. We were hidden behind a series of outthrusting cliffs, overhung with creepers, which slowly dwindled in distance down the bank level. The river bank was moving past our eyes. We did not speak, when we were tramping behind the out-thrusting cliffs. By then we had reached halfway down, where the path widened to form a sizable terrace under a rocky overhang which jutted out above the road, shading the ground under it. We were caught in the shadow, where a light breeze blew off the river; the humidity seemed less intense, though the sun had grown fierce. Feeling blinding in the sudden shade from the sparkling light, I stopped peering through the dark with my eyes adjusting to it. When I went ahead, there was nothing but fear, as everything had become a part of a new disastrous reality, disastrous because the people didn't want it and they couldn't control it. Though, I closely looked at these developments, I had not witnessed the things from such a close quarter, as it was during this time. Here Fizagat/Sangota, there Imam Dherai/Ghorejo. Here flames, there fire, with the two sides were hardly separated by River Swat.

Realizing his blunder little way off we had reached the dangerous bend, *Jawad* stopped. We also stopped at the fissure, once a waterfall, but now dried up due to environmental changes. Beside me, *Kaki* felt furious, too blind to see the way. "Let's push on, let's get back, let's...", he gasped for breath. He was too busted and broken down to think straight. He was out of reason. He fought nausea, but no use crying over spilt milk. Wanting to be himself, he touched the ground with his feet, but it was only his shadow restored to him. He had become breathless and frozen. I also stood in shock and despair. I could see nothing in the horrific details, but only the images of falling bodies.

Meanwhile, there was a bang, a split, a rift, a screech. There was smoke and darkness—the darkness that the light feared to fierce it—that overwhelmed us. Everyone was in fear, everyone in panic. Sure, fear creates adrenalin, which helps one do a job. There was no second thought, but only the word run echoed in my ears and the next moment I found myself taken to my heels with the crowd of people.

Terrified, we fled back tramping along the road with the dust rose off it like flour. In the rush and panic, we nearly fell above one another. Turning the bend, I could hear the running footsteps behind. Reaching the mountain residue, I fell down in the dusty grass in the ditches. Enveloped in the swirling dust, I was trembling. I had been plunged into claustrophobic darkness, with my eyes brimmed with unspoken disappointment. I could sense my depression and humiliation, sense my spirits and energies had drained away. I was in phobia all the time, only conscious of that mass of earth poised above my head, and I could not help wondering what was to stop it from falling on us.

Everything had happened against my expectations. The earth had caved in and the floor heaved up. The deafening roar reverberated in the confined space. Increasingly panic-stricken, I sat to my knees, dazed and shocked. Then, I began to retch, though there was nothing left in my empty stomach to void. I felt headache coming the back of my head and throbbing like crazy. Feeling crying, I gurgled a low moan. The grief started to flood through my weary and irritable body, as I toiled on with sweat streaming down my body. I tried to hitch up breathing. It blew away my will-power, while it was too much of an effort to move. Wanting distraction, I swore under my breath. I wanted to live. I didn't want a river burial. I didn't want to end up moldering in earth. I tried to become nothing, so that nothing could hurt me. I raised my sightless eyes and looked up at the sky without blinking, feeling me at the mercy of fate. I stood motionless and looked at the events with an odd disbelief. For a moment, a look of irritation clouded my face. Sir patted me on the top of my head. I for the first time realized why a teacher has been given the status of father. With this, the feelings of remorse came over me. Sir guided me towards the rock wall for some rest, asking *Lalzada* to take me there. Worried! I hastened my steps to secure a sizeable shelter. I found a shade and stampeded in the dark to console my body sticky with sweat. There was no relief, however. I felt a deathly chill stole all over my body.

“Don't lose heart, everything will be ok”, an aged person beside me asked. He also had a little boy with him, who came to sit beside me.

“What brings you here”, I asked him.

“We were on the way to the home of my aunt”, saying this he left to his family. With this, I felt sorry for them. Then I felt regret.

There was something dark. Frightened and completely absorbed, my memories betrayed me. Something dreadful had happened. More will happen, terrible than it; there was no way of telling. Anything might lie, then uncoil and strike in silence, in darkness. What I had learned was dreadful in itself and dreadful in what it had opened up about life that brought the vulnerable creatures into death. Then my mind took me to the Babozites. How they came to disturb the Red Thin Lines. They had either broken the norm of the day or they were more daring. Their emotions would have to wait; they had bottled up their rage. They had realized that only fast thinking followed by an equally fast action might help them out. Without considering the risks and dangerous results to their teenage lives, they were hell-bent on crossing to the otherside. How hard the hapless couple would have struggled, but there was no escape. The steep mountain walls could only provide support for their souls to depart in some peace on the granite body. The waves of River Swat at their front had blocked their way. The safety walls on the road were too weak to hold them for long. The enclosure at the upper hand had already plunged them into the Death Circle and the outlet at the lower end was too far away that their thoughts could hardly reach it. Hatred, madness and death had all struck them undefended. They were too weak to defend them against death. Their bodies were exhausted like an ill rabbit on its all four. None of them strived any longer. They had to waver in to the chain of attempts. The things had ended for them as soon as they had begun.

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## Humiliation

How many things I had planned for the day? How grave were my emotions for my love? How early it was, when I had got up? How hurriedly, I had finished my breakfast, with one cup of tea, unlike the previous days, not savoring it in the freshness of the morning. I did everything in rush, so that I may reach the school in time and not miss the chance to receive *Daral* and *Kashmala*.

From the sublime of the morning, when I had high hopes and expectations to the ridiculous now. Unfortunatley, I had badly failed to save the wrecked ship of my life. I didn't think I would see such humiliation, with all of my dreams broken into pieces.

Suddenly, I was struck with horror and a shiver run through my body. I could tell myself that I was in hot water, in a vulnerable state and just because one terrible tragedy had overtaken us that didn't mean another was waiting to beset us. Blood and death, the two words, almost absurd in simplicity, drew through my body like poison. This was the end of life, indeed. They were not nameless they looked on. They were dead but death had not made them unrecognizable. The similitude between the living and dead had made me hypnotic.

Indeed, this dark place seemed sinister in the presence of supernatural. I was so uncertain and thought if only I was not here, none of this would have arisen. But it was no use saying if...life moves on... what is to be will be.

Light breeze was blowing under the walls of the rocks. The sun was still hot outside, however. That choked up the river mist and added up to the suffocation. There seemed it was still summer, though it was late October. It was the heat, which no one could take joy in, as the moist and downcast heat hung close above the ground, even under the rocks, it was humid and sticky, when the wind dropped and the day grew hotter. Moreover, the heat that came from the burning bodies of the stranded people, choked up the wind that blew off the river.

We wanted to go on, for which we roamed around like unbridled and terrified sheep, knocking at all the doors of escape but failed to find an outlet? What a filthy luck! We could not go ahead, nor could we stay back. The Death Circle had submerged us. Thinking of going through the upper side was like inviting death and going through the lower side was to face death. Most of us were only few kilometers from their homes and the thought of being so close was driving us mad, because we found ourselves suddenly bereft, with nowhere to run.

*Jawad* was even more restless. He strode around striking dramatic poses with his hands on his head appealing for mercy, for sparing him from the spot in chaos. Then his pain, exhaustion and disappointment flared up in recrimination. The frustrated youth with short fuse began to snap; he made a fuss and was clearly aggressive, remonstrated. He outrightly blamed his colleague. "This side is dangerous; the police man had told you, then why you came", he busted out with his thin pressed lips hardly parting his teeth.

"Yes, he had told us, but it was late", *Tahir* snapped.

"Late, it was in Manglawar that he told you about the closure of the road to Mingora. "This way is short", you said, "and the policeman is making a mountain out of a mole, that he is exaggerating the situation. Now you see the situation is exaggerating us and you see the fruit of your short way." His white face turned red. He furiously looked at me, as if, he held me equally responsible.

At first, *Tahir* silently absorbed of what he said, but when the frustrated youth had become even more aggressive in his criticism, he had to finally outburst at him. "Hush this thing up", he broke out closing his dark eyes, as if, to retain his memory. "It was only an advice; I thought the policeman was himself not aware of the situation."

"How can you say so", *Jawad* asked?

"Look, I have no knowledge of unforeseen things. I wasn't supposed to know the situation would be so grievous."

“That’s why you took the policeman’s advice so light.”

“Eh, policeman, policeman... It is a daily occurrence, then why you came for duty. Tell me, was there any report of such seriousness, although the situation is always threatening here. Then why do you place the blame for everything squarely on my shoulders.”

‘Today’s situation was different. We had a chance to make our way through Matta, I had told you to go through that side, hadn’t I?’

“Yes, you had told me, but it was late. Moreover, I was not ready to cross the dozens of check points or bear the humiliation of lines on that side. Besides, you were also not aware of the gravity of the situation, it was only here you came to know about it”, he maintained with his cheeks were blushed with rage and when he looked at his fingers it were full of fine hairs from his thin moustaches, which he got hold of it from time to time and pulled them out unconsciously during his talks.

“I had better not listen to you and gone on that side”, *Jawad* asked?

“I think you have gone mad. But don’t make a circus of yourself, the people are looking.”

With this, *Mamo* had found an opportunity to intervene. “Stop this thing. Is it a time for such things?” At first, I didn’t recognize it was *Mamo*, but when I looked at him from close quarter, I saw it was him, but something was missing in him. I was taken aback and got worried over my memory. I was still thinking over it, when I noticed his missing cap making his bald shining head had totally altered his expression? “Don’t be silly, it is not a time to make quarrel or to accuse one another. We have to think of a way ahead. We have got to get out of this bloody swamp.” *Mamo* tried to arrange his cap. Unfortunately, it was his bald head his hand touched and he for the first time realized he was without his cap, which he had lost it during the mad running for life. Therefore, his tone immediately changed to a mild one, as if, he had lost his grace with the loss of his cap. “We have only got to think of a way out”, he said with a reluctant smile to hide his feelings.

But who could have stopped *Jawad*. Knitting close his eyebrows, he only changed the direction of his criticism. “How can we escape, tell me?”

Fed-up or sad over the loss of his cap, *Mamo* went back to sit under a tree behind. The spot was visible from the Death Trap, but a difficult shot up range if one was sitting. Strangely, the people began to follow them there too. I also followed and plunged myself beside him on a wide grassy patch under the thickening shade. Seeing me *Mamo* smiled. His dark good look revealed that this elderly fellow was a man of easy going manners and ready smile. Worried-stricken, I also tried to smile, but my lips hardly parted. I was really upset, thinking of my misfortune, I had to suffer since the restless night, and still suffering. Meanwhile, *Chacha* came to sit beside us after making his family sit comfortably with other females. I felt sorry for them, but what is to happen will be happened, then why to spoil one’s mind?

“Where is *Usman*, his grandson”, I asked him.

“There with them”, he pointed towards his family. They were more visible to me now. Maybe the shade of the tree had given a good clean-up to my mind eyes. The poor females seemed to be looking for some miracle. Indeed, a storm was brewing and everybody wanted to finish before it broke. The granite body of the earthen floor was turning into a live volcano and the sharp curved nail we were until this hour may not be hospitable long and could merge us into the Death Circle. The fierce paws could push it into the expanding Death Trap. Predictably, the Death Valley hid facts and dwindled the things happened on it. The only things it exposed were deaths.

Unluckily, *Jawad* and *Tahir* came near us. Seeing them *Mamo* was very much confused and would have changed his sitting place again, if it were not for *Gulab*, who accused *Chacha* for his misfortune. “I am here because of you”, he busted out. “I had told you the situation is not good, but you would not hear me”, he added with his comparatively short nose was about to disappear in the middle of his fatty cheeks.

“Things were not so grievous when we were coming”, *Chacha* hesitantly asked.

“These things are not always obvious at the start, they can show up later. There is always a carriage.”

*Gulab* was a driver by profession. Friday was off for him, but he had to yield in to *Chacha* request for Khwazakhela, as he was father of his friend *Sidaard*. But now there was no respect. It was a matter of life or death. *Chacha* could see rage in his deep dark, quick and vibrant eyes.

Nervously looking at the movement of his *lips*, this white haired heavy bearded man looked confused. The misery of the fate was that he had brought his wife, daughter-in-law, grandsons and granddaughters with him. The children were looking to his grandpa with frightening eyes. *Chacha* had realized his mistake, but what use. In confusion, he even lost his small grandson. As he realized it and had found him, he began to scold him for disappearing, ignoring it was not the small boy to commit the fault, but he himself for not keeping a watchful eye on him. Even so, it was a good opportunity for him to release his anger over his grandson than silently absorbing the bitter words of *Gulab*.

The fresh influx was from the students of PAITHOM Hotel. They got the news from *Wakeel*, one of the students, who in turn received it through his brother. There was no traffic, so they were on foot to reach their destinations. On the other hand, there was a full stop here. There was dread, there was curiosity. Everybody was trying escape, everybody was trying to know. They picked up bits here, bits there. They then put it all together and it added up. Some picked up bits in their own batty way; they had got it all muddled to make a story of their own.

With the passage of time, sir also became aggressive. “Everybody here would end up in mystery, I am telling you”, he said looking at *Mamo*. “No one will take responsibility in this regard, although equally responsible.” He put the blame of all this on the shoulders of the Government and school management. And when it didn’t satisfy him, he brought the parents in it. Whereas, he made me a stamp to testify his arguments. “Think of this student, he comes from Shahi Abad. Ask him why is he here”, he looked at me, but I was silent? Noticing this, he said again. “I am sure, he is here due to his parents. Am I right”, he looked at me with such an intensity that I had to confirm it? Unwilling I shook my head in confirmation, although I was more than happy to come to school due to *Kashmala* and *Daral*.”

“You should look at the situation in broader context”, *Mamo* responded. “There are services groups, who have to ensure presence at the station of their duties, as the state machinery would come to a standstill if they deserted. Then think of daily wagers, they have to face the storms daily to keep the hearths at their homes alight. Now come to shopkeepers, their businesses may drown, their stocks would go down the drain, that’s why they are so reckless. We all have to keep the wheel of life going on; it is the only way of survival.” He looked at *Katib*.

Instead of confirming *Mamo*, *Katib* began with his own agonies. “I had already decided I will not come, but he insisted”, he accused his friend *Nazar*. How I had been so foolish. If I got out of this trouble alive, I swear I will never let anyone else make me miserable again.” Sure, they had all got a new identity. The circumstances that followed proved his prediction was true. PAITHOM institute had closed its doors for them. It was no more meant for entertaining guests or teaching Hotel Management Courses. It was soon to become a strategic center for Taliban and then a model internment center, where the detainees from war on terror would be kept. During this time the study time will be over for those who are dead and the ones alive will be out of age for it.

“I think we should go through Kanju”, *Katib* said.

“Easier said than done”, *Wakeel* interrupted. “Firstly you would not be allowed through that side. And suppose you are let, how many flash points you would have to cross? And the area around Imam Dherai can be more dangerous in case of shootout.”

“Then what else should we do, *Katib* asked?”

“Wait my dear, till we are allowed”, *Wakeel* replied.

“Hey, who would allow you?”

“The high-ups will be trying their best”, *Wakeel* replied.

“I don’t think so. It will take days before peace is restored.”

“What can we do other than wait”, saying this *Wakeel* stood beside a rock and lit a cigarette? Smoking a cigarette, he had no view of the direction the smoke, only providing it an easy outlet. From distance one saw the wreaths of smoke curling about his head. Perhaps, thinking of an easy escape from the mouth of death, he let the smoke an easy escape from his mouth. In a short while, he had become a chain smoker.

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## Ray of hope

Having struggled under heavy odds, the stranded people had exhausted their energies. They were too weary to register a surprise. While it was now an effort to move, because they didn't think beyond their sufferings. Drowned in deep thoughts, they even ignored the Friday prayer, which a Muslim can hardly think of missing it.

In the dying hope, two young men came along. From appearance they seemed to have just come. However, it was not important, the way they came interested me the most. The enthusiastic and adventurous guys, with their muscular bodies and strong features, didn't stop for retreat, but inspected the whole area with professional eyes. Then they straightly went to the barrier placed on the road in the morning to stop traffic.

For a while, I thought they are going to repeat the mistake we committed that led to the loss of precious lives, but it was not so. They closely looked at the Death Trap and then got back to us. “How long you have been here, I don't know, but I may only express my sympathy for you. I may regretfully say that you have lost all hopes”, one of them namely *Fa'aris* said. “We have recently come”, he said after a short pause, “now what's more important is that we have got to get out of here at once”, he remarked.

“How”, *Gulab* straightly asked him?

“Look at the mountain”, he pointed towards the giant, “we would have to cross it.”

“How is it possible”, *Gulab* asked? “Look at these people, do you think they would make it.”

“We are forced. We have no other choice. We must do it”, *Fa'aris* responded.

“Suppose they agree, what will you do with the children, the females and the aged people?”

“Look at the dirt track, leading to the second last canyon”, *Fa'aris* said pointing towards it. “We can hire the services of the drivers to take us through the track. In such a case, we will have little way up to mount to the top.”

“Who would go with you on the narrow dusty road”, *Gulab* asked? “Set aside the nature of the track look at the immediate risks of using it. You see little way off we will be exposed to the Death Trap. Would the drivers be that mad to do so”, he snapped? “Being a driver myself, I can see the threats from here and if I give my guarantee, I am sure the other drivers will not be ready for it”, he maintained.

“But we can, at least, try”, *Fa'aris* asked.

“And what if they denied”, *Gulab* returned.

“Then we can take the way through the gorges”, *Fa'aris* said.

“You are a hard fellow, I can no more argue with you.”

“The matter is not of arguing; but of life-or-death. We have only got to get out of the Death Valley”, *Fa'aris* said. “And suppose, I get back of my decision, is there any other option with you”, *Fa'aris* asked again? Nevertheless, *Gulab* simply ignored this time.

“We should not waste our time, let's get out of here”, *Fa'aris* friend *Shahram* asked.

“First convince these people”, *Fa'aris* replied.

“They have already said what they had to say. They will not come with us, lets go”, he asked.

“It's not fair, we cannot leave them at the mercy of fate, we have got to help them at this time of need”, *Fa'aris* said.

“How will you do it, tell me. Can we force them, if they are not willing”, *Shahram* busted.

“We can try to lit-up hope in the bewildered minds of these people”, *Fa'aris* replied.

“Then don’t waste time here, let’s try”, *Shahram* asked. “Mere thoughts would not pay anything. Let’s decide our way and have a strong determination to be out of here. We have got to get us off this hell fast to a gentrified surrounding”, *Shahram* asked *Fa’aris*.

“You know, we are in danger and the more the time passes, the more the risks will rise. We have no option other than to make our way out. For you as well as for us there would not be the lessening of the accursed pain here. The danger is here hovering over us. The evil is here near; it is coming nearer and nearer. It is here in this place, where it awaits us. It is almost upon us. It can only happen here and that we can avoid by leaving this place”, *Fa’aris* explained.

“This is a warning, not time to lose, we must go. Soon it will be too late. We must get away from here. We must not delay. *Shahram*”, came forward to reinforce. However, he was out of temper on seeing the inaction of the people. “There is still time, he fell back... breathing heavily... no more. No more wait; that is enough. I have had my warning, I am not going to stay here anymore”, he asked *Fa’aris*.

The stranded people looked to one another, as if, the words were making room in their disconcerted minds, But they still lay. Dependency destroys one and now I could see what this meant. You can’t have your identity if you are dependent. But it is also dangerous to meddle with fate, to try to make the life go on the way you force it to succeed.”

Meanwhile, *Mamo* got hold of my hand and asked me to come with them. However, I stopped. “I cannot go until *Nekzada* sir is here.”

“Are you crazy”, responded *Mamo*, “you see the situation is getting worse.”

“I have already committed a blunder to bypass him once; I cannot ignore him this time.”

“I am asking him”, saying this he went to him.

Sir was sitting with *Katib* and clearly denied, when *Mamo* tried to persuade him, saying he was still unable to decide what to do next. “Besides, I would not be able to cross the mountain on foot all along. I would like to go with the drivers”, sir explained.

“The drivers have already denied. They have already excused”, *Mamo* asked.

“I know, but I hope they will come, as they have no other choice.”

“As you wish”, *Mamo* remarked and then silently left.

I stayed with *Lalzada*, who touched my hand in happiness. The impatient *Katib* was also with us. With regard to intention, he was clear but only to this level. Materializing his plan, his heart sank. Still in formative stage, he fell into despair. And why not, when the mere thought of the mountain made one feared and exhausted. He was also conscious that the more he mounted the more he would have the immediate threats to mount behind him, as reaching the second canyon they would have kicked off the mountain wall between them and the Death Trap. In such a case, they would need no enemy! It was like putting pigeons among cats. This way, he would make him even more exposed.

Little after, *Mamo* brought *Fa’aris* to convince us, as he didn’t want us to stay behind. “Standing between devil and deep sea”, he said, “it would not be wise to hang here. In such a case, we would be at risk all the time and our confusion would increase with the situation grows tougher”, he explained. “Most likely, the chance of life is there beneath the dark green jungle canopy of the mounts, like turtlebacks above Kokarai area of Saidu Sharif. Hence, we can use a little good fortune for change, provided we have handled it carefully. This being the last option, we must follow it. We must cross to the other side. It is a last ray of hope; I think you can understand what I mean.” Instead of sir, *Katib*, an over apprehensive chap, was making up his mind. He was, at last, ready to bring the option into force and jerked up to stand. Then again there was something dark. Maybe the dark side of his struggle exposed him to censure, which he may have seen in his death, when his soul has departed, before his departure from the Death Valley. That’s why he only changed his sitting place for another and sat firmly again.

“You would never relinquish what you salvaged”, *Shahram* said. “So much is at stake. Nothing will change, there wouldn’t be the lessening of the accursed pain here.” The haggling *Katib* had a reference point, with strain hoping to hasten progress. He mustered efforts to convince sir, but he had already clarified and was sure the drivers would go but didn’t try to force others, as he was not in a position to take their guarantee.

The breath of *Katib* came in short gasps, as he rose unsteadily to his feet. He was considerably shaken, but better than he could bet life here, where he did not seem to have much luck with anything at the moment, to hurry up. For the first time, he felt something like freedom. He was now going to live a little life of his own. Foreseeing the bad feelings, he knew he would have to take a chance, at least, to be safe from the shot up range. The mountain had given him that chance. If he did not avail this, it would be like inviting trouble at the spot, not a right one. Seeing him, *Fa'aris* tried to make another attempt to convince the drivers, this time without *Shahram*, maybe for the fear that he may not create problems. But seeing him *Shahram* followed. Whereas, the unpredictable and unreliable people once more started to have hopes, as they saw *Fa'aris* going towards the drivers. It had illuminated a new hope in them. They heaved a sigh of relief over it.

“Time is on the lapse. We are fast losing the chances of escape. What will you do, when you find yourselves in a position of nowhere to run? The time is not far off. It is a high time you can help yourselves and these poor people. Otherwise, it will be late. At least, think of those people, they have no one to help them, except you can take them out of here”, *Fa'aris* remarked roaming around to inspect the wheels, as if; he was looking for vehicles with lizard feet. “We have to cross the mountain, but I don't think we can do it in the limited time, we have got with us, as we would be soon in dark. We cannot cross the mountain in daylight. In such a case, we would not be able to go any further. At least, think of the children, females and elderly people. You have also your families, children and elders. Are these people not like them to you”, *Fa'aris* asked? “If you want a fare, I am ready to pay you your choice one”, he explained.

This didn't go well with one of the drivers. “The issue is not of fare. How can we play with our lives in a situation like this”, he said?

“We have not used this track before”, another one came to clear his position. You can judge the consequences in such a case.”

“If the vehicle working on the under construction road can use it, why can't you”, *Fa'aris* asked.

“Because, they are especially designed for it”, yet another driver intervened. “Furthermore, the vehicles are our only means of livelihood, we cannot leave it here”, he added.

“If you are not alive, what use your vehicles are”, *Fa'aris* asked. The drivers were silent and did not bother to reply.

“I had already informed they will not come”, the angry *Shahram* said, “but you were eager of your insult.”

“If we want to cross the mountain in broad daylight, we must find such drivers to take us, at least, to the middle of the mountain.”

“Provided they are willing”, *Shahram* snapped? We are already late. Look at the watch; do you know what the time is? It is going three o'clock, while we are still haggling here”, with this he got hold of *Fa'aris* arm and dragged him by force.

When the people saw the negotiations fell into deadlock again, they felt much aggrieved. Some of them even made dramatic poses to express their grief on seeing them going empty handed.

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## *Journey through mountain*

At last, the stranded people began their painful journey through the mountain. *Shahram* led them, as *Fa'aris* was a bit upset. Yet, he made an emotional speech before leaving, because it was an emergency and he had a better sense of it. Therefore, he tried to make the people better enough to glide over this awkward situation. “You must sense you are practical, reliable and never put a foot wrong and expect everyone do the same. It is the only way, which would likely save you from being miserable and enable you to endure the hard journey, sticky heat and manage onward shuffle. You must keep you going on; keep you covered up, clean and cheerful. You must try to be a whole and not to abandon the weaker; help them till the huge group has got its strength back. You should realize that nobody is going to be left. Move as a group, at a speed of the lowest person. No good letting a bit of wishful, thinking put every body's life in danger. You must cooperate and be on the lookout for each other's weaknesses.” I could see the movement of his broad shoulders and biceps solidly defined.

Undeniably, the length was high and the steep chasms of the mounts suggested the feelings of unendurable pain. Besides, the part of descent might be treacherous. They might face stumbles and falls. Whereas, once in dark and they no longer has the faint light of stars and moon to light the way up, they would not concentrate on their footing. They would be lain, breathless and afraid, under the weight of their bodies. For that too they would need a rhinoceros skin to sleep on loose stones and rocks. However, a drowning man catches at the straw. These people were aware of the politely inverbalized general opinion and each other's desires that they all wanted to get off, as they were put in a situation of life-or-death and they would instinctively fight for their lives.

The journey was long, but crossing the second canyon they would be at a difficult shot up range. In the exhausted silence, they would have made an immediate chorus of protest to this, but it was a matter of life, while the signs of which they had seen at the opposite side. For them, on the other side was freedom. Hence, feeling queasy, the people moved along the rocks. Together, they clambered up the cliff patch, which seemed to have become a sliding sea of mud. They slithered, they slipped. Eventually, they reached the boulder clipping. They jerked their heads round and then jerked it back again, as though they could read their thoughts or mentally reviewing the events that brought them to the site or they were still expecting the vehicles. With this, my eyes turned to the drivers, who were now changing from stubbornness to a mild tone. The people had hardly made up the floor of the first canyon, when their last ray of hope had faded out.

Fueled by the fear of being left behind, the confident drivers got into their vehicles. They also called us to them. It seemed they had all met to sort it out and were going to get us out of the trap, the one to outshine the other in taking us out. A wave of immense relief flooded the faces of the stranded people, as they crammed into the wheels. They had no belongings but an impossible happiness swept over them. They felt happy with a blissful oblivion. They had the feelings of triumph. Sir was right, when he said the drivers would go. From my close interaction with them, I saw if *Fa'aris* was a master planner, sir was a sharp observer. In a few moments, I had been of enquiring nature. There seemed to be something mysterious in my own background, I expected in others. I wanted to discover as much as I could. I also tried to think of those things that would keep me off the worries of the tangible risks.

We were now travelling up the dirt track, with dust rose off it like flour. The trail was shining like gold. Snaking up a lizard feet with the load of people the vehicles wended their way through the zigzag road. The breathtaking moments were over, when we saw the second last canyon to the crest and then found ourselves at the end of the track. The drivers parked vehicles and we clambered down.

Looking up and down the unusually quiet road, it was almost an unbroken drive at a snail pace, except at the sharp turns, which

lasted almost half an hour. Hopping up and down the people spread like a group of hunters at the sight of a hunt. I had hardly walked a few steps when *Chacha* called me. I got back to see his granddaughter was sitting on a stone. She was unable to move due to her high-heeled shoes, which had to be removed from her feet, though she protested it. Whereas, her mother was scolding her for wearing such shoes. *Chacha* wanted to give *Mehwish* a support. He handed over the shoes and purse to me. We began to trudge along the bare rocks.

Horribly stretched, the caravan of weary, thirsty and hungry travellers continued inching their way up. They scrambled up the steep inclines. They really whacked, they did not bloody know, although the ascent of this second last canyon wall was not that much difficult. The trail was in better condition than the one we thought. There weren't much loose rocks, and long stretches cut into solid stones. There were steep inclines but the footing was more certain. Only the turns at switchbacks gave us trouble. From there we would go up the shoulder, the back, and then up again and back until we were in a proper position for new incline. In order to raise our morale *Fa'aris* said, "we are in time and should continue our steady jog." Over this *Katib* whispered. "It is premature to say. Walk on time may mean the destination is not far, but that might be ten minutes or ten hours, anything under the day. And if the journey is not far, what we had to lose?"

Odd looking without food, we tramped on inching our way up the chimney until we were close enough to hack away some more. Dragging our feet, we made the canyon floor well in time, knowing anyone dropped out would be left. The young obviously had a lot of stamina, which might just take them out of this mess, but they did not appear self-disciplined and mentally strong. The elders steadily inched up their way, heaving up the slope like a baby elephant. They were trembling with exhaustion.

The condition of *Mehwish* was pathetic, however. Her feet were swollen and face red. The sweat from her eyebrows ran into her eyes and made it sore. The heat splashed up and down her back. Her strength and energy flagged and she looked awful. She was whimpering with pain, which gradually revealed itself. She couldn't take more. Her lips were beginning to crack; tongue seemed to fill her mouth. Her mind was sleeping and she forced her sleeping mind to concentrate on keeping the rhythm of jog, feet, hands, shoulders and head pulling against them. To her bad luck, she had injured her right foot. Poor *Chacha* looked confused and called me. I rushed to tell *Fa'aris* about it. He got back, sat to his knees and asked us to help her over to his back. I was much aggrieved to see the gravel under her left foot was blood stained and her blond hairs were stiff with sweat. The blood from the foot on the earthen floor had not yet formed a cake, a dark mud. Helping him to his feet, *Fa'aris* began downwards, braking against the thrust of the body which pushed against him as though it were a thing of its own impetuous will. He took a long turn and began towards the top. *Chacha* huddled up behind him like children. He seemed like he is drowning himself, and there is nothing he could do to save him. *Usman* took my hand. His vex-pale face glistened with sweat.

My shoes were loose on my feet as the flesh had shrunk from it. Tiredness had made me blurred. I rested and thought of my empty stomach. "If give in to my strong desire to eat and drink, I would not make up to the crest" Ravenously hungry, I got up again, when the pain returned. I rustled ahead and a moment later of the long hour of hard walking, I thought I must get something into my stomach.

Winching each time, *Chacha* moved his back against the bare rocks. His breath was harsh. He only tried to hear by-now familiar sounds of his sniveling. The sinews in his arms trembled with the effort. He was shaking and whimpering with fright. His body was rigid and trembling. His wife was in worst than him, with her tongue swollen, protruding from back, cracked lips, her eyes dull and sunken in their gaunt and haggard face, the backs of her hands were blistered, her feet and legs were red and swollen. They tried to warm way through like an animal at the approach of an earthquake. It seemed, they were wading chest high through a pool of water. Perhaps, they had got the touch of the sun, but if they gave in to their strength they would never get to the other side. Hence, they had to roughly line-up with others like ants to a mound.

*Jawad* still fought imagined horrors and looked behind. Damp and sweating, aching and uncomfortable, he flung himself down in the shade beside a narrow overgrown path meandered in ragged zigzags between blackish rocks just to top. The ground was littered with dead leaves. He lay on loose gravel at the bottom of shaft. There was no more strength left in him.

Indeed, it was a hard part of the journey lay along the cliff to the top. We were tramping along the track, winding up to the top. Near the summit, the sun had exhausted us. The light became in one instant intense and then fading, as if, someone were snapping a lamp on and off. The going was difficult, but our minds forced us continue our jog. Breathing and moving took a great effort, but we had to reach the top. We assessed our strength and weakness, as we trudged along the track. We were forced to continue the jog and refrained rest. We lay panting on the ground until the heat had subsided and it was possible to move again without panting.

Shaking with loathing, I could hear the people gasped in incredulous disbelief. ‘Would they be able to hush this up.’

Reaching the top, the people found a new zeal born of hope, even the disappointed *Katib* had the belief that he was going to get out and give his best. He was happy and tried to hide his exhaustion. He stood up slowly, and then blinked in surprise. Feeling cramped and tired, but he was tense with excitement and expectation. He had learned to work with unsuspected ingenuity and enterprise. For the first time, he felt a sense of order. He had learned his capabilities and limitations and how to deal with them, which was, indeed, a self-confidence. So far, he had learned about the theoretical aspects of things, but now he had learned the things have its practical aspect too. Simply, nature thinks of everything. This frustrated fellow was now thinking like other stronger that he must help the weaker ones. Books had already thought him that they are meant to help each other. They have been divinely endowed for this purpose. What books had failed so far to change the mindset of this wavering fellow was brought about by the journey. Yet, he didn’t try to mingle with Nazar, as if, he was still angry that he brought him there or leaving without even bothering for permission from him.

