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**The Whispering Chinar**

The white mansion, reverentially separated from the village by a high wall, stood out in stark contrast to the brown mud houses of Charbagh. Barbed wires, placed on top of the wall, further dissuaded overly enthusiastic intruders. The main gate opened on to a meticulously manicured lawn that was split by a narrow brick path with rose blooms lining its sides. The lush green turf stretched out solemnly to the stairs of a hospitable veranda that ran along the entire facade. The four imposing pillars that supported the veranda safeguarded the privilege and grandeur of the Khan and his family.

An imposing chinar spread its commanding arms over the lawn. Legend had it that it was planted by a saint known to the grandfather of Khan Sahib, who had told him that the family would prosper as long as the tree lived. Over the years, the glory of the mansion had become entwined with that of the tree, sheltering its inhabitants from the sweltering

heat and staying a silent witness to the many stories that unfolded under its span. It was said that the chinar whispered to people who cared to listen. Older family members had firmly believed that its rustling leaves conveyed messages from nature. But the generation that could decipher its whisperings had faded away and the new one attributed the rustling only to the breeze. Thus, when one of the bullets fired by the eldest son of Khan Sahib in order to prompt the maulana to announce Eid al-Fitr had hit one of its branches, it wasn't considered sacrilege.

A large black door in the veranda led to a loft whose height was deliberately set at a level to impress. This large hall was utilized for entertaining men of consequence and served as a rendezvous for the family as well. To reinforce nobility, the walls were decorated with pictures of Khan Sahib's ancestors with their British sahibs.

With the world steadily becoming a busier place, Eid provided the only opportunity for the family to get together. The abundant progeny of Khan Sahib- three sons and six daughters- had grown into an inexhaustible army of grandchildren. The diversity in their individual personalities was united in only one thing: preserving their privilege. And that required, as a matter of right, the presence of at least four maidservants at mealtimes to ensure satiated appetites. But there were other cravings too, that hadn't ebbed away. Carrying a genetically embedded desire for land, each of Khan Sahib's sons looked up to his father with expectant eyes. Khan Sahib, over the large span of his life, had inherited as well as accumulated vast landholdings in his personal name. With his health on the wane due to a recent bout of heart issues, his days were likely numbered. It may be added that the division of land, among the sons, was already determined but there were some portions that were still up for grabs. Given his current infirmities, Khan Sahib had handed over

the day-to-day running of land affairs to Fahad Khan, which meant equitable distribution of the land produce among the brothers. He took a cut for shouldering this responsibility.

Depending on the weather, the family got together for meals either under the chinar or in the hall. Khan Sahib always sat at the head of the table or rather, the long line of tables that stretched out in front of him. A large number of charpoyas would be arranged on both sides. His children would sit nearer to him, followed by the grandchildren. Seating was always age related: elders sat closer to Khan Sahib.

It was a typical patriarchal set-up. The importance given to men was evident in the seating arrangement as well as the servings of the choicest portions of food. Khan's children had yielded to this well-established order but his granddaughters would question their mothers about the preference given to their brothers. Such concerns would often be hushed up and the matter chalked up to the universal order of things as desired by Allah.

That year, Eid al-Fitr was celebrated in Khan Sahib's village during the balmy month of September. The announcement was made at the mosque adjacent to the house. The Pukhtoon tradition of announcing a happy occasion, especially Eid, by firing a few rounds of bullets, was the sole privilege of Khan Sahib's eldest son. The sound of the bullets emanating from the mansion was enough for the maulana to announce Eid in tune with the holiday schedule of Khan's grandchildren. The intent justified the action: the children would get another day or two to gorge themselves, against sleeping on an empty stomach on a dull Ramadan day.

It was Eid, and brunch was being served under the chinar. Having made himself comfortable in his seat, Khan Sahib looked up and surveyed his progeny. From behind those thick-rimmed glasses, the hawklike eyes could discern the

seen and the unseen. As he surveyed the hopefuls, waiting for him to take the final bow, his eyes rested on his youngest child, Fahad Khan. This green-eyed boy with blonde hair and a matching moustache was the replica of his mother in form and attribute. Among his children, he strongly believed in Fahad Khan to bear his mantle.

Khan Sahib's own circumstances had been different. Being the only child of his parents and having been bestowed substantive landholdings in a hostile Pukhtoon environment, he had to fend for himself. Over the span of his lengthy career, he had created circumstances that ensured the safety and increase in his landholdings. But now, he had taken a back seat, providing advice to Fahad at his discretion. On his part, Fahad looked forward to completing the last one year of his bachelor's of law (LLB) degree before getting fully involved in the complexities of landed aristocracy.

