

Chapter

1

This country's history is being forced to repeat itself, by hook or by crook. You can therefore see that another prime minister (yours truly in this case) is on his way to the gallows. This is our convoluted way of taking the country forward. However, I plan to go down fighting by securing the truth through this memoir.

So, let me first ease you into my version of the truth about this nation-wide strife by first getting my real introduction out of your way. I am Arsalan Mehboob, the so-called detestable foreign agent whose media trial you follow on T.V. every day, wishing to see him executed before sunrise. But that traitor being flogged by the channels barely exists in real life. To understand this Arsalan, you need to switch off your T.V. sets and first get accustomed to his more popular, earthy moniker. Arsalan *Guppy* (exaggerator) is my epithet bestowed fondly for the fantastical yarns I abundantly spin for the amusement of friends and family, just to make their drab, middle class lives a tad more interesting. *Guppy* is not at all suggestive of, God forbid, trickery; to the

contrary, it is a chant of endearment and captures the essence of my innocuousness. What's more, in my circle of friends, I am considered a safe bet in terms of repaying borrowed sums as well as keeping most sensitive secrets such as extramarital affairs which became a bit of a contagion in our conservative neighborhood after the advent of Instagram.

The innocence embedded in the very syllable of this by-name thus is my first line of defense against the grave charges of treachery labeled against me.

Now please don't get turned off by *Guppy* and dismiss me as a lightweight. Some words, you see, can betray higher, even converse meaning if so intended by the speaker. For instance, my father frequently called me bastard, which you please appreciate, is one of the most voluble examples of such words. He seemed to own me with the might of his ancestry whenever he admiringly called me bastard on account of my unbridled wit. (Come on, he was my father; I knew his dictionary). So, it goes with *Guppy*. While the sound of this word announces my innocence in no uncertain terms, its meaning seemingly belies my intellect till you start reading me; then you meet *Guppy* the storyteller, the fabulist. For those interested to learn more of the root of this nickname, please read the footnote.

A brief mention of my professional life is in order before I move on to the more noteworthy part of my story. As a professional banker I consider myself to have expired years ago, the cause of demise being prolonged exposure to monotony of the branch operations of a bank whose payroll I might still be on. With repetition being the only measure of productivity there, I kept floundering in my work in early years since being mechanically efficient was not my cup of tea. The prolific Xerox photocopier in the branch that belittled originality with beaming wickedness became my spiritual enemy # 1, and in

¹ It was Grandpa's fault. When I was 5, he started reading me *Sinbad Ke Karname* (The adventures of Sinbad) and when I started to grow out of his range he ensnared me with a new trick; he started narrating 'Nanhe Mian Arsalan Ke Karname' (The adventures of little master Arsalan) from his mind. In the stories, I could catch thieves, talk to fish, speak confidently in public, and occasionally fly. During my teens, he upgraded his narrative with 'saving the world' theme to keep him company. But by time, I had lost interest in his concoctions and was building a fertile imagination of my own.

my nightmares, I saw myself turning into one. Developing a sustained interest in drudgery on offer, I felt, could turn me into a sub-human. To avoid my motorized fate, I dodged work whenever possible and resultantly missed out on career breaks that landed one into the coveted manager's room where one could watch T.V. all day. Inevitably, the avoidance of work led to a sense of job insecurity, compelling me to acquire some survival skills from a languid officer who always got good increments despite sitting all day like a body awaiting burial. The skill-set I learnt from him primarily consisted of practicing sycophancy shamelessly, revering even the paraphernalia sanctified by the manager's touch. It worked wonders and my job at least became secure for years to come without the quality or quantity of work coming into the equation.

These career setbacks notwithstanding, at heart I managed to stay larger than life especially after office hours when my chest could heave like a swashbuckling pirate (a childhood aspiration) and my swagger on exiting the branch could still resemble that of Sir Vivian Richards coming out to bat. But above all, I managed to remain a man who never cut corners in love.