*Mamo* felt a sense of achievement at the top, with a need for opium based balm to remove his headache and hangover. The sweating exhausted fellow had found strength, born of hope. However, he had lost interest in his personal appearance.

We made a good progress. After the first headlong flight of panic had subsided, we moved forward easily. *Fa’aris* was rapturously happy over summiting the mountain. His sweating face revealed the feeling of elation. Hopefully, he was sensible and saving his strength. He made himself do deep-breathing exercises, pushing at his abdomen as he breathed in slow, sucking it back as he exhaled. “If one breathes deeply all the way up, he would not panic, as it was physically impossible to get panic if you breathe a slow deep and easy”, he explained.

We were now going down the other side. Below us, the landscape was like a bumpy patchwork quilt, lying upon a sleeping giant. The invisible sun, which was slipping behind the mountain, was still shining with a fierce but detached clarity. The light was sharp and ominous. The sun, which always went in advance, had now left us behind. We were creeping forward. Trembling in every limb, unfamiliar movements were tearing at the muscles of my inner thigh. My stomach ached, as if, I had just finished a fast one mile run. It was increasingly hard to discipline breathing. Stained with sweat and dust, I felt I am being torn into two. We started to circumnavigate the cliff. We made a good progress as we trudged around headlands and across long stretches. As we plodded on, our spirits lifted. In spite of aching arms and legs we could see we are making much faster progress. The descent was much easier than we thought. This side of the ridge was a series of fat humps rolling down the canyon. The trail was also wide and the turns were very few. We would not have to use much strength, but only to keep ourselves from bumping and making us fall. My legs no longer trembled, but making involuntary movements. My body was dripping with sweat and I continued inching my way down until I was almost to my balance. My shoes slashed and from my forehead sweat ran into my eyebrows. I scrambled through the defiles, wincing at every touch of the walls, which scratched my hands. I could have got through without a scratch. I could have avoided the rasp of the wall. But my muscles automatic moves imbalanced my acts.

Very few people ever used this way or came that high. Perhaps, it was only a remote past practice when there were no roads. The sun was nearly down over the ridges. It was a blur of white and yellow. It made me see the angry sun behind but not the ground at my feet, making dry runnels in the loose rocks. Coming out of the defile, I looked up at the long sweep of the outside of the curve and then down into the wide canyon mouth. A slight breeze blew off smelling of fragrance, refreshing on my face. That gave me an extra strength.

Further down, we didn't cling; we didn't watch for others to catch up but continued our journey until we were nearing the ravine on the left run downhill. We were now walking on an even surface of grit and sand. Excitement grew among the people. They crawled forward, as if, to reconnoiter the area. We had covered a long distance down this side of ridge to the canyon below. As I gazed into the dying embers of the sun, spread out before me, I saw the savage countryside had already baked in the day heat.

I could feel the cool air arising out of the canyon floor and the heat slowly left my body. The muscles in my arms and legs ceased to jump with fatigue. The lower ranges, canyons and hills spread out in shadow, signaling the approaching night. The spectacular hazy blue mountain ranges covered with rain forests at my left made me recall our school tour to Kalam. I felt an awe I only previously experienced with *Daral*, with a hushed solemn feeling, as if; we were again hiking down the green mountains.

We went down, slowly and carefully feeling for holds. Humiliated and exhausted, we had strong feelings for food. We all wanted to eat whatever we could lay our hands on. Fortunately, there was a wedding ceremony at the foothill. The food was ready and the hosts were waiting for wedding guests. The marriage procession was stuck on the way. The time steadied past. The morning gave way to evening. The hosts had lost hopes. Look! How Allah Almighty arranges food for His creatures. The hosts invited the people, who were generously served with all kinds of food, which they wolfed down. Looking at them, nobody would have seen anyone eat like them. It was as though their whole being, their bodies and souls were involved.

In the dying light, the canyon walls changed to purple and dark blues. In the dusk, the slight humidity had brought a final sweat from my body, making me smart. I didn't break my steady jog. The last rays of the sun made the sky, the mountains and the men the colour of dark blood. Beyond the angular split in the clip, we could only see green forests and the sky. The two translucent blues divided by a thin, dark blue line had recently become two dark greys with a black dividing line.

We were now going at the undulating foothills to the West. I had never walked so badly or felt as exalted as on that twilight run racing down the quiet grey mountain. We picked our way daintily towards the road. Outside a light wind had got up, it brought no relief, however. I suddenly felt inexplicably wary. Little after we found ourselves on the road.

Luckily, it was not long after we found a vehicle on the way to Mingora. Reaching there, we took leave from *Fa'aris* and *Shahram*. Sir was much worried about me. He invited me to him, but I excused. I knew my parents will be anxiously waiting for me. He then asked *Mamo* to take care of me on way. "In case of any problem, especially near or on the bridge, directly come to me", he asked.

I was not worried in this context, however. *Mamo* and his friends were with me. Their homes were situated above our area.

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## Home coming

Dragging my feet behind me, I reached home. It was very late. Therefore, I asked *Mamo* and his friends to spend the night at our parlour. However, they didn't stay and left.

My body had become stiff and too heavy for my legs to support it. I could hardly pull myself on the step to the front door of our home, that too with support from gate bolt.

Entering home, I was straightly up for bedroom, as my head was heavy with the effort and I remembered nothing, except bed. Unluckily, my mother had collected our relatives for my reception. She gave me such a warm welcome that I needn't further headache.

"Where were you? Why are you so late? What kind of picnic it was", she asked to my surprise.

Apparently confused at the outburst of questions, I felt my head was splitting and I was unable to reply, as there was nothing on the blank parts of my brain, except, "leave me alone, I am not feeling well", which I cried out more than once.

I had no clue in my baffled mind, but to silently proceed to my bedroom. Nevertheless, my mother would not leave me before I have tumbled out everything. The worst thing was when she saw me without my school bag, which I had dropped during the mad running for escape. That infuriated her to the extent of holding me of my arms, so that I may not run away. "Where is your school bag? What has happened? Just tell me what the hell has happened."

I was silent, which infuriated her even more. "Where were you, why don't you tell me", she shrieked?

"I was in the hell", I cried out. Though, I said it in anger, but we had really come from a hell.

Fortunately, my father came. Perhaps, he had come to know about me. Otherwise, he would not have come due to my mother. In fact, he was out since Isha Prayer, which was a good excuse for him to be out of home. That's why he didn't bother to come, though it was long after the prayer, but he knew well about my mother's nature, her anger and her restlessness.

"See what has happened to the boy. What kind of picnic it was", she asked. I didn't get the meaning across picnic, but I was not in a mood to ask about it. It was later on that I came to know when my father told me that *Kaif* had informed him about everything on phone. However, he didn't disclose it to my mother for the fear that she might not make a big issue out of it by making hues and cries.

Looking for opportunity of escape, it was the best time to slip away. I stealthily went to my bedroom in view of the expected quarrel. Sadly, the issue didn't end there and my parents came to my bedroom, the the procession for the rest of the quarrel to be completed before my eyes. However, my father asked them to keep silent in view of my condition. He sat beside me like a petrified child, who is ordered to the effect for information about some wrong doing before punishment is awarded to him. "What happened to you my son", he asked?

For me, there was something draconian beyond control. The words had no meaning, nor did I want to follow suggestions. I avoided details, as I was not in a position to meet their queries and simply concluded that the situation was not good and we had to come on foot.

"I am not feeling well. I am dead tired, I want to have a rest", I asked for the fear of further questions.

My father had come to know about my feelings. He asked them to leave me alone. My mother was not happy. She still looked at me in the corner of her eyes, but couldn't dare to talk. Stepping out of my bedroom, she turned back and asked if I needed something to eat or pills. I blatantly denied, so that she may not prolong the topic. At last, she left taking with her the load of questions. She even got back to close the door and looked at me for a chance to talk to me, but seeing me in an uncompromising state of mind, she left.



Dead tired, I went to my bed. My condition began to worsen, with splitting headache. There was no more strength left in me. I thought I am being propelled into something unwanted, and there was no way to escape it, nothing which I could depend. I was not convinced of anything even if the whole world knows it won't make any difference. I had been plunged into a situation, where believability was a far-off thought. I felt like I am drowning myself, and there is nothing I can do to save me. It was that terrible desolation sweeping over me and I didn't know what has been done to me. There was a stirring, there was indignation. I stood powerless against the situation. I could not understand what sort of game the life was playing with me. Indeed, life is a play game. It plays upon one's life in such a way that the mind boggles as how to get through a particular situation brought by it. Sometimes it is safe; at others it plays the hell.

I was full of suspicion. The bloody thoughts chased me. The bereavement was there to grow. There were shadows, even darker than the darkness of the night. In order to take the weight off my shoulders, I stroked my forehead. I was in a post-traumatic stress disorder. I had fallen into an all-out syndrome. The reaction was strong. The feelings of loss continued to overwhelm me.

It was difficult to overcome inertia and indifference, to do even that. Predictably, my grief had reached beyond the limits. It seemed so real to me. Whereas, I lay struggling to give over to sleep, but the pull of the sleep wouldn't make me forget about the fear of loss, would be there to hold me, read me. I had feigned sleep full of nightmares. I cried softly or whimpered in my sleep, and when I awoke of the sinister dream, I found myself exhausted. The silence of the night grew and the cool descending air on the walls had something secret that mixed with small chirping sounds and disappeared. Then, it reached its peak and was more a curse now, a shout of anger and frustration, than an invitation beneath the weight of subsiding anger against fate. In the grave parts of my mind, there was something dark that moved to grow and overwhelmed me, with the waves of sickness arising from my intestine and persistently crashing upon the beaches of my brain. I stared at them, absorbed by the events that were not of the hour but somewhere on the edge of my mind like slow sweaty movements of indistinct figures, which are laboring within a dream, like those solitary nights, I was struck by a bad fortune. The dark shadow sprung up like the opening petals of a night-blooming flower. A wound had entered. My mind conjured up the dreadful scene I was trying not to think about it.

"Everything will disappear. Moreover, I would run off into gossip, more diluted with each day's telling, where beyond sorrow for its own death and become a compassion for everything else would I be. The people would shrink away from me. Twilight after twilight, discourse about me would shrink from friends to relatives. Then no one would bother about my once presence on the earth. The mountains slept, the earth slept and the things upon it slept, but something in the air was unsleeping. I looked up at the gloomy sky from the window and read the fading stars, but nothing could console me. The only thing that stood revealed to me was that I no longer belonged to myself.

In the morning, I got out of bed with tearing muscles. Strangely, my body was stiff and aching in each and every limb I tried to move. Soon, I came to realize about my mistake of not listening to my mother, when she asked me for food/medicines. I came out of my room and straightly headed for the water pump in the lawn to wash my hands and face, instead of attending washroom, which I feared like everything in my bedroom. My mother rushed to help me, but I stopped her with my hand, as I was still not in a position to talk. There was no more strength left in me. There was nothing like clear for me in the faint pearl glow of dawn. Drowned in the cloud of depression I felt dubious.

Looking like a ghost in my crumpled nightgown, I went to the kitchen to eat something and take medicines. My mother began to arrange breakfast. Then to my horrors, I suddenly found myself imagining in great details of deaths. Now I wanted to see if there was any life left outside the confinements of the home. I was about to come out, when my mother called: "Wait", she cried out, "where are you going?"

"I am going to find out about the situation."

"First have breakfast; I have already prepared it."

"No, I am going out first."

"What has happened to you? I came to kitchen early in the morning to prepare breakfast for you and am waiting for you since then."

“How should I eat, when I am not hungry”, I had hardly finished when she broke out.

“I think there is some grievous problem with you. Why don't you tell me about it? What has happened to you my son, tell me please.”

“Nothing has happened to me. Don't put yourself to tests because of me”, I was more than upset and didn't think what I am saying.

“You are talking about strange things? You were not like this before. What has happened to you...”, she began to sob and then said that I must be under the effect of a magic or an evil eye and that she must consult someone about it. “Now I see the truth. I must consult someone”, she went on with her “truth, consult and sobs.” Forgetting about my health, I began to console her instead.

“Then why don't you come for breakfast?”

“I am fed-up.” Hearing this, she erupted again. Perhaps, the word fed-up did not go well with her or she was fed-up of it. She began to blame and curse the evil eye and was about to cry, when interrupted: “Ok mom, I am just coming, only to enquire about the situation from the people”, saying this I rushed to the front door, got out of home and saw some people were standing in the street towards the main road. My father was also with them. I went to him. He tried to make a cozy conversation with me and smiled, but I did not return it.

When I came know that around twenty people have lost their lives in the Death Circle, I felt restless and trembling. I was losing control over my body. I couldn't move. The strength seemed to have ebbed from my legs and the good red blood in my veins stopped flowing. I felt my body stiffened, my blood frozen, my heart stopped beating. The ground seemed to have been pulled away from under my feet and I was revolving in the air. Everything was dark. I could not move until the restlessness had receded and the intense pain and supplication had gone. I was clueless and pointless, still too numb, still to take in the situation and fully realize the radical changes made in my life.

Having overcome the brief shock, I managed to get back home like a languid sleep walker. “What happened”, my mother asked? I was unable to reply. Thanks, she did not drag the topic, just telling me to come to the kitchen. “The breakfast is getting cold”, she asked.

“Twenty people are dead at the Death Circle. I was also there.” My head lolled sideways and I fell down the ground.

“N-noo”, my mother cried out with such intensity that within few minutes, the entire neighborhood was at our door.

I was taken to hospital. “He has had a deep shock. He is recovering, but it will take time. I am prescribing these medicines. Give it regularly to him. He needs a bed rest. Show him to me again after one week”, the doctor asked after examining me.

When we got back home, my mother informed me that *Kaif* had called me three times. “He was much worried, when I informed him about you. He also took your father's cell number. I immediately dialed his number. He was very sad. “The blood in my veins stopped flowing, when I came to know about you, that you had been taken to hospital. “What happened to you”, he asked?

“The doctor said I had a shock. Anyway I am feeling better now. What about the situation there in your area”, I asked.

“Not good. Our area is in severe fire. The people are leaving. There was also announcement to the effect from the elders.”

“What have you decided”, I asked?

“We are just afloat, and would go where the wind takes us”, he responded.

“This is a sorry state of affairs. You should do what the other people do and try not to lag behind”, I suggested.

“I am mindful to it”, he said. “We are making preparation for leaving the area and would go to my aunt home”, he added. “Ok, I will inform you as soon as we have decided it”, *Kaif* had to cut short the talks due to the emergency.

“You must inform me, when you have decided to leave.”

“Take care of your health, I would soon contact you in this context”, he concluded.

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## ***PART – II***

### **Period of Contention**

(Unspeakable disappointment)

## Spreading fire

“Water, a little water”, I mumbled while turning restlessly on my pillow. My hairs were damp with fever and I was too weak to move without a support.

“Coming son”, returned my mother. She held up my head, while I took a few sips of the glass, and then lay back exhausted on my pillow.

I was so hot that the local dispenser was to be called for my treatment at night. He administered me emergency treatment by resorting to two injections, after the drop-down of the mercury level, which he forced the temperature down by soaking two towels in cold water, putting one on my heated forehead and the other on my feet. For the time being, I felt relieved, but the fight between dispenser and fever prolonged to days—one day, two days, three days—that made me sick, as none of them would easily yield in. Fortunately, I was relieved of his injections, when the battle between them ended in victory for the disease and he suggested my father to take me to hospital in view of constant fever.

I was admitted to the hospital and then discharged the next day after the heat left my body. The doctor also asked about our area and suggested my father to change it in view of my sensitive nature. Probably, he was also aware of the sensitivity of our area in the backdrop of the spreading effects of the Red Thin Lines. My father was very upset as well as bewildered over it, as he didn’t want to leave the area.

Reaching home, I asked my mother if *Daral* had called. I was rather disheartened to find that he had not. I would not put up with it silently. I immediately dialed his number to complain him for ignoring me at this time of test.

“You don’t know about the situation here, we can’t venture out of home”, he had no solid reason, but tried to dwell upon the situation.

“The situation is worst everywhere, but it doesn’t mean one forget his fellows.”

“Here the things are quite different. Ask *Kaif*, he would tell you about it, if you don’t believe me”, he asked.

“He had already called me, despite the worst situation over there in their area.”

“He would not have informed you about the ordeals, which they are facing there at Khwazakhela”, he asked.

“Have they left for Khwazakhela? I am ill, I don’t know what happened thereafter”, I asked.

“The situation is worst here. Even the locals are collecting their luggage and baggage, as the Death Circle has increased its dose from mere bullets to IEDs, mortars, rockets and cannonballs, which have been added to the line of fire, in addition to other improvised and sophisticated weapons of mass destruction. As such, poor *Kaif* is preparing him for further escape.

“He has not informed me about all this.”

“That’s why I am telling you that the situation is worst here. *Kaif* recently called me to solicit my opinion in this context. He was very upset, saying they would have to leave the area soon.”

“Where would they go?”

“District Shangla”, he replied.

“What!” “Why Shangla”, I asked?

“There is no other way”, he replied.

“Why not. They can go to Matta..., I was yet to complete, when *Daral* intervened.”

“Matta, eh!” “It is better to die there, than going to Matta. To me, Matta is more dangerous than there, don’t you hear about the reports of bomb blasts and deaths reported there almost on daily basis”, he added.

"I don't mean they stay there, but through that way they would come to Kanju and then Mingora", I asked.

"Would they go by air", *Daral* retorted. "Going to Kanju, they would have to cross Sherpalam, Shakardara, Ningolai, Bara Bandai, Koza Bandai, then Dherai. You know every inch of the earth there is a risk", he added.

"But what about their family, what they say about it?"

"They are against his decision; they want to go through Matta. *Kaif* also thought so, but I told him not to even think of it."

"Have you thought about the troubles through that side, which they would have to face."

"Yes, but you have not looked at the situation from close quarters. This side can be more dangerous for them."

"Why don't they stay for a few days to look for a chance of escape through Matta? I mean if the situation is a bit normal over there?"

"You don't know what is going on around us. There are only sounds of firings and bomb blasts. Around seventy persons have been killed so far only in Khwaza khela. I know that some people are leaving for Mingora through Matta, but to me they are making a big mistake."

"You are right but you see they would have to cover two districts before reaching Mingora. Would his mother face the ordeals."

"I asked *Kaif* if there is some problem with her on the way, they may seek temporary shelter, till she is in a position to go further on."

"But there may also be threats, as the situation is out of order everywhere. District Shangla is no exception."

"You are right, but still it is the beginning there and all we can do is to pray for good. This is the entire story my dear. Now tell me what can one do in such a situation other than to think of escape and survival."

"The situation is worst everywhere", I said again, "even more for me, but it doesn't mean we forget our near and dear."

"What I am worried about the most is my mother. She is ill, whereas *Khanji* is not ready to leave his beloved area and property. Sometimes he says we should wait for warning to the effect, at other he says we should wait for appropriate time. I cried out to him my heart that she needs a specialized treatment but to no avail. He even scolded me for my behaviour. I know the doors of escape are being closed for us."

"Why don't you discuss it with *Adnan*", I asked.

"He says *Khanji* knows what is better. But we should leave at the earliest. We are at the flash point between Matta and Khwazakhela."

In view of the gravity of the situation, I myself discussed the issued with *Adnan* on phone. He was also worried about the disruptive activities, trickling in from all sides, but said that the problem is with his mother. "She cannot afford, even to walk for a mile, set aside the ordeals of the way in curfews, traffic jams and frequent checking. But *Daral* holds my father responsible, as if, the war has been imposed upon us by him. What father says is due to my mother. She is kidneys patient. Who wants to live under such circumstances, but we have to take the bitter pill for her. While *Daral* gives our sacrifice the name of selfishness and his emotionality the name of wisdom. He says we are living in a nutshell and misjudging the situation. Set aside the humans, I even know about the effect of the situation on the animals' lives in the backdrop of the hail of bombs and rain of bullets. Moreover, the radiation and heavy metal concentration in soil and water is adversely affecting the environment around us. Hence, not only are the humans, but the animals are also on the pathway to extinction. The number of wild and pet animals has dwindled in this dangerous period and continue to plummet. There would be no beak, no pair of black wings sailing through the sailent brilliant sky. No chattering of sparrows or wooing of pigeons. You see, the birds are leaving abodes. Their nests are empty and bleak like a deserted village abandoned in unending famine. There are wars, there are curfews, but what can we do."

I was simply confused. In resolving their problem, I had become a problem for me. I was now thinking of the situation and my mind drifted to birds. I looked at the sky and was much aggrieved to find there was no bird. Luckily when I turned my eyes, they fell on a persimmon tree in the lawn of our home only yards off from me. By the turn of good fortune, I saw a sparrow was sitting on a branch. I was thankful for its generous presence among us in such a situation and wanted to thank it, but for the fear that it may not flew away, I kept silent.

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## Tough time

Probably, the stranded people thought that they might escape to a better future; the truth was the otherwise, however. They had been invalidated for routine life. They had been rescued but not saved, as the ordeal was not the first or last. It was the beginning of long trials. However, sweating in the mountain it was hard to think that by now the things would have been so changed.

The Death Circle was engulfing the surrounding areas, swallowing up more and more lives, with the effects of the heat could be felt in the areas around it. The Red Thin Lines were now appearing and developing across the slim roads of the Death Valley of Swat.

Many people had crossed the Red Thin Lines and gone. The majority of the losses occurred around Manglawar. Whereas, the Death Circle was on the fast track towards the upper parts. It had reached as far as Fatehpur, even far beyond the home of my beloved. On the other hand, the lower part around Fizgat was burning, with the flames were leaping around to heat up our village.

My father was much worried after the doctor advice in the backdrop of my disease. He had taken it to his heart, as he had hardly three weeks left in his leave from Saudi Arabia. He didn't want to be displaced at that critical time. Unfortunately, I was bored with nothing to do, except eat and drink, that had killed my hunger. Yet, my mother didn't spare opportunity to bring me something to eat, until I began vomiting. Now my father had no option other than to begin to consult with almost everybody, who came to inquire after my health.

"On one side my leave is coming to an end. On the other hand the doctor has advised me to shift to a safe area, I don't know what to do?"

"You should go to Mingora. There you can find accommodation and manage your children well", my uncle (Father of *Atif*) suggested.

"You should extend your leave. And when *Uzman* gets well, you would be able to decide about you then", my aunt suggested.

"Suppose *Uzman* gets well, what about the situation, is there any option? We must leave, they are right", my father said.

"But why to leave the area, when other people are there", my mother anxiously asked.

"For better future of our children. Nothing will change here. There we can have better treatment facilities. Besides, the change would have a positive effect on the health of *Uzman*, away from this environment, the doctor also hinted to it."

Over hearing the name of the doctor, the ghost of evil spirit again overwhelmed the mind of my mother. The doctors cannot cure it. He needs a spiritual treatment. We should find someone, who cures such diseases", she asked.

"What nonsense you are talking about. He has had a shock, which needs treatment. I don't want to drag the topic and spoil my mind on brooding over these things. We should have to leave at the earliest.' It was, perhaps, the first time, I could recall, that my father dared to stand before my mother because of me. But, it was only for a short while. Soon he had changed. Yet, he was uncompromising about my health.

"We can hire a tutor for him", she seized the opportunity. "This way he wouldn't find a time to spoil his mind", she added.

My father agreed and hired a tutor. Like our English teacher, he was more interested in putting in his philosophical assumptions, rather than teaching course books. Actually my father had told him that he was not interested in my course books, but only to engage me in some positive activity. Thus, instead of teaching me the course books, he would teach his philosophies. 'You must bestir yourself and decide on your future. Disasters can threaten but there are always ways of avoiding it. There are times when the evil can be avoided. These things are not destined to happen, not exactly. They could be in our paths, but if we are aware of them, we can stop them from happening, which is possible when we are patient and that is the half battle. That much you could sense. It is a natural assumption. However, all the disasters are not the same. Who would compensate for our losses? Yet, I felt much relieved with him, as he was an easy going and joyous person.

Unluckily, on the third day of his tuition he called my father on phone in the morning that he would not be able to come for the tuition in the backdrop of increase in curfews. With this, all his psychological assumptions were gone. He didn't even bother to see me. Perhaps, he would not want to face me due to what he taught, but failed to himself follow it. That's why; he stealthily left, leaving for me his thanks and good wishes only. Now everything was clear. There was no second thought. We had to leave. My mother wouldn't object anymore.

In this context, I also called *Daral*, as he was still the only closest person to my heart. "Someday we all have to leave, so why not now", *Daral* said. When I asked him to persuade his father and come with us, he was silent. Then, he simply said that he will talk to me later, which I waited till late in night, but in vain. The next day I called him to complain about keeping me on the long wait for his call.

"I couldn't remember it."

"You couldn't remember, what do you mean", I asked? "Do you know how long I waited your call?"

"How should I know, when I was not aware of it."

"Yes, how should you know, when you didn't even bother to think about it", I snapped.

"You know about the bloody situation, I can't even remember what I had eaten in the morning."

"Why do you remind me about the situation again and again? I am also the resident of Swat, but regularly contact you."

"I didn't mean you don't know about it, but I am also worried about my domestic problems", he reminded again.

"I don't want to go into details. What I want to tell is that you are ignoring me. Why don't you clearly tell me if you are fed up of me."

"You took it ill, I didn't mean that. Actually I have mental problems these days, you know well."

"If it was for mental problems, I still lay in bed, but I didn't try to cutoff ties with my friends", I asked.

"You squarely put the blame for everything on my shoulders, but I am not well. There is something strange about me these days."

"I am not putting blame on you. But I have judged you are ignoring me, even at this hour of need", I maintained.

"Why do you remind me of it? I am also in need. Anyway, I don't want to drag the top, we can discuss about it later."

"Not later on. We should clear everything. I don't want to add to my suspense, when the doctor has already suggested me a bed rest. I also need a peace of mind, which is possible when everything is clear to me. I want to settle everything."

"Hey, what has happened to you, why are you talking so strange", he asked.

"Because I am fed-up now."

"Okay, if it is so serious to you, I will try to regularly contact you. Happy now", he asked?

"Yes", I responded forgetting about every other thing. Nevertheless, nothing changed, except *Daral*. I had taken all this to my heart. For me, the nights were long and the days dark, during which I only waited for call from *Daral*. I complained about his behavior with me time and again, so that he may come out of his emotional streak of mind, but he wouldn't. The situation had brought remarkable changes in him.

Now the faint glimmer of hope had also gone and the time had come I had to part ways with *Daral*. I had lost the trust; he reposed in me and was an important asset of my life. "How long was our friendship, but how fast I had to lose it? How fleeting are the worldly things. Our love, our mutual trust, our respect for each other's families, all were gone like a dust washed away by monsoon rain.

With this loss, everything was slipping away of my hand. I felt a strange feeling of loss, even for my beloved, as if, everything about us was related to *Daral*. I had become sensitive, aggressive and biased. I felt a sense of deprivation and only wanted another shock, deeper than the previous one—such a shock that I may never open my eyes again.

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## *Mamo's father death at our home*

Pleading a migraine, I led through the circumstances of fear and panic. There were deaths, there were losses. I felt threatened. There was danger, I was there, and I was very close. I could but see it, I could but feel it. Hence, my days were dreary and meaningless. I was bruised, lonely and mentally impaired. I was in a pathetic condition, knowing what it felt like to be abruptly bereft.

The troubles had hit me in battalions. Worried sick with my defeatist attitude, I was passing time in a measured gratitude. I was not allowed to have my way. For me, there was nothing like unity and fraternity after cutoff from *Daral* and the fear of the lost of my beloved.

Being weak is a worst thing, indeed. It leads one to the end of disappointment. There is nothing like calm, peace, patience and things such as charm, courage, meetings, greetings or dealings with others. One hesitates, even his own shadow.

Meanwhile, *Mamo* came to inquire after my health. When my father informed me about it, I was a bit light hearted. Soon, I was out and happy to see him with a new cap on his head. I informed my father about the generous help he extended to me during the time of test.

“Don't mention it. You are like my son”, *Mamo* asked.

“I was much worried about you. You were not feeling well over that night. You felt terrible. I had come to see my aunt, I thought I would enquire after your health on the way too.”

“Where is yours aunt home”, I asked *Mamo*. I thought the home would be near us, but I didn't recognize his relatives, although my father knew about them. My father thanked *Mamo* and then went home to fetch tea.

When my father left, I informed *Mamo* all about everything. “We have decided to leave the area”, I asked.

“Where do you intend to go”, *Mamo* asked?

“I don't know, as my father is still confused about the choice of place. However, he wants to go to Mingora.”

“There is nothing to confuse”, *Mamo* said. “Mingora would be a good choice in the situation like this”, he added.

Meanwhile my father came back with tea. When he had made him seated comfortably, *Mamo* asked him about his future plan in the choice of the place. “I am still haggling over the issue”, my father responded.

“I have a friend in Mingora, who owns five quarters”, *Mamo* said. “I have constructed the quarters. If you are interested, I would call him and he will arrange one for you. There you would feel at home. The location is also good. *Fa'aris* also lives there.” *Mamo* looked at me.

My father agreed. My confusion was also over. For me, there was no place better than the one in which *Fa'aris* lives. Unluckily, when *Mamo* asked his friend about it, he said at present all the quarters are occupied. But, he assured him that he would arrange one for him. *Mamo* said he would remain in contact with us and inform us, when he has found a home. Now, we waited for the call, which was like the call from *Daral*, as there was no whereabouts of *Mamo*. By the turn of bad fortune, his cell number also came off.

The curfews prolonged to make us fed-up. I rubbed my eyes. My mother exchanged furtive glances with me, which I came to know she had either been put on the job of investigation or she was looking for effect of magic or evil eye on me. However, she no more talked about it. She had come to know that evil spirits are everywhere and couldn't be tamed or treated by traditional way of spiritual treatment.

The time had come I lost the desire to speak, as the things revealed the world is coming to an ultimate end. My mind was now like a marble headstone on old grave. The sentiments carved on it had sunk in earth. All the head boards had cracked. It had lost its paint. It had lost all the visitors, who once claimed it. My expression changed and I regarded myself with derision, distrust and dislike.



Frozen with terror, I stared at the situation, tired and fractious, grumbling like children long past bedtime. The blows came suddenly. The earth seemed to have straitened and that I was living in a strange land in some foreign locality, with my own bosom friends behaved me like strangers. As I battled against boredom, my frustration and disappointment deepened in depression and lethargy of despair. Many thanks to the doctor, who had prescribed me the sleeping pills for my rest. I began to support on them, which were to me the best kind of support in this world of cheats. I increased my dose to increase my sleeping time, even from night to day.

My father was much worried, as I had undergone a profound internal transformation, which had altered my expression. I only tried to find control over my crooked movements. “We should ourselves try to find a home instead of waiting for *Mamo*’, there he asked. For this purpose, he began to contact all his sources. My mother didn’t object it. I felt sorry for her, who was against it, as she didn’t want to leave her relatives. For my part, I began to increase my attempts to contact *Mamo*. At last, I found his number. He assured to help me in this context.

With this contact, I felt a bit steady and wanted to share my feelings with someone, which I suppressed so far. I would no more destroy my life for others. I would accept the reality. I would forget them. I would try to lead a happy life. I would not make my parents worried about me. I would change myself. But how should I forget *Kashmala*? Thinking over this, I felt sad and alone again. Then I thought, “if *Daral* can change, everybody can change, then why I knit myself in bounds.” However, nothing changed.

The only person whom I remained in contact was my friend *Kaif*. They had left for Shangla, with the extended family now including his aunt’s, according to the schedule they had made. Thereafter, they left Shangla on November 10, 2007, after the temporary shelter they had found with a local, due to his mother illness, unable to continue onwards shuffle due to her rheumatism. “We were not happy there”, he said, “and left as soon as there was a suicide bomb blast on Amir Muqam Bungalow, in which two security personnel were killed and the former MPA Pir Muhammad Khan severely injured. Later on, he also succumbed to his injuries.” He also said that their slow progress was due to his mother. “We have to wait for some vehicle from time to time to take us through the mountainous tracks.” They were now in Buner at the home of a distant relative over there. I was now thinking of all those unfortunate people who were hit by the circumstances. I was thinking about *Mamo*, I was thinking about the marriage procession would have got to bride’s home or Gul would still be looking forward to its way. I wanted to know about my teachers. I wanted to reach them, appreciate them, talk to them, laugh with them and weep with them.