Khan Sahib smiled wryly as he saw his progeny attack the food. With his own plate full, he assessed each person's personality through their eating habits. They had all filled their plates with greedy exuberance. It had been on one such occasion when he had identified Fahad as the right person for handling and fairly distributing the land produce. They all wanted to be fully satiated with their choice among the served dishes. And as always in a large gathering, the portion of the choicest meat dishes could not match the number. Khan Sahib visualized them as a bunch of hyenas snorting, gnawing and chewing. In the deafening ritual, the four maidservants were constantly kept busy as they ran between the tables and the kitchen, filling dishes, pouring water and bringing warm bread.

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The Eid holidays were numbered. Soon the mansion emptied

as the family members returned to their city dwellings. After Khan Sahib's wife's death a couple of years ago, the responsibility of running the affairs of the mansion had fallen on the strong shoulders of Lala. An old, faithful servant, he was considered a part of the family and referred to as Lala, elder brother, by the old and the young alike.

Lala had an emaciated face with skin wound around thinly like wrapping paper. His long nose seemed to be an afterthought, piercing the face and slicing it into two. He had an ugly columella dangling over his philtrum and was in the habit of rubbing his palm upwards against it with a loud snort, persistently trying to rectify the mistake of nature. People who knew him well could tell instantly from this gesture that he was either getting prepared to lie or make a false promise. And he made a lot of promises to everyone. He would always promise to take Khan Sahib's grandchildren on a ride to the lost village of Kiyara, which was now well under water after the construction of the dam, to show them the remains of the great palace that Khan Sahib's family once owned. Now under the ill-conceived dam, the grandeur of the remains was highly exaggerated to keep the children excited about the impending trip, which never came about. The children never asked him how they would be able to see the remains of the palace when it was under water. Fahad Khan would always smile at the oft-repeated story Lala narrated to his young nieces and nephews.

While his two elder brothers had settled in cities, Fahad had decided to embrace the rustic life. He abhorred seeing people come together in confined places for the fulfilment of vague personal ambitions. He called city dwellings mausoleums of the living dead. Fahad cherished the wide open spaces of the village and loved to take in the fragrances of his orchards. In the absence of his brothers, the attention he received from everyone in the village was addictive. In

the *hujras* next to the village houses where the men would gather, village elders, as a matter of respect, would insist that Fahad occupy the charpoy-head instead of the charpoy feet, despite his reluctant refusals. Elsewhere, he would be asked to mediate between dissenting parties. However, most of his time would be spent standing in for his father at weddings and burials. There would be times when he would have to attend two to three weddings and the same number of burial prayers in a single day. Given the frequency of these rituals and the solemn nature of the people at both, he would sometimes reconfirm from his confidantes if the occasion required congratulations or a prayer. Apart from these social occasions, there wasn't much entertainment for a young man. It was only in winters that Fahad would put together a team of servants and leave for shikar in the surroundings of Charbagh. In the restrictive life of the village, therefore, there was something of interest for him when he spotted Saad Bibi on a swing.

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The chinar not only guarded the mansion but also provided amusement to the household. On one of its branches was a swing that provided hours of pleasure to the Khan's grandchildren during their visits. Surprisingly, the branch supporting the swing had for years weathered the weight of these well-fed children. During the rest of the year, when Khan Sahib was away, the maids enjoyed the hilarity it provided. The merriment surrounding the swing made the chinar quiver with joy, but this went unnoticed. Believing that nobody was watching her at this time of the day, Saad Bibi had removed her veil to enjoy the swing. Within seconds, the tall girl had managed to take it to its full sweep. With her legs firmly perched on the wooden board, the

swing was entirely subservient to the command of her lithe body. On every trough, her auburn hair covered her face and flowed away from her as she reached a crest. She sliced the air like a scythe and found pleasure in the oscillation provided by the swing, its movement imitating life in so many ways. Fully immersed in her joy, she was oblivious to the fact that Khan Sahib had entered the house and was slowly walking towards the mansion. Fahad could not forget the horror on her face when she realized his presence. In her amazement, she fell awkwardly from the chinar and swiftly tried to hide behind it, making the episode even more hilarious. Khan Sahib could not help smiling and Fahad laughed out loud from his vantage point in the main hall.

