

The phone call

24th July 2006, Islamabad

8:30 PM

It came to me on the second ring of the telephone. I was about to take a bite of reheated Hawaiian pizza when it hit me, and I knew. My father had died. Maybe it was the smell of diced pineapple and melted mozzarella cheese wafting through my nostrils. Maybe it was the moonlight pouring in through the window, bathing everything in a pale, lifeless glow. Whatever it was, one thing was certain. As soon as I bit into the juicy, hot pineapple and chicken chunks, I tasted death on my lips.

Time stood still. The rain drooled from the eaves and trickled down into the plastic buckets and pots we had placed to catch the rivulets streaming down the wall. I was one with the rain-soaked walls. Grief washed over me. The despair made me moan in a voice I hadn't used for many years. I felt enveloped in the sweaty embrace of melancholy. I felt suffocated in a cone of sadness that drowned out the chirping of the crickets outside the window. The deathly silence was broken only by the ringing of the phone. I knew it with a certainty as cold and damp as January fog.

Boots was in mid-sentence, telling me about his latest lady crush and the red veins in her pink skin that ebbed and flowed whenever she spoke. Being somewhat of a self-professed modern-day poet when it came to describing the female anatomy, Boots had likened the vision to the beauty of the Punjab *'nehri nizam.'*

He stopped talking when the phone rang and he peered into the darkness, peering towards the sound that came from underneath piles of dirty laundry, forgotten DVDs, and layers of dust.

‘That thing works?’

I shrugged. I felt dread’s icy fingers creep over my heart.

‘Who has the number? Who calls at this hour?’

I could have told him, but I said nothing. The phantom limb ached for what was once there. I bit my lip.

I knew from the moment the phone rang.

I swear.

I knew something had gone horribly wrong. It was unmistakable.

The banshee wail of the phone cut through the still, humid air that covered the city like a blanket.

Suffocating.

It was the monsoon season. When it wasn’t pouring, the air felt damp and heavy. It reeked of rotting fruit, sweat, and hopelessness. Walking outside felt like wading through neck-deep water in heavy winter clothes. It made you want to stand on tiptoes with your mouth skyward, gasping for air. During the day, I could feel the steam rising from the soil and the trees. The air smelled of bird poop and dirty socks.

My mind wandered back to the attic. I hurriedly brushed the thought away.

The shrill sound of the phone bounced off the fly-stained walls of my tiny room. Piercing the calmness of the night. Gathering speed and intensity. Like nails being scratched on a blackboard. Like the shot fired thirteen years ago that changed my life.

I cringed. Paralyzed, as memories slid into the light. Gnawing at the carefully pieced-together bedrock of my persona.

‘Bloody hell, ok!’ Grumbled Boots, stuffing a whole slice in his mouth as he got up.

‘No, wait,’ I blurted.

‘What?’

‘I’ll get it.’

‘Fine.’ Boots eased himself back on the edge of the mattress and picked up another slice.

I looked over my shoulder at my mobile, which stared back at me, as if to say, hey don’t look at me. *I know better than to come between a man and his Hawaiian pizza.* The phone rang again and again. I put down the pizza slice. After licking off the orange flavoring of *Lays masala chips*, I picked up the receiver on the fifth ring.

‘Hello?’ I asked, surprised at the tremor of a ten-year-old in my voice. There was a garbled sound at the other end, and then static as the line went dead.

‘Hello?’ I tried again.

I put the receiver down and walked to my bed. In those five seconds, nothing had happened. And yet everything had changed. Something was wrong. I could sense it in my bones. I checked my mobile to see if it was working. My home screen showed all three bars of signal.

‘What happened?’

‘Nothing, the call dropped.’

‘You, ok? You seem like you’ve seen a ghost.’

My head snapped up at Boot’s choice of words. Ghost.

A boy had died.

Like a relentless mosquito that refuses to go away no matter how many times you swat at it. The memory had never left me. I had felt its warm, stale breath on my neck all these years.

‘What?’

‘It’s nothing,’ I said.

‘Bata de jigger, better in than out. Something is bothering you.’