Now to the reasons for writing these memoirs: The violence plaguing my beloved country remains largely visceral and if there is one account that can throw a revelatory light upon this turmoil from its gestation, I believe it is mine. Chaos is not new to this country. We are good at inventing it both at domestic as well as at industrial scale. Besides, as a nation, we are getting better at hating one another all the time. This time around, it engendered behind closed doors during a game of good intentions being played at "Mount Olympus" of our country. And when one of the so-called divinities cheated, hell broke loose. Inevitably, that old, haggard fellow called the common man got rounded up yet again and was paraded as the mastermind of anarchy. His small life, brittle dreams, sweaty smell, and abundance were all held against him. Nobody heard him out, or looked through him when it was needed the most. Not a soul accepted him as an unfortunate bystander caught in the toxic swirl of events. They

refuted his stamp of patriotism that was his sun-burnt skin. After his arrest, torture, and confession, the 'national interest' is generally secured for another few months. Not this time though.

While I have commenced writing as there is a tomorrow, my fate still hangs in the balance. I am unsure if God would grant me enough time to complete these chronicles let alone smuggle them out of this dingy cell. In case this piece of truth does reach you, please pay attention and draw lessons of sanity from it. In case you don't feel safe with it, just bury it at a place where the posterity's fingertips could retrieve it later for rewriting the history books.

In its present bleeding state, my large city appears small-minded, making foes out of schoolchildren and gunmen out of neighbors. I am told of the red dust that takes over the city at evenings to deny people a chance to wish away the foreboding. The night wind grieves too like the squatting mother who waits in vain all night for her son by the open door.

And to think it all began because of an insulated relationship between a man and a woman who for long were quietly minding their own business, practicing love inside the precincts of their small apartment or once a while outside too, at their designated private places, like the Frere Hall where shadows from birds' flight came down on them like ghostly debris of the Raj.

This love of ours was not meant to break out into the open, go viral on TV and social media, and turn into a subject of hatred in the public mind. Private love blooms and flourishes in a habitat, a bordered space but withers, even becoming hazardous when it becomes public knowledge. The histories of this world will tell you that time and again. Thus, it must be prevented from becoming a public property and must remain your best kept secret.

Innocently inquisitive at the start, this love was a marvelous exploration of self and other. Competing fiercely with each other to separate the superior enthusiast amongst us, we tried to match madness for madness, sacrifice for sacrifice, thinking this was how love was engendered and cemented. Somewhere on the way,

we got tired of showing off. It was the end of reason.

Those days now look too distant to have occurred in real life.

It is fitting to begin this account from that fateful day when the Powerful surprised me by giving a buzz on my cell, offering in his overwhelming baritone voice to work exclusively for him. For someone like me who had never let worship come in the way of his prized indolent routine, it was natural not to be circumspect, notwithstanding the stature of the prospective employer.

Zeus rang on my Samsung android at a time I was jostling through the cheap Marriot Road perfume lane, utilizing the office lunch-break to purchase a birthday gift for Maya, my love for ten years. At the end of the alley, a shopkeeper sporting a goatee was purveying scents in odd shaped bottles. Seeing my interest in his merchandise, the skinny shopkeeper added a tantalizing lure to his sales pitch.

“Come Sir, unlock the dizzying aromas of harems from past civilizations. Buy one for your girlfriend and get another for your wife at half the price.”

To be honest, the word harem has always titillated the depraved sections of my otherwise resolute anatomy, not for the bedecked wives on offer but for the reticent concubines- obliging women of endless possibilities.

“And how am I to assure myself they are indeed aromas from those times?” I asked with mocking curiosity.

“Vintage smells have a way of letting you know their history. The ones here will deliver to your mind the colorful glimpses of Constantinople and Samarkand when romance stimulated the Islamic world. Evoke those glorious cultures for a throwaway price of Rs 2,000/ for a 100 ml bottle.”

When he helped me smell one of his offerings by placing the small soaked piece of paper beneath my nostrils, I could not help feeling a bit giddy and yet the squalid lane obstinately remained in view.

“This one lacks teleporting power. Show me something, shall I say, more ‘whisky’.”

“Sure, here’s one of the best, sir. *Marjana*’ was the exclusive smell of the well-heeled in the times of the Ottoman Empire. Under its influence, a middle-class female stops seeing poverty; what’s more, with time she develops a queen’s strut. Make your wife feel like a royalty while sweeping the house.”