Fahad's first interaction with Saad Bibi took place a couple of days after Eid. One of his nephews, Shuja, had decided to stay back for a few days. At dinner, there were three of them: him, his father and Shuja. Shuja was a few years younger than Fahad and enjoyed being pampered by the villagers. They were seated in the main hall, and Fahad was busy listening to Khan Sahib, as he advised him on some land issues. After dinner, Fahad asked for green tea, which was brought in by the same girl he had earlier seen fall from the swing. Lala had followed her to make sure everything went smoothly. She was modestly dressed and had her chador wrapped around her. With lowered eyes, she presented tea to all of them. When she was serving Shuja, Fahad saw the leer in his look. Fahad was not bereft of these feelings given his own age, but the blatant hormonal nudging of this thirteen-year-old rascal made him wonder what lay ahead. He was sure Lala had seen the look, since he asked him, 'Is your tea not sweet enough?' Shuja's leer transformed into an embarrassed grin. Unaware of the sensitivities of this class, Saad Bibi, while pouring tea into the cup meant for Fahad Khan, clumsily spilled some into the saucer. When

she served Fahad, he politely asked her to clean the saucer first. She obediently took both the cup and the saucer and innocently poured it back from the saucer into the cup. As she offered it to Fahad again, everyone burst out laughing. Even Khan Sahib's sombre face relaxed and he smiled. Saad Bibi's jaw dropped, and her large hazel eyes shortly rested on Fahad's face trying to find an answer. Finding none, she quickly left the room. Fahad carried her startled expression in his mind till he went to sleep.

Fahad's room was next to his father's. It was disconnected from the main hall, and one had to walk along a passageway to reach it. The next morning, when he entered the hall to ask for breakfast, he saw Saad Bibi in a combative mode. With her face flushed in anger, her thick eyebrows tightly knitted and the index finger of her right hand raised, she was clearly giving a piece of her mind to Shuja, who, on the other hand, was standing sheepishly, mumbling something.

'Saad Bibi, Shuja! What is going on here?'

'Nothing much, Khan,' Saad Bibi replied, covering her head with the chador that had fallen off her head during the altercation.

'This boy was trying to become a man by targeting me for practice.'

'No, no, uncle,' Shuja whimpered. 'She is like my sister. It is just a misunderstanding.'

'Shuja, before I beat the hell out of you, get out of this place as fast as you can,' snarled Fahad. 'You are going back to Lahore today.' Shuja darted out as fast as his blubber could take him.

The duty of sending Shuja to the city had to be carried out by none other than Lala, who was asked to escort him to the bus stop. The only saving grace for Shuja was the protocol accorded to him in the form of his bag being carried by Lala. Fahad saw him depart from his vantage point in the



main hall.

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In his youth, Lala always carried a revolver. The leather holster carrying his gun would always be firmly attached to the bandolier that lay across his chest. The tips of the silver bullets shone like armour in the leather contraption, augmenting his formidable presence. He wore a constant smirk, as if only he knew the story of how the world had been brought into existence. To a certain extent he was right. At least he had deciphered what every man had ever wanted. In his youth, all the young girls in service at Khan Sahib's house were personally inspected by him before being given a fitness certificate. His inspection was considered paramount. He loved Khan Sahib and ensured that all the people working at the mansion were worthy of this position. After all, it was Khan who had saved him from his cousins when he had killed two of them in cold blood over a petty land dispute at the tender age of fifteen. He had run away from the land of the slanting mountains to Charbagh, seeking protection. Various *jirgas* were called for his retrieval, but at these meetings, Khan had always politely refused to surrender him. The house was a sanctuary for men and women of the nearby mountain villages; the women running away from abusive husbands and the men from vendettas. Khan had foresight: he could use Lala to his advantage in the future. That he did, and over the years, Lala became his confidante and consiglieri.

Among other qualities, Lala had an exceptional gift for determining the epicentre of tremors arising from lovemaking. He could smell the specific zone of wickedness and easily identify the parties involved. In and around the mansion, there were ample recesses available for wicked intentions to materialize. However, for the inhabitants of

the mansion and those associated with it, the vast catalogue of vice remained restricted to fulfilment of carnal pleasures. Lala would initiate his snooping ritual by raising his snout, smelling the air, and rubbing his columella with the palm of his hand before heading in the right direction. He would find the most inconvenient hours of the day to carry out his inspection. His acute sense of hearing and smell led him to the exact spot of the muffled sounds of lovemaking. His duty was to let Khan know about it and then jointly decide the course of action. It was one of these clandestine operations that had led to one of the maids being married off to Khushrang, the imam of Khan Sahib's mosque. Another successful operation had led to a forced betrothal with Khan Sahib's driver; yet another maid was married off to a maulana in a nearby village. And so, the sanctity of Khan Sahib's house had been dutifully preserved. Given the exemplary physical beauty of these mountain dwellers, there was little Khan Sahib could do to limit the hormonal enthusiasm of his sons.