After the long wait, we finally succeeded in finding a home through one of my father’s friend. I dialed the cell number of *Mamo*. “I wanted to contact you, but I had no balance. Whereas, I couldn’t venture out of home for easyload or loading a card”, he impatiently asked. “I want to leave the area. I would straightly come to you in the first place. I would have long left if it was not for my father, as he was not ready to leave home, saying he had built his house for his security, and not to leave it in his old age”, he quoted from his father.

“How would you convince him then”, I asked.

“It would be in vain to convince him anymore. We would have to force our way to leave. The situation is getting worse. Some ninety percent people have left. Reportedly more than half million people from Swat and Shangla have been displaced during these numbered days. I have already missed a chance of escape through relief in curfews.”

“How would you come, when your father is not ready, while there are curfews?”

“We would have to leave through theft ways now. I would have to do it for the sake of my family. Regarding my father, there is no need to seek his permission anymore. I have already tried my best. In this regard, I even took the services of my relatives close to him. He wouldn’t budge an inch. Even little before you called me, I asked him that this area is not safer anymore. Around 300 people have been killed so far. Search operations are also going on. I collect the information, wherever possible for me, bit here, bits there and gather them for my father to convince him, but in vain. There is a wave of resentment. Scores of people have left and the displacements are going on.”

“But we are leaving, maybe tomorrow”, I asked *Mamo*, when he had completed his sad account.

“Wait for me, at least, until tomorrow. I would inform you, we would leave together.”

“Okay, I am discussing it with my father and then informing you”, I asked. When I told my father about all this, he said that they are welcomed anytime. “We would wait for them, as it is a time of test and we should divide our bread with them”, he added.

Thereafter, I sent easy-load to his number, as he had no balance. Little after *Mamo* himself called me and said that they are coming to us tomorrow. We began to wait and receive them with a warm welcome on my Father's instructions. We had made all the arrangements for them, with a comfortable bed for *Mamo*'s father, who was in a critical condition, so much so that we had to arrange the local dispenser for him. He was too weak to walk without the support from *Mamo* and his grandsons, *Shahid* and *Kashif*. Actually, *Mamo* had to exploit his weak health and dragged him to our area. His father didn't resist anymore, as he was too feeble to resist by the illness and anxiety he was nursing for the past few days due to the deteriorating law & order situation and the pressure from *Mamo*, also led to his low blood pressure. Unfortunately, his condition kept on worsening, till he departed this mortal world just the other day, before reaching Mingora as they desired, and buried there in our area. The death of his father was a huge set back for *Mamo*. It had plunged him in a deep shock. He would mostly remain silent.

On the third day of his father's death, when my father asked *Mamo* about shifting to Mingora, he said. “I am not going anywhere.”

“What do you mean”, my father asked? “You are here with the intention to go to Mingora”, he added.

“I have changed my mind. I want to send my family to the down districts and get back to my area”, he said.

“I know you are in distress, but you should think logically. You have to be cool minded to decide about your future.”

“I have thought over everything. I would not be able to support my family for long, being a poor contractor, as I have already spent most of the cash with me during this time of test. Now I am left with a small amount of money that would enable them to reach the down districts. There, I have heard that the refugees are given support for their rehabilitation by the government, NGOs and the general public.”

“Are you crazy”, his cousin *Shafqat*, who had come to the funeral of his uncle through theft ways, snapped. “You know very well about the situation over there, don't even think of going back to your area”, he asked. He also invited him to his home in the upper parts of Tehsil Kabal towards Matta, where the majority of the people were still living.

“I don't care about the situation anymore. It is better to die at one's own home, than been killed as a way farer.”

“You should think about your children too”, my father intervened.

“I have already thought, I would send them out of Malakand Division, where my son *Shahid* will take care of them.’

We were in a rather strange situation after *Shafqat* left. On one side, *Mamo* was not ready to leave with us; on the other hand his family was not ready to leave without him. Fed-up, I had to intervene by telling my father that the time is slipping away of our hands, as his leave was coming to an end. Hence, my father made a final attempt to convince *Mamo*, but in vain again. At last, my father suggested him to stay with his family at our home until there is some relief on the ways or he had clarified his mind about everything.”

“Uncle is right”, his son, *Shahid*, said. We should stay here for some time. Mother is also of the view that we should wait for some time. Then we would go together.” What an irony of fate, only a few days ago, *Mamo* tried to convince his father for Mingora. And now his sons were convincing him to the effect and he was playing the same role his father played earlier. I also tried to convince him, but his decision was final. He thought him responsible for the tragic death of his father, for dragging him in such a condition.

In short, we had badly failed to convince *Mamo*. Therefore, my father gave the keys of our home to *Mamo*, with the instruction to my uncle and other relatives, so that they may be at ease to decide about them, and we shifted to Mingora.

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## *In the city of Fa'aris*

The eyes of my mother were wet, when we reached the city of *Fa'aris* in the saffron sun of Nov 20, 2007, which had gone down over the ridge, and was tinting the sky of sulphurous pink and rose. It was late in evening; but many thanks to *Mazhar* uncle, who had kept the hujra reserved for us. We had a comfortable night. The family was hospitable and did their best what this small family could do for our comfort.

Reception in the city of *Fa'aris* was not that much warm as we expected, however. It had become a ghost city to distract refugees. Gloom swayed everywhere. The occasional lights at night made it even more unreal. That's why our visit had shown us that there was nothing, except poignant memories. Like my cloudy mind, the city had worn a depressed and unwelcomed look. The Death Circle had engulfed the surrounding parts within its flames, with the Red Thin Lines were crashing against the city's confinements. Although they were not fully settled down the ground, the city felt sullen and menace hung around the buildings like an invisible thunder cloud. As such, the inhabitants were surrounded by violence. They were cooped up and bored with nothing to do in the confined quarters that were just short of intolerable. The people lived in constant fear. Morose thoughts swayed. There was no affectionate hug, but only droning on the likelihood of war. The impatient and frustrated people were put up with their bouts of melancholy each time they mentioned the war inevitability.

In short, the city of light had moved back from the hubbub of daily life. The business activities had come to a halt for most part. The owners of buses, coaches, trucks, rickshaws, motorcars and motorcycles showrooms were winding up their terminals and businesses along the roads against the increasing number of death instruments, wherein they saw the birth of a new stormy phase. Thereafter, it was the turn of the utility companies, who were leaving their pipes and cables uninstalled, as the workers were more obsessed with the news of the coming disasters and momentous catastrophes than work on the pipes and cables. They had sensed the danger to the existence of their works. Moreover, the contractors, builders and land owners were now thinking of shelter from the rainy season. Thus, with the expansion and maintenance work stopped, constructions over and repair works shunned, the threat surfaced and the devastations were more visible.

Sensing the threat, the drivers also parked their vehicles with dusk. They abandoned pick-ups, loading and unloading and retreated by the early alarm of the danger, which they had sensed it in the thin air of the city. With this, the smoke receded and dust settled down. The increasing car emissions that filled the sky above under its routine manifestation left the atmosphere and settled down, alongwith the dust particles against the thin traffic and dead silence of the day. A postcard blue sky remained clear and even bluer than it.

Same was the case with our new home, when we visited it the next day. There were no lights and the water was to be managed from the neighboring home. Uncle said that he searched the entire area, but failed to find a single home. "You know the migrations are on the rise and the IDPS have made a beeline to the city", he added. "This one was not for rent, the owner wanted to himself shift to it. However, he changed his mind due to the situation and left work on it. We can easily make it worth-living, however. Still if you don't want to shift to it, we would look for another home. Until that you can comfortably live in the hujra", he explained.

"We are in need of shelter and would go wherever we can find it. But, I want to consult my wife in this regard", asked my father.

Thereafter, we left to the market. My father bought two cellphones, one for me and other for home, as we had no phone set now. No sooner than I had put the SIM card, I began to save the numbers friends and relatives. Soon, I found if one has a cell phone, he must be involved in some sort of activity. The first thing I did was to dial the number to *Kaif*. They were in Buner with some relative. Then, I dialed the number to *Fa'aris*. "This is *Uzman Shah* speaking", I asked.

“How are you *Uzman*?”

“I am fine”, I replied, “and what about you.”

“Very well”, he responded.

“What about the situation in your area”, he asked.

“We have shifted to Mingora...”, I replied.

“When”, he asked?

“Recently come, just yesterday”, I responded.

“Where do you live”, he asked?

“In *Shafqat Abad* ”, I replied. I gave him the address.

“You stay”, he said, “I am coming within half an hour.”

I began to anxiously wait for him, to look to the face of that strong man, who was once our leader and I memorized and tried to follow his words in letter and spirit. At last, he reached. “You are exactly in time”, I hesitantly asked.

“Why not, I had the commitment of half an hour.”

*Fa’aris* was in a hurry and took tea only. Then he showed us his home, which was at a distance of about two kilometers. He invited us for supper, but my father declined, saying if he wants to help us, he should look for a rented home for us.

*Fa’aris* assured my father that he would try his best in this context. Thereafter, he left like a gust of wind.

Uncle was a bit upset over it, but my father said. “It is not good to live in the hujra, as it is for your guests.”

It was just the other day *Fa’aris* called my father on phone and asked him that he has found a home in their area. “Though, the owner was not ready to give it on rent, fearing the emigrants from that side of the river, but I gave him gurantee”, he said. “The home is small, but it is comfortable”, he added. “You can visit it at any convenient time”, he asked.

It was the same day we visited the home in the evening. *Fa’aris* served us with tea first and then we saw the home. It was small, but worth-living, so we decided to shift to it the next day. Uncle took us in his own vehicle and stressed us to remain in contact with them. Soon after uncle had left, I felt all alone. Hence, I called *Fa’aris* on phone to inform him about our shifting. He came to invite us for supper. “I will come to get you soon after the Maghrib prayer”, saying this he left.

*Fa’aris* came to get us at the stipulated time and we left with him to his home. It was a spacious home with past grace. The parlour we sat was well decorated, with Irani carpet and traditional sofas. The walls were painted in deep green colour. The environment was sober, with a saintly smell. From these furnishings I could guess that they valued traditional goods and originality. They had zest for the past glory.

His elder brothers, *Faran* and *Haseeb* also came to join us. They were joyous family. We were soon merged in their company. *Shahram* was also present. They were like a family. I felt jealous over their friendship. They were a perfect match, smart and sober, with grand habits, visible in their faces. For some time, I saw my reflection in the face of *Fa’aris* and *Daral* in the face of *Shahram*. Then I felt sorry as I had lost *Daral* and with this the pain of *Kashmala*, which I tried to avoid, entered my heart to sour the pleasant environment.

We also met *Fa’aris* father, who came to see us in brief before he was going to Masjid. He was a prayer leader. We also went to prayer after some time. After the prayer, we came back to the parlour. We had our supper and enjoyed ourselves well by interesting tales. I heartily laughed and didn’t want to leave this graceful company, but it was late, so we had to reluctantly leave.

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## New challenges

My time mostly passed with *Fa'aris* and *Shahram*. So, I didn't find time to look back and collect the broken pieces of my relations. The days were peaceful and the nights a blessing. As such, I could easily push back the destructive thoughts that could likely damage my mind. The happiest thing was that my father comfortably left for Saudi Arabia on November 29, 2007.

One day before his leaving, *Mazhar* uncle invited us for lunch. Thereafter, aunt frequently called my mother on phone. My mother was very happy, because we had no other relatives and she was eager of company. *Fa'aris* mother came to her, but she was a different sort of women, not appropriate to her nature due to the fact that she was not in the habit of too much talking and refrained bake-biting as a sin. However, my mother would not be contented until she has tumbled out everything in her mind. I also felt easy in the sense of familiarity.

Unfortunately, it was not very long. The things ended in a nightmare for me, when one day my mother came to kiss me on forehead. "Congratulation my son", she said. "*Baji* (*Mazhar* uncle's wife) has wished *Guldana*'s hand for you", she added.

"What!" "What did you say to her", I asked my mother in confusion?

"What should I have said other than to thank them for it", she replied. "What a luck you have got my son to get an offer from such a well-to-do family." My mother even began to pray for my protection from evil eye. For this purpose, she also spit saliva on my face. "Don't say about it to someone else, till everything is clear. You don't worry my son", she asked, "I am going to clear the things soon."

It was something strange, not that the offer was from the girl's parents, but I had fallen into a reality. "Do you know what you are saying", I asked my mother? "How can you even think about such things in the presence of *Kashmala*?"

"Don't look behind my son. You have a bright future before you. Forget about her", she asked.

"I don't know what the future has in store for me, but I am already engaged. I would not even think of another girl", I snapped.

"Engaged, how you can say so, is there any proof with you", she asked?

"Are the words of *Kashmala*'s parents not a proof? Have you any doubt about them?"

"They have not given their words. They have just asked to wait until the girl is grown up", she explained.

"Whichever the case is, they have indirectly agreed. Whereas, they have always behaved me like their son."

"This is your presumption. If they found a better match for *Kashmala*, they would not hesitate to give her hand to them."

"Stop mother. I want to make it clear to you once for all that I would not get back of my words, no matter what may come."

"What kind of words", she asked? You have not given any words to them", she added. "Look son, you have got the best chance, if you missed it, you would repent forever. You see they have bought expensive clothes for us."

Now I understood why she was so impressed. Therefore, I tried to change the direction of the topic as I knew about my mother. She would not be convinced by these encounters. She was a different sort of woman. "But have you informed father about it", I asked.

"It is not a problem for me, I need your consent and then leave everything to me."

"I would never give my consent, I would rather prefer to die, but I would not deceive *them*."

"There is nothing to deceive my son. It is a golden chance for you. If you missed this chance you would not be happy throughout your life."

"I am already sad and ready to accept this worry too, but I would not yield in."

"Look son I am doing this for your good..."

“Stop mother. I don’t want to discuss this topic anymore. And if you insisted, I am going to leave the home.”

Now I fell into a sort of mental hibernation, as I had sensed the threat. “It must be her to have convinced them.” She was an expert hand in such matters, famous for her unilateral decisions, did a thing first and convinced my father later. She had also convinced my aunt to give her daughter’s hand to me, which I had rejected just in the nick of time. Besides, she was even more interested in Kashmala. “But I wouldn’t leave her. She is mine; mine alone. I would not deceive her. She is innocent, always contented with what we bought for her from the school shop, took it silently, looked at me and then left for her class. Why I even tried to forget her for the mistake of *Daral*. If I thought he is no more interested in me, it doesn’t mean she would also do the same.” I had now fully realized how deep my love for her was. “I would not let it happen. I would tell my father about it. He would not bet on his principles. But how I would tell him about it”, then I thought. “I would tell Fa’aris about it. He would be in a better position to inform him.” I went to him after Maghrib prayer, as my father had already given my command in the hands of this strong soul. I was yet to tell him about it, when he got hold of my hand and asked me to come with him.

“Where are you going. Is anything wrong”, I asked him?

“Nothing serious. Actually the situation is not good. You see there is increase in bomb blasts. The families of police officers are especially under threat. Therefore, uncle wants me to come to *Shahram* and not let him leave home”, he explained.

“How it would be for him, who was like a free bird, to pass his time at home.”

“I am also worried. The situation has left deep imprints on his mind. It’s really a tough time to navigate. Just pray for good. ”

“It is not for prayers to control the situation; it would need a sound policy to fight the menace.”

“Prayers can do marvels, if you are sincere.”

“But the threat is more visible now, especially for *Shahram*. If it were not for you, what would have come of him?”

“You are right. He is still like a child for me, even since the time they shifted here.”

‘Are they not from this area?’

No”, *Fa’aris* replied. “They are from down districts. Uncle was transferred to this area, when we were children and settled here. We played there till late”, he pointed towards the cluster of homes, once a playground. “My parents also loved him like me. We were even admitted to the school together, although he was younger than me. I was a monitor of the class. Once I beat him with stick, which he complained about it to my father, who was angry at me. Thereafter, he reminded me not to beat a student with stick or to involve myself in quarrel with someone, even if I know he is at wrong. “We are all brothers, and when a brother commits a wrong, the elder brother bears it with patience and tries to make him understand with love. If a student commits a mistake, you should handle him with love, because it is due to some weakness and it is our duty to try to remove the weakness and not to punish him.” He quoted from his father. “Thereafter I never tried to quarrel like other children, because quarrel was not in our blood, due to our training from my father.”

Now, we were at hujra. Fa’aris rang the doorbell. Shahram took time in coming out. “Sorry to keep you waiting. Actually my mother stopped me, saying my father has strictly prohibited us from coming out of home, adding the families of police officers/officials are under constant vigilance and a main target. My blood was shot up over this...”

“It’s ok. How was your day”, Fa’aris asked?

“I am disturbed due to my father, as he has not come yet, whereas his cell phone comes off. While the phone operator said he is out.”

“He may be on emergency duty”, *Fa’aris* asked.

“That’s why I am so worried. You see the hell is coming in from all sides. On the other hand, the Govt has resorted to lip service. Given the present situation, the people are without official protection. Don’t you think they are deliberately being pushed to themselves get things moving on and insist on action, due to what he described pseudo efficiency, bureaucratic dead-ends, cynical corruption and official lack of interest in

public problems. Further alienating them, the citizens in power have turned their faces away from this greatest tragedy.”

“Turmoil in Swat is comparatively worse that has led to a rough and inexorably hostile neighborhood, where a semblance of calm seemingly restores from time to time. On the other hand, the area remains unsecure from infiltration”, Fa’aris said. “Thus the disruptive activities keep trickling into the area. The restive areas of NWFP and Afghanistan are also meant devastation for Swat and the villages lying in close proximity to its border. The infiltrations have seen increase in attacks on security check posts and killing of dozens of security personnel at point-blank range and taking with them scores of others as hostages. So, it will take the government a substantial time to control the crisis. Hence, it is not a time to turn against the government, but to give it time and support. The public should help in transition to new and emerging hopes. They should, at least, wait as the Government has already vowed to go to the end of the earth to nab the evil. To me what the public should do is to support the government and the leaders to help in transition.”

“There are no protections, no security, no erections against the intruders along the entire length bordering the various lands and flashpoints. The half measures like establishing dozens of check posts in the urban limits would not stop the valley from being caught in the throes of conflagration. Hence, the valley is expanding to its last extremities, bordering the restive areas. Stunned with grief-stricken expression, the people are leading their lives miserably. If the people want to value their lives, they would have to strive for it.”

“The people are like petrified sheep and would create more problems for them this way”, Fa’aris explained.

“Stress is a part of life, but too much of it can kill one. The situation is badly effecting the lives of the people in the form of frustration, depression, hyper-tension, which is impeding normal life. Is it not better to boldly face the situation, than absorbing slow death? In such a case, one may, at least, die for a cause, than being expired uselessly with no aim.”

“There is no bravery to stand against anyone. The people do not know about their enemies. In such a case it is better to be patient. Besides, it is for the Govt to protect the lives and properties of the people, and not the public to stand for them.”

“The Govt has failed to defend the public. How can it come to their rescue? In stark contrast, unidentified crimes have ravaged Swat. Killings are going on indiscriminately, even with more accelerated pace. In the same zeal, the infrastructure is being destroyed with impunity. The news of deadly incidents stay in the headlines of newspapers and news channels for few hours and thereafter consigned to back-burner. Hardly anyone is heard of talking about the identity of attackers, their parentage, domiciles or family’s history and background, their past and present places. The attackers move and act like predators, pillaging and disappearing with ease, instilling fear in the areas under their control, even beyond to firm their grip. It is due to the lack of resolve on the part of govt to get to the root of the crime in the impoverished Swat, which has obscured everything. Regarding the leaders, they are already seeking to scrap or delay targets for ensuring that they remain hooked on power. You see the worst scenario in which the efforts to contain the problem by using alternatives grow, the more it mounts with the initiatives taken to cure it.

“You are coming to the point. If the public are not supporting the leaders, how can they help in transition”, Fa’aris asked.

“The hapless people are coming under attacks. The State of Swat, unaccustomed to such violence from intruders from tribal hinterlands, is the main target. How can they support the government under such circumstances”, Shahram maintained.

“It is not only Swat, the whole of the province is burning”, Fa’aris said. “The long stay of the intruders, who frequently attack the hordes of people, has aggravated the problem”, he added.

“Why the marauders are let go unpunished”, Shahram asked.

“My dear, don’t spoil your mind over these things. Just wait with patience and pray for good”, Fa’aris concluded.

Having thoroughly listened to them, I felt a bit heavy headed. So, I straightly went home and took a sleeping pill to go to bed early.

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## *Phone call from Guldana*

Full of sorrow I got out of bed. I still felt heavy headed, as I had gone to bed without discussing my problem with *Fa'aris*. Hence, there was a cloud of depression on my mind. I was especially worried about the situation.

The first thing I did in the morning was to go to Fa'aris. He was not at home, however. *Khurram*, his nephew, said that he has gone to the fruits/vegetables market. So, I got back home.

I was still on the way, when my mother called me on phone and asked me to immediately come to home. I hurried up, fearing there may not be some emergency, because it had now become a norm of the day.

“Is everything ok”, I asked my mother as I reached home?

“The mother of *Guldana* has invited us for lunch”, she responded.

“I am not going there”, I said.

“What!” “Do you know what would be its likely effect on them, when they come to know that you have denied”, she asked.

“I have nothing to do with what they say about me. You just think of yourself. You needn't think about me”, I snapped.

“You are my son and not my father. You would have to follow what I say.”

“I am not a child anymore. You please don't argue with me over everything.”

“What would they think about us? What would be their impression?”

“I have nothing to do with them. Please, don't tell me of it time and again.”

“They think you like their child and if they came to know about your behavior ...”

“I am not their child. Would you please shut this topic now?”

“Then what should me do, when I have given my word to them”, she hesitantly asked looking at me.

“You may go if you want.”

“Who would take us”, she asked?

“I would hire a rickshaw for you. You take them with you”, I pointed to my brother *Asad* and my sister *Seema*.

Accordingly, I hired a rickshaw for them. When they left, I locked up the door and came out. I roamed around the streets, looking for immigrants from the area of *Daral* to take the cell number of Khanji, as I didn't have his number. We contacted each other from PTCL set, but that was long before. Now their home set was not working, whereas ours one was also closed.

Disappointed, I got back home. There was no strength left in me. The wretched problems had made me so weak that I always felt in want of strength. There was no zeal left in me. Hence, I remained stuck to my bed for most part. Meanwhile, I received a call. It was from the home of aunt. “Why did you not come”, she asked me.

“I was not feeling well”, I answered.

“What happened to you?”

“I don't know for exact, but there was no strength in my body. I felt weak.”

“Come here, my brother will take you to a doctor.”

“No need to it, I will be fine soon.”



After the As'r prayer, my mother came back. She was very happy. She told me how good people they are. "Look they have sent food for you", she added. "How beautiful *Guldana* is. You are very lucky, but you are not grateful. You don't want to be happy. You are running after shadows that have made you too blind to see the truth. It's the time to come out of the shadows, I am sure you would be very happy."

"Leave this topic mother, I don't want to discuss it", I asked.

"But why? What is wrong with *Guldana*. She is beautiful, educated and above all a well nurtured girl. You see how her parents love her. I am sure they would open up their hearts for you", she explained. "They would keep you happy. They would look after you like their child."

"I know mom. The wrong is not with *Guldana*. The wrong is with me, because I would not be able to take such a crucial decision, especially at this stage, when I am already hurt."

"Why do you think so, why don't you try to forget about the past and live in the present?"

"I can't forget *Kashmala* mom. I know I would not be happy without her."

"I know about your feelings my son, but the things have changed now."

"Please mom, leave this topic."

"Okay, but you should seriously think over it. You have got a golden chance. If you missed it you would repent forever."

I said nothing thereafter. I didn't know what to do, how to face the situation. One moment I thought that I am already engaged. Then I thought like my mother that it was just a proposal, which *Khanji* had deferred it, till we are matured. "Whether he would remember it or not when the proper time has come", I thought. "If I followed my mother and accepted the offer, what would come of *Kashmala*?" It was here I found myself in pathetic condition, because I would not be able to forget her."

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## *Shafqat's demise in suicide bomb blast*

In the backdrop of my mother's desire, I was thinking over every aspect of the engagement proposal. My mind was mostly occupied by it. I was sure I would not be ready to accept it at any cost, yet I thought over it.

I was still brooding over these things, when there was a call from *Shahid*. It was at the time of Isha Prayer on December 9, 2007. "Is everything ok", I asked him fearing there may not be something wrong?

"*Shafqat* uncle is killed", he answered in worry.

"Oh no!" "How?"

"He was killed in a suicide bomb blast, in which fourteen persons were killed, including three policemen."

"When did it happen", I asked?

"Today, I thought you would have heard about it."

"No, I have not heard about it, as I didn't go out of home for long."

"*Mamo* has also left for his funeral."

"What!" "Why did you allow him in such a situation of fire", I asked? "Why didn't you stop him?"

"We tried, but he was not ready to listen to anybody. He also asked me to take the family to the down districts."

*Mamo* was still haggling at our home due to my uncle and other relatives, as they took special care of him on my father's instructions. The last time, when I contacted *Shahid* he told me that *Mamo* was changing his mind. "He has shown some flexibility", he said. "We would soon be there to meet you at Mingora", he expressed. I was very happy. Unfortunately, the sad demise of his cousin had destroyed that hope.

"It is very sad. You should now come to us, as there is no more hope of his coming back. Here, we would think of further course."

"How can we leave under such circumstances?"

"You are the elder of the family now. You should think about the future of the whole family."

"I know, but we should, at least, wait till the mourning period. Then we would finally decide about it", he responded.

"OK, but you should make hurry in this context. And also inform me, when you have decided it", I asked.

Thereafter, I waited for response from him, but he didn't call. On the fourth day of the mourning, I asked *Shahid* when they intend to come. He was still confused and asked that he would ask *Mamo* about it.

"When will you call him?"

"I am going to call him now", he responded.

*Mamo* was more angry, when he called him. "Why don't you leave despite my instructions", he yelled.

"How it is possible we leave you here at the mercy of fate in such a situation of fire", he was a bit emotional to say this.

"Look the situation is not good, you should immediately leave the area, before it is too late", *Mamo* stressed.

"The situation is worst everywhere, even in the down districts, where bomb blasts are reported daily."

"But there is a big difference. You see, scores of people are being killed on daily basis. Moreover, communication infrastructures are damaged with impunity, houses being razed to the ground and shops are blown up. There is a high tension, and if the things are being equal, all the ways of exit will be closed. I am telling you again to immediately leave the area", *Mamo* asked again.

When *Shahid* informed me about it, I asked him to abide by his father. He had to yield in to the pressure and decided to leave for the down districts. We agreed that they would spend a day or two with us and then leave for their intended destination early in the morning. Moreover, my father had asked me to give them some money, so that they may not face problems on the way.

We began to wait for them. However, late in the morning *Shahid* called me to inform that they have postponed their program. “My mother says, we should wait until we know exactly about *Mamo*.”

“What do you mean, *Mamo* has already clarified his position”, I asked?

“You are right, but my mother said he was changing his mind before the demise of his cousin”, he explained. “Therefore, we should give him some time. Still, he is too emotional to decide about his fate”, he quoted from her.

“The delaying tactics may create more problems for you”, I explained. “You know the situation there is not good. Killing is now a cheap game and ignored for most part, being a matter of routine. There are curfews, there are fights, and hideouts are being made, even in the mountains. Homes and schools are being destroyed. People are dumped in the debris. The things can only be worse. There is no standard, no redressal and compensation or rehabilitation. Edibles shortage has also begun. Markets are closed, shops locked, only arms and ammunitions can be seen, which the public cannot eat, but they eat them instead. Masjids are also closed. No one is allowed to step out of his home. There is no movement, even of the birds, which reminded me of *Adnan* observation, then what are you doing there.”

Thereafter, I kept silent, as they were at our home and I thought they may not take it ill. But my father was much worried about them, especially in view of my uncle's family preparing to leave the area for down districts. Furthermore, they were in short of money. That's why he wanted them to leave at once, because the refugees were looked after there in the down districts. Although I had told him about everything, he asked me to convince them, whichever means possible. Hence, I had to contact *Shahid* again. This time, I contacted him after consulting *Atif Shah*. *Shahid* was much nervous, when I called him. “Is everything ok”, I asked.

“Nothing right”, he responded. “*Mamo* is not attending the call, I don't know what has happened to him”, he asked.

“Maybe there is a connection problem”, I responded. “Yes, but it is the second day I am trying his number”, he explained.

“You know the networks are mostly out of order. Anyway you should try someone else number in your relatives over there, maybe they have some clue about him”, I asked. Poor *Shahid* began to dial the numbers of his relatives again and again, but in vain. He was so confused that he wanted to himself go to him through theft ways, but I stopped him. “Are you crazy? Do you know about the situation over there?”

“Then what should I do”, *Shahid* snapped? “Neither, he is calling, nor could we reach his cell number”, he asked in fear.

“You should demonstrate patience and try the numbers of your relatives. Maybe you find someone's number.” I also asked him to extend the circle of contacts with his relatives over there, even if, it be in the neighbouring areas, so that he has a wide range of choices.

*Shahid* did what I asked. So, he began to contact the cell phone numbers of his relatives on the extended list over there from that time on and never ceased. It was after a long struggle that he finally succeeded in dialing the number to one of them namely *Safdar*. “Right now, I don't know *Mamo* would be there or not, but I am going to him and you should call me after half an hour”, *Safdar* asked.

Poor *Shahid* waited for each and every minute, and when he dialed the number at the scheduled time, he was informed that *Mamo* has left for his area through the mountain. “When did he leave?”

“Early in the morning”, *Safdar* responded.

*Shahid* was so confused over the news that he directly took the family to the down districts, according to the scheduled time he had given to some of his relative over there, without even bothering to come to us for the night. With their departure, there seemed the last chapter of *Mamo* has come to an end, at least, for the time being.

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## *My search for immigrants*

My fear for the safety of my beloved family had mountend a new height, especially after the sad demise of *Shafqat* uncle and the misadventure of *Mamo*. I didn't know what would have come of them. Whether, I would ever see them on the living planet again or not?

Now my restlessness had reached the peak. I would not be satisfied with anything, other than I have found the contact number of *Khanji*. Therefore, I went to *Fa'aris* to seek his help in finding immigrants from the area of Daral. He assured to help me in this context.

I know *Fa'aris* will do it. He will put his best efforts to find someone at the earliest, as it was an additional quality of him, besides being a mixture of many goods that one can possibly find in a person, that he didn't add to one's suspense and tried to resolve an issue as soon as possible. However, I would not wait. With strong determination I came out of home and turned my face towards Green Chowk. On the way, I asked about emigrants. There was no information, till I had reached Tahirabad. There, I came across a person from Bandai. I met him by chance, as the local whom I asked about the people from Bagh led me to him. "That's the one", he asked as soon as his eyes fell on him.

I straightly made my way to him. His eyes shone on seeing me. Maybe he was out for a company in that new abode. He didn't know about the people from Bagh, but gave me some clues about the immigrants living in Landikus. He was not sure, but hoped they would help me. I took leave from him and got back. Reaching home, I was so restless that I turned towards Landikus instead of going in.

On the way, I received a phone call from my mother. I clealy told her about everything, so that she may come to know about my intention. She didn't protest but asked me to come early. There I found a person from Charbagh and asked him about the people from Bagh. He gave me the address of a family. Soon, I found myself knocking at the door and a young man came out. I asked him about *Daral*. He was a bit confused, but when I reminded him of the entire family, he said: "Ok, ok—they live in Bar Cham. I know them, but they are very far from us. That's why I didn't come across them, when we were leaving the area."

"I have come for the cell number of *Khanji*", I asked.

"I don't have their number as they live in Bar Cham and we in Koz Cham", he explained. "But I am asking my brother. Maybe he has some information", he added. Unluckily, when he got back little after, he excused. "I am sorry my brother doesn't have the number", he said. He assured me that he would try his best in this context. "Give me your cell number; I will inform you as soon as I have got the same."

I also asked him if he knows about someone else from their area, but he had no information, as most of the people had left for the down districts. Anyway, I gave him my number and left in view of the time factor. Now I waited for *Fa'aris*. It was after the Isha prayer that he informed me about two persons from their area, which his friend Amir Sahib had told him about them.

"Do they know about them", I asked?

"I think they must know", he replied.

"Should we see them now", I impatiently asked.

"Wait till tomorrow. It is not good to go to them at this time of the night."

"When will it be tomorrow? What would have come of them? Would they be alive or.....? "Why they not came out of the area", with this I felt angry over *Khanji*. I thought him responsible for everything, even for my misfortune.

Wretched, I got back home and slouched in the nearest bed in the veranda. Soon, I fell into sleep. When I got up, it was mid-night. How long this night was, as I could not sleep thereafter.

In the morning, I had reached the home of *Fa'aris* earlier than my appointment and began to wait for the clock to strike nine in front of their home. I saw *Fa'aris* came out of home, exactly in time. And it was not something strange, because he never ever tried to break his words. He was always in time. When he saw me he smiled. "When did you come?"

"Recently", I replied.