Shaking my head as if it amounted to something unethical, I returned the bottle and he pushed forward another.

“This erotic one is called *Hoshruba*’ and it endows vibrancy to soul. It is ideal for bickering couples who are past their prime. Its use by the wife before sleep results in spiritual merger with the spouse and they wake up remembering the same dream.” With a straight face, he added, “Before winking became an established norm within the walls of harems, this provocative scent was how concubines silently updated *Sultan* about the end of their restrictive days.”

I said I was unsure if such a subtle mode of communication for sharing the curious update was needed after ten years of close and reasonably vocal relationship.

“Buy one for yourself too, here.” He handled a small bottle strangely labeled *Zambeel*. “This one makes one feel tall and brawny. You’ll like it. It’s for a man of your body.”

The deadpan delivery of the man with the goatee indicated he did not see anything funny about his claims, or didn’t want to. I was sure if a Holy man came in his range, he would pitch his perfumes as soul purifiers that cleansed wives’ minds by putting a lock on their perverted desires of studying family-planning literature or having releases of their own. When I objected to the silly names of his perfumes, he replied by complaining that people like me threw money at perfumes named ‘Poison’ and ‘Opium’ without giving any moral thought but grumbled when sold guaranteed Harem products.

Still standing undecided about the *Hoshruba* (that smelt too lemony), I heard that ring on my mobile phone accompanied by the customary wiggle in the pocket. The screen was silent on the

caller, showing an unknown number.

“Hello. Who’s there?”

“Hello Mr. Arsalan Mehboob. Why are you wasting time on such counterfeit products? Step aside would you, for a minute,” a deep, husky voice croaked out of the speaker.

“Who is this, Muneer plumber?” I had been chasing the lazy soul for days to fix the flush leak. But though the voice had the same rasp, he was the last person to spend money returning my calls.

“Oh, Mr. Arsalan, please think big for a change. This is Zeus with capital Z, my dear, and need I say I have been watching you for a long time. Before I can dispense the reason for my call, may I implore you to get rid of the perfume you are holding so endearingly? I hate to reveal it is actually made from the confluence of rosewater and peacock secretions.”

My hand jerked so repugnantly that some of the urine or whatever flew off the open bottle and splashed the shopkeeper’s face. The royal stink of the Ottoman Empire was truly a blast from the past that momentarily revealed to me the glimpse of the festooned pot of Suleiman the Magnificent. Zeus or whoever seemed right since the escaped fluid had even betrayed a nauseating color while on its way out.

“Sorry *Bhaijan*.” After uttering the apology, I impulsively ran for my life. Looking back after reaching the relative safety of the alley’s corner, I saw the poor shopkeeper spitting inconsolably while at the same time mouthing profanities aimed, probably, at his supplier -the peacock.

After catching my breath, I briefed the voice on the phone about what had just transpired. He was pleased at my well-directed spraying of fluid, adding that the aftertaste of the so-called medieval discharge could cause chronic nausea, making the person suicide-prone.

“How the hell were you so sure it was not a perfume ‘Zeus my lord?’” sardonically I inquired from him after nearing my branch.

“This is what I do for a living, my friend, keeping tabs

on sinners and perverts, punishing them when I can't take it anymore. That shopkeeper is a 3rd - generation felon whose polygamous father died arguing that apes evolved from, guess what, humankind! By profession, he was a zookeeper and trust me, each of that vendor's nine siblings resemble one or another of the Zoo's caged variety. Rumor has it that his own wife eloped with a stallion half her age, clinging to her lover's back as it galloped into darkness. Now please don't ask me if they lived happily ever after."

After the chuckle, the acutely hoarse voice came rushing back. Apparently, this Greek god could do with some gargling.

"Now, I come to the point. Broadly speaking, if there's one thing I cannot stand, it is the human tendency to blame fate when matters go irretrievably wrong. My mission is to change this thinking by making people like you take some responsibility. Let me now explain the 'why you' part before we proceed further. As a kind deity filled with humanity, I care not only for the needy but also for the indolent. I think your saving grace is your passion to think and it must not be wasted. If you've not yet realized the momentousness of the occasion, please do; this is your moment of truth. From a washed-out existence, you are about to become someone prominent beyond belief. The deal is simple; you have to assume the mantle of his particle."