With a year to go for his LLB, Fahad kept travelling between Peshawar and Charbagh. Every time he was in the village, Saad Bibi would serve him. As expected, they started conversing about small things. It was Saad Bibi who served breakfast to Khan Sahib and Fahad Khan in the main hall. Over the course of their interaction, Fahad found that Saad Bibi had a highly developed intuitive sense.

One day, while serving him breakfast, she asked, 'Why, Khan, you seem to be worried?'

'But I haven't said a word,' said Fahad, surprised by her question.

'You do not have to say something to show you are worried,' she said, her hazel eyes resting on his face for a split second before being quickly drawn away.

'How did you guess?' he asked as he looked up at her in surprise. He was still at an age when surprises came easily.

Saad Bibi's ruddy complexion exuding freshness was typical of someone in their early twenties. Fahad noted the placidity of her expression that still managed to convey concern.

'Khan, I might not have read books, but I can read people well.'

Fahad was intrigued by this short conversation; he wanted to know more about her. Until then, he had attributed all forms of intuitive and nonintuitive sense to education only. But now there was something more to be discovered. And so, their conversations started getting longer, making Lala worried. For years he had successfully warded off attacks on the sanctity of Khan Sahib's house against the ever-present threat of a scandal. In this case, although he could certify that Fahad's hormones were in better control as compared to those of his two elder brothers, the fact that he was spending a lot of time with Saad Bibi was worrying him. What perturbed him most was that despite his best efforts during his sniffing ritual, he could not detect any tremors, making the situation even more complicated.

Fahad started visiting the village more frequently. Whenever he would meet Saad Bibi during these short trips, she would reiterate, 'But I am a poor girl, Khan.' Her sad face and downcast eyes would make her seem so innocent. 'And I am not even educated.'

'But you have passed eight classes, haven't you? I will teach you, Saad Bibi. I will teach you English, and we will live here in the village. We do not need to go anywhere.'

'Why do you want to marry me, Khan?'

'Would you stop calling me Khan?' Fahad would say, with mild irritation.

'No, I must,' she would respond with a firm tone. 'You are a Khan, aren't you?'

'Please do not talk about being together,' she would add. 'I will serve you for the rest of my life.'

‘But I will make it work.’ Fahad’s youthful determination would make him promise things he genuinely believed could work. He contemplated discussing the matter with his father and elder brothers. One thing was for sure: he wouldn’t back down. He rubbished class differences, believing them to be a facade created to distance people from one another. He strictly believed that all human beings were created equal and should be allowed to live the way they wanted.

‘Why do you want to torture me, Khan? I have gone through hard times,’ she would say, her agony visible in her wistful eyes. ‘I wanted to study but my brother pulled me out from school. He wanted to marry me off to a drug addict for a few thousand rupees. And like so many others before me, I sought the refuge of Khan Sahib’s house. They cannot touch me here.’ In her anxious moments, Saad Bibi’s thick eyebrows would knit together, and she would stare into nothingness.

In Tehsil Swabi of District Marden, only the privileged had telephone connections. Nevertheless, it was an outdated system: all calls had to be made through the operator stationed in the village. The number allocated to Khan Sahib’s house was a one-digit number: One. The operator knew everyone in the village and could readily distinguish between voices. His favourite pastime was listening in to calls and picking up juicy gossip. And so, he would frequently listen in on Fahad’s calls to Saad Bibi. It was inevitable that he told Lala about it in all its details. ‘The plot has reached dangerous proportions,’ he would tell Lala. ‘The two lovebirds are planning to get married, Lala. Do you honestly believe it is befitting to the honour of Khan Sahib’s house?’

Lala was faced with a difficult situation. He had never faced a circumstance in which a young man had overcome his physical urge to enter a long-term relationship. The absence of furtive sounds and the long telephone calls were

making him wary. The situation required much more tact.

A year passed and Fahad completed his LLB degree from Peshawar University. Now he was free to stay in the village. Fahad and Saad Bibi became inseparable. Their amorous escapades could not go unnoticed, and tongues started wagging. But Fahad was an honourable man, who genuinely loved Saad Bibi.

He would hold her close to his bosom and say, 'We will always be together, Saad Bibi.' But she would loosen his grip on her, look into his eyes and say nothing.

'Say something, Saad Bibi.'

'Don't you love me?' he would ask her. But she would just embrace him tightly without saying a word.

Little did Fahad know that he was under a microscope and each of his movements was being registered and documented not only by the chinar but by others as well. One day, Khan Sahib ordered breakfast to be served under the chinar and asked Lala to call Fahad to join him. There was a light breeze, and the whistling leaves of the chinar were desperately trying to convey something.