"Let's go", he said.

Reaching there, we met an aged person, who came out at the door on knocking it by *Fa'aris*. Luckily, he knew about them, but instead of meeting our quest he began with his own miseries. "How we reached here, I cannot describe in words. There were checking....." "There are few families left in the area. One is theirs. I enquire after them from imam Sahib. He informs me about everything", he explained.

"How are they", I intervened to ask?

"They are good, but for how long", he responded?

"What do you mean", nervous I immediately asked?

"The wife of *Khanji* is at a critical condition, due to which they can't leave the area", he explained. "Poor *Yousaf* is passing through the critical time of his life", he added. "How influential family he belongs to, but which time he is passing through. What would come of them? Thanks the Imam Sahib is there, otherwise, what would have come of them."

"Have you their number", I asked?

"I don't keep mobile with me, but my son makes my contact with the Imam Sahib from his mobile."

"Where is your son", *Fa'aris* asked?

"He is in Odigram", he answered.

"When will he come back", I asked?

"In the evening", he replied.

"Then we will come after the Asr prayer", *Fa'aris* said. "Should we leave now", he asked me?

"As you wish", I responded.

"I will tell him about you", the aged person said. "He will be waiting for you", the added.

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## *Shahram in pathetic condition*

During Asr prayer, *Fa'aris* received calls and cut it off unattended as soon as he had gotten them. Though his phone was on vibration, it even disturbed me beside him.

He came out of the Masjid immediately after the prayer. I also followed him. He picked out the phone from his pocket and saw there were four calls from the mother of *Shahram*.

“There must be something wrong, something serious”, he said in a state of turmoil. “Let's go”, he asked me. I was not happy, because we had given time to that aged person for the cell number of *Khanji*, which I was anxiously waiting for it.

“What has happened”, *Fa'aris* asked *Afaq*, who was already waiting for him out in the hujra, when we reached there.

“*Shahram* was in quarrel with my father”, he responded. “My mother called you, but you were busy”, he explained.

When *Shahram* came out on the message of *Fa'aris*, he was very upset and squarely blamed his father for their misfortune. “If we have threats because of him, why doesn't he take long leave or transfer, till the situation is back on the track”, he asked.

“It is an emergency. He has departmental obligations. Besides, he is not alone; the whole police force is behind him.”

“That's the problem I am so worried about. He is a police officer and thus a main target. How many personnel of police force have been killed so far and how many of them have deserted the Police Department. Miserably failed to maintain law & order, the officers/officials working at flashpoints are collecting their luggage and baggage. They have now come to protect their own lives only. And why should one indulge him in other's affairs, when he has no backing, when the price of survival is one's own effort. Thus, some of them have tendered resignations to reverse their commitments, and some fled. Their concerns are regarding the inability and passive response of their immediate administrations and under the parody of inaction by policy makers who would trash their sacrifices and rub away their own sins. Even the civil administration is earnestly waiting for a call from Provincial Govt to switch off lights and lock the doors of their offices, in search for a ledge. From the inability of administration, it is clear that the extension work would soon be replaced by extension in graveyards. Indeed, the police have come to the fact that they would end up in a bloody secret, a guilty one and would be abandoned with less response, not equitable to the losses. Even those who wield policy would have some sort of promises for their services, but would turn a deaf ear to their services and their sacrifices would simply be ignored and consigned to back-burner. On the other hand, the high-ups would turn their backs from the poor families of the policemen. They would have a rare mention of their services and mere promises made to their families, that too in throwaway sentences. Later on, they would be forgotten, alongwith the promises and the words uttered in their favour. They have come to know that those charged with protecting them would only protect their ranks. They would pretend that none of such things, likely to disturb peace are happening. They would boast up high claims about peace. They would ensure the public that their apprehensions about the situation would be taken into account and soon a new age of responsibility heralded and they would lead a prosperous life, free of cares. For that purpose, a bonfire of regulations would be lit, hobbled bodies would be inflected. They would claim to ensure peace and stability. They would keep on ensuring the media and public that the valley would become even more of an exclusive playground once again for ultra-rich. It would be unhampered by effective restraints on killings. There will be no use of lead shots; even the killing of birds of prey prohibited. However, their indifference to the ground reality would be distilled into a great collective shrug, which the police have sensed the truth. They have sensed a similar combination of inanity and contradiction from the statements of the governments at both the provincial and Federal level as well.”

“I think, you have accepted your defeat, but he would not reverse his commitment. He is not supposed to get salary by performing duty in normal situation only. He has a commitment to be on duty no matter what the weather is like—sunny or stormy. At this point his presence at the station of duty is more than any other time. He is a public servant, and it is his duty to protect public lives and properties. In this context, he needn't suggestions. He knows better how to perform his duty. He is not bound to you, but to the state”, *Fa'aris* snapped.

“There is no bravery in the situation like this”, *Shahram* explained.

“Uncle is one of those officers, who are true to their duties. To him, duty is a trust and he would not be ready to tolerate any lapse in it. You have better not to upset yourself by such encounters”, *Fa'aris* asked.

“What should I do, close my eyes”, *Shahram* responded.

“Wait my dear, wait for peace”, *Fa'aris* responded.

“Hey, you still believe there will be peace?”

“Yes, hope is always there”, *Fa'aris* responded.

“But how it is possible, when the Govt is not interested in it”, *Shahram* asked. “Here you see, it has turned its back from this greatest tragedy of humanity”, he added. He even went to disobedience by challenging the legitimacy of the government.

“Why do you blame the Govt for everything”, *Fa'aris* asked. “It is not the Govt responsible for all this. You see how the threat spread. But leave this topic; it is time for prayer. We left for Masjid.

*Fa'aris* was very sad due to his commitment with that person. “We must go to him. We would and apologize him for getting late.”

Soon after Maghrib prayer we went to him. On the way, I felt a cool breeze on my heated face. I took a deep breath, as I had a glimpse of the past adventurous life, which was eclipsed by the bleak future. Thus, gloom descended upon me, and I fell silent. The more I neared the area, the more I became restless. “How would *Kashmala* and *Daral* be? What would be the condition of their mother, *Khanji* and *Adnan*?

When I took the number of Maulvi Sahib and got back home, I took no time in dialing the number to him. I took the number of *Khanji* from him. Then I unruffled myself, as if, I was going to them before dialing the number to *Khanji*. Thanks, I not only found the number, but also a different *Khanji*. He warmly received me in a tone that was full of sympathy, when I greeted him. “Hi! *Uzman*, it is you after such a long time.” For sometime, I closed my eyes to retain my memory. “Thanks God! How are you and how is your family”, he enquired?

“We are in Mingora and good”, I responded. “I tried my best but yours PTCL number came off, and I had not yours cell number”, I added. “It was after a long struggle that I found it. I missed you all alot. How are you *Khanji*”, I asked.

“Not bad”, he said after a little pause.

“And how is *Daral* and others”, I hurried to ask. He was silent again for some time. Whereas my heart sank, till he said well in a faint voice.” I didn't know what to say next, for he was mostly silent, but I again encouraged myself to ask him: “May I talk to *Daral*?”

“Oh, sure”, he said after a brief silence. My heart began to thump fast, as I was tantalizing to hear the voice of my only best friend, whom I had lost in the cruel waves of the circumstances.

“How are you *Uzman*?” My eyes welled up with tears on listening it from the mouth of my sweetest friend after such a long time.

“I am fine and what about you?”

“Not bad”, he replied.

“You didn't try even once to ask about me”, I asked.

“Our PTCL connection had long been cutoff. I wanted to inform you, but how? There was no way to reach you”, he responded.

“Besides, you left me no choice. You even didn't bother to inform us at the time of shifting to Mingora, telling *Kaif* to inform me instead”, he complained. Whereas, I lost contact with *Kaif* thereafter”, he explained.

The very faint voice of *Daral* was distressing. So, I didn't go into further details about these things, as the time was not fit for it. What's more, he was in a strange situation. Neither, he wanted to stay, nor did he want to leave. "Don't lose heart, everything will be ok."

"My mother is seriously ill, she cannot even stand without our support", he added.

"May I talk to her", I asked.

"Why not." He took the phone to her. I briefly inquired after her health and took the phone to my mother. They talked to one another for some time. I also talked to *Adnan*, who gave me his cell number for easy contact.

My contact had been restored. However, due to frequent signal problems we rarely talked. Our discussion largely centered on the situation. We exchanged news, which traveled fast than the speed of the wind.

My mother closely observed me, as she was not happy over it. "You did better contact *Daral* to inquire after his family. But you should be careful in your contacts with them."

"Why", I asked in surprise!

"They would think we are still interested in them."

"If they think so, they are right because I have not lost interest in them. Instead my interest in them has increased with time."

"You would have to limit your contacts, because I have already finalized everything with the mother of *Guldana*."

"I think there is straw in your head instead of brain, but I wouldn't yield in."

"You disobedient. How you dare talk me like this. I would tell about it to your father", she snapped.

"If I am disobedient, it is because of you. Is this the way to talk about such things at this time when they are passing through a critical stage. But you will not be able to understand this, as you have no mercy at all. And you are right we should take this issue with father. I have also better not to spoil my mind with you anymore. He would decide about it."

"He has already decided it. He knows about my position and accepted the offer", she explained.

"I wouldn't believe it. I would myself talk to him in this context", bewildered I asked my mother.

Hearing this she was silent, as if, she had lost words. And I didn't insist, as talking to her was a futile effort. Now I wanted to immediately go to *Fa'aris*, but there was no strength in me. My blood pressure was low and my thoughts had begun to torture me. "How can I deceive *Kashmala*? How can I forget her? My mother has gone mad, but why would my father concede. I have never seen him to compromise on his principles, instead he thought me to follow it, then how it can be possible." Having no option, I took another sleeping pill and went to sleep, which I awoke in the near dark and began to wait for the morning.

In the morning, I spared no time to visit *Fa'aris* with my problem. "I can't believe your father can take such a decision. Anyhow it is premature to make an opinion before we have asked him", *Fa'aris* said after I told him about the entire story. He then took no time to dial the number to my father and put the issue before him. Strangely, he was not aware of all this.

"How can I do so", he responded?

"Then how she can say so to *Uzman*", *Fa'aris* asked?

"Actually, she tried to convince me, saying she has already proposed *Guldana*. I was angry over this, but when she tried to prolong the issue, I asked her that I would think about it, as I was busy. I wanted to put the issue up for some time. You don't worry I am talking to her about it."

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## High-profile killing

Nights were long and days dark, during which I found retreat in the company of *Fa'aris*, who took keen interest in election activities and accompanied me with him to the meetings in the slim preparations for the elections, 2008. The mood of the time betrayed everything regarding these activities, however. Simply, the public minds were not in these things. They were bewildered.

False rumours were essentially circulating constantly on this land, whereas the people would not understand the things around them. They felt adrift, floating with no destination. They saw them just being carried where the tide took them. On the other hand their sentiments had reached its peak. They were not ready to forget of what they were to put up with during the circumstances of fear and panic.

The Red Thin Lines had disreputed all the institutions and the people feared they might be crushed anytime between the thumb and the nail of index finger, to snap them in two like fleas. Hence, they no more believed in beliefs and looked at the things with doubt, supposing they were deliberately being pushed into the situation. Instinctively, the people knew that they are being watched and chased. Remembering the reality of their position between bullets and blades, they were mostly silent. It was a terrible thing, indeed.

The focus of *Fa'aris* was divided between *Shahram* and me, due to the grievous problems we were facing. He would give us proper time and tried to keep us engaged in some positive activity that may help us in our recovery. “I know we are dependent on the situation and can't lead a free life of our own, but we have got to get through this trial”, he asked.

I would somehow try to follow his instructions, but *Shahram* would not mend his ways. He was not interested in anything; especially the elections. However, *Fa'aris* gave regular time to him. He avoided political topics with him, as he knew he didn't take interest in these activities, nor did he want to act on beliefs. The worrying thing was that there was no institution in the country, unassailable for him. “There will be political arguments, but nothing will alter, not where survival is concerned. The people would be sacrificed like a goat to get a tiger.”

His condition was serious that once he locked himself in his room. The whole family tried to make him open the door but failed. Hence *Fa'aris* was to be called for it. “Shit!” “The matter has come to this”, he remarked. “What was the issue”, he asked *Afaq*?

“*Shahram* wanted to go to my aunt's home”, he began. “But my father forbade him in view of the situation”, he added. “Instead of abiding, he resorted to reasoning with him and went to the extent of accusing my father for our misfortune. Over this, my father was angry and scolded him for his rough behavior. My mother and my cousin had to intervene, otherwise he had crossed all the limits”, he maintained.

“Come with me”, *Fa'aris* asked *Afaq*. They went home and I kept waiting for their coming out. Very soon, I was alone, thinking of my misfortune, as if, I had brought the troubles with me. I also felt sorry for *Shahram*. I thought him a carefree person like *Fa'aris* but I was wrong. Perhaps, I was yet too young to know about human nature. I had never thought that human beings are not what they appear. They only resort to projection, the social roles. My attitude about people was changing now, with the change in the behavior of *Shahram*.

After sometime *Fa'aris* came out with *Shahram*. He shook hand with me and sat beside me. His beautiful eyes were red with unspeakable disappointment and he was not well. “I cannot believe that a strong person like you can be so easily broken”, I asked him.

“Is there any hope left”, *Shahram* asked?

“Yes, hope is always there, but all one need is patience and guts”, *Fa'aris* intervened.

“Guts”, *Shahram* ridiculed, “what kind of guts for the people like me, always under twenty four hours threat.”

“You know there can't be two deaths for a person. He dies once, his fate is decided, then why you spoil your mind.”

“I am fed-up of the situation. It is like an everyday death for me. What kind of lawless land we are living. All times threat, is this a life?”

“Look, your family has great expectations from you. You are intelligent, don't destroy your life”, I asked.

“What use, when there is no life”, he said. “Sometimes, it seems we are living in a hideout. There are no facilities, but only death. What kind of life it is when one feels unsafe even at his home? Everything is frightening. One cannot be sure, he will be back home alive or not.”

“Why do you allow yourself to think about such things that are hurting you, especially at this peak time, when you have gone through your graduation with distinction and are at the crucial stage of your academic career”, *Fa'aris* asked.

“You know very well, I cannot spend my time at home, with constraints. If I do, for how long it will be”, *Shahram* asked.

“Elections are round the corner, you believe it or not, but I hope there will be a positive change after these elections.

“It is your opinion, but I don't think any change, at least, in the near future, nor do I see any candidate of merit in the prevailing set up”, *Shahram* remarked. “You will see they would amass votes and live the area for safe homes”, he added.

“There are strong candidates like *Miangul Asfandiyar Amirzeb*”, responded *Fa'aris*. “I think, he is no less than a miracle for the people”, he added. *Asfandiyar* had decided to contest the election on PF-81 Swat constituency for general elections of 2008. He was the son of Prince *Miangul Amirzeb* of Royal Wali Swat family and grandson of former ruler of Swat and former president of Pakistan *Ayub Khan* and nephew of *Miangul Aurangzeb*, the former Governor. His father was a member of National Assembly of Pakistan in 1977. The young and popular politician was affiliated with Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and was elected to NWFP Assembly on PML-N ticket in 1997 elections.

“It is your presumption, all are the same”, *Shahram* said.

“My dear he has already served as education minister, which he was inducted into cabinet on Sep 5, 1998, a position he held until October 12, 1999. The ardent member of the Royal Family of the former Princely State of Swat also served previously as a District Nazim, after winning the election for the seat in 2003, which he remained in the position until 2005”, *Fa'aris* said. The people were satisfied with his performance. They drew analogies between him and his grandfather, the former ruler of Swat, *Miangul Jehanzeb*, who developed the valley on modern lines during his rule, which ended with the merger of the Princely State of Swat in Pakistan in 1969. Moreover, he had a strong educational background. He received his early education in Catholic Public High School, Sangota, then Army Burn Hall School Abbottabad, where he completed his Senior Cambridge, after that he received his bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering from the School of Engineering, University of Peshawar in 1989. He was, in fact, an asset for the people of here.

“He alone can't help in transition”, *Shahram* said.

“Don't be disappointed, I hope the leaders will raise the issue on the assembly floor, because they are also from this area”, *Fa'aris* hoped. “You just wait”, he added, “the date of the elections is drawing near.” “There will be a political change, a transition of power to elected govt. You see the political heat is already rising on the national front, especially in the backdrop of the meeting between *Benazir Bhutto* and *Nawaz Sharif*. They have met to publicize their demand that *Pervez Musharraf* fulfill his promise to lift the state of emergency before January's parliamentary elections, threatening to boycott vote, if he failed to comply with the demand. They have also promised to assemble a committee that would present to *Musharraf* the list of demands upon which their participation in the election is contingent”, he explained.

In this regard, the campaign rally of PPP at Liaquat National Bagh in the run-up for the January 2008 parliamentary elections was seen as a milestone on the political arena, to boost up democratic culture and pave way for peaceful transition of power to public representatives. Unfortunately, little before the scheduled general elections, in which *Benazir Bhutto* was a leading candidate, she was leaving the campaign rally, when she was killed on December 27, 2007. Her killing left such a void that couldn't be filled in the PPP circle. The death of the 11th Prime Minister of Pakistan, serving two non- consecutive terms in 1988–90 and 1993–96 was one of the greatest tragedies. The death of the scion of politically powerful Bhutto family and the eldest daughter of *Zulfikar Ali Bhutto*, a former prime minister himself, who had founded the centre-left Pakistan People's Party (PPP) was a huge setback at the time the country was passing through a critical phase.

To add insult to the injury, the other day of *Benazir Bhutto* assassination during her three-day mourning period, *Asfandiyar* was campaigning in his constituency, when he was killed in a roadside bomb blast targeting his vehicle on December 28, 2007 at Manglawar near Sangota. Six of his supporters were also killed in the attack. His assassination was the first high profile killing during the skirmishes in Swat.

The heart-rending news went through *Shahram* like a dagger. Although I had never seen him to have ever expressed his liking for *Asfandiyar*, but that night he was broken. Same was the case with *Fa'aris*, but as I have already said he never attached importance to anything beyond control. For him everything had its limits, even the mourning. The stalwart carried on with life, irrespective of the consequences. To him life was fleeting and no one should be mourned beyond limit, as it was to him the way of life to end. To him *Asfandiyar's* death was a big blow. Life never ends with him. Therefore, we should pray for his departed soul to be rested in eternal peace and that's the true reward we can give him", he said.

The conditions of *Shahram* were pathetic. Pitched in trouble, he had begun to depend on tranquilizers and increased its doze with increase in his constraints, as he resisted every move that curbed his freedom. The resistance made by this free bird to break the cage saw momentum with time. While, *Fa'aris* was to be called for him to pacify the resistance made by this encaged bird, because the family members avoided confrontation with him. He even didn't care for his mother and accused her of siding with the other family members against him. So, the distance between them had widened. He also argued with *Fa'aris* by prolonging an issue. Nonetheless, *Fa'aris* knew that in the faint glimmer of hope, he was the only light for him. Therefore, he always behaved him with love. Here, I found myself entangled between them. *Shahram* was changing fast, while *Fa'aris* was steadfast, though they were like two facets of gold. I didn't know why *Shahram* was so apprehensive in his presence, who was like a thick shade for us. True! Allah did not create such men like *Fa'aris* effortlessly or in quantity, filling their hearts with the rarest of commodities, and indiscriminate love for all mankind. Even *Nekzada* sir commended him for his love for mankind.

Before going to bed, I spent much time in the veranda by lying in bed. I looked at the sky in the dim light of the stars for deep silence to help me in sleep after taking a sleeping pill. I would remain in such condition for a long time.

The last night of the year, 2007, needs a special reference here. On that particular night, the world had gathered to celebrate the New Year's Eve, with large crowds having flashes of light, watching fireworks to welcome the year 2008 with bangs. They had made all the worries take a back seat on that special night. Whereas, I was celebrating my defeat on that particular night.

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### ***PART - III***

## **Dangerous living**

(Perpetual losses after the high profile killing of *Miangul Asfandyar Amirzeb*, just the other day of *Benazir Bhutto* assassination).

## Fa'aris in turmoil

When the dawn broke, Swatis found them under the New Year's sun. There was nothing like new, however; except the new terror. People were now afraid of everything, even of totally loving a thing in case it was taken away from them. There was no respect for human dignity and reverence. No one was supposed to be spared. Neither exhortation, nor danger could mollify the battle-axe on duty. The law of the land was not allowed to operate. People were at a war, imposed on them. Each one of them was at a post at his own soil to fight for survival.

Indeed, the year 2007 had ended, but there was nothing like a good end in Swat Valley. There was only the end to public lives, properties, trades, businesses and schooling. The Red Thin Lines had begun to end all that came in its way and disturbed its existence. Woe to anyone who fell into these lines and crushed to death. The death ration was everywhere. People were hit in shootouts. They came under attacks. They were killed at point-blank range. Shelling and firing accidents had become the norm. Mortars, rockets and cannonballs squarely fell on them. People fell flattened by the burst of fire. They cried, they attempted to get up but the flames swept over them and there were no more cries. There was nothing but burnt out, mutilated and charred bodies, lost children, mute with terror. Men embarrassing dead, women screaming, their faces contorted with anguish. They were going round in circles, their cloths in tatters, and their hands covered in blood. Crying for help, they threaded their way among debris. Wild-eyed with panic and fear, they carried maimed little bodies, even some beings without hands, arms, legs and faces. Petrifying the innocent children, the terrible scenes prevailed. The people buried their children heads to protect them from the scenes of horror. The dead bodies remained aground and the injured cried for medical assistance. Feeling something akin to anger at the massacre; the people were bent double by the waves of nausea. Then steadily a feeling of cowardly relief came over them.

The people had never wanted this war, they did not understand it. Still, the disruptive activities kept trickling on into the area. Whereas, the situation warned that the squally winds were reaching its height and would prevail along and off the area. The wind speed would gradually increase to come closer. The public would have to find a shelter. They would have to find stronger holds. They had reason for it.

In such a situation of fire, my mind was blistering in two halves, with the dividing line of River Swat between them. At night, I brooded over that side of the divide, which was burning. At day, I thought about this side of the divide, which was swelling. Thinking over all the happenings, I endured until now, there seemed I have spent years in miseries. I only tried to shut out the terrible thoughts which kept chasing me round. It will always be there troubling me like rheumatism, always there will be the knowledge of what we had to lose.

'*Shahram*'s father said the situation has to be fixed in blood-letting, as no side was ready to surrender. Moreover, the situation suggested that an average or even every Swati is extremist and embraced or advocated extremism. Though, it happened in some cases but there was anger. Almost everybody who was an average Swati did often relate, justify and refuse to unconditionally condemn the ideologies driving violent extremism – even when it had its direct effect on their minds in the form of bombings and attacks.

Uncle also felt unsafe. He diverted *Fa'aris* attention to it and would often grope for words when he expressed his sorrow for *Shahram*, who had come to destruction. He asked *Fa'aris* to be especially attentive to him.

*Fa'aris* tried his best to make him not to think of future in such a disappointed way. "What is to be done will be done, then why you think of such things not within the reach of your mind", *Fa'aris* asked.

"Why not within the reach of mind. Everything is within the reach of mind. And you are right, we needn't think of future, our future is already written", *Shahram* responded.

“Why do you take everything for negative? Do you know pessimism is infidelity”, *Fa’aris* retorted?

“The fire has reached the hub city. Al-Fallah and National Banks have been set on fire. The business and trade activities have come to a halt. The city is not safer after the Gas Plant and Grid Station destructions and killing of head constable and son of DSP with other murderous dins pouring in daily. The threats are awakening the citizens. They would soon be leaving the city”, he maintained.

“Look, I am serious; I am not in a mood of boring things. The changes occurring in you are worrying us all”, *Fa’aris* snapped. “You have lost control over yourself. You should behave yourself. You should sort out things for you. How long others will decide things for you.”

“Other people decide things for me. What do you mean? Do you want to say I am burden on on you?”

“Why do you want to create tension for others”, *Fa’aris* said? “But I am not in mood of such boring things. Let’s go *Uzman*.” We left.

“I have the only option left now is to convince uncle for his marriage”, said *Fa’aris* on the way.

“Marriage, what do you mean. How can you say so in such a situation”, I asked.

“To me it is the final solution, as we have badly failed to reform him”, *Fa’aris* said.

“I fear you may not create more problems for him this way instead of resolving them”, I asked.

“How”, *Fa’aris* asked.

“If his life partner is not a better match for him, there may be more problems for him”, I responded.

“You don’t worry about it. *Shahram* likes his maternal cousin. That’s why he wanted to go there on that day. I hope it would be better for him.”

“Would uncle agree to this”, I asked.

“There is no other option.”

“I think you should first discuss it with *Shahram*.”

“I should make the things clear first.”

“Indeed, you can do it, but he must be engaged in all these things. He is no more that muscular boy I had seen and known him.”

“Let me know about the intention of uncle first. I don’t know what would be reaction of *Shahram* if there is some problem from uncle.”

It was just the other day that *Fa’aris* came to me after Maghrib prayer. “Everything has been agreed upon. Uncle expressed pleasure over my decision, saying he is ready for everything that may help in his son reformation. We can talk to *Shahram* now?”

When we went to him in the night and *Fa’aris* put the issue before him, he was bewildered. “Are you crazy? Is it a time for such joke?”

“It isn’t a joke, we are doing all this for your good”, *Fa’aris* responded.

“What the future holds in store for us, I am worried about it and you want to make other worry with me.”

“There is nothing to worry. Is there anything better than you marry your choice girl”, he asked.

“I think, I need some time”, *Shahram* asked after some silence.

“Ok. Take your time. I would ask you tomorrow.”

*Shahram* was still confused when we met him the next day. “It can only add to my burden, as I haven’t stood on my feet so far.”

“Then what can resolve your problems, chain smoking or over dependence on tranquilizers”, *Fa’aris* snapped.

“That’s my problem”, *Shahram* said apparently angry over it.

“Oh sorry, I had not thought about it. I have better not interfere in your affairs anymore. Let’s go *Uzman*”, *Fa’aris* asked me in anger.

“I tried my best to make him understand not to take a step in anger, but he wouldn’t listen to me. “I did nothing wrong”, he responded.

Thereafter, he never came to the hujra, nor did he ever try to meet *Shahram*. Uncle requested him not to do so, but he was a different sort of person. “*Shahram* has made a world of his own, where neither I have any place in it, nor do I want to live in it”, he remarked.

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### Doomsday scenario

Preparations for elections, scheduled for February 18, 2008, were at peak. Campaigns were going on for it, with candidates visited different areas, held meetings with the prominent figures and general public as well.

Finally, the day of the dangerous elections had reached amid widespread rumours of bomb blasts during the polling. The turnout was unbelievable on the other hand, with the Awami National Party (ANP) to take lead in NWFP (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) Province.

Though, the elections were peaceful, it doesn't mean the days were without its cost. It were followed by two bomb blasts, including one on a marriage ceremony, turning it into a funeral ceremony. The sad news made us upset; still we were hopeful for positive change, as the turnout was incredible under such circumstances. "The people have shown their valour by casting votes and electing their leaders in such a situation of fire", *Fa'aris* said. "I hope the leaders would take up the public issues on the assembly's floor and work for amelioration of the militancy hit and panic stricken public. They will not forget about the sacrifices rendered by the brave sons of this soil", he explained.

Unfortunately on February 28, 2008, the sad news of the demise of a senior police officer (DSP), Javed Iqbal, one of the closest friends of the brother of *Fa'aris* poured in. I went there with *Fa'aris* to attend the funeral prayer at "8:00 p.m. Near the gate, the police constable stopped us. He allowed *Fa'aris* and his elder brother *Faran* to enter after brief checking and then turned towards the former Nazim, who began to argue with him for checking him. "Sorry sir, but we have strict orders to check everybody due to increase in bomb blasts."

"Blast in funeral prayer", the *Nazim* ridiculed!

"Anything can be expected these days", he responded.

"Oh, it has come to this", the *Nazim* expressed.

When he had finished the arguments, it was my number. The policeman checked me briefly and I entered. *Fa'aris* was waiting for me at the gate, so that I may not be displaced. Then he went to stand in the line in front of me and I stood behind him beside the *Nazim*, who still jerked his head back and furiously looked at the constable for causing him to hardly find a standing place in the last lines of the prayer.

During the funeral prayer, there was a suicide bomb blast. The murderous din, which ceased with a long silence, the first groans, the first cries, the first shrieks, the thick black nauseating smoke of burning human flesh shrouded the disaster. Gradually, the survivors got up covered in blood swayed giddily and stifled a scream, dazed and took in the dreadful scene. There were nothing but only burnt out, mutilated and charred bodies. Stripped naked by the explosion, the nightmarish creatures hopped by with astonishing speed on one slipper clad foot while from the bleeding stump dripped a dark trail of blood. They wailed, they could not see. It was a doomsday.

With uncharacteristic tenderness the people helped the injured, but rarely saved due to the serious injuries. We were miraculously one of the survivors. I found myself clung to *Fa'aris*, who felt dizzy and began to call out to *Faran*. Nevertheless, there was no response. I also tried to cry out with him. But I feared I couldn't hear my own sound. I thought my voice was making no sounds, like a terrible dream in which one calls without any sound, calling for help, yet there is no call that can be heard. *Fa'aris* hands kept twisting before him as he searched blindly around the crowd for *Faran*, never able to focus. He began to search for him in the survived people with blackened faces, but didn't find him. Then he looked for him in the injured, but failed. My heart sank, as he turned towards the dead bodies. It was, indeed, a doomsday scenario. I held out a cry in my throat, when I looked at so many dead bodies. I couldn't dare to move ahead and fell unconscious.

Swat was in all-out mourning, when I opened my eyes. It was hospital where I saw myself, when I came to my senses, and the first sight to behold was the crowd of wane looking people from the surrounding areas. There was a general chaos; nearly fifty persons were killed, including the

Naib Nazim and other prominent figures, and around hundred injured. I was one of them, with minor injuries, perhaps due to late entry with the Nazim. The first word I uttered was *Faran*. However, I felt my faith was shaken, as there was no response to the question of the poor boy. I had no attendant. I wanted to go to home, but the bandages on my hands and head invited an elderly person to ask me if I was needed something.

“Where is my mother”, I asked but then I came to the fact that I had no one at the hospital. Therefore, I took out my cell phone, surprised to see it was safe. But, as I wanted to dial number to my mother, it was off. Now I wanted to go home, but the elderly person stopped me.

“Are you crazy? How can you do so under such circumstances? Where is your attendant”, he asked?

“I have no one.” I felt for the first time that my life may be such a meager representation in people, whom I could call, I could depend.

“Wait a bit, when someone of your relatives come. I wouldn’t let you to leave in such a situation.”

“I have no one.”

He felt very upset and asked me to seek the doctor’s permission. “Still, there are bruises on your body...”

“It is nothing, I must go”, I asked again.

“Ok. Wait a bit I am asking the doctor”, saying this he left.

Little after he came with a doctor, who without even bothering to talk at once administered me an injection. It was only in the morning that I opened my eyes. The elderly person brought me juice and some fruits to eat. I only took the juice and asked him if my mother had come. “Maybe she was not allowed due to emergency”, he responded.

Hearing this, I came out of the bed in protest by him and left the hospital. As I reached the area, there was all out mourning around it. I straightly came to *Fa’aris*. “What is this? What are these people doing here”, I asked in a semi-conscious state.

“*Faran...*”, he couldn’t pronounce ahead, but I had understood about everything. “Did you see your mother”, *Afaq* came to ask me.

“No, I was straightly here”, I replied.

“Your mother has left for hospital”, he said. I was absolutely confused, when *Fa’aris* asked me to go to home to enquire further about her. Without wasting time, I rushed towards my home. I saw my sister was wiping tears on seeing me.

“Where is mother”, I asked her?

“Didn’t she come with you from hospital”, she said after a brief silence. She had hardly finished, when I got back to the road and found a rickshaw. In order to look for my mother, I went to the ward which I was admitted, but she was not there. I looked for her in the crowd of the wane looking people out there at the surgical ward, but didn’t find her. I looked for her in every ward, but she was not anywhere.

Fed up, I got back to the ward and asked an attendant if he knew about my mother had come. There was no response, but when I was coming out, one of the attendants called: “Sometime before a woman had come to the ward, asking for some patient by the name of *Usman* or *Uzman*, something like this. However, there was no patient by this name.”

“That was me”, I responded. “Where is she”, I asked?

“I don’t know, as she soon left and we didn’t see her again”, the attendant said.

I requested him to put my SIM card in his cellphone, so that I may dial the number to my mother. He did it at once, and I dialed the number. Luckily, I found it. “I am *Uzman*. Where are you mother”, I asked?

“I am *Seema*.”

“Oh shit!” She was my sister. My mother had left her mobile phone at home.

“What should I do now”, I stood contemplating for some time and then went to my bed again?