After stepping into my small apartment, I hurled myself upon the couch which immediately returned my self-esteem which I seldom carried to work. For many years I had been nurturing this fantasy of getting up in the morning, dressing up for office, letting Maya adjust the tie knot and kiss me goodbye, boarding the public bus, letting the office building pass by, and returning triumphantly to my apartment on a sputtering rickshaw within an hour.

"What's the big deal about it? Take a leave any day and fulfill this dream," Maya would suggest innocently.

“You don’t get it. I want this as my daily routine for the next fifteen years till retirement. It will give me ample time to freshen up and relax while at the same time keeping me technically in the category of office-going fraternity.”

“But that would render you futile. Without any source of income, you would lose this rented apartment and perhaps your wife too who certainly doesn’t fancy living on the soiled platforms of Cantt Railway station. Unwillingly you may have to arrange my lodging boarding with one of your colleagues who may take me as a second wife or something like that.”

“Is that your fantasy to become a ‘something like that’ of a friend of mine?” I would stare at her inquiringly.

Maya would keep nodding. And I would remember my old man who believed in the converse meanings of words. Though he was silent on the interpretation of nods, but I guess the ‘bastard’ logic could safely be applied here. (Come on, she is my wife and I know her dictionary of gestures).

Still buried in my immersive couch, I told Maya who had called me earlier in the day.

“My God, you, mean Zeus, the so-called god of ancient Greek mythology. Who gave Him your number? Didn’t you ask if He’s on Facebook or Twitter? Ok seriously, tell me, were you overwhelmed or scared?”

Turning philosophical, I said that what truly scared me was the overwhelming temptation of joining hands with the bank robbers in punching the hooded manager in case of a branch robbery.

It must be said that religion was no stranger in our house. In fact, there were two for a small apartment, for a family of two. Ten years ago, when we sat to discuss marriage on a public bench, it seemed like a zero sum again, a clear winner and loser should emerge on this front. We were both trying to impress with what was ingrained in our upbringing.

I took a haughtier stance by making my fingers snap and looking at my watch repeatedly while asking her how quickly she could revise her concepts and preconceived notions and

convert. Her understanding of the world, I enlightened her, was based on the culture of dance, item numbers and myths but my version of truth was super-neat extracted through meditation. Secret siestas at the office helped towards this end. To me, it was like delivering the killer punch at the very start. Though never greatly convinced of my own intellect, self-elevation was always on my 'to do' list (and more recently it went on top of the list after remembering my age by, rather oddly, staring at my stalled wall-clock last weekend. A pure case of serendipity I must say.

But she was having none of that. How could she leave something that was part of her family's DNA, she asked? To her, changing faith purely on marital grounds was insanity.

"Arsalan, please understand. The decision to change faith is not like switching jobs for the sake of higher rewards and kinder boss; it's about revolting against hard core beliefs drummed into your conscience by parents. So, please try to understand and accept me like I am."

It was a difficult conversation where neither party wanted to give an inch, leave alone a mile. I seemed to be well armed in terms of my beliefs but her generational DNA did not allow her to listen to a superior moral and lifestyle model. "Too bad," I thought. All her relatives, dead or alive, aunts and uncles, forefathers, their grandfathers, and their neighbors plus servants seemed to embody her and her arguments. I could almost see them all in her expressions. I nearly hollered that it simply couldn't be a minority's call. But then feeling the coolness of the evening, I offered an olive branch.

"Well, let's try to reach a settlement. You quietly try my 'way of life' in parallel for a fortnight without forgoing your own. Trust me, like a homeopathic medicine, my soothing principles have no side effects. In fact, they offer all the exhilarating stuff like dry fruits munching, unending habits, plenty of day dreaming, gossiping friends, unending family anecdotes and noble upbringing behavior patterns that would leave you tethered to bliss. If after a fortnight you sense a spring of contentment sprouting inside, and more importantly, have not been

struck by lightning or fallen victim to any other vengeful act of your countless deities, then you can make a permanent switch.”