At his age and position, Khan Sahib was expected to be phlegmatic. His neatly trimmed beard and clean upper lip gave him the reverence required for taking decisions for the village folk. He ensured his head was covered with the customary white cap worn by the Pukhtoos of his district, providing him further credibility in deciding the fate of his people. And Khan Sahib's sharp eyes, behind those thick-rimmed glasses, were known to pierce people with their gaze. Nature had been abundantly bountiful to him. His eyelids doubled over his eye, making them formidable and mysterious. The village folk had a general consensus: they believed he could mesmerize anyone with the intensity of his gaze. In many a local council, his overall appearance combined with his stare and his gruff voice seemed to resolve the most contentious issues.

‘But why do you want me to go to Lahore?’ Fahad was surprised at his father’s insistence. Their shared aim had always been for him to look after the lands. Even now, he was largely running the affairs, taking advice from his father when required. So, he was surprised when his father asked him to go to Lahore to meet an old lawyer friend for career advice.

‘You are a capable person, Fahad.’ Khan Sahib looked at him admiringly.

‘There is no harm in finding out what you can do with that law degree.’

‘But I don’t want to practise,’ Fahad sounded desperate. ‘Looking after the land is a full-time job.’

‘Take a holiday, Fahad. Go spend some time with your brothers and their children.’ Khan Sahib was not leaving any room for negotiation.

Fahad desperately tried to wriggle out, but Khan Sahib’s will prevailed.

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The telephone lines were down for many days now. The telephone department was pretty mad with the public works department for cutting the telephone lines- albeit inadvertently- during some construction project in the vicinity. Saad Bibi kept hovering in and around the main hall in anticipation of a telephone call, which never came. She was dusting the main hall when Nasreen, another maid from the slanting mountains, poked her in her ribs. ‘You never told us that you were getting married and leaving.’ This short, statured girl had been working there for some time. Like Saad Bibi, she also kept to herself and did not bother much with what happened in her surroundings. She was the only one Saad Bibi could speak to with her guard

down. Nasreen knew about Saad Bibi's relevance to Fahad but had kept her mouth shut, and that is what Saad Bibi admired. 'Saad Bibi, your brother and your future husband are in the mosque; your nikah is about to be performed.'

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It was unprecedented! How could a woman, albeit a virgin, enter the mosque? The men sitting in a semicircle near the *mehrab* were shocked to see Saad Bibi enter the main hall of the mosque. Her brother tried to get up but was instantly restrained by Lala. Javed, the drug addict, managed some incomprehensible word from behind the drooping moustache covering his ugly mouth. His kohl-lined eyes could still not fully mask the dullness brought about by regular drug use.

'Why did you come to the mosque?' Maulana Khushrang was shocked to see such a beautiful woman enter the mosque. 'This is a clean place, and we do not know what condition you are in.'

'Am I the only unclean one here?'

'Child, you should go back to the house,' said Lala calmly.

'Go back to the house,' growled her brother. It was clear that he could not be restrained for long.

'While my destiny is being decided by you?' cried out Saad Bibi, her frown admirably enhancing her beauty.

'These decisions can only be taken by a guardian, in this case your brother,' Khushrang said, looking at her brother for endorsement.

'Yes, it is so. There is no running away from fate,' her brother added. 'The last time you duped our father and ran away. We cannot let you dishonour us again.'

'So, you are all gathered here to honour me by giving me away to a drug addict? How honourable, brother.'

‘Child, we are doing what is best for you,’ Lala said, once again trying to defuse the situation.

‘Let me decide my destiny. If this is the only choice that you have for me, then I have a better one available.’

And so, with rheumy eyes, Saad Bibi left the mosque to the relief of all the pious men. The sanctimonious religious duty disrupted by a profane girl was carried out without any further disruption.

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Nasreen was the first to see it. It had barely been an hour since she had given Saad Bibi the news. How could it all happen so quickly and without any warning? Running away from marriage and finding protection at Khan Sahib’s house did indicate a powerful sentiment but could not be termed fanatical. How could staring out into nothingness be an indication of things to come? How could an absolutely rational person deal with circumstances in such a way?

Perhaps it was her destiny, a sum total of her circumstances. She had desperately tried to break out of it but had failed. Even the rising mist from the spillways of the dam could neither cool down her temperament nor bring about any relief. They say the chinar had shaken violently that day, indicating a prescient warning of some calamity. With a noose around her neck, Saad Bibi’s lifeless body was found hanging from the same branch that she had so fondly used as a swing.