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*Collapse all around*

“Why did you leave the ward, without even bothering for permission, for discharge report”, the incharge of the ward came to ask me with visible anger in his eyes. “Suppose, there was something wrong, who would have been responsible for it”, he added.

I had no reply, but silently absorbed of what he said. Meanwhile, my mother came to the hospital. I could see nothing, but to hug to her and asked her to get back to our area, our people. “We have no one here”, I asked. She just consoled me and said nothing more. Maybe, she had grown up to know about the reality of the situation. Or she wanted to play a fatherly role. Hence, she made no hues and cries.

The next day, I was discharged. It was the first day of the spring season that had blossomed in mourning, heralding a doom in the fountain of blood to welcome the season of flowers with deaths and destruction all around. Over fifty persons had lost their lives and around hundred injured to mark the beginning of one of the most frantic time of the year, with the destruction it had brought was a huge setback to the bleak efforts for peace. The losses were huge in many respects. The tragedy was not only huge in magnitude, but also in its general effects upon the public, who were now fearful of everything. They led their lives in a measured gratitude and tight circles. Fearful of all powers, trust was now alien to human nature. Loathing the idea of dependency, they were as suspicious of it as a wild animal sensing a trap.

On the fourth day of the mourning, we went to the grave of Faran. ‘How much more should we take? Would there be any end to this blood carnage.’ Facing the fact that *Faran* was killed, the frustration overwhelmed me and I felt despair for all the losses. Nonetheless, no one would disturb or tease them on the cruel earth. Their names had been removed from the living list and added to the dead list. Their life span, brief and short-lived was forming a momentary and fleeting part of a large whole, which was incomplete. They had lost all their senses. They would not build up customary quarrels with their family members. That day and all the days to follow, they would remain silent. Their body would be present in grave but they would not and their relatives would not want their bodies without them. They had now become a part of the Death Valley, where all the miserable wretched were received by a way of funeral ovation. Therefore, the ending will not be different from the beginning. The Death Valley had everything ended in mystery. In this place of solitude, the things had a strange beginning and ending. Generally, there was no beginning or end, or here like the spot in itself, it had the end before its beginning.

We got back to the hujra to express solidarity with the bereaved family. Looking around the dispirited faces, my mind was spinning in darkness. I saw nothing but only the signs of pain and regret over them. The more I tried I leave behind the grief, the more I nursed it. Once again, I was helpless and hopeless due to the random violence, which swirled around me fleeting. I kept my distance from them. The suspicions in my mind turned into disgust and distrust, the distrust into resentment, the resentment into hate. I tried to lift the mood, but to no avail. Life was shrinking away, everything about me seemed dead and loathsome. I wanted to cry but the cry started low in my throat and burning and scraping all the way up, exploded near the top of my head. There was no escape, the agony was constant. I abruptly stood up, as though my legs were working on its own impetus will and wanted to combat the forces of memory moving over me. Just the opposite I needed, I departed myself to be alone. Without any courtesy, I left for home. There all the horrors and threats congealed and suffering physical weakness I stumbled forward and would have fallen except for the bed which I reached for just in time. Sitting heavily I closed my eyes. I tried not to dwell on the phantoms plaguing my mind, but there was nothing to ease my sense of incredulity. Peering into the mirror, I saw my face turned pale and drawn. I couldn’t stay at home and got back to mourning place. I looked at the silent mouths to speak. My mind was exploding, I wanted to cry like savages, when *Fa’aris* father said. “Death is a written fact. Nobody can escape it. What we can do is to pray for departed souls to be rested in eternal peace.” Tears began to flow from the heavy eyes of *Fa’aris* down to his cheeks well defined.

The time was especially hard for him. The monster would not forget the tragedy. The injuries were deep. I spent most of my time with him. He would smile on seeing me. But it was feigned, just to hide his grief. Thereafter, he spent his time in solitude, as if, adjustment was hard for him. The only place I found him was in Masjid. I sat with him for a long time after prayer.

One day I was with *Fa'aris* when *Kaif* called and asked me to find home for them at Mingora in view of the deteriorating situation over there in Buner and the resultant fear among the people, especially after the Taliban made inroads into the district. Fights between them and Awami Lashkars were also reported with bomb blasts and other murderous dins.

Though, the family of *Kaif* was already due for Mingora, but the situation was somewhat normal in Buner, while their relatives were well-off and hospitable. Unfortunately, they were to find shelter now as their relatives were also up for escape to the down districts. My friend was much worried and asked me to find home for them at the earliest. I couldn't muster courage to ask *Fa'aris* about it. So, I contacted his friends in this context, whom I was well acquainted now. Fortunately, we found a home in one of the suburbs of Mingora on advance rent for a month after two days struggle, as the city was already packed. Somewhat relieved of the burden of *Kaif* to leave me, I found a bit of peace of mind. It was not for long, however. He soon came to me with even more problems. "I am fed-up; I don't know what to do", the aggrieved *Kaif* said. "On one side the situation is not good, on the other hand there is a general shortage of commodities, with the price hike has broken the back of the masses. Do you know the price of five Kg flour has reached Rs: 550 and one Kg rice to Rs: 500", he explained, as if, he was talking to a foreigner. What the poor masses can do under such circumstances.

You know, our dependence was on agriculture. Whereas, my father has already spent what he had in his hands. Now, I am thinking of work somewhere, I mean at a shop or any other establishment. You are well settled. You would know about the people who can help me in finding a job." I was surprised to hear all this from the well nurtured and mischievous child like *Kaif*, who were the property holders and had a handsome income from their gardens and other agricultural fields. The cruel situation had made him grown up more than his age.

"Why don't you ask for help from your uncles? You said one of them is in UK", I asked.

"Actually, my father is not happy with them. In fact, they accused him of injustice in the distribution of property, especially that of our joint home, which presently belong to us, though it was given to us by my grandfather", he explained.

"You know the businesses are on the verge of collapse", I responded. "Economically the people have reached the extent that many of them are forced to beg. Migrations have reached all times high. People are not only thinking of safe exit from death, but also from financial constraints. What is more, the massive blackouts, particularly after the storming of Mingora Grid Station and Gas Plant destruction have further aggravated the situation. There is no electricity even for fanning. The people are spending their days in bombing and nights in eyes."

"How should we know about such rainy seasons, otherwise we wouldn't have been so lavish. The problems are mounting up and there is no income. "Not to mention the children schooling. We haven't admitted my younger brother to school so far. But if we had admitted him, what difference it would have made when the entire education system has been collapsed. Indeed, the children schooling suffered the most during this time. It was only on February 16 that the schools were reopened after the early winter holidays given on December 07. Thereafter, they have been closed forever. "To me, the people are on the fast track to Stone Age savages."

"You know education is fundamental and universal right of a person and provides the very basis for opportunity, social and economic mobility and facilitates growth", I said. "If the schools remained close for long, I fear the doors to education would be closed for the people, which would be a huge setback, due to the fact that an inclusive quality of education for all is an essential ingredient for development. If we think of progress, every child will have to become more productive of their parents. Rather unfortunate is the fact that the people would no more be able to educate their children, not only by the security concerns, but also by financial constraints. The well-to-do people would somehow manage the education of their children, but it is the poor like us, who are doomed from all sides", I remarked.

“How they can, when the schools are closed”, he responded. “And suppose, they are reopened, how the educational activities would take place in the congested classrooms, badly insulated with semi-furnished structures by the damages. The shabby structures would have a look of horror to affect the students’ minds. But think of life dear, learning is a second option. You know the students have long been plunged in darkness. They could not be even defined in term of literacy, lagging behind the world, where only reading and writing can’t be considered literacy. Here fundamental rights like security and health are crushed under feet and we think of education.”

“People are extremely deprived. There is nothing like freedom of opinion, expression and movement. Even no word uttered remains unaccounted for. The consequences are often severe for what one said against the other, most often ends in loss of life for him. Restraints on movement, acts, deeds and saying has made the people realized that the earth is no more for them.”

“People are living in anguish; especially the common men are meted out with bias everywhere. They have no voice in decisions making and their rights don’t form a part of grand development vision. The things meant for betterment ends up in even more problems. Not to mention the chronic issue of bias, which exists even in planning and delivery of infrastructure projects. Fed up of anti-poor bias, people are finding it hard to adjust them in mainstream life. The high scale bias and irregularities have hit them everywhere. They do not find comfort in the prevailing set up, where they are deprived of equitable development. Thus they knew no culture or tradition to matter or follow or share their responsibility to the state. The contribution of these people to peace, progress, solidarity, integrity or their part to contribute in the national development has been ended. Neutrality means only for those who are comparatively less affected. They do not have their survival totally dependent on the situation or their income from here. Otherwise, the downtrodden people are close to hysteria. They are grabbing the arms of the stronger for favour under fear or anger. They mean survival and feeding their families, for which they even take extreme steps, which become a torture for them with the power change from one force to the other. Regrettably, what these people decide by the time would not end their torture. They are unable to think over the fact that following the one would simply mean inviting the wrath of the other. They do not know that in the game of chess the victory is on the board, but at the end. Thus, they fall down with each and every other trick. Sweeping aside the controversial issues and need to regulation, they are affiliating views that have its direct impact on their lives.”

“The continuous failure of policies to put the situation back on the track has added to their problems. There is no visible improvement, to strike a balance between demand and supply on the fluctuating economy. Making both ends meet is the only end of life. The concept like respectable livelihood is a dream. The people cry out their heart, but their voices remain unheard on diverse issues like security, health, education and food, which are not only social issues but also the rights issues. That’s where; the people lose sense of rights and duties. They are no more obsessed of their capabilities and live without realizing their lives.”

“By the turn of bad fortune, the crops and fruits have also been destroyed. No one is allowed to harvest crops or pick up fruits. Even our standing crops, which were ripe, were spoiled. There are also reports of killing of peasants in fields/gardens. On one side, there are bullets, while on the other hand there is hunger. If one escapes the one, the other awaits. Whereas, the bullet has no culture to matter or follow, it kills what comes in its way. In the struggle for life, people are not only being displaced, but many disappears, because the rain is lashing down and they are stopping for shelter, the fortunate ones under their own doorway, the unfortunate ones ending at the doors of others.”

After detailed discussion about the situation, I suggested him to go to the down districts. “There the people are looked after by the Government, the NGOs as well as the public of the respective areas. *Kaif* was, however, still confused over it because of his parents. They had already discussed the topic among them but could not reach a solid conclusion.

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## *My mother's blunder*

*Rehan* uncle regularly enquired after my health on phone. The mother of *Guldana* also talked to me three times from the phone of my mother. They also visited me, when I was discharged from the hospital. They had bought cloths, shoes and sweater for me, which I was not happy over it. Therefore, I asked my mother that why they resort to such things.

“They think you like their son, that’s why they are so generous with you”, she responded.

“I know mother and I am thankful to them for their hospitality, but I don’t want to be so close to them. I don’t want to be under the burden of their favours”, I asked.

“They love you my son”, she replied.

“I know mother, but why they do so, you know very well?”

“Look son, the time has changed”, my mother said. “You must accept the reality”, she added after a brief silence. “They are still waiting for you. I tell them you are not feeling well, but how long I will do so. You should go there, at least, to see the maternal uncle of *Guldana*. He is still looking forward to see you.”

“No mother, I can’t. My heart is not ready, how should I go?”

“He is a guest; he has come from Dubai on leave. You should, at least, think of him.”

“I must have visited him”, I asked, “but you know very well why is he so interested in seeing me?” “I fear mother. There seems to be a trap in everything they do for me”, I explained.

“It is not a time for such emotional encounters”, my mother said. “You should demonstrate patience; emotional decisions often end in destruction”, she added.

“What should I do then, accept their offer?”

“Some decisions are taken in compulsion. Here you should think about my position.”

“What was your compulsion, ha? Did they force you? “Then why you took such a unilateral decision”, here I was out of temper as usual. “You still have a time mother. You should try to withdraw with wisdom. You should not resort to frequent contacts with them.”

“I can’t get back my son”, my mother replied? “I am forced”, she added after a brief silence.

“Why do you think yourself so weak mother? Tell me what’s your problem”, I asked again in view of her silence?

“I have given a ring to the girl”, she asked.

“What!” It was like someone has hit me hard on my face with a slap. “Why did you do so? How can you give her the ring, without my permission, when I had already rejected their offer?”

“They had asked for it”, she answered.

“Don’t tell a lie. Why would they ask for it without your consent?”

“Don’t start again, please; I am already in trouble. Help me out of this problem.”

“You have made your bed and now you must lie in it.”

“You are my son and if you turned away your face from me, I would take poison to kill myself”, she asked.

“Why did you do it, when you already knew about me, when I was already attached with *Kashmala*?”

“I thought there is no proof. It were mere words of mouth”, she asked?

“Were the words of *Kashmala*’s parents not a proof? Have you any doubt about them”, I asked.

“They had not given their words to the effect. They had just asked for wait till the girl is matured”, she maintained.

“Whichever the case is, they had indirectly agreed”, I snapped.

“I thought if they found a better match for her, they would not hesitate to give her hand to them.”

“I don’t know what sort of human you are”, I asked my mother in anger as she told me about it again and again and I didn’t like to hear it as I would not tolerate it. “What kind of mentality you have got, I don’t know. Look at the situation and the hardships they are passing through. And you say, they would give her hand to someone else. They would break their word. When I hear about such things from you, there seems my mind is exploding. And if you didn’t mend your ways, I fear you would lose me soon”, I threatened.

My mother had no more words, but began to weep. I had nothing to console her, but silently came out of home. I roamed around the area, but there was no peace. Now I went to a shop, little way off from our home and bought a cigarette. It was for the first time in my life that I touched a cigarette. I even didn’t know how to light it. That’s why I had to buy a match with it to light it in a lone place, so that no one may see me like this.

Looking like a thief around, I smoke the cigarette. For sometime I could not stand, and then I got up with a splitting headache and came home. I said nothing but silently went to my bed. I hid my face in the blanket only to be alone for some time. Soon, I found myself in loss and despair. It was the loss of everything that I was emotionally attached with, my good deeds and bad deeds, even my sinister errands, all inflected its value and reproach. I wanted to indulge them all. I wanted to reach them, appreciate them and regret them. They were similar to a live picture on the plain screen of my brain. It moved around in front of my eyes like its manifestation in a dream, good or bad under the veil of sleep, its worthiness poured in from all sides. Its effect was simultaneous and rose from my brain to overwhelm me.

Deep inside the pit of my brain was the apprehension I had by the time, but had no reason for it. Rightly said, depression is infectious. It generates anxiety, which in turn can grow into fear. Fear can grow into panic and that is where one might lose his head and act without thinking. And if one loses his head, he will probably lose the rest of him.

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*Daral* on the Ruin

Biologically alive but emotionally felt dead, *Daral* went through the motions of living like a languid sleepwalker; at all times behind his manners he suppressed his rage towards the situation. In fact, he was in such a situation, where believability was a far-off thought.

Meanwhile, I received the message of blasting of Khwazakhela Bridge from him. With this, the communication between the vast areas of Tehsil Matta and the localities over this side of River Swat discontinued. There was no movement among the people

Like ever, they were the worst victim. I had to speed up efforts for his reformation, especially after the NWFP Assembly had taken oath that was followed by the oath taking of the Chief Minister. I informed *Daral* that everything will be okay. “You don’t worry; the newly elected govt has taken oath. It will be trying its best for restoration of peace”, I said. ‘When there is a bit of calm’, I asked, “you straightly come to me.’

“I don’t think there can be any positive change in the present scenario”, he responded. “You see the day the Chief Minister took oath saw two bomb blasts in Swat. One in Gat Peochar on a local Jirga and the other in Khairabad Galoch. There were also ten raids around Mamdheri and the curse of curfews still continues”, he added. “The leaders’ hands are tied up. On the national political ground, the judges’ tension is also growing up. So, if judiciary is hijacked, media clapped, the leaders’ hands tied, who will come to the public rescue”, he asked.

“You are right but...”, signal problem. It was days after I found his contact again. I asked him not to lose heart. “Efforts are underway to control the situation. You may know, President Pervaiz Musharraf has visited China amid the judges’ tension. The Jamat-i-Islami Chief Qazi Hussain Ahmad has met Nawaz Sharif. The prolonging issue of judges has got international reputé, paralyzing the mainstream politics. To me, there must be a solution to these things now. We would have to take a decision, if we don’t want to lose our country”, I explained.

On April 22, the news of the sad demise of Muhammad Hussain Advocate, Kabal, a prominent political/social figure, reportedly killed alongwith his father and other locals whereas his brother was injured, poured in. *Daral* was very upset, saying the killing of the leaders is not a good omen for the area. “If the genocide of leaders and peace workers went on like this, the area would soon be deprived of them. In future, no one would dare to take part in peace activities with such killings. Instead of raising voice, they would be more liable to isolate them from mainstream life, due to which the common men would remain vulnerable to the clutches of those who exploit the situation for self-gains.”

“The leadership crisis has led to rising political instability, internal and external conflicts, and crises upon crises, including energy crisis at the second top of the list. Above all there are imposed conflicts on many fronts due to which the ever ready enemies undermine the efforts for peace. On the flip side of the coin, there is lawlessness, corruption, regional and national conflicts, ethnic divides, sectarian killings, clash of institutions, frail economy and lack of financial resources. That has also led to the lack of capacity and capability building, mistrust among institutions and insufficient community support. This unending wave of crisis has badly affected the socially distressed people.”

The other day, TNSM Chief Maulana Sufi Muhammad was released. His release was thought to be a positive step to bring the situation back on the track. But it was not for long. The skirmishes in Swat had entered a new phase of violence in the month of May, with two policemen and an aged person killed in Matta. There was also a bomb blast on Mingora Police Station, in which one policeman was killed.

On May 21, Taliban and Govt agreed to a truce. They had reportedly their agreement on fifteen points. It was agreed upon that Taliban would accept the Govt writ. They will not oppose the vaccination campaign, a burning issue at that time, nor will they resort to bomb blasts. On the other hand the Govt will impose Shariah in Malakand Division. Army will go back to its barracks. Mam Dheri Markaz will be turned into an Islamic University. As usual, I tried to convey the news to *Daral*. However, he was already informed and said that America has expressed its anger over the truce and mounting pressure on Pakistan to turn it down. He feared the government may not yield in to it.

The losses to precious lives continued. Bloodshed is on its peak. *PTDC* Hotel in the scenic spot and sky-roof of the country, Malam Jabba, was also set on fire, with the weather office. At last, the short truce ended on June 29. Malam Jabba Hotel was completely destroyed. *Daral* now ridiculed the very idea of relaxation. “Relaxation, eh!” “We will end up here; even the police stations are not safe. Matta Police Station was destroyed with police and FC personnel in it were killed. In Shawar twenty six Taliban were killed. Thirty security personnel were also killed. Maulana Samiullah Ningolai was also killed after Isha prayer. A student of class 10 came under the attack and killed.”

“Bomb blasts are everywhere in the country. Many damages are reported in it. The ways to exit are closed. Four persons were killed in Manja, Kabal. Besides, a bomb blast in a market in Charbagh resulted in many killing. The Taliban Commander Baithullah Mehsood has warned the government to resign within five days and has announced cutoff of negotiations. Army infiltration is also going on.”

“Firings and blasts have become a norm of the day here. Besides, hail of mortars and cannonballs are being fired on Gat Peochar from Baryam Bridge. From FC camp various areas are being targeted. People cannot venture out of homes”, he added. Here the things are worse. It was only today that around twenty eight police and FC personnel were reportedly kidnapped, besides many other murderous reports.”

“The situation is worst everywhere. In Ningolai a youth was killed when he came under firing. That was followed by a shell fell on a house, in which reportedly seven persons were killed. Around twenty five Taliban and twenty security personnel and nearly fifty civilians were reportedly killed so far in those areas. Besides, six Labourers were killed in a persimmon garden. The dead bodies are still there. The SPS School has also been blown up. Similarly a police van near Hazara Bridge was blown off in which an SHO and a constable were killed.”

“There may be some relief in other areas, but here are round the clock fights erupt between Taliban and security forces. Many people are being killed in these fights as compared to other areas, besides the schools, which are being destroyed”, *Daral* explained.

“People are killed everywhere, with schools being destroyed. Aligrama Middle School was blown off just the other day. The premature blast caused three bombers killed, when it went off. There are also reports of fight in Deolai Kabal in which a commander was reportedly killed with thirteen accomplices. Similarly, there the curfews are more severe than your area, with army infiltrations to control the situation.”

“Here are Jet planes bombarding and ration of bomb blasts. In Upper Swat, an Army vehicle was blown off in a remote control bomb blast in which two personnel were killed and many injured. Are such things reported there in the other areas with such impunity?”

“Why not, you see bomb blasts were reported in Sangota the other day, how many people would have lost their lives in it. Besides three youth were brutally killed in curfew. It is not only here, let's come to Buner, on August 13, six Taliban were killed in Buner by people in revenge to the killing of eight policemen. I think it was just few days ago in Peshawar when a manager of utility store was killed. The relatives took him to hospital, where a suicide bomb blast occurred, killing nearly thirty five people and leaving fourty two injured.”

On August 18, there was the news of President Musharraf resignation. *Daral* felt a glutting satisfaction over it, saying it is good news that he has resigned, at least, the people would heave a sigh of relief. “It is all due to his wrong policies we are in such a situation today.”

“Those responsible for laying the foundation of these things have gone, what remains is a legacy of rabid extremism, intolerance, and bigotry that rapidly spread through Pakistani society like an epidemic disease. This accommodation of extremist mindset has also created a political space and a favourable environment for extremism to thrive in. The domestic terrorism prevails. The root cause still remains untouched and unaffected.

The killing of *Mosa Khan* and *Muhammad Amin*, the former Nazim, Ningolai, alongwith other accomplices also poured in. The death toll in Taxila bomb blasts on August 22 had reached one hundred and around two hundred people were injured. There were also reports of the killing of the son and grandson of Muhammad Khan in Shahdherai with eight guards. His home was blown off. In Koza Bandai the grandson of Jamshed Khan was injured and his servant killed. In Aligrama, two persons were killed. There is no whereabouts of many people known.”

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Unfortunate end of *Mamo*

In the backdrop of continuous battles and damages to public lives and properties, the stranded people in the restive parts of Tehsil Kabal were given relief in curfews. With this, the people had found a chance to leave for down districts, mostly through Kabal chowk (square).

I was very happy, as *Mamo* had now found an opportunity of escape and I was sure he would directly come to me. With this thought in mind, I began to try his number. Unluckily, it was off and after being tired of dialing it, I straightly went to *Fa'aris*. “The people of Kabal have been given relief in curfews. Nevertheless, there is no whereabouts of *Mamo*. His number also come off.”, I asked.

“There may be some connection problem, I hope he will straightly come to us”, he remarked after himself trying his number. Our long wait ended in the imposition of curfew again. There was no whereabouts of *Mamo*. So, I got back home.

In the evening, there was a knock on the door of our home. I rushed to attend it, thinking it must be *Mamo*. To my surprise; there was a strange young boy nearly of my age, worn out and almost falling with fatigue. “Is this *Uzman* home”, he asked in a soft wavering voice?

“Yes”, I am *Uzman*”, I replied. “How may I help you”, I asked?

“*Mamo* had told me about you”, he responded. Hearing this, I opened the door of the parlour for him and made him seated comfortably.

“Where is *Mamo*”, I impatiently asked.

“It's a long story. I want some rest.” He fell in bed like a dry log, closing his eyes, then opening it again, as if, he had difficulty in bringing things into focus. I went home to bring something to eat for him. As I got back, he had fallen into a deep sleep. After the Isha prayer, I came to him with *Fa'aris*. “We should make him eat something and then ask about *Mamo*”, *Fa'aris* asked.

I put hand over his chest and shook it a bit to awaken him, but he didn't give response. I shook it again. This time he jumped with fear. “Who is this”, seeing me he cried out?

“I, I am *Uzman* and this is *Fa'aris*, my friend”, I replied.

“Where am I”, he looked at me with doubt, then fell silent drooping down his head, as if, he had now recognized me. Then, he raised his head up and looked at me again, maybe to enquire what he had thought in his mind was correct or not. This time he fully recognized me and sat. Without any courtesy, he asked me for bringing him some food. *Fa'aris* guided him to washroom for refreshment. Before leaving, I looked at him carefully and finding as I saw him behind the veil of dust that he was a smart teenage. “Who are you”, I asked him after food?

“I am *Nizar*”, he replied. “*Mamo* had given us your address”, he added. “We didn't find the opportunity to escape, however”, he explained. “Distressed we lay listlessly in our position, like prisoners counting weeks, days, hours, and minutes until our release, knowing that each day of survival increased our chances of getting back to our families”, he continued. “The situation was worse. Tanks were moving towards the strongholds of Taliban. Firing and shelling continued. Taliban resisted the action in Kabal. Gunship helicopters accompanying tanks resorted to shelling in suspected areas. Many people were killed in this operation. Deolai Bridge and police station were blasted. Charbagh police station was also gutted down. Jet planes continued bombardment of the area. Mortars were also fired. In one of the mortars incident on the residence of PTI candidate for Provincial Assembly and the former Nazim as well as legendary cricketer of the area, *Sher Khan*, his brother leg was cut-off.” Long after it, *Sher Khan* was also killed, reportedly during Isha Prayer.

“Moreover, the jet planes bombarded Gat Peochar, which was one of the strongholds of Taliban. Reportedly fourty Taliban were killed and as many as fifty injured. The attacks on Koza Bandai and Gat Peochar continued. Reportedly twenty five bombs were fired on Gat Peochar and the second high commander of Fazlullah Mufti Saeedur Rehman was killed in one attack.”



On the last day of August, the Government announced cease fire till Eid-ul-Fitre. However, there was no response to the announcement and the killing spree continued, with the losses of millions of valuables, when the homes were blown off.

“The month of September started with Jet planes bombardment on Gat Peochar. Many losses were reported. There were severe firing on the strongholds of Taliban”, *Nizar* said. “Our area never saw peace during the entire period. There was no whereabouts of many people known”, he added. “Fortunately, four hours relief was given in curfews. I didn’t waste time to escape to Mingora”, he explained.

“Where is *Mamo*”, I impatiently asked, as he mostly droned on the situation around the area.

“He is dead”, he simply replied.

“What!” How easily he pronounced the three words, not knowing what would be its weight. Hearing this, my blood froze and there was all out dark. My eyes filled with tears and I could not find words. “How did it happen”, I asked in disbelief.

“He was dumped in debris, during the bombing of the area, when the room he was living caved in”, *Nizar* replied. “It was not only him, his friend *Darvesh* was also killed during another attack. They met the same fate”, he briefly replied. “The most tragic death was that of *Behroz*, who was stranded with us. He was killed alongwith his family when his home was made target.”

“How many more deaths would we see”, I shouted in order to take the weight off my head.

*Nizar* stayed with me on my insistence, as I found peace his company. Maybe, we had something in common. Our discussion mostly revolved around *Mam Jan*, whom the people shortly called *Mamo* and was so famous by this name that very few people knew about his exact name, was finally dead, leaving us in the lost ways of life. The person who ruled over the hearts by his rare smiles and high conducts had been mixed in soil.

“When the unfortunate *Mamo* reached the area after the funeral of his cousin, he was greeted with the sight of destruction and deaths for miles. He was stranded with the five percent people who were either there for watch and ward duty or stranded alongwith their families due to serious patients. Some of them stayed out of their own will on the hope that the situation would come to normalcy. They had made a big mistake, however, which they realized very soon. They now wanted escape but it was no use, it was too late”, *Nizar* explained.

“*Mamo* could no longer push to the back of his mind the fact that people were dying”, tears of rage and misery welled up the eyes of this young fellow. “The death of his father and cousin had made him obstinate and uncompromised. For long time, he remembered seeing his fellows brutally been killed that drained all energies from him”, the misery of *Nizar* was tinged with regret and fear. “Strangely, *Mamo* would think of us (I and *Darvesh*, a PST teacher) more than him. I was for watch and ward duty at my home, with my cousins, who left through mountains, but I couldn’t muster courage. We lived like proclaimed offenders, spending one night here, the other there. We had lost all those rights, entrusted to one under the law of the land. But, a constitution is where the state has a writ over its land. *Darvesh* had been stranded due to his delaying tactics. His brother *Talimand* insisted him to go with them, but he said it was premature to leave the area. Now he had lost hopes, but how should he leave. Since the offensive had overwhelmed him with anxiety and terror, he did not have the courage to dwell on things. He was quiet and felt all alone, although he did not want to be alone or quiet. He wanted to cry on the verge of his hysterics, thinking in repentance that he had picked a wrong time to stay back. He swerved to avoid the blood squirrels. The notable extremes had brought him to his knees. It made him immobilized and he felt remorse. He did, ’t have the power to sustain anymore. At one time he saw they are going to die, the next he attached hopes of rescuing, still at other he saw the prospects of peace, then again deterioration and destruction. His eyes filled with tears, when he looked to his children. Resultantly, everything distracted him and lured him away he dispersed himself.

“*Darvesh* accused and often cursed him for bringing misfortune to his family. *Mamo* consoled him that by one accusing him or other, he would get them both arrested. “You should demonstrate maturity, you should not behave like lost children in rush and fright. You should patiently wait to pick a way out”, *Mamo* tried to divert their attention, but he was terribly frightened. He could not stop thinking about so many lives lost and it was all yet to happen over again.”

“We were living in groups like families in the posing danger. It was after all better than being dead, when one can be of some use. Life was only an agony for the people. They sneaked restlessly from room to room looking furtively to right and left, with bad conscience of a criminal in them. Finally the shock, when one met up, face to face with one’s own relative and run away.”

“Our area had now been turned into ruins”, *Nizar* explained. Around 80% houses were damaged. According to the latest information, nearly fifty persons were killed. The dead bodies lay around. Moreover, the edibles shortage was constant. The power system had been destroyed in Ningolai and Bandai. Dherai was also near vacation. The people mostly left Swat through Kabal square, which was a shortcut to Barikot. For me, I had no money nor was I in a position of long journey, as I was not feeling well. Therefore, I straightly came to you.”

“The news travelled fast. People were killed while trying to cross roads. They were killed in front of their families. They were burnt alive, when their homes were set on fire, as that of Dardyal Nazim. Four missiles were fired from jet planes in Upper Swat. Reportedly, a school was made target in which thirteen Taliban were hiding were killed in the attack. A suicide bomb blast occurred in Totano Bandai on Army Check post, which reportedly resulted in ten Army personnel killed. Moreover, Taliban had left Koza Bandai. Mines were being cleared. Totano Banadi and Galoch were under attack. People were crossing River Swat to Mingora for escape. Some of them were reportedly drowned. Three security personnel were also killed near the river. Besides, two security personnel were killed, when a bomb was thrown on a van in Dakorak. Moreover, in a suicide bomb blast in Madyan, nine persons were killed. Matta and Kabal were under curfew.”

“When some relief was given in curfews, the residents of Bandai visited their homes for the first time, but most of them got back on seeing their homes turned into ruins and their crops destroyed. It was also reported that around eighty thousand people had evacuated Bandai and the surrounding areas. Some of them were still roaming around and stumbling in various areas for shelter. Whereas, in Allahabad a mortar shell fell on a house, killing four persons of a household. Mingora Bazar remained closed. There was no power. With the blowing up of Mingora Grid Station, the whole Swat had fallen into darkness. The people had been plunged into Stone Age.”

From his talks, it occurred to me that *Nizar* was a good boy. He was mature, intelligent and clever. I requested him to stay with me, as we were very happy in each other’s company. During his stay, we had developed intimacy, brotherly relations. The last few days, he spent with me passed smoothly, but his family was pressing him hard for coming to them and he had to finally yield in to the pressure from his parents.

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## Visit by *Guldana*'s relatives

One of the maternal uncles of *Guldana* had come from Dubai, as I have already said. He wanted to see me. That's why the mother of *Guldana* wanted me to visit them. In fact, she was interested in introducing me with him, as she thought me to be her son-in-law. However, I was not ready to go there and asked my mother to tell them that I am not feeling well.

Unfortunately, it was just the other day of the tragedy of *Mamo* that they decided to visit us instead. My mother knew that I would get angry over it; therefore she didn't tell me about it but asked *Fa'aris* to inform me instead.

"I have got to tell you something. I am waiting for you in front of your home", he asked me on phone in the morning. When I reached there, he told me that some guests were coming to us.

"Guests, who are they", I asked in surprise?

"The family of *Rehan* uncle", he said.

"What they want", I nervously asked despite knowing about the fact, but didn't try to disclose it?

"Maybe, they want to meet you", he replied.

"Why they want to see me", I asked?"

"You know well why", he said, but don't say something about it to your mother. She has no role in it. Whereas, she is already worried about it, that's why she asked me to inform you instead of directly telling you about it.

"There must be something wrong. She has sold me to them, but I would not let it happen", I said in anger.