He was right. ‘It’s hard to explain,’ I began.

‘Try.’ he said.

‘Well?’

‘There was this man,’ I began.

The phone rang again. This time I picked it up on the second

ring.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello, Bunny *ji*,’ even over the phone, I could sense the worry in my mother’s voice. My heart sank.

‘*Ji Ammi*, are you ok?’ I asked, my voice sounding garbled. The lump in my throat made it hard for me to swallow.

‘How are you, *meri jaan*?’ She asked. ‘I am perfectly fine.’

There was a pause. I could feel Ammi collecting her thoughts.

‘Bunny *ji*,’ she continued. She addressed me the same way she always had since the first day I had been placed in her arms at four in the morning. My wails rising over the call for Fajr prayers. Forever her Bunny *ji*.

‘Bunny *ji*, your Abu has had an accident,’ she said as I sank to the floor. ‘Please don’t worry,’ she continued, her voice aching with the love I could feel reaching out to take me in her arms.

‘I sent Sakhi Marjan to pick you up. He should be reaching you. Can you please go downstairs and see if he is there?’

I nodded, too scared to speak.

‘Bunny *ji*, are you listening, baby?’ she asked.

‘*Ji Ammi* how is... how...’ Even now, thirteen years later, I could not finish that sentence. I still did not have the courage to give voice to the thoughts swirling inside my head. Ever since that night. Circling the drain but never going away. In my mind, if the words remained lodged inside, pressed against the roof of my mouth, nothing had happened.

‘Oh, don’t worry, Bunny *ji*,’ she said cheerfully. ‘He’s perfectly fine, ok, I have to go now, baby. Please make sure Sakhi Marjan has picked up Abu’s night clothes and slippers, and just come with him, ok?’

‘*Ji Ammi*, I’ll be there.’

‘I love you, *meri jaan*.’

The last time she had addressed me like that had been when I was seven. I had scraped my knee on the concrete, trying to jump over a hedge on my BMX bicycle.

I choked back a sob and nodded as I hung up.



‘Bunny, are you ok, man?’ Boots was by my side. I looked at the lines on my hand. They seemed to throb like the flow of a river.

I recalled another night. When my father had disappeared into the marshland of another river.

‘Everything ok?’

I looked up. ‘My father has been in an accident.’

‘Oh my God, is he ok?’

‘I think so. I don’t know.’

‘What’re you going to do?’

‘There was a man,’ I said, my thoughts turning back to that night. ‘This notorious Sindhi bandit, who had been killing and rampaging, playing a game of cat-and-mouse against the state for over a decade.’

Boots stood back and let me continue. He understood I needed to get it off my chest. I told him about the Anti-Dacoit Operation the Army had waged against the Sindhi dacoits.

‘What could a raggedy group of dacoits do against the Army?’ asked Boots as he warmed up to the tale. I looked at my watch. I had time. It would take Sakhi Marjan at least an hour to get here.

I told him about the *kacha*, the inaccessible tract of swamp land and heavily forested area that ran parallel to the River Indus. For years, it had been the personal kingdom of Khalqu Chachar and his band of mercenaries and guns for hire. It was his state within the state where nobody could catch him.

‘And it was your dad’s job to go after him in the *kacha*?’

I nodded.

‘Were you scared for him?’

I nodded.

Suddenly, sitting in that hot room, it all came back to me. I remembered the tales and legends all the kids at Pano Aqil Army Cantonment had heard about the cunning and elusive dacoit. Our

Sindhi class fellows could not hide the pride and joy they felt when talking about this modern-day Robin Hood. Even though I didn't understand most of the words, I could taste the insult and hate in their voices. They would curl their lips and bare their teeth in a snarl.

Khaleel-ur-Rehman, my fiercest rival for the position of class Prefect, was a local. He had whispered during class that Khalqu enjoyed shooting the ears off his captives through his deadly *AK47* and liked making a necklace of the ears and tongues of the soldiers who dared to come after him. I had scoffed and tried to walk away. But he had persisted. During recess, he pointed out the school guard. He was an old soldier who got the job after retirement.