I was always proud to celebrate our side of festivals with zeal, hugging every Tom, Dick, and Harry up to their first cousins all day long on Eid. I wanted her to enjoy all these privileges but nothing logical was sinking into her that evening. The time had come to be blunt. I told her a dead end was round the corner and thus we should end our relationship at once after one last supper fittingly at a restaurant with the dimmest lights and that I'd rather pay the fat bill than lose my beliefs. Then, she could vanish into the night in search of a handsome co-religionist while I would embark on a more arduous journey involving flirtation with celibacy. After 20 years we could sit again and exchange notes for deciding the future course of action.

After dinner however, things took a surprisingly pleasant turn, as we adopted a more pragmatic and problem-solving approach based on religious co-existence, keeping our respective gods intact.

This was many years ago. Now we lived together, declared as husband and wife not only by hard-nosed judge (who seemed one on deputation from an anti-terrorism court) but more, importantly, by each other. We even held our private celebrations in a quiet corner of a public park in the presence of luminaries of the skies. We took turns performing some of the cultural singing and dance moves which alerted some stray tramps and at least one potential kidnapper who wanted to know if we had won some kind of lottery and, if so, whether we are willing to be kidnapped in a gunny bag without resistance. Fuming inside, I told them it was street theater promoting cultural harmony and we were targeting the Arts Council as this play's final resting place. In the vital matter of the order of cultural rituals, obviously I did not budge an inch as mine were carried out first.

Reverting to the present, religion was once again at the center of our animated discussion.

“Listen, it's no joke. Zeus did call. In terms of voice, nothing out of this world, in fact at times he sounded exactly like a highly

respected defaulter of our branch. Not taking any chances, I gave him all the respect I could think of. In short, he wants to bestow me with a new individuality; he wants me to be the Boson.”

Higgs’ Boson, when discovered in 2012, was discussed in our house with the same thrill of possibilities as that experienced by two trapped minors seeing a shaft of light. We both were convinced that after this ultimate discovery, new science vistas would open and companies offering economy class time travel would mushroom soon. The name lent credence to the notion that discovery was as much religious as it was scientific.

“With due respect, aren’t we all kind of Bosons, I mean?”

“No Boson indicates something higher and exclusive. It exists because of its invisibility and is the only bona fide authority. This Zeus chap is probably seeing such magical qualities in me.”

Maya said I was getting carried away and must get down to Earth. Whoever had called me was, as far as she could make out, a friend trying to pull a fast one or a Jihadist looking to extract terror financing out of banker. She fumed at my naivety but finally agreed to call me Boson for a day.

I had been there before, seeing her opposition evaporate spectacularly in an instant, letting her intimacy resurface to remove space between us. Usually at such times, we made love in an unconventional place, like in front of the dressing table to make four out of us or behind the front door and once and only once, inside the wardrobe full of clothes. It was a suffocating kink and had felt like two perverted corpses in a mass grave scrambling for hours to position themselves properly.

And yet our relationship never had wholehearted dependence on lovemaking. Without much exaggeration, something unfathomable existed between us that kept us entwined even while physically apart. At first it surprised, even spooked us, this connection, that was not like-mindedness alone but something more. During a typical weekday, we seemed to commune with each other almost as if we were face to face, the experience giving us both a feeling of vicarious, double existence. This all had commenced even before our marriage, during the two-year period when we were

building on our chanced (and nerve-wracking) meeting at the desolated Hawks-bay hut where she lay dying in a pool of blood. What a morbid scene it was! The streak of blood coming out of the door had caught my attention while I waited for my college picnic group to arrive. She was silent and gone except for her eyes that kept blinking as if wanting to breathe.

I could have killed her then, by simply leaving the gory scene. Instead, I took the unlikely step of carrying her in my friend's car all the way to the hospital and soon after into my daily routine.

She couldn't thank me because I always stopped her, fearing it would create an unnecessary reference point, an undesirable pivot of mercy, placing an imbalance at the very root of our growing relationship. Whenever I felt she was attempting to express gratitude, I put my hand on her mouth. That was how our intuitive connection was discovered.