"Now leave these things. It is not a time for such things. You should behave yourself before the guests."

"Why they are coming", I anxiously asked again. "My mother is also no more interested in them, then why they not leave us of our own", I added.

"You should keep it in mind that your mother is responsible for this sorry state of affair."

"I know, but it was not only her. And maybe she was incited to it by them", I responded.

"They had not forced her. They would have just expressed their desire. Anyway, they would not bear the insult, if you behaved like this at this stage. They would feel deceived", he asked.

"We are human, and to err is human."

"Some errs are irreversible. You were already attached with another girl. Then why your mother did it. I would still like to suggest, if you are not sure from the other side, I mean if the parents of *Daral* have not given the hand of *Kashmala* to you and it was a mere proposal, you should accept the offer from the parents of *Guldana*. They are good people, I know them. You would be happy with them. I am sure you would forget about the past. You would take interest in *Guldana* with time", he asked.

"I am not interested in anybody, other than *Kashmala*...", I, I can't even think of leaving without her", I responded.

"I don't want to go into detail, as this topic hurt me, as if, I am doing something wrong in resolving the issue", *Fa'aris* explained.

"I know about my mother's mistake, which I repent. What we should do now is more important than brooding over these things", I tried to shut this topic.

"What I mean is to tell you to be serious and not to show anger or say something wrong before the guests", he asked.

“I am already cognizant to these things, but what would I say if they tried to discuss the issue with me”, I nervously asked.

“You should tell them that it all depends on your father. That he is the elder of the family and wants to himself decide about it, when he has come on leave.” Here, I also felt sorry for my father.

“Would you not come with me”, hapless I asked *Fa’aris*.

“Why not, but I think they would try to keep these things secret from me. You don’t worry, everything will be okay. Right now you go to your home and ask your mother if anything is needed from the market. Reluctantly, I left for home.”

My mother asked me to buy chicken and fruits etc. I did it accordingly and then began to wait for the guests. During this time, I once again tried to make my mother understand to be careful. “You should tell them what I have already told you in detail. Tell them that you have already discussed these things with my father. And he has asked you not to resort to anything in this context, without his consultation and permission. Also try that they may leave early, as I would feel a burden on my head as long as they are here.”

“Why are you against them; what they have done to you? Their sin is that they like you like their children”, she asked.

“If it was so, I would have received them from the core of my heart, but you know very well, why they want to see me.”

“Whichever the case is, they are our guests. They want to see you and not to eat you.”

“Yes, ofcourse, but you had left me no choice. And to be frank, it were not them; it were you to destroy my life.”

“I am your mother and not an enemy”, she asked?

“I am sorry to say that what you did was not the work like a mother”, I explained.

“I thought the situation is on the worse. It would be better to have some sort of support, at least, to help us in our settlement here.”

“Why do you believe in these things mother? Why don’t you look into the facts from both sides? How can we bypass *Kashmala*? How can we deceive them, when they have not said or done a thing that may mean they are not interested in us.”

“How should I know about your mentality my son”, my mother said with lament. “I thought you would take interest in *Guldana* with time, I didn’t know it would have such bitter consequences for me.”

“Now leave these things, but follow what I told you”, I asked.

When they came, we warmly received them. They were the families of *Guldana*’s two maternal uncles. One of them, who had recently come from Dubai, was with them. This gentleman asked me nothing about what we expected, but dwelled on general things, mostly about the situation. The thing went wrong at home, however. I don’t know what my mother had told them, but they took my father phone number from her, which confused me so much so that I asked *Fa’aris* to call my father now and inform him about these things.

My poor father, a gentleman to the last point, who never ever tried even to harm an ant, as far as I could recall, was in a flux because of us, because of my mother’s folly. He would reap what she had sown, though he was even not aware of these things.

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Where is *Daral*?

The mood of *Daral* changed like the harsh winds on fight against the summits of mountains, vanishing and shrouding in clouds. He was passing through the tough time of his life. On one side, his mother was hanging on for treatment facilities; on the other hand there was no way out to take her to hospital. They run from pillar to post but failed to find an outlet.

In the closing channels of life, he could see nothing other than to retreat in rebellion against the system, against his father, against his brother and against all those whom he thought caused him to suffer. “She needs dialysis and specialized treatment. I had told you to take her to Peshawar. We had a chance to force our way out, but you were not ready to leave”, he accused his father. “Now use your self-treatment techniques to treat your mother, you the Stone Age savages”, he snapped turning his face to his brother.

Unfortunately, his mother breathed her last the other day. She had left the ephemeral world having suffered long the protracted illness, but the pain which caused her to die would not leave the mind of *Daral*. He nursed it and went into a resourceful silence that had something dreadful for his father in the unexpected situation. He didn’t talk to them and left home, disregarding the situation of fear and panic.

The next day, when *Daral* came out of home, *Adnan* followed him on the saying of his father. *Daral* knew that he was being chased; therefore he stopped in the middle of the way. “What are you doing here”, he asked?

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know”, *Daral* simply replied.

“What do you want?”

“There is nothing for me to want”, he replied.

“Father is worried about you, you should behave yourself, at least, in front of him.”

“Tell father not to worry about me”, *Daral* replied, “I am mature, I can decide of my own.”

“Look, the death of mother has left him alone, he needs our attention”, he asked.

“He is also mature; he has better take care of him.”

“I had heard that snake eats its babies, but I had not heard the babies eat a snake.” *Adnan* said that when he got back home empty hand, his father was much worried. “We have better discuss these things with *Imam Sahib*.”

“Father got the message and asked me to invite him for supper. The *Imam Sahib* was good enough to come with me after the Isha Prayer. He made *Daral* sit beside him. “I am seeing changes in your behavior. I rarely see you in *Masjid* these days, what has happened to you.”

“Nothing”, *Daral* simply replied.

“My father interrupted and explained everything to him”, *Adnan* said.

“Look son it’s a trial, which we have to face it with vilour and patience”, *Maulvi sahib* said. “Your father is right, it not only in Swat, the entire country is suffering. There are even attacks on places like Wah Cant where a suicide bomb blast occurred, killing around seventy persons. When such high secure sites are unsafe, where can one find retreat”, the *Imam Sahib* outlined. “You should wait with patience, every option to normalcy is under consideration, there must be a better result, I hope”, he maintained.

“I had told them to leave when the situation was a bit normal and other people were leaving. Even my friends insisted me to persuade my family to go with them. I insisted, but they didn’t listen to me”, *Daral* pointed to us.

“Your friends had sound families, but you didn’t know about your mother’s complications, she couldn’t bear the hardships of the way.”

“We could have safely taken her out of this bloody place and tried to make her treatment possible.”

“You can say so because you didn’t know exactly about her sufferings. But it was her fault to hide the things from you.”

“Let the past be buried down and think of future”, the Imam Sahib interrupted. “There are still many people like us who are facing the situation. You have better to think about them and not of those who have left”, he added.

“But we should take a way that is relevant to all”, *Daral* said. “When the majority of the people were leaving the area, what had we to stay back. “Our dependence is on agriculture, when our production from fields had stopped, what were we here to stay for”, he asked?

“You still have that option my son”, the Imam Sahib said. “You can go where you want”, he added.

“I don’t have any option now”, *Daral* snapped. “For me, everything is over”, he added.

“It is not good to disappoint like this. Still you are young, you should think about your study and future”, the Imam Sahib said.

“Study and future”, *Daral* smiled. “What kind of study and future, when one has no choice”, he asked? “The education career of the people is over long before, even the children’s future is at stake. Schools are not only closed but being destroyed. The fear has transferred to the children. Their future is dark. How should one think of education, when there are no facilities, but only fear? The lives and properties of the people are hijacked. They are brutally killed and the dead bodies dumped. Even there are no mortuaries for dead. And how should, when the killing spree has reached beyond control. In such a case, mortuaries would simply mean a separate Department, but you know that due to financial constraints, there would be no such plan, as our government is always in short of money even for the living, set aside the dead.”

“You should ignore these things. You should not take them to your heart”, my father intervened.

“How to ignore, when the hail of mortars and rockets fall on people, bombs rip through them, with the ground shakes and the ruins collapse. There are explosions and great flames leap up to engulf everything within its way by a shower of stones, metal and fire rain down. The entire Swat is a war zone. Public fear has mounted new heights. The edibles shortage has reached its peak. The price of 20 Kg flour has reached Rs: 850”, *Daral* had now outburst and would not listen to anyone till he had released his emotions long pentup. “The stranded people are not safe anywhere. They would keep shifting on from one area to another and end up in a bloody secret. The escape of the people is now a dream. Is this the life?” In fact, the situation and the death of his mother had made *Daral* to remember the losses only.

“Don’t behave like this before the Imam Sahib”, his father retorted.

“Let him speak”, the Imam Sahib asked.

“The problem is not what he says is wrong, but the problem is his behavior”, his father responded. “How can one leave his ancestral area so easily, and when there is a patient at one’s home. And if we had left, was it sure we would have been safe in that particular area. Anyway, if he wants it, we would leave at the earliest; there will be no slip-ups this time.”

“N-noo, I am not leaving”, *Daral* replied. “I wanted escape for my mother, for her treatment. He began to weep. Then all of a sudden, he was serious and furious, as if, he was at the end of endurance. She is dead. And how she died is more important for me than my life. Escape is for those who value their lives. But I have none of such things in my mind. Neither I want to live, nor do I want to leave.”

“Look son, it was our fate we have met. We should bear the shock with patience.”

“It was not a fate, she died of pain. She had, at least, the right to treatment and she should have been allowed that right.”

“Who can meddle with fate? She was destined to die, if under treatment or without it.”

“Death is a written fact, I know but how she died, without treatment facilities to her, is what actually matters to me. She is dead, but the pain is still alive in my mind. It will remain forever. The things will not change for me. There would not be a better tomorrow for me, I would not be able to live in peace and harmony. So, let me have my own way.”

“Your own way, what do you mean”, I intervened.

“You would not be able to understand it”, *Daral* responded.

“Have you gone madd? I think, you have come to rebellion?”

“Yes, you may think so. But I have not come to this brother. I was brought to this.”

“Who brought you to this”, I asked?

“Those who caused us to suffer”, *Daral* replied.

“No one caused us to suffer, why don't you try to understand”, his father interrupted.” “We met our fate, it was written for us.”

“Now it is my fate, it is written for me.”

“Don't think so my son, don't think so. Why do you put us to trials?”

“We have been in trials in since the day, I told you to leave the area”, saying this, *Daral* went to his room. “I went behind him and asked him to come out of his emotional streak of mind and look at the things with patience”, *Adnan* said.

“It is not a time to tidy up things, we should go ahead with our purposes”, *Daral* replied.

“Still not satisfied my father also came to ask him that we would do what he wants, but he said nothing, but wanted to go to bed. When I went to his room in the morning, he was not there”, *Adnan* said sobbing. “Then I saw a letter on the table beside his bed, which read out:

Dear brother,

“It is with grieving heart I convey this message that I am leaving home. Forgive the plainness of the words and bear no ill feelings towards me. I don't hesitate to tell you that I am not ready to leave my area, nor do I want to silently bear the sufferings. I had already decided my way, but keeping in view the health condition of mother, I was unable to materialize what I had planned”, the letter read. I don't want to hurt you but I know there is no future for us—not me, not you, nor anyone else—here in Swat. Forgive me and take care of father and sister. Don't try to look for me, if there is life, I will see you again myself.”

“Rest assured and remember me in your prayers.”

“Your loving *Daral*.”

Having labored over each and every word, *Adnan* reread the letter, at least, five times, lost heart then read it again before he had decided to show it to his father. “I couldn't form words, but to hand over the letter to him. My poor father stippled out a cry. My sister began to weep. We then visited the Imam Sahib with the letter. Having read it, he took us to *Sardar Khan*, a prominent figure of the area. We went to police station, the nearest check post to report the missing. They registered the missing report and assured their help in finding out about *Daral*.”

For me there was nothing more, but to remember my last talks with *Daral*. He had left such a wound on my heart that I would not forget it throughout my life, because it was him who called me that night before he went to sleep. He apologized me about his last behavior.

“I have been rude with you, but I could see myself in you. You are my only trusted friend. I would remember you forever”, *Daral* said. He also apologized for not talking to my mother. He also explained the reason, which he attributed to his excessive emotions of distress. “I was unable to express my emotions, which kept me away from all those who loved me and I loved them. I have never ever thought you away from my family. I have always loved you. You would ever live in my heart and I would pray that everybody get a friend like you. You always made things easy for me. If there is life, I will directly come to you. I promise you will be the first I would want to see.”

“I was happy over this, as I thought *Daral* would straightly come to me. I didn't know he would take such an extreme step. I would never be able to forget his last words. What they imply, you would not understand, but they would ever echo in my mind? Perhaps, he also meant that I may keep him engaged in my thoughts. That's why he said, “you may forget me but I cannot, as you are my only trusted friend.”

Indeed, *Daral* had strongly touched our hearts before leaving us like a gust of wind. I would ever remember him in my private thoughts.

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## Madness

Shocked at the missing of *Daral*, I was not myself. I didn't want to talk to anybody and tried to avoid every thing that could likely damage my mind. Therefore, I spent most of my time in the company of my friends.

One day I visited Main Bazaar with *Shahzeb*. When I got back home late in the evening, I saw the mood of my mother was off. She was restlessly roaming around in the small lawn of our home. From her look, I could guess there was something wrong. "Where were you", she asked, which reminded me of the old days, as I had heard such a question from her mouth after a long time. It also reminded me of my school days, when she tried to fasten me in the fetters of time from head to toes. Here, I also felt sorry for the sweet past.

"I was with *Shahzeb*", I replied. We had gone to the Main Bazaar for walk", I added.

"Why didn't you attend the phone call", she asked?

"I have not received any call", I responded. However, when I looked at my cell phone, there were three miscalls from my mother. I didn't disclose it to her, but simply asked if everything was okay.

"The mother of *Guldana* wants to clear the issue of engagement; she wants me to call your father to give them a fixed date for it."

"You should tell them to directly discuss the issue with father", I suggested in worry.

"She says it is not good to talk to him in this context. What should I do now", she nervously asked?

"Tell them you have talked with father and he says he would think about it and then inform uncle accordingly."

"How can I do so at this stage? We have to be very careful in dealing with them", she asked?

"Why not, when you have already sold me to them. We would have to follow what they ask, like slaves."

"Why do you put the blame for everything on my shoulders, when I have already done what you asked me."

"If you had thought about it before, we would not have to face these things today."

"I am not going to spoil my mind with you. I just wanted to convey their message."

"Why are they so serious about it, you have only given her a ring, there was no engagement."

"In our society, giving a ring to a girl is considered like engagement. That's why the mother of *Guldana* is so anxious. She even says they would not bear the insult, saying their whole family has come to know about it."

"It was not our fault. We had not told them to inform their family."

"She is calling me, since I gave the phone number of your father to her. I think she fears there may not be something wrong."

"But you have not told me about it."

"How should I, when you get angry. Therefore, I keep these things secret from you."

"I wouldn't budge an inch, no matter how far they go. What I am worried about are your mistakes. Hence, the more they try to pressurize you, the more I would feel disgusted and my expression would change and I would regard them with derision and distrust."

"It is not a time to get angry. We have to be cool to come out of this problem."

"What kind of situation I am passing through, you know well. *Daral* is missing. The situation is worse, there are bomb blasts, the killing spree is going on. How can you suppose me to be cool or think of such things? If you fear, I would myself talk to them", I asked in anger.

"No, no.... my son. You should not indulge yourself in these things", my mother requested. "You should do nothing. There is still time. We would think of a better solution to the problem", she explained.



Though, I tried to avoid this topic with *Fa'aris* for many days, as he was already hurt. But due to this new challenge I made my way to him, with the requested to help me out of this trouble. "When your mother has clarified the things, why they take up the issue with her then. Anyway ask your mother to put up the issue for sometime. I am trying to think about it. Maybe I also discuss it with your father."

When I got back home, I saw my mother had grasped her head. She was very upset. When I told her about what *Fa'aris* had asked me, she was silent for sometime and then said. "I don't know what to do, I am much confused my son."

"Why", I asked?

"She has invited the families of her brothers for Sunday. She wants us to be there. I fear she may not take up the issue there."

"When did she talk to you about it?"

"She had recently called", she replied.

"And what did you say?"

"What should I have said other than to accept it?"

"I would not go there, mind it. You also better tell them we are here as militancy hit people. We have left our home in search for a ledge. We are miserable people. We have many problems. We cannot lead a normal life like them. We have deep worries behind us."

"We cannot cutoff relations with them. They have many favours on us. But you don't worry, there is still time in it, we would think about some solution", she said keeping in view my worry.

With strange feeling, I went to bed that night. The burden of the day, the next day and the coming days, all inflicted its worth. There was a high pressure on my mind. I also felt worried for my mother in view of the embarrassing situation she was facing.

Full of these thoughts, I went to sleep. When the morning came, I found myself at Masjid. After the prayer, I sat with *Fa'aris* to recite from the Holy Qura'an till Ishraq to offer Nafl. Thereafter, I spread my hands in pray. I would not be fed-up, but continued to pray against what was beyond understanding for me. I would never cease until the sun had touched my wet eyes, peering through the openings. I wept for our misfortunes, so much so that the ground under my eyes was wet, when I put my head in prostration and then lifted it.

Thereafter, *Fa'aris* accompanied me with him for tea in view of my situation. I was a bit relieved after it. However, the once dear home was now so dreadful for me that I thought we are going to fight enemies or preparing ourselves for going to a mourning. My mother was also sad; she even didn't want to talk to me and remained silent for most part.

Strangely, when we went there, they like ever received us with a warm welcome. There I found myself at ease in the company of *Guldana's* uncles, so much so that I felt regret over my earlier thoughts. Like *Rehan* uncle they were gentlemen to the last point. They didn't try to discuss something undesirable with me. Actually the thing always went wrong at home by the mother of *Guldana*, as I have already said, but what was the fault of the poor mother in all this. At this, I thought myself with derision.

We spent almost the whole day with them. There was not a single moment I found myself bored. In the evening we bade adieu. To my surprise they had said nothing about what I feared, when I asked my mother, just reminding her about their apprehension.

My mother was very sad, even feeling sorry on my birth and wished for another son old enough to have married *Guldana*. This time, I felt so sorry for my mother, but what should I have done, when I was already tied to someone else and would not live without her.

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*Kaif's dilemma*

Fights and firing incidents had become an order of the day. Every move either made by Taliban or Pak Army created a fresh wave of fear among the people. The effects were everywhere, even in Mingora city which was not safer anymore.

The killing spree continued. The president of Rickshaw Union and leader of Jammāt-i- Ulama-e-Islam (JUI), Sardar Ali, was killed with two others in Mingora. Moreover, schools were blasted with impunity. Sangota Public School and Swat Public School (SPS) were blown off.

In view of the circumstances of fear and panic, the citizens only thought of escape. Kaif was also among them. Trotting in the streets of Mingora he called me on phone and sought my opinion in this regard, saying he has thought about every option but couldn't reach a solid decision. As usual, I suggested him to go to the down districts but he was undecided. That's why I asked him to come to me.

Without wasting time, he straightly came to me. He was much worried about the choice of next place. "I have come to you in a state of high confusion", he started. "I have tried my best to convince my parents for going to the down districts, but failed."

"What they say", I asked?

"My mother is not ready to go to there in the scorching heat?"

"Use your common sense. You are already facing financial crunch. In such a case, you cannot afford to stay here in Swat anymore."

"I know and I have told them, but instead my father reluctantly called my uncle in UK on phone on the insistence of my mother. He has sent him one hundred thousand rupees. Now, my parents now want to go to some safe area in Swat."

"I don't think it can be a better choice. Here you see, almost everything is over—life, education, business, communication."

"You are right, but my mother is the main hurdle. She is ready to go anywhere but in Swat, even suggested me to go to Bar Swat to her sister's home, but I asked her not to bring to mind the thought of that side. That side is more than dangerous for life. There the homes are being blasted, the schools are blown up, and arrests are being made. I even fear to think about that side. How many losses have been reported so far? Even the whole of the households were destroyed. What's more, the war planes continue the bombardment of Gat Peopchar. According to the latest reports from Govt sources, twenty Taliban were killed in it. The home of the Provincial Minister for science and technology, Ayub Asharay, was also set on fire, with three of his bodyguards were reportedly killed. News of Peer Barakullah killing also poured in. Jet planes bombarded Gat Peopchar, in which fifteen persons were reportedly killed. Pir Samiullah was killed and hanged. His home was set on fire and several of his companions were kidnapped, eight of them were killed later on. Two of his commanders were slaughtered in Gawalerai chowk. A police constable and a prayer leader aged seventy five were also killed. You would also have heard about Oct19 Jet planes bombardment on Bar Thana. The Bazar was nearly destroyed, with many killings. There was also a bloody fight reported between Taliban and Peer Samiullah Lashkar, resulting in the killing of six Taliban and fourteen other people. Moreover, on the first of November, a mortar felled on a flying coach in Matta, in which eleven passengers were killed and around seven injured."

"You should convince your father then", I asked?

"He says we should wait for the outcome of the operations, adding that Mula Fazlullah has also announced to stop target killings. But I informed him that there is a big difference over the issue between Taliban in Kabal. Although he shown some flexibility to go to his niece in Dir Upper in case of further tensions but I told him that there is no safe place in the entire Malakand Division. Dir is no exception. You would have come to know about the recent bomb blast there, in which ten persons were killed. Whereas, a police van was blown up with remote control bomb. A school bus also came under attack. Two police personnel, four prisoners and four students were killed."

“Then, you should wait some time more, till you have come to know, at least, about the outcome of Maulana Sufi Muhammad meetings, who is trying to patch up the differences between the Govt and Taliban.”

“Nothing will change here. The whole valley is under fire. To begin from Babozai Subdivision, Mingora police station has been blown up. Around twenty to thirty police and FC personal were killed in the attack. Buffalos shed near it also came under the attack and buffalos were killed. Homes around it were also damaged. An SHO was killed in Islampur Terminal. A suicide bomber blasted him off in Sind police Line, in which five policemen were reportedly killed. There was another suicide bomb blast, in which 17 persons were killed. The brother of Wajid Ali Khan, Umar Farooq Khan, a police officer was killed. In Qambar a person was killed by a mortar. The other day it was reported that five persons were killed in Mingora including a sub inspector. In Tahirabad, many innocent people were killed. The home and Hujra of MNA Kaki Khan was blown off. Qambar High School was blasted. Two brothers were slaughtered. A woman beggar was killed with her daughter in Mingora. Shah Dawran has threatened the girls’ education. He has also warned against brandishing of arms by public.”

“To cross to Kabal Subdivision, Aligrama and Sirsenai Girls schools as well as Fazalabad Girls School Kanju were blown up. Besides, an FC personal and another one, who were probably kidnapped from Kabal, were slaughtered. On the other hand two sons of Mula Jan Kanju were brutally killed while they were on their way home on motorcycle from their medical store. Moreover, scenes of carnage were seen in Kanju, when six members of a family were brutally killed. In Aligrama and Dherai two couples were slaughtered.”

“In Sersinai, a mortar shell fell on a house, in which several killing were reported. The other day, another mortar felled on a house, in which seven members of the same family were killed. That was followed by a remote control bomb blast on police and FC personnel. Many killings were reported. Besides, in the bombing of Roringar, many innocent people were killed. In Deolai a person was slaughtered. A Taxi driver was arrested from Deolai and torture killed. The brother of Mian Syed Hasham reportedly hit in shelling succumbed to his injuries. The worst situation holds the day in Shah Dherai, Deolai and Kabal. There are fights; there are curfews and mortar shelling. The areas have been evacuated by ninety nine percent people. Notices were issued to the people of Kabal, Akhund Kalay, Zawra and Shah Dherai to vacate the area. The influx of Army continues. In Bara Bandai a school near Janazgah was blown up. Over hundred people lost their lives in the surrounding of Kabal Square only during the month of November. December began with around ninety percent damages to houses in Kabal. Homes were looted, markets razed to the ground, even hospitals were not left. Two persons were killed in Galoch and four missing. In Aligrama, a bakery owner was killed. Four persons were killed in Totano Bandai and 40 persons killed in bomb blasts in Buner.”

“The sacred day of Eidul Azha began with strange feelings. Bara Bandai was given ultimatum upto 12 O’ clock to vacate the area. Fortunately, the intervention by Islahi Committee persuaded Pak Army against the operation.”

“A suicide bomber blew him up on Ayub Bridge, partially damaging it, due to which communication between Mingora and the vast areas of Nikpekhel was cutoff. A woman was killed inside home in firing. Three other persons were killed in Kanju. Riaz Khan was killed in Mingora. He was a prominent political/social figure and a member of Islahi Committee Kanju. Firing and counter firing continues. On the other hand in Shamozaï six members of the same family were killed in shelling and around seven injured. Barikot Bridge has been blown up. There are severe fights. Mortars are being fired. In Charbagh a person was slaughtered. In another incident in which a mortar fell on a house, six women and two children were killed. Similarly, ten persons were killed in a suicide bomb blast on a check post near Manglawar. Khwazakhela and its surrounding areas are underfire, with scores of killings and injuries in the fights, blasts, shelling and cross firings.

“Jamat-i-Islami has also issued a white paper of ANP performance, with the fulfillment of its commitments has been termed unsatisfactory. It is the end of another year, but there is nothing like a good end as usual. There is not a single place in Swat Valley, which is safe enough for one to shift to it”, he concluded.

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## Human slaughtering

Persistent knocking at the door awakened me from restless sleep. I got out of bed, changed my night dress and rushed to the door on the rare hope of *Daral* coming to me. There, I saw *Kamran* was standing with *Aftab* and *Jamshed*, our neighbors in such a way, as if, they were listening to my feet being in hurry. On my appearance, they asked me to come with them to Green Chowk to see the slaughtered bodies.

“Slaughtered bodies”, I was surprised to hear this. “Are you crazy, is this a sight to behold. I am not coming. I have already seen much blood.” With this I wanted to get back, when *Jamshed* got hold of my arm and pulled me with them by force of arm.

I was still trying escape, when *Aftab* got hold of my other arm. “Leave these things. We are not here to listen to your lectures or philosophies, nor have we sought permission from you or have made you a request.”

“It is not fair. It is not fair”, I tried to show my anger and explain about the things in my mind, but they would not listen to me.

Upset, aggrieved and undecided, I had to go with them, holding my exploding head in my free hand. On the way, I stumbled forward and escaped falling two times. Meanwhile, *Jamshed* interrupted, “you coward boy, we thought you a lion heart, but you fear dead bodies.”

“You needn’t worry my brave lion heart, we would not discuss the issue with *Fa’aris*. We would not tell him how brave you are. And by the way, you needn’t worry if there was a need for running, you have already got goat legs”, *Aftab* asked to make me surprised.

“Goat legs, what nonsense you are talking about?”

“Nothing nonsense my dear, we know how you escaped the Death Trap. *Fa’aris* had told us about everything”, he replied.

“Incredible”, surprised I asked!

“What else did he tell you about me”, I asked?

“We know everything about you my dear. *Fa’aris* says you are a good boy and that we shouldn’t leave you alone.”

“But he would not have told you to take me to such grim scenes”, I responded.

“We thought *Fa’aris* always takes you to good scenes, so why should we not take you to this today.”

They made me fear, then I thought it must be a fault of their age, still too young to understand the true life. But why I am so serious?”

“Hi, what are you thinking about dear. Don’t worry we would not run.” *Aftab* gave me a push to disturb me in the middle of my thoughts.

“You are very naughty, I thought you are like your elders, but I fear you have not an iota of them”, I asked.

“It is nothing my dear, we would show you how to live in the situation like this”, *Jamshed* said.

Drowned in deep thoughts, I reached the spot. They like rodents pushed their way through the crowd and I stood away. Meanwhile, my eyes fell on *Tahir*. For sometime, I thought my eyes may not deceive me, but it was him, indeed. Now instead of my friends my eyes were fixed on this victim, as my curiosity provoked me to focus attention on him, so that I may not miss him. Peering through the crowd, he raised his head up as he stood on his toes and then balancing his feet to have a clear look of the slaughtered body of a local singer.

No sooner than he had finished the postmortem of the dead body and came out of the crowd I rushed to greet him. “Did you recognize me”, I asked. First, he seemed a bit confused, then he embraced me with such warmth, as if, I was his lost child.

“What a surprise to see you? How are you? What are you doing here? Where do you live”, he asked?

Take a breath first, so that I may tell you about myself. I am fine and live there behind Shaheen Market. I gave him my address, and then asked him about *Jawad*. “How is he, where he lives and what he...”, then I thought it is a normal question, I mean to be asked in a normal situation. Therefore, I stopped, thinking what he would do other than the job of escaping from one area to another in search for a ledge.

“*Jawad* is dead”, he said after a brief silence.

“What!” There was a current in my mind, as if, someone has touched a glowing electric wire with my head. Thereafter, I was not in a position to ask, but to take leave from him. Broken hearted, when I reached home my curiosity to know about *Jawad*’s death increased.

The next day, my friends again went to see several other slaughtered bodies. Then the other day, two other dead bodies were found in Green Chowk and Sohrab Chowk respectively. They didn’t take me, as I had already told them that I had not witnessed the dead body of the singer, nor would I ever try to see someone else. So, they didn’t take me again. However, they regularly informed me about the situation.

Yes, indeed, the Year 2009 had begun with human slaughtering. Slaughtered bodies lay on footpaths and intersections. Green Chowk was locally named Khoni (bloody) Chowk by the dumped slaughtered bodies, which was a common spectacle. Later on the name was changed to Shuhada (martyrs) Chowk and then Farooq Shaheed Chowk. Then again it receded to its old name “Grain Chowk”, with time.

The Red Thin Lines were more visible now on the roads of the city. The bored people got up with the news of slaughtered bodies and gathered at the chowks (intersections) of the city to have a look of it, which was now a common spectacle.

Unsurprisingly, the situation was dangerous and out of control. Over twenty people were killed and dumped in just two to three days. Besides many other people, including Khan Sherin Babo, a member of Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and Dr.Siraj, were reportedly killed.

I had lost contact with my relatives by the bloody signal problem. My thoughts about *Daral* were intensified. Finally I got to the fact that it was a useless waste my leftover energies in hope for betterment. Each night, I turned to my private thoughts and a few minutes before sleep overcame my body, I wept for the dead and lost. I had enough real problems in addition to the imaginary ones. I felt the lack of privacy. There was an odd situation I found myself in it, where I longed for solitude, but was frightened of being alone, and felt lonely all the time in spite of never being alone. Everything that can be done will be done. However, the vacuum left by the irreparable losses would not be filled. I would not relinquish my search for emigrants. What I heard were only the news of deaths and destruction. The prevalence of low confidence to the situation was like faster winds with heavy rains to get stronger and risk high quality life, hit normal life when the areas are not braced for it. It was far more complicated to study or understand it. Deep depressions intensified and the remnants of joy shoved violently towards extinction.

My mother would keep silent for most part. She had forgotten all about her usual chats with the mother of *Guldana*. She would mostly think of her relatives, especially my grandmother, whom she had lost in the cruel waves of life. She was double confused due to her mother. She would weep when she lost contact with her. Then again she wept on the restoration of contact with her. She was in a strange situation, she longed for contact with her mother, she feared of contact with her. While to me very contact with her was to invite troubles, because grandma would collect all the painful stories about her extended family for my mother and recited them with a hurting skill to make her weep blood tears. Thereafter, she would fell in darkness. She had even forgotten about *Guldana*’s. She also tried to invite her relatives to our small two roomed house, which they would not accept if they had found opportunity due to the extended family of grandmother, with seven sons and four daughters spread in various parts with their own families, which wouldn’t be accommodated with us. My mother’ tried everything she could for peace of her family, but the pain would not go away. She was stuck with the way that seemed to be a part of her now.

The heat had reached the scattered villages, where the little children in rags could no more be seen out to play on the mud lanes near the sprawling meadows and bunches of flowers surrounded by fruits orchards. They had been forgotten by their parents under the burden the life had brought to them. The people were leading their lives like beggars. They had no choice and how should they? Indeed, the beggars can’t be choosers. That’s why they did not like weddings. There were no festivities, no get together, no laughter. People hearts were not in such things. There was a general silence. Everybody was thinking of those who were away from them or had been lost in the mortal world. They remembered the hilarities of the past. They had only the past to fill them with life in the pains of loss.

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### Quarrel with drug peddlers

In one of the chill evenings of January 2009, we were following *Fa'aris*. When he crossed the intersection, we saw he was nowhere. We looked around for him, but didn't see him. We had missed him somewhere around the square.

Losing all hope, we were just starting back down the cool damp path, when my eyes fell on a movement coming from an unlikely place, the graveyard. That cloistered area hidden behind the thick walls, where the victims from bomb blast in the funeral prayer had been buried.