What about him? I had asked irritably.

Watch closely, Khaleel had whispered. He had once been on a patrol that had been ambushed and taken prisoner by Khalqu.

You're lying, I had mumbled, not even convincing myself. I felt my feet turn to stone. My eyes had bulged out of their sockets. I wanted to run away then, fearing something bad was coming.

But I couldn't.

Khaleel wouldn't let me live it down. I knew he secretly hated me for being selected as the class monitor. I had heard him talking with his other Sindhi friends. It didn't help that our class teacher, Mrs. Afzal, was my mother's best friend at the Army Ladies Club. My ten-year-old brain told me this could all be a ploy hatched by Khaleel to scare me. Ever since I told him that my father was being posted in Sukkur City and would be hunting for Khalqu Chachar, Khaleel had been telling me stories about the dacoit every chance he got. At first, they had been fun and interesting. But now, as I continued to stare at the back of the old guard, I wasn't so sure.

And then the guard turned his head. He had one ear missing. The air went out of me. I wanted to run away and not let Khaleel see the fear in my eyes. I couldn't. Suddenly, my legs had a mind of their own. My mind shrieked, but my body refused to obey.

Without facing him, I felt the smile in Khaleel's voice. He told me that Khalqu had let the soldier keep one ear so that he could hear what the dacoit wanted to say. Khalqu wanted the one-eared soldier

to be a lesson to other Punjabis. Not to dare come into his domain.

And now, my father was doing just that. In my mind, my tennis-playing, movie-watching, pizza-loving father seemed a mismatch against the man known for kidnapping and killing people for money. Instinctively, I cupped my ears. They were big and pointy, just like my father's. Very hard to miss. Abu stood no chance of going into the jungle with those big ears. For someone who loved making ear necklaces, my father's extra-large ears would be hard to resist. It would be like dangling *BP Bubble bar* chewing gum in front of a kid. I could see no situation in which my father would come out of the *kacha* with both his ears intact.



I crawled on all fours towards the saggy embrace of the dusty, run-down couch Boots and I had picked up from the flea market. A million thoughts were clamoring inside the rapidly shrinking real estate of my mind. I absentmindedly traced out the cigarette burns and holes in the couch. I dug my nails inside the fabric, gouging out chunks of compressed foam and meshing them into pulp.

'Well, you seem to be taking it pretty well,' mused Boots from the window as he sprinkled ash from his cigarette on our neighbor's roses.

He was right.

I had seen enough movies to know that when you hear bad news, you have some sort of emotional breakdown. At the very least, I should have been more worried.

But once I had put the phone down and was alone with my thoughts, my mind decided to focus on other things. Like what to do with my Hawaiian pizza. Should I put it back in the fridge or eat it or leave it? Was I willing to eat re-reheated pizza even if it did come from *Tehzeeb*, bite for bite, the most loaded desi pizza this side of the Ravi?

My stomach grumbled in protest. I hadn't eaten anything since the afternoon when I had to skip lunch because of Rubina breathing down my neck. As I pondered over this dilemma, there was a part of me that stood to one side, shocked at my callousness and indifference.

I ignored him.

I knew him. We had grown up together. Not that I had ever given him any indication he was welcome. But he had stuck around. Refusing to go away. Poking his head into whatever decisions presented themselves over the years. He had been with me ever since I had been on my own. He was my 'what-if' version.

'I guess it hasn't sunk in yet,' I said, hoping Boots would buy it.

'Did you try to talk to your father about your fears?' He asked in a softer tone.

'Don't try your second-rate psychiatry bullshit on me.' I feigned indignation. He said nothing. I could only see his silhouette where he sat on the windowsill. The lower part of his face glowed red as he puffed on his cigarette.

'Did you?'

'I don't remember,' I lied.

'Well, anyway.' Boots got off the sill and rubbed his buttocks. 'You can at least call up your father and check if he's ok.'

'I can't,' I said with a sinking feeling.

'Why not?'

'We haven't spoken in seven years.'