

A POUND OF FLESH

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Ahmed describes this piece in his own words below:

For almost everything in life there is a price to pay. In prison, a pound of flesh, literally, could mean to lose some weight, or metaphorically, could mean to gain some insight in one's brain. Either way you must sacrifice to gain something in life.

I have been locked up more than a decade now. Most of my family lives overseas, and on an average, I get a couple of visits a year, plus sporadic phone calls. From behind bars, this fragile contact with family was slowly starting to fade away and gradually an animal idea, some people think that prisoners are animals, was beginning to sink within until almost a couple of years ago. In the summer of 2015, I was participating in a writing class when one day, we prisoners and a volunteer civilian lady began discussing the next week's assignment. After a few minutes of debate, the civilian lady suggested that we pick any current news and create a fictional story around it, while keeping the original facts intact. The problem was solved.

In the beginning, the process of writing an observational and personal experience type of story around current news seemed fairly simple; yet in the middle of creating this imaginative world, I began to re-engage with my emotions of loss, regret, and acceptance. And once I had finished the assignment, I met my human side which I was neglecting. Now, since then, gradually, that "animal prisoner stigma" has been stripping away, making me a human being.

And that observational, part journal, and part personal experience goes like this...

Sitting in the living room with my extended family, I watched my mother and my brother's family who had flown in from Pakistan. Everyone's face shows the impact of the grim news. To my alarm, somehow they are expecting me to lead them.

Lyla, my wife, is sitting next to me on the sofa and