"There he is", I asked. We moved slowly towards the black Iron Gate, wanting to see but not wanting to be seen. We saw him standing before the marble headstone of his brother's grave, whom he had lost in the cruel flames. When our eyes grew accustomed to the dim light we stepped back behind the protection wall and peered through the gate at *Fa'aris*, who appeared to be merely standing before the grave. He did not seem in the attitude of praying but rather defiant posture as though he were asking questions from the grave.

Gazing at the gate, we kept waiting for him. When he had finished, we drew even. "What are you doing here", he smiled to ask us?

"Mother has sent me", *Afaq* began. "Shahram goes to some drug abusers. Mother says you are the last ray of hope for her."

"Does uncle know about it?"

"No", *Afaq* replied. "Mother says we should not inform him. It would shatter him, as he is already passing through many ordeals."

"Do you know where he goes", *Fa'aris* asked?

"I don't know, but he comes out of home after Maghrib prayer."

"Call me when he comes out", *Fa'aris* asked *Afaq*.

It was not long after the prayer, *Afaq* called *Fa'aris*. *Shahram* had hardly reached the main road, when we reached him. We silently chased him. At the end of the street, we saw him speeding steps. It was a simple matter to slip into the narrow alley, which run down to the stream. From there he took his way to the other side and slipped into the street. He was out of sight, but when we rushed, we saw a moment later he was loping down the street in pursuit of nothing. He re-emerged in the faint light, not certain of his destination, but feeling the need for movement to counteract his anger. Then he stopped, as if, to have lost the way. "Who sent you behind me", he probed in anger.

"We wanted to know about your friends", *Fa'aris* responded.

"Why do you want to see them, when I am going to them out of my own will to find some peace and peace and satisfaction."

"It is not peace, but destruction that you are behind", *Fa'aris* responded. If you want peace you should surrender yourself to the will of thy Lord, instead of surrendering yourself to devil. I still request you to leave these things; they are destroying your life."

"I can't, it is too late. I have seen enough life, I needn't anymore."

"I may be wrong but from your behavior I may come to the fact that you had always been on the wrong face of life. And if you didn't mend your ways, I fear you may soon find yourself at the point of no return."

"We are already at the point of no return", *Shahram* said.

"Look, it is my humble request to you to change yourself now. If you feel unrest go to Masjid, instead of coming here, offer two Rakaat Nafl (prayer), then recite from the Holy Quran, soon you would get satisfaction. Make it your routine to recite from the Holy Quran."

"You can say so because you are free, you can have a choice", *Shahram* asked.

"You can also enjoy a peaceful life, if you leave the devil way and come to the truth. But you have already put down arms, you have already accepted your defeat", *Fa'aris* remarked.

“I have not put down arms, but what should I do, if I can't find peace, even I can't sleep without drugs.”

“It is because you have crossed the limits. You are striving on the wrong face of life. You go to bed late, you get up late, you are not regular in your prayer, you don't recite from the Holy Quran, so you need sleeping pills at night and worldly supports during the day. I would still suggest you to get back and set your timetable between the five prayers. Simple logic, Namaz set one's agenda. When you get up early, offer regular Namaz, you feel happy, active, healthy, energetic, and always in time for study, work or sleep. Look, how lucky we are to have got everything clear. This life is transitory, you shouldn't attach so much importance to the worldly things. You should study, at least, *Surah Najm*, especially its fourth, fifth and sixth aphorisms of the last part are that all the things return to God. That all our hopes should be in Allah and we should fear none but Him. And that He alone can give life and death, laughter and tears, wealth and satisfaction. “That to thy Lord is the final goal”, *Ayat-42*. “That it is He Who granteth laughter and tears”, *Ayat-43*. “That it is He Who granteth death and life”, *Ayat-44*. “That it is He Who giveth wealth & satisfaction”, *Ayat-48*”. “Here you can find the meaning of all of your questions. When it is Allah who gives life and death, wealth and satisfaction, when He gives honor and disgrace, when He gives bread to his creatures, what is fear then?”

“No err can hurt you, if you are well guided. We should strive for good, and leave the result on Him only. For us is only effort and its fulfillment comes from Allah. We should try to help the needy within our bounds, because the service of humanity is the highest act of devotion and the highest religion is the religion of humanity.” *Fa'aris* continued with references from the Holy Quran and Hadith. It is only then we can help in transition. But, we can do this when we are well prepared for it, both physically and mentally.”

“Now let's go, we would discuss this topic after Isha prayer”, *Fa'aris* asked.

“I can't. You go.” *Shahram* looked at *Fa'aris* with entreating eyes. I was much aggrieved to see the dark rings around his beautiful eyes.

“I wouldn't let you stray. I would go to the end, but I would not let you stray”, *Fa'aris* had become emotional.

“Let's go”, he asked again.

“No, I am not going. You go”, *Shahram* said again.

“Then I am also going with you to see your friends.”

“I will not let you go there”, *Shahram* said.

“I will find them myself”, saying this *Fa'aris* asked *Afaq* to go home and asked me to come with him.

“What are doing”, I asked?

“You just follow me.”

“Do you know about them”, I asked.

There is an old building near the stream that belongs to a notorious boy, a drug peddler. He has reserved one room at the basement for drug abusers. I can guess from here where he goes.”

“What would you tell them”, I asked as *Shahram* was going there out of his own will.

It depends on them. We were now at the base, which we approached through a dark narrow lane at the end of the street. From there, we turned right, then down the street beside the stream. Down the steps to the basement, we reached a room, dark and gloomy like the people, who used to gather there at night. We knocked at the door and a young man, with big moustaches came out. “May we come in”, *Fa'aris* asked.

“Yes”, he doubtfully responded. Three other people were there as we entered the room. They greeted us, but with a suspicious look and dislike to show they didn't like coming of strangers, as they looked at one another with doubtful eyes.

Having greeted them, *Fa'aris* introduced himself and me. He informed them about the purpose of our visit and the overall situation at the home of *Shahram* due to his irresponsibility. Then he warned them of the consequences, if his father comes to know about it.

“We have not forced him, *Shahram* is coming to us out of his will”, hearing this one of them said.

“When his father approaches you, you should inform him about it”, *Fa’aris* smilingly said.

“Why do you threaten us with his father”, one of them said? “I also belong to an approachable family”, he added.

“I am just informing you and warn you to close your den and not to spoil the innocent people. And if you belong to a high family, I mean approachable and respectable family, work like your elders to maintain their status and always keep yourself away from such base activities.”

“If it were base activities, your *Shahram* would not come here”, he explained. “In fact, it were you to give him a base life and we gave him a happy life and peace of mind”, he added. “that’s why he comes here.”

“It is not you to give peace; it is Allah, who gives life, who gives peace. Fear Allah and seek His forgiveness for your sins in the situation like this”, *Fa’aris* said.

“Don’t try to teach us, leave us of our own”, he asked.

“I would have left you, if you had not destroyed the lives of innocent people”, *Fa’aris* said a bit out of temper.

“You better leave, otherwise, you wouldn’t be able to go on foot, if you stayed here any longer”, the other person said.

“What would you do, you wretched person”, *Fa’aris* asked?

“You are abusing me in my place. First you encroached upon our secrecy and now you abuse me, you the son of bitch”, that person said.

“I am the son of a prayer leader, a light to humanity. And I swear that from now on, you would not spoil innocent people anymore.”

“Who are you to stop us? If your father comes, he would not stop us. And now get out of here; otherwise, we will drag you out.”

“If you see so much power in you, come and take me.”

“Please don’t”, I begged *Fa’aris*. “It will serve no purpose,” But in quiet despair, they were now two barbaric visions.

The motivation on both sides was powerful. The two men were now confronting each other with less than three feet between them. The first man raised hand to jab, when *Fa’aris* held his hand and exchanging a devastating blow in his stomach till he began to cough. One of the sitting fellows seeing his friend stood to attack *Fa’aris*, when he administered such a professional kick that bumped him into the wall, then another one rose and *Fa’aris* hit him with the same speed. They again rose and encircled *Fa’aris*, but the impact of *Fa’aris* kicks and fists was so strong that there were automatic cries now and then, with bespeaking pain. Meanwhile my eyes fell on untoward movement. The fourth one of them was grasping something out from his underwear. I was attentive to him and seeing a pistol in his hand, I jumped and before he had set it out in his hand I had dragged it from him. He was going to attack me, when I hit his head with the revolver with such a force that there were two sounds, one on his head like a stone touching a hard surface and another on the ground that frightened me, because the hit was on his head and the sound came from the ground. It was in fact the sound of the magazine, which had fallen down of the revolver.

Thereafter, the cruel man without any mercy to look at my age, held me from under my arms with my hands were moving freely in the air and bumped me into the wall with such a great force that a cry tore off my mouth and I thought I have been dumped into the wall by the cruel creature, splitting me in two. As soon as I had made me well on my feet, I delivered a second blow to his midsection, with the deadly instrument, which caused him to buckle and his arms clasped about his stomach. I was preparing for another blow, when I saw this man fell above the other three, screaming with pain. As I was thinking over the riddle, I saw *Fa’aris* had dragged him from the collar and without any resistance; he was above his three companions already on the ground in wait for him. After this, *Fa’aris* asked me to follow him and we came out. I showed him the revolver, which was in dilapidated condition. He took it from me, got hold of my arm and we departed.

“Where are we going now”, I asked him on the way?

““To *Shahram*’s father”, he replied. “I want to end this chapter. It is the best time. I am sure they will soon be behind the bars”, he added.

“But we have beaten them. Do you think they would take action against them? I feared lest the police might arrest us instead of them.”

“Hundred percent”, *Fa’aris* replied.



“How do you know”, I asked, “as I wanted to know about everything. It was a police case and I feared arrest.”

“You don’t know about uncle’s behavior with criminals”, *Fa’aris* said, “he is famous for his strictness, throughout the area. They are lucky he is not in this circle at present”, he added.

Turning the street towards our homes, we came across *Shahram*. “We have met your friends, they will be lying there in the den, if not taken to hospital yet, and this is the revolver from one of them.” *Shahram* was frightened over these things.

“Why you did so”, *Shahram* asked?

*Fa’aris* was silent, as if, confused over how to reply. Foreseeing the grave feelings in him, I patted him on his shoulder, so that he may be himself. “I took the extreme step, because you were not ready to listen to me.”

“When I am not ready to listen to my parents, who are you to interfere into my affairs”, *Shahram* asked.

“I am *Fa’aris*”, the monster replied after a short pause and then he sat down grasping his head with both of his hands, as if, to regain conscious. Then he felt himself driven forward by a force that literally lifted him to his feet. His hands, which he never ever raised in violence moved as though of its own accord, grabbing his collar and holding fast. “You are an evil, you have brought us evil”, he broke out. With this I heard the sound of slap. The sound was like a distant thunder, with blood flowing down the side of *Shahram* mouth.

Leveling him, *Shahram* moved forward with singular speed, a sharp jab to the side of *Fa’aris* face, which seemed to imbalance him. They exchanged blows of equal devastation. I mediated and tried to separate them, but to no avail. Thanks, the people around gathered and separated them. They took them both to the hujra. Luckily *Shahzeb* was there. Seeing this, he stood at once. *Fa’aris* asked him to call uncle.

“Uncle is not at home”, he told a lie, as he knew the consequences of informing uncle. That’s why he was in panic all after that.

“You are a blot to your family, to the society, you are a criminal”, *Fa’aris* said turning to *Shahram* like a savage? “But I don’t want to let you stray and destroy your life before my eyes”, he was coming to his senses.

‘Destroy my life, is there any life left for us, and if there is, mine is already destroyed”, over this *Shahram* said.

“Behave yourself. You are a responsible person of your family. Instead of handling your responsibility, you are destroying your life.”

“I can’t have my way, being under twenty four hours threat. My home has become like a mourning place. My father behaves us like a stranger. He prefers to keep him away. He is no more interested in us. You don’t know what is going on at our home?”

“You don’t know about the official engagements of your father these days. And if you think your parents are suffering, you should help them in reducing their burden, instead of adding to it. You are the elder of your family; you must be careful and show responsibility to your family. And as far as your father’s interest in you is concerned, maybe he fears he might not hear something against his expectations, which would weaken him. Do you think what might be the effect of your habits on him? Suppose he comes to know that you stealthily come out of home and go to them, what will be its effect on him? It is that fear that he is silent, being already hurt.”

“Nothing is over; it is just a trial that would end someday”, *Fa’aris* said. “It is not only you to face the situation, we are all passing through it, but it doesn’t mean we depend on drugs. As far as the threats to your life are concerned, you are not alone; we are with you.”

Thanks, *Fa’aris* remembered that we had missed the Isha prayer, which I waited it all the day, due to the translation from the Holy Quran. It was the only time I found peace in the company of the Sweet Book, full of wisdom.

“How do you feel”, *Fa’aris* asked me after the prayer?

“Still you have not left me to think over it, I will tell you about it tomorrow”, I asked.

“You are a lion heart, these things will not kill you, I am sure”, *Fa’aris* smiled and said.

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## *PART - IV*

### Record Migrations

(Pathetic processions drenched in sweat amid baggage dropping from exhaustion, as they threaded their way for the down districts).

Meeting with *Chacha*

During walk to the deserted fruits market in the evening, just two days after the quarrel, I saw *Chacha* with his son *Sameer Ahmed*. I greeted him and there was no need to further introduction. He hugged me and kissed me on my forehead. Thereafter, he turned his eyes towards *Shahzeb Khan*. I introduced him with reference to *Shahram*. *Chacha* was a bit confused, as if, he found difficulty in recognizing him and needed additional information. *Shahzeb* looked at me with inquisitive eyes that I knew was his confusion on how to meet the query in view of the deteriorating conditions of *Shahram*. Therefore, I had to interrupt and explained about everything to him.

No sooner than I had informed *Chacha* about it, he extended his hand towards his son, which he understood was a gesture to support him. Now *Chacha* wanted to sit. We helped him to the nearby steps to the second floor of the building over the shops. He tried to wipe his wet eyes, as he made him comfortable over the second step from the base. “How..? Why...?”

Regarding how it happened, I had already told him about the whole story. As far as ‘why it happened was concerned’, there was no answer to this question with me. Now I had no idea on how to change the topic. Thanks *Chacha* himself provided that opportunity by asking me about the other young man, which I knew what he meant by it. So, I jumped in to say that *Fa’aris* is fine. Then, I suddenly asked him about his grandsons, so that he may not turn to the sad topic of *Shahram* again.

“We have decided to leave the area tomorrow”, *Chacha* replied instead of telling me about his grandsons. Maybe, the decision was connected with his grandsons, that’s why instead of telling me about them, he began the story of leaving the area.

“Where will you go”, I asked him?

“Anywhere, I mean in the down districts”, he replied.

“And what about you”, he asked me.

“Right now, we have not felt the need for leaving.”, I replied. “And where shall we go, when my father is in Saudi Arabia”, I added. Actually there was no need for us to leave the area in the presence of *Fa’aris* family. They looked after us like their family, even *Fa’aris* mother came to our home almost every other day. Moreover, *Fa’aris* father looked after us like his children. What’s more, this small area was rather safe. For us leaving it would mean leaving our family, because we were at home there.

“Where do you live”, *Chacha* asked?

“Near the home of *Fa’aris*”, I replied.

“I will be pleased to see that muscular boy”, *Chacha* expressed his strong desire? “I often think about him. I haven’t forgotten him. I told about him to my family.” *Chacha* Looked to his son for confirmation. “Do you remember it”, he asked his son, who nodded his head in such a way, as if, he had forgotten it or *Chacha* had forgotten if he had told him about it or not. “Where does he live”, he asked?

“We live there at the back of Shaheen Market. I will be please to see you there.”

“Why not my son, how can I forget you? But right now, we have some guests. We have many things to do. We have to make preparations for departure. I would like to suggest you to leave the area, as the fire has reached Mingora”, *Chacha* said with lament in his worn-out eyes. “Which time we are living in? Oh my God! Which time we have been left to”, he expressed his grief? *Sameer* put his hand over his shoulder to console him or to remind him of the time factor, so that he may not go into details by leaving the job they were there for. “Everywhere, there is fire and the Muslims are burning”, *Chacha* added after a brief silence, “there is nothing but only the news of killing and destruction.” “Oh my God, it is a tough time for the Muslims. *Gaza* belt has also been attacked by Israil, with hundreds of Palestinians killed in the Israil’s attacks”, he continued?

“People are kidnapped, they are killed. Killing in firing, bombing and mortar/shelling continues. There are severe fights between Taliban and Army in Matta, Manglawar, Kabal and Bandai, with many killings. Oh my God, which time we have been left to”, he went on.

“The sacred places like Masjids and schools are also unsafe. Qambar Girls High School, Banr High School and Haji Baba High School Mingora have been blown up, alongwith Balogram Police Station. Five schools were blown up in Mingora. In a remote control bomb blast on Army convoy, three civilians were killed. People remain stranded in curfews. In a second blast in Fizagat three persons were killed. Five persons of the same family were killed in Khwazakhela, when a mortar felled on their home. “Oh my God, which time we have been left to.”

“The situation is not good my son. Therefore, you must leave the area at the earliest.”

“Efforts are also underway alongside to bring the situation back on the track”, *Shahzeb* interrupted. “Jamat-i-Islami has resorted to set-ins for the war effectees, offering meditation.” President Asif Ali Zardari, however, gave a go ahead call to Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman. The Awami National Party members also came to Swat. They held a meeting at Circuit house in this regard. Mulla Shah Dawran has gone on one week leave.”

“I don’t think so; I think the situation is deliberately being deteriorated”, *Sameer* criticised. Maybe, he feared *Shahzeb*’s talks can lead Chacha to postpone his intention, as if, they had forced *Chacha* for living the area and they might change his decision.

“But the operations in Kabal and Matta have been completed. There, the people have also been allowed to their homes”, I intervened.

“There is nothing like such thing. On January 25, around ten Taliban were killed in Matta and Ningolai, including commanders”, *Sameer* held. “Ningolai has again been evacuated from the stranded people”, *Sameer* was fueled.

“But some of the people from Bara Bandai and Ningolai are still there because of the intervention of peace committees there.”

“They are there because of some serious problems. You cannot imagine their sufferings”, *Sameer* replied, as if, he was living among them. “Taliban have also released a hit list of the landlords and changing its strategy by reshuffling commanders”, he added.

“We are living in the worst time of our lives”, *Chacha* intervened! “There is panic and destruction everywhere. The people can’t even think of moving out of their homes in view of frequent and sudden curfews. Dead bodies remain scattered. Four dead bodies were seen laying in Ningolai. People are killed everywhere, even in crossing the River Swat to escape the skirmishes or the long curfews. The patients and the injured die on the way. Bullets have no name of the killed written on them. They are fired like pebbles. Scores of women have been widowed, and children made orphan. Displacements continue, rather speeding up. The public are on foot. They have left their valuables behind and selling their pet animals on the way at throwaway prices or leaving them in the open sky and take their course.”

“*Uzman* you are like my son, I would still suggest you to think over the option. You must ask your mother in this regard. The situation is not good and delaying tactics may aggravate the problems for you.” I don’t know why *Chacha* was interested in my leaving the area, but it came to my mind that either he wanted all the people to leave with him or he wanted them to convince his son against it. Whichever the case may be, for the sake of his convenience, I told him that I would consult my mother in this regard and that we would not be far behind them.

He felt a bit relieved over it. His son also warmly shook hand with me at his departure, probably happy over our failure to change his father’s mind against his decision. *Shahzeb* anxiously asked me if we were really leaving the area. From his question, I could guess that he was not happy over this, because we had become so close during the course of the time that no one thought we are IDPs. The people thought that we are the relatives of *Fa’aris*. In fact, I commanded much respect in the area and no more thought myself displaced.

“Presently, we should leave for home, then we may think ahead”, I joked.

Here, it is worth mentioning that in those days the people tried to reach home with the sitting sun. If they were late, it would simply mean tension for the whole family.

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### Caravans of displaced people

Marching towards unknown destinations, the displaced people from the valley wended their way through Mingora and Kabal. They were alone despite in groups. No one expected the other, nor any time after or before. They could not make it, or call them.

The timing was not clear. The people escaped as soon as they got opportunity. Threading their way difficultly among the people, the pathetic processions were trying on pavements amid baggage, drenched in sweat. They were dropping from exhaustion with their heads slumped on to their chests. They didn't complain once, though from time to time beads of sweat broke out on their brows.

Like a flock of sheep, the crowds moved down the streets, with their heads bowed under the weight of their burden and exhaustions. Slowly the people came round. They were pale, their faces drawn. They were too weary to register a surprise at being hailed in unfamiliar surroundings. They were struggling under heavy loads. The sufferings were so soul destroying that the crowds huddled up together.

The squares and bazaars were full of people. Along the narrow roads stretched processions and vehicles moving at a snail's pace. It took hours to travel a few miles. The slow marching of feet looked like a herd of ghosts, marching towards obscured destinations. The fugitives joined one another on the way. Everywhere, there were so many wane-looking children, women with tired faces, weary old folks. At that movement, the dreaded humming could be heard above the noise of angry children crying under the tramping of feet. They wanted to snatch a few seconds sleep. They were un-resting. Perhaps, they still feared that the bullets may rep through their bodywork.

*Fa'aris* provided logistics support to these people in the form of food and shelter etc. For this purpose he had made special arrangements on the instruction of his father and with the generous help from his friends as well as the people from this blessed locality. We were assigned with the duty at the main squares, where the people approached for onwards shuffle to the down districts, to invite them for food or support in the form of treatment to the patients and temporary lodging facilities for them. There was humility of *Fa'aris* father in it, the sincerity of *Fa'aris* mother and the love of *Fa'aris*, which were the choice acts for Allah Almighty from his humble servants.

The refugees came along, described their unspeakable sufferings. The soles of the female were swollen. However, these people were lucky enough to have had a chance and force their way out of the death traps, as they will all not get away. Some of them were still stuck. Their red rimmed eyes betrayed exhaustion and wonder of wonders, as there was deadlock, threat and anger. They were there to face all this.

Perhaps, there had been no worse time for the country in its more than half past century of existence. The novelty of attacks that raged across the valley, the hot pursuits, and the Federal and Provincial administrations were not well prepared to confront the situation, help minimize the losses. The government and its institutions seemed to have conceded to the situation, turning its back to the dangerous living, demonstrating that no chronic problem, however, grave will take priority over an immediate concern, however trivial. That's why, the people called it a pseudo-war for vested interests. The silent public could do nothing but to be grateful for commands, anger and threats. Moving forward, going backward, avoiding obstacles, heaps of rubble and barriers of barbed wires, frightening glances, this was all the life.

The people kept bumping into friends and acquaintances all over the places. Some of the displaced families were under the open sky. They would never end up forgetting the exodus. They would no more remember the pleasure of meeting old friends. They roamed around in search of kindred spirit. Some knew nothing about the whereabouts of their relatives. They often laughed like savages over their destiny.

Kill on sight had begun at the end of the month of January with curfews. Coming out of home was to invite death and remaining at home was to wait it. People were between the devil and deep sea. Some of them cried and their cries died down with their death. Helicopters were patrolling. Swat had become a headline for media; even the international media gave full coverage to the news from it.

February made no difference. Thirty villages were worst affected. Communication infrastructure damaged. Kanju police station was stormed. Reportedly seventy people were killed in the first two days of the month. Death toll in Charbagh and surrounding areas had reached 120. In Shamozaï a Nazim was slaughtered. Around thirty police and FC constables surrendered after two days of intense fight. They were surrounded and there was no aid reaching them. Babaji School was gutted down. The Govt had announced the closure of banks, NADRA offices and courts. The refugees had gathered at Barikot to flee to the down districts. The route was closed. They protested it. In Baidara, four people of the same family were killed in shelling. Mortars fell in Ningolai, Hazara, and Madyan, killing thirteen persons.

Al-khidmat camp was set up for the affectees. Saudi Arabia sent financial aid for the displaced and war-ravaged people. Maulana Sufi Muhammad launched a peace camp in Mingora. He would go to Matta in procession to meet Mulla Fazlullah. It was followed by brutal killing of *Mosa Khan Khel*, a Jeo News correspondent, reportedly kidnapped from the caravan. Both the Govt and Taliban regreted it. The peace camp marched to Deolai. Fazlullah gave him authority, saying the Taliban would put down arms on the condition of construction of damaged homes and compensation to the deads' families. Thirty two people were killed in a bomb blast in funeral prayer In Dherai.

The month of March began with clashes between Army and Taliban. Maulana Fazlullah made an emotional speech on FM, criticizing the govt for failing to honour its commitment. Here, in clashes between Taliban and security forces, as against the truce, five policemen were killed. The Aman camp was over with the end of the agreement between Taliban and Govt. Sufi Muhammad accused the government for failing to implement Sharia in Malakand Division. Jamat-i-Islami and Kanju Aman committee criticized the govt, saying the anti-state elements were up against peace, while the government was giving them a room for sabotaging the agreement to dishonor its commitment.

On April 13, Sharia bill was passed. The president signed it after approval from National Assembly. Nizam-e-Adal Regulation was implemented in Malakand Division. In Takhtaband, a lady doctor was killed with four others. In Khwazakhela two persons were slaughtered. Ningolai High School was blown up. There were also rumours of attack on FC Camp Kanju. Taliban patrolled in streets. The leftover people of Kanju were given ultimatum to vacate the area. They had no option, but to drag them from there. Mingora was also vacated for most part.

The doors of escape were closed. Like rodents, the people led their lives in holes. People buried their dead everywhere. There were also reports of looting. There were also reports of missiles, drone strikes and jet bombing. Reportedly seven Taliban were killed. Similarly in Gat Peochar, nearly six army personnel and several Taliban were killed. In Shamozaï eight persons of the same family were killed in Jet bombing.

Mamdheri, the Center of Taliban, was destroyed by Jet bombs and missiles. Balogram Girls School was blown up. The other day Taliban vacated Kanju. Army was now moving towards Damghar. Reportedly, eight Taliban were killed in Madyan. In Matta Army camp was blown up. Many killings were reported. Bara Bandai High School near Army Check Post was blasted up.

People were in dark. They were now living in Stone Age. They were famished by edibles shortage. Sigram, Koza Bandai, had become a trade center and communication avenue. There were also reports of killing and injuries through the ways the people used to buy things.

Govt announced on FM to vacate the area from Ningolai to Kabal. Islahi committee intervened and it was decided that the people in Bara Bandai would remain confine to their homes during the operation. Reportedly, Army was deployed at ten places in Koza Bandai. The operation in Koza Bandai had been completed and launched in Bara Bandai. The committee members accompanied Army to minimize the damages. Sufi Muhammad spokesman Amir Izat was reportedly killed alongwith accomplices. An Army major was also reportedly killed.

Taliban were on retreat. It was also reported that upto thirty Taliban have been killed in Sirsinai including two important commanders. In Jet bombing on Mahak village, five Taliban and one civilian were reportedly killed and many injured.

The month of June had begun with severe fights. Jet bombing were also reported in Swat. Taliban had, however, left most of the areas. Search operations were going on and there were arrests. Many homes were razed to the ground.

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*Life as IDPs*

Hardly a soul on sight in the entire width and breadth of the valley; even the animals and birds had disappeared. There was no wooing of pigeons or chattering of sparrows. Every place was deserted—the farms, the houses, the outhouses and the barns. There was a dead silence. The homes were empty and dark, appearing quite different. There was no trace of smoke coming from chimneys, or a faint gleam to show there was someone in the interior. The roads and lanes were blank and streets abandoned. The dark alleyways spread dread and gloom.

People had been uprooted from the valley in a miserable condition. They had not sufficient money. There was not enough to eat. They spent the nights wherever they found a shelter. Hence, the refugees were sleeping in the doorways, in the mosques, in schools. Some were staying without meeting a soul. They were not counting on the others.

Temporarily, they felt joy when they unexpectedly reached safe homes. They felt safe and lucky, when they plunged into secret burrows like rodents behind surface of family life. They felt a gloating satisfaction and camaraderie of a job completed, a mission accomplished. They felt exultantly proud to have succeeded in escape from the Death Valley. However, it was only short after they had reached their new homes; they felt that their twitching with excitement was but only brief. The houses they lived in looked quite strange. The places they lived in had become unfriendly. Even, the friends seemed to behave strangely. That's why they soon found that they are not in their camps, which every inch of it was known to them. It felt uncomfortable, as it was not the end. It was the beginning of further trials. Hence, their escape was becoming like an old war wound, which always aches and sometimes unexpectedly hurt. Dithering with the fleeting anguish, they had no zest for living. In the torpid midday heat, the people felt sick, gritting their teeth, thinking what had they done to deserve this. They no more felt the cool air heavy with sickly sweat stud of roses. There were no mild and starry nights and pungent air full of hay smell.

They did not stop fiddling with those knobs. They missed their friends. They had got such a lot to tell them, but then it was dark. No light shone in the congested streets of their minds. They wouldn't relinquish their endless search for the emigrants to enquire from them about the situation in their area. What they heard from them were only the news of deaths and destruction. Hence, it was far more complicated to study and understand it. Therefore, the deep depressions intensified and remnants of joy shoved violently towards extinction.

'Would the people ever see their homes again?' There was a general silence. Everybody was thinking of those who were away from them. They remembered the hilarities of the previous years. They had only the past to fill them with life in the pains of loss. Each night, they turned to their private thoughts and in few minutes before sleep overcame their exhausted bodies, they wept for the dead and lost.

It is worth-mentioning that the locals had generously opened their hearts and houses for their displaced brethren. Everyone had gone out of the way to give pleasure to others. They hugged the fugitives passionately, snuggling up together with them despite the fact that they had already enough problems and it was the additional burden of having to look after these grief-stricken people from the Death Valley of Swat.

Results of Matric and FA/F.Sc exams had been announced. Swatis were given special concession. The result was on the previous year's ratio, but in the majority of the cases, the students were not aware of their results. Nonetheless, what they should have done with their results, when the real life exam was yet before them, as the postmortem of the whole of Swat had begun to make it become a center of sad news.

The prevalence of low confidence was like faster winds with heavy rains to get stronger, risk high quality of life, hit normal life, when the areas are not braced for it. The heat of Death Circle burnt the things came in its way to disturb its existence. Scores of people had crossed the Red Thin Lines and gone. On the other hand, who would have dared to take eye on the horrific scenes and count the catastrophes?

## *PART - V*

### IDPs returning to their homes

(No greet, no celebration, as the IDPs went past the dilapidated homes with all sorts of refusal on the doorsteps).

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## End of operations

The wars were over and operations ended. The people had found telephonic signals, following its suspension for nearly two months, which was like a new life for them. They had, at last, come to know regarding the whereabouts of their families as well as other near and dear.

Happy over the news that the situation is coming back to normalcy, the displaced people earnestly looked forward to a go-ahead call from the Govt, as there was the good news of IDPs return to their homes. They had all their eyes fixed on the likely date to be given for public return. Finally, the time had come, with the deadline of June 25, 2009, was given to them for return to their homes.

The suspense of *Kaif* was increasing with the deadline drawing near. Unfortunately, there was report of the seventy persons killed in Waziristan and around fifty injured in drone attacks and the fights in Charbagh and surrounding areas, with many losses including an Army major and a captain. “The situation reveal we would not see the light of the day in Swat again”, he asked in confusion.

“Don’t lose heart, the situation is coming back to normalcy”, I consoled him. However, when the deadline had reached and there was no sign of return, *Kaif* was upset again. “Preparations for IDPs return are underway”, I asked. “The electricity has been restored after two months. Similarly Army has taken control of the surrounding areas. In view of the overall situation, I think it will not take long for public return.”

“We are fed-up here. I fear it might not be delayed any further.”

“There is nothing to prolong. Operations have been completed and infrastructure is being restored.”

“But the curse of curfews is still going on. People are still meeting their daily needs through mountains. They have to pay thrice for the goods brought from the distant parts. Some of the people have lost their lives on the way. They have died for fetching food. Taliban’s homes are also being destroyed. I have also heard that the surrounding homes are being damaged by the force of the blasts.”

“Don’t spoil your mind over these things, the time is not far you would come to your area again.” Unfortunately, dates after dates were given. There was suspense, there was anger. Now the month of June had ended. There was fight in Shah Dherai. Both Nasl and Fasl (generation of people and crops) had been destroyed. There were also reports of killing of Taliban high command with twenty five other members. The stranded people were allowed to bring goods from other parts. Whereas, the migrations were still going on in parts.

Fortunately, with repair works and return of the people from Buner, signs of normalcy were emerging. Returns between Shangla and Kalam had begun. Situation in the restive parts was still out of control, however. Kallakille had badly been damaged. Kot area of Tehsil Charbagh was under fire, with many damages reported. Hail of mortars were fired on Ser Tilligram area of Tehsil Charbagh.

The Prime Minister announced July 13 for refugees return. At last, the time had come. The people began to move, with the assistance of Govt and international community. The first caravan came to Barikot, then Kalam. Those not in camps came later in their own transport. The return of the people at Kanju Township, due for their homes on July 16, was prolonged to July 20 with the killing of an intermediate student. The other day two youth from Bara Bandai were killed on their way home from Sigram.

People were returning to Mingora through curfew passes. The other day the people of Kanju were allowed to their homes. The return was in parts. Operations were also going on. In Koza Bandai and Mamdherai the Army saw resistance from Taliban. There were also reports of killing of six Taliban and three Army personnel. Mortars were fired. Several Taliban were arrested and their homes razed to the ground.

Waves of people were returning to their homes. The people heard Azans after a long time and turned up towards Masjids with strange feelings. Telephonic communications were also restored. Electricity had also been restored after a long time, but currents did not flow in lines. Yet, signs of life were emerging. Nevertheless, many of the refugees had left the world and buried in other places.

Here, the family of *Kaif* had stuck at Barikot due to closure of Barikot-Mingora road for security and checking purposes. Next day they got up early in the morning to hurry up for their home. Unfortunately diminishing the shades around it, the sun rose high and high, yet the road was jammed. Still there was hope. They were, after all, in their own camp. When the sun had reached the middle and the scorching heat of August streamed in uninvitingly, the people couldn't stay. They were swelling in the scorching heat.

In the searing afternoon sun the vehicles began to move with a lizard feet. After the long pains of the sizzling heat, when the caravan of the people reached Mingora, the sun had set. They were stopped at the security check point in Amankot at the mouth of Mingora city and not allowed to go ahead even on foot. So, they had to spend the night in petrol pumps or elsewhere. In the morning they were allowed on foot.

In short, the month of August was the month of public returns. People remained busy in making security passes. Slowly attendance at the damaged schools also started. The makeshift schools were welcoming the broken students. Business activities were also resumed. Children sounds were heard and birds chirping began. Yet, the people were in post-traumatic disorder. Qumi Lashkars were being formed. Together with these developments, the operations went on, in which several killings and arrests were reported. There were also curfews and arrests.

Preparations for Independence Day were going on. For the public, the day held less significance, however. They did not want to celebrate anything like freedom or wedding etc. As such the Freedom Day was celebrated at official level only. Pak Army arranged programs in different areas to encourage the heart broken people, but they preferred to remain shut indoor.

Public returns were still going on. Some of the people on the way to their homes were still spending their nights under the open sky. Some wept for their lost children, or other relatives. Almost all the roads were damaged due to overuse by heavy machinery like tanks or devastated in bomb blasts. There were also the barriers of check posts and checking points. Minutes distance was covered in hours. Going across Swat was troublesome and took more time than going across Pakistan. With dusk the people had to reach homes. Otherwise, one had to spend the night if stuck. Public Committees were being formed for Taliban to surrender. Besides, arrests were still going on.'

Soon after *Nizar* had reached his area, there was a suicide bomb blast in Kanju Chowk on August 22. *Nizar* informed that around three Army officers lost their lives in the blast. He also said that severe operations have begun. "Human life is cheaper than chickens", he added.

A youth was killed in Shakardara. There were also reports of sixteen policemen killed in suicide bomb blasts in Mingora. Moreover, dead bodies were found in River Swat.

The month of September began with surrenders. There were also the lines of people for registration and ration. The people were busy with ration from various NGOs and Govt. They were happy when they got ration and vice versa. Target killings were also going on. Taliban high command Muslim Khan and Mehmoud Khan were reportedly arrested from the surrounding of Mingora. The Chief Minister also visited Swat. There was curfew throughout the valley. Army was firming its grip around Taliban. Ten dead bodies were also found lay on the bank of River Swat. One was identified from Nawakilli, who was buried; the other remained there for a long time.

During the search operation in Bandai, three Taliban were reportedly killed. People were called to Dheri ground by Army. Further on, lists of Taliban were issued and pasted on the walls. Homes of Taliban commanders were also razed to the ground.

Forgetting the past is a special gift from Allah Almighty. On Sep 21, the people celebrated Eid. Announcements were made to form public Lashkars for watch and ward duties at night. Taliban network had been destroyed. Besides their killing, surrenders were going on.

Turki Army Chief reportedly visited Swat in October. There was a bomb blast in Islamic University Islamabad, in which several students were killed. Educational institutions were closed. There was also curfew due to the news of infiltration of a suicide bomber.

The last month of the year 2009 saw the killing of *Dr. Shamsher Ali Khan*, MPA, and peace worker, in a suicide bomb blast. The people of Dherai were gathered to Dherai ground. There were also reports of thirteen Taliban killed. The dead bodies were reportedly lying on road in Sigram.

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### Huge losses

Huge losses were reported during the year, 2009, both in men and material. It was, indeed, the year of dangerous living, during which the people saw many trials including displacements.

With a slight relief in curfews, the people fled from one area to another. Subsequently, they switched off electricity, wondering as they looked at their doors; if they would come back to their homes again. Trailing hastily dressed constantly swelling traffic overtaking was forbidden. Brisk paces were passing the pathetic groups of people like unfettered and terrified sheep in a warning of an earthquake; they wended their way across the streets, on the roads. The people themselves tried to create a semblance of organization among the pathetic exodus. Now the towns were deserted, it was eerie, there were no bodies in streets. Places were full of distraught people, who were hit by the crisis upon crisis and finally left their areas having lost all the hopes of recovery due to constant wars and frequent curfews. They congregated at squares, mingling with the stream of the refugees from other parts. They would ever remember those filthy kilometers all their lives, costing them a lot of backache, chilblains, chapped hands and hunger. There was not enough to eat. No sheaves of corns were there. Their rucksacks contained few valuables. Expectedly, the people were tired of being stuck and they had to face the tragedy till the last.

Remarkably well informed about their strength and weaknesses between bullets and blades, the souls of the people remained discontented. They were in need, but no one could help them. They felt the waves were coming over to them, especially after the dispute prolonged and the efforts to patch up the differences between the contending forces failed. Yet a faint light was there. The people hoped there might be some better to come, even out of such suffering, thinking this must certainly be a waiting period. In the meantime, they must try to resign with serenity for whatever fate was in store for them to defend them against the faintly disgust shafts which came from the evil.

Unfortunately, the number of hideouts and check posts kept on increasing. The dread spread, the bullets fired, bombs blasted, IEDs exploded, mortars felled, cannonballs shot, the earth shook. The victims killed, the breathing cried, the deafening noises made the public dumb. Each time a mortar or cannon fired, it seemed there was an explosion in one's head. The people went mad by the noises of explosions. The weather was dry. The blood splinters remained aground. It seemed the rain had tired of washing away blood from the earth's surface.

The people had now come to the conclusion that their existence was at stake and the valley would no more bring blessings to them. Therefore, they hated their homes, they hated their areas. They didn't want to live there. Everyone was up for exit.

They were displaced in millions to down districts. According to estimation over 2.3 million people were displaced from Malakand Division during the operation, which was officially over after three months of intense fighting. The number was to the down districts, excluding the displaced people within the district. There was hardly a soul left in the valley, which spread dread in the restive parts.

It was also the year the people came back. They were so exhausted, they eventually got to grips with themselves, and they were delirious. They had imagined their home coming differently. They knew there would be no greet, no fuss making or celebration on their arrival.

Everything that can be done will be done. However, the vacuum left by the irreparable losses would not be filled. The poignant memories from which we would not be able to escape our urge to get out, is too strong to resist. The thoughts still hurt the conscious. In addition to lives, the damages to economy and infrastructure inflicted by the war were also extraordinary. The operations caused devastation to social and physical infrastructure on a large scale. There was a halt to commercial activities for months. Nothing harvested, nothing produced. Business activities had come to a halt. Shops, markets and factories were closed. Supply of goods meant for Swat remained suspended. The number of food items continued to plummet. The prices were straightly shot up, as there was a general shortage. Moreover, the wars were soon followed

by panic buying. The disasters had taken a heavy toll on the economy in the initial period and there was usually no extra-activity to generate afterwards. Furthermore, the lengthy disruptions, the delayed restoration of the region's transportation lines and energy infrastructure, which had aggravated the economic fallout, delivered a greater destruction. Therefore, the actual economic losses exceeded millions, likely billions.

Nonetheless, they were now on their home ground in their own camps, which they had left with the wonder if they would ever see them again on the face of the earth. The names of the places and villages were the same, but they were not the same. The people were in two minds. They were kidding them about the human nature, who won, who lost. Should they celebrate a victory or defeat?

During the horrors of war the people had become men. The critical moments had given them deep insight. They went past the dilapidated homes with all sorts of refuse on the doorsteps, then doubt, then fear, then shame set in. They were keen to live; they refused the slightest critical analysis of the situation. The IDPs still faced immense post-conflict difficulties. A research study carried out by Aryana Institute for Regional Research and Advocacy in April 2009 estimated the losses to agricultural output in Swat at around 4 billion PKR per annum during 2008-09. With a pre-war output at 9 billion PKR, this amounts to a loss of 44% in terms of agricultural output. The farming sector engaged upto 56% of labor force in Swat, during the conflict 30% of the labor force became jobless. Post conflict rehabilitation and recovery programs were in operation since IDPs returned to their areas in late August 2009. The total estimated losses resulting from the conflict in Malakand Division amounted to US \$227.5 million.

Ofcourse, the war was over, but everything was not going to be the same again. There had been all those wasteful and horrible deaths and losses. Yelling vociferously, the victim families were now clad in black. For nearly a month they remained in a state of shock. They didn't want to speak. They ate what was put on the plate and slept curled up in the little beds in their homes. They were in a condition like coma and did not come around for a long time. They found it hard to get out of their obscured daily routines. Like books, they were the souvenir of past doom. However, they would not be able to get others reveal an intimate side of them. They were so stupefied that they did not hear each other, until the black veil covering their minds was getting over, and their number wore off. They were now able to give one the attention they required. They fell into each other arms and cried for long over the losses. Now inspite of their tiredness they managed to find the words of comfort they needed to hear. However, they were still incomplete on the face of the earth.

There was nothing to dig over, nothing to do in the silent houses, except empty ash trays. Out of the stranded people, who had escaped the Death Circle on the doomsday of October 26, 2007, the living ones also stood in these lines. They were now very small in number. However, this time they were not there for escape, but were trying to make an entry into life. Regarding the habit, they had developed it in the down districts, where they stood in lines for registration as IDPs for getting Rs: 25,000/- announced by the Chief Minister, NWFP, per head of a family. They stood in lines in front of NADRA offices or at registration/Ration Points and waited for hours, even came for days to make ATM cards etc. Initially, they stood silent but their dignity began to recede and finally retreated. Without any further ado, they were now adapted to weather conditions, to bitterly colds and scorching summers. Their immersion in ration had made them habitual to the changing seasons. They had been allocated ration books. Green/Yellow/Red for money and ration. Without these coups stuck inside the book, it was impossible to obtain ration. Being a part of routine, the people would sleep and get up with the thought of ration. They would go to the ration points or venues of Benazir Income Support program, up in the lines waiting. Fortunately, the cool waves of River Swat dropped down the mercury level to keep them calm. The only thing that troubled them was to spend the precious hours stuck in traffic jams, due to inadequate communication infrastructure and check posts. Nevertheless, the remembrance of the bygone days kept them calm and energetic.

Indeed, they had not challenged the writ of the government or harmed the State's image, nor were they crazies or savages. They were those miserable people who suffered the devastations of militancy and then the subsequent military operation.

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### Our home coming

It was after the long trials of well over two years that we had to finally decide to leave for our area in February, 2010. We were in a rather strange situation, as if, we are going to another world.

For me the cumbersome task was to visit the home of *Guldana*. I didn't want to go there due to the fear of the issue of our engagement. Therefore, I asked my mother that we would call them on phone when we have got back to our home.

"I am not so selfish." My mother was angrary over this. "How can we bypass them when we have been like a family during all this time", she remarked? "We must see them, if you want it or not", she asked.

"As you wish", I reluctantly agreed, "but I fear they would try to pressurize us."

Reaching there, I stayed at the Hujra and my mother, my sister and my brother went inside the home. After sometime, *Guldana's* brother came out to call me to home, but I denied. Little after aunt herself came out with my mother to burst out at me, as if, she had found an opportunity to release her emotions. "What wrong we have done with you that you are behaving like this..."

"Please aunt, we are not here to hurt you", I interrupted in view of her rising anger as she was going out of temper. "We are thankful to you for what you did for us. You have a lot of favours on us. We would always remember your gracious help to us during this time of test. No doubt, you always behaved me like your own son. And I too always considered you like my mother and would ever remember you, but I didn't ever thought of such a crucial decision to be made regarding my life, without the consent and presence of my father", I tried to explain.

"What I am worried about is your behaviour. You have changed a lot", she complained.

"I am worried about my missing friend. Moreover, I am not in a position to decide about my future. That's why I have left everything to my father, because he is the elder of the family", I tried again in light of *Fa'aris* detailed lectures.

"Your mother should have thought about it before proposing my daughter", she said. I was blushed to hear it. My apprehension was right. It was my mother, who proposed *Guldana*. She had told me a lie by saying that her parents have offered her hand for me.

"I am sorry again aunt, I don't want to hurt you. Actually my father wants to himself decide about my future, I, I ...", here I found myself in want of words, when she interrupted.

"Our whole family has come to know about it. When your mother has already proposed *Guldana*, then why you want to delay it."

"You are right aunt, but we are here as IDPs. We have our own problems. Still we are not in a position to take such a crucial decision. And we are here to take leave from you. If you kindly give us permission to leave, we would be thankful to you."

"Why not, when you are fed-up of us. How can you spend time here", she said.

"Please aunt. We are not here to disturb you, but to take permission. If you have minded it, we may leave. Let's go mom", I asked mother.

"How she can go, when we have not even talked to one another", aunt said.

"Ok, you go home. I am going to my friend. I will come back to take you, when you are free and ready to go", I said.

"Where is your friend", my mother asked.

"There in *Panr*", I responded.

"*Panr*, but I have not heard about this friend so far", my mother asked.

"Actually, he doesn't like us that's why he is making an excuse to leave us", aunt intervened.

"I will call you later", saying this I came out of the hujra. I straightly came to the road and began to roam around in pursuit of nothing.

The environment was not good. I found myself helpless. As such, I got back to the hujra. Reaching the gate, I could not dare to enter but got back on the road. I was very much confused. I didn't know what to do. I also felt fear for my mother. Thanks, my mother called me on phone after some time. I got back and reaching the gate I saw *Athar*, the brother of *Guldana*, was standing in wait for me. Reaching there I saw a changed aunt this time. "Though I should not have discussed these things with you, but you are like my son..."

"No aunt, you are like a mother to me, you have every right to say what you want", I had hardly finished when I saw *Guldana* bringing tea for me. She looked at me with many questions in her eyes. I felt small and tried to control myself. Then, all of a sudden I sensed a trap. My mother was emotional; I feared she might not have done something wrong. I tried to finish my tea and take leave from aunt but she would not be ready to leave us before dinner. "Then we will be late aunt, you know we have a lot of things to do."

"You can do it at night. I would not let you before dinner with us." My mother smiled over this, so I couldn't say anything more and began to wait for Maghrib prayer. "What kind of fruits this visit would yield in." I still feared my mother may not do something wrong.

Meanwhile, uncle also came to join me. After the dinner, they half-heartedly allowed us to leave. "What did they say", I asked my mother when we got out onto the road and began to wait for auto rickshaw.

"They said nothing about what you feared", she replied. With this my mind changed altogether and I felt pity for *Guldana* and her mother. I felt cheat. I drew myself to Isha prayer and after that I wanted to let me fall into a sleep. I asked my mother that we would arrange the things tomorrow. "I am not feeling well." My body cried out for rest, but the uneasiness had been within me all the time and unsleeping.

Hardly had I fallen into a sleep, when I got up again by terrifying nightmares. I cried softly or whimpered during the feigned sleep, but when I awoke of the sinister dream, I found myself exhausted. My dream had been so vivid. I gabbled nonsense! Sweaty after the horrors of night, my hairs were damp, as if, I had been in fight or fever. I never spoke; I was frightened.

Suddenly, I saw *Daral* in grave, in the same mud he was not allowed touching it on the living planet. 'No, it can't be so. *Daral* can't leave me. He would come one day. I would find him, but where? With this I began to weep. Then I fell silent, thinking of my loneliness, which I never ever thought about it, not even when I lived within its shadows. I thought about all those solitary nights I led in lost faith and broken loyalty. Everything was leaving me, except the sorrow and despair in me had mixed with fear of loss. I wanted escape, but saw my own death in him—the feelings of it came from somewhere, from a hidden place. My body I so loved and nurtured out of all possible care was put in earth and forgotten like a discarded tree stump, because the soul had left it. Whereas, no one wanted it without soul. Then I thought that in some unknown way, I did not understand, I must have done something terribly wrong to deserve this. I must be guilty of something grievous, though I did not know what it was, but knowing that I must be guilty of some dreadful sin.

I punished myself without realizing it. The images of the most intense, the wildest and regretful movements I had spent ran through my mind at the most astonishing speed. I wanted to pour out the burden on my head, but strangely disappearing; my voice scratched in the middle of my throat and broke upon the shores of my brain in a splitting headache. My dreams had been broken like a sand castle swept away in a high tide? Nonetheless, there is always something dark about dreams; no matter they come to us at night or day. Most often the dreams become as blinding as the brightest sunlight. Therefore, we feel more guilty than offended.

Walking down the room, I felt the pressure of having to put into words what I endured to take from the events its carapace of silence seemed to brutalize it yet again. I saw myself like a machine with two parts—one part working, the other closed off. I could feel, I could not act. My taste for humiliation had combined with arrogance. I was not capable to do anything right, the next moment deriding the good sense to punish myself. I remained in such a condition for a long time, till the sleep had relieved me of the painful thoughts.

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## *PART - VI*

### Normalcy in nostalgia

(There would ever be tears behind our laughs. We would never be able forget of what we lost during the time of unrest).

Visiting my beloved's home

Feeling a heavy weight lay on my chest, I came out of home. It was the second month of our shifting back to our area. My father had also come on leave from Saudi Arabia. But I was alone this time, because I was going to my school and all those places, where I could probably recollect my past. Therefore, the visit was special to me in more than one way, and I had mixed feelings on the way. I missed all those, whom I was attached somehow; even the thought of *Guldana* came to my mind to disturb me. Yet, I was especially careful about *Daral* and my beloved family, because they were now an integral part of my life, perhaps, much more than I was to them.

Thanks, my father and *Fa'aris* had resolved the issue. “We would ever remain thankful to you for the generous help you extended to us at the hour of need”, my father told *Mazhar* uncle. “I would have been rather happy if *Guldana* had become my daughter-in-law, as I make no difference between her and my daughter. Still I cherish her to be my daughter-in-law, but I am not in a position to do so, due to the fact that *Uzman* is attached to someone else”, he added. “And I wouldn't be able to get back of my words”, he explained. Uncle was good enough to look into the fact, saying it is all the game of luck. He wished me the best of luck in my future endeavors, saying I was like a son to them.

*Khanji* had also accepted our offer as soon as my father put it before him. “*Uzman* is like a son to me. I myself wanted to clear the issue, because she is my responsibility now after the death of her mother.” My mother felt small to hear this, maybe she recalled her saying that the words of mouth had no status or she had recalled her foolishness of proposing *Guldana*. Anyway the timely intervention and good strategy of *Fa'aris* and my father saved me from a big blunder. So, I was happy and sad at the same time. Happy because I was going to the home of my in-laws and sad because *Daral* would not be there. His thoughts would not leave me to rest. They would ever torture me.

Reaching the terminal, I saw many vehicles were on the stand. The people had perhaps forgotten about the unrest. I got into the front seat of a flying coach. Thanks, it didn't take long to get full and we began towards our destinations. Everything was visible to me, like an every inch of the earth was within the purview of my mind, which I had studied it like a horror story. Nearing the once Death Circle, my heart began to thud fast, even faster at the Death Trap and to increase in the spot where the two *Babozites* were killed and *Rohail*, *Bacha*, *Kaki* and his friends disappeared. When we crossed the bend, the mountain was visible, alongwith the dim light and tough life behind it. The blood carnages, the bomb blasts including the one on the funeral of the senior police officer, which took the life of *Faran* and we were among survivors—everything was within the purview of my mind.

Finally, I found myself at the school gate, bruised and lonely. There was no whereabouts of my friends. Even the watchman was a strange person; I had not seen this face before. I wanted to enquire from him about *Kaka*, our old watchman and my friend, but I feared his death. Therefore, I deferred it for the time being, as I didn't want to hear the death news anymore. I was fed-up of it.

“I am *Uzman*, *Uzman Shah*. I have come to see the principal and the teachers”, I asked the watchman.

“Why do you want to see them”, he asked in a soft wavering voice?

“I am their student”, I replied. “Just tell the principal that *Uzman* has come”, I added and he left after thoroughly inspecting me before leaving, as if; he was looking for a suicide bomber in me.

I was surprised to see that after sometime the principal himself came out at the gate to receive me. He hugged me to his chest and held me there for quite sometime. “How are you, *Uzman*”, he asked with visible tears in his wet eyes?

“Fine sir”, I shortly replied, “and what about you sir.”

“Fine too, thanks.”



“Come”, he asked and I followed him.

Entering the gate of the school, I found myself in want of strength. I saw myself being drawn to something that had no existence at all. I was simply confused, till all of a sudden my eyes fell on our classroom, which was in the way to office. I stopped for a brief to peep into the class from the window, but there was nothing to be seen despite the students in it, who were allowed the light and fresh air through the window. When I tried to focus my attention on the desk, which I and *Daral* used to sit on it, I found myself at loss, because there were two strange boys sitting on it. They were different in all respects. There was no attachment between them, as if, they were unknown to one another. Their eyes were not that of *Daral* and *Uzman*. They had not the intimacy to look into each other eyes and express their feelings through them. They were careless, because they were not aware of each other’s feelings. How should they, when they didn’t bother about it, when they had no connection between them. There was something strange about it. There was no *Daral*. The principal had probably seen into my feelings, that’s why he quietly left for the office in the same quietness without uttering a single word. Perhaps, he did not want to disturb me but to leave me for some time in my discreet world, full of sorrows. However, I followed him in the same serious mood, he had left me.

Entering the office door, I saw the light was trying to encroach upon the ventilators, the door and the windows and through all the crevices around, as the sun was on the rise, high and high it rose and the light was flooding the room. It followed me, chased me, reached me and touched me, as if, it had something secret about *Daral* to tell me. I sat on the chair beside the side wall.

The principal expressed his gloom over that day of October 26, 2007, when we were stuck at the Death Circle, saying he was not aware of the intensity of the situation; otherwise he would not have let us go. “It was only when I had reached home that I came to know about it”, he explained. “How is the situation in your area”, he asked me in such a way, as if, I was his teacher and he was my obedient student.

“Good enough sir”, I simply replied. “How are the teachers”, I suddenly asked.

“Well. However, *Nekzada* Sir and *Wajid Khan* Sir have left. *Wajid Khan* sir has got another job, while *Nekzada* Sir has opened a tuition academy. The sad news is that *Kaka* is dead.”

“What”, bewildered I asked! “How!”

“He was killed during the operation of the area”, he answered while I had held my head in both hands. “I think, I have made you worried?”

“No sir, I am habitual to these things now”, I responded. “May I see the teachers”, I asked.

“Sure, let’s go.” He took me to the staffroom. There I met the vice principal and other teachers. They warmly received me. The most interesting thing was when *Shaukat* sir saw me from class through window and came out as soon as he had witnessed me, still holding chalk in hand. He hugged me to his chest with such a warmth that I thought he must have heard about the news of my death and saw me alive.

“Strange to see you”, he said in hurry, as if, he feared the principal might not criticize him for leaving the class vacant. “How are you?”

“I am fine sir”, I simply replied. “What about you sir”, I hurriedly asked after remembering it.

“I am so happy to see you”, he said instead of replying my question.

*Shaukat* sir had changed a lot. Probablely, he now got on with his duty without fear, that’s why his hair were unruffled and he was no more disturbed by the hardships of the way. His forehead was also clear from the frequent puzzled frowns, which revealed he was hopeful about future. His face revealed a clear picture about it, which it didn’t expose it during unrest. It gave me the entire picture of the things about him. The painful thing for me was when he unexpectedly asked about *Daral*—the thing that the Principal was cautiously coming to was directly asked by *Shaukat* sir on the flash of the moment. As such, with the coming of the sad account of *Daral* under discussion, we felt hurt and aggrieved. There was a dead silence, which I broke by getting permission from the principal.

“I am getting late sir, as I am going to Matta and then I would come back home again”, I asked.

“You are welcome to the school anytime”, the principal said. “I will be pleased to be of any service to you”, he asked.

I wanted to request him to give me the desk which I and *Daral* used to sit on it, but I couldn't muster courage and left the school with many thanks for the hospitality and good behavior of the principal with me. Soon, I was out at the road and found a vehicle for Matta. I reached there little more than half an hour later and found myself standing at the door of my beloved home. As I rang the doorbell with my trembling finger, *Adnan* came out. "Hi *Uzman*, I was waiting for you." He warmly received me like ever.

Entering the door, my heart began to thump fast, as if, something had come in its way to stop it from beating. It happened to me each time I entered the home. There seemed my whole life depended on this special occasion from door to the room of *Khanji*, with my eyes roamed around the home for *Kashmala*. When she dared to look at me from a corner, I felt a strange current that ebbed the strength from my body. Her eyes were like bullets to pierce through my heart, as they shone to end in the large sea deep eyes of *Daral*.

*Khanji* hugged me to his chest and began to weep. Most probably, he found a new life in seeing me, because I was like *Daral* to him. He saw the reflection of *Daral* in my face. That's why he frequently asked about me. And *Adnan* called me to come to him.

When I looked around, I saw *Daral* stared at me from all sides. Uncle had collected all his pictures and had framed and set them on the walls of his room. He began to point out to the background of each and every picture with reference to the classes during which these were taken. Tears began to stream down my eyes on each and every description of this beautiful face, with his eyes deeper than the oceans and looking at me absorbing all the seas of the world, except that the waves from it crashed upon the shores of the deep green eyes of *Kashmala*.

"He was not from this world, indeed. He was a mismatch for this cruel world. He was from a fairyland. He was a character from the fairy tales. In fact, the loveable character was a peace of each and every heart, but himself not in peace for a single moment in this cruel world. I wanted to cry out my heart. "How it can be possible that I have come to the home of my friend and he is not present."

*Adnan* had grown beard and there was not an iota of youth in him. He seemed to have undergone a profound internal transformation. However, the thing that worried me the most was the condition of *Khanji*. He had lost interest in his appearance. He soon began to weep and *Adnan* told me that it has been for a long time that he resorts to weeping, whenever the thought of *Daral* comes to him.

"I find peace in seeing you my son", uncle said. "Try to come here, whenever you find time", he added.

"I know you were an integral part of *Daral*", uncle said. "He loved you." He stopped to control his feelings. "In fact he loved two persons as far as I could recall, one was his mother and the other you", he explained. "He wanted to go with you on that last day of the school. He had told his mother about it. She had asked me, but I didn't give him permission, because of the situation, due to which he even didn't go to school", he began to weep again. "I am responsible for everything. I am responsible for his disappearance", he wept blood tears.

I was also about to cry, as I thought *Daral* had got fed- up of me after my last encounter with him, but I was wrong. I didn't look into his feelings, but wanted from him an equal response.

The worse thing was that uncle thought himself responsible for the disappearance of *Daral*. "It was all because of me, I was strict with that fragile flower. I didn't understand him", he frequently reminded about it.

"What you did was for his good", I tried to explain. "You wanted to make him a responsible person. You don't worry *Khanji*, it was not your fault", I tried to console him. Nevertheless, uncle would not be satisfied. He said that he didn't allow him to make his way as he desired.

"If I had sent him out of here, he would not have punished us like this."

"What you did was for the benefit of the entire family", I tried my best to make him forget about these things. For that purpose, I spent the rest of the day with them, till evening. Now, it was late and bade permission heartbroken. *Khanji* asked me again and again, whether I would regularly come to him. I assured he would find me at his disposal, whenever I am needed. Reluctantly, I got back and reached home at night. Tired I went to bed, like ever carrying with me the burden of the day, the next day and the coming days.

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## Normalcy in losses

Whether it was victory or defeat, the days will haunt me throughout my life. Neither I could celebrate my narrow escape from death, nor would I be able to forget about the losses we suffered during our long journey through terror.

Perhaps, the injuries were deep; even more than the wounds, as the years' long sufferings during which the blood carnage continued to take its toll with impunity had a high price tag. What it exposed were only unexpected deaths and losses. The blood carnages, the bomb blasts, the murderous dins, the first groans, the first cries, the shrieks, the black nauseating smoke of burning human flesh. That's why the more I try to forget about the past, the more it reminds me of the things we lost, with the phantoms of the falling bodies are still afresh in my mind. They arouse in me the feelings of loss for my near and dear, who were once an integral part of the living planet, but left us behind in the transition of life to underline the incomplete course of the worldly things.

How long it took us to reach the dark, gloomy and unjustifiable time; but my trials mostly began with my friend *Daral* in the second half of the year 2007 and ended in turning my peaceful existence beyond imagination. I don't know he is dead or alive, but I would ever remember him in my private thoughts, being my only best friend and the brother of my beloved *Kashmala*. Therefore, I still sleep with anxiety and fear and awake with depression. Perhaps, my depression has got the form of an infectious disease.

The next day, *Fa'aris* called me on phone. "Where are you", he asked me in an elated mood.

"At home", I replied.

"Are you free", he asked?

"Right now there is nothing special for me", I responded.

"Come here", he asked.

"Is everything ok?"

"Yes, we have got good news. We are waiting for you."

*Fa'aris* used to go to the Travelling Agency of his brother *Faran*. His business was flourishing by heaps and bounds. He soon earned goodwill for the business around in the area.

When I reached there, I saw in the corner was sitting the handsome *Shahram*. On seeing me, he stood up from his chair to greet me with a warm welcome. My eyes filled with tears, when I saw his bright eyes. Ofcourse, it were the tears of joy over the time tested friend of *Fa'aris* recovered from the effects of drug addiction and had come to normal life. The main role played in this context was the father of *Fa'aris*. When he came to know about the tragedy, he called them both and held detail meetings with them, untill *Shahram* had to yield in.

*Shahram* regularly visited the Agency. This way he was away from the ill effects of society and was swift in learning the crafts of the business. His parents felt relieved when they found that he was with *Fa'aris*.

We were now a whole part of the society of *Fa'aris*. We all collected around him. He was an *epitome* of class and hospitality, nobility of nature, elegance and simplicity, gentleness, hope, love, persistence spiritual strength, compassion, hard work and dedication. He never dropped the mannerism, even in the worst circumstances, followed by the killing of his brother in the bumb blast. Our intimacy, our love and respect for each other was not limited by our shifting back to our area. Our feelings were the same.

This way life was coming back to normalcy. The worrying thing was the target killing, however. The VDCs were the main target, which continued to pour salt on the unhealed wounds of the people and reminded them of their tribulations.

To come to the point, *Fa'aris* wanted to give me the happy news of *Shahram's* engagement. He looked to him and smiled. Perhaps, he recalled the day he quarreled with him over the topic. I participated in his happiness, but I could see tears behind his smile. Like me to hide *Daral* behind my smile, this monster hid *Faran* behind his smile. Nevertheless, we never tried to bring them to the front. They were the part of our backgrounds now, whom we would ever mourn in private thoughts. On the other hand, he was lucky. He had seen *Faran* buried in front of his eyes. He knew about his grave, where he used to retire and poured out the heat of his heart. But for me *Daral* is nameless, neither dead nor alive. He has no grave or place of existence, where I could visit, at least, to pray for his happiness or eternal peace of his soul.

Ofcourse, we can pray anywhere and for anyone or anything, but if we don't know the whereabouts of that person, we are simply confused. Hence, I am simply confused. I don't know where *Daral* is. 'Whether he is alive or dead. Where can I find him? I would go to the far-off end of the world for him, but where should I begin my search from, I don't know...'

Indeed, we should not expect too much from others, we should not depend too much on others, we should not love too much with others. Because what we say, what we do, it follows us throughout our lives. Whereas, the time changes like weather. Hence, there must be a middle way to be adapted between the two extremes. We have to be careful; we must not indulge ourselves too much with others. We must show wisdom in imparting a thing to make one understand about it, like a medicine. I had learnt much from life, but it was very late.

*Daral* had flown away like a gust of wind that had no direction, but piercing through our hearts. "What name I should give him—dead or alive, I don't know?" Someday I would see him. I am sure, even if it be in the hereafter, but I will wait for him, because he had promised me that he would never ever desert me, and I will keep this promise alive throughout my existence. I would not forget him, because he is alive in my heart. One day, I would see him, I am sure. I would tell him, how I looked for him, how I remembered him, how I wept for him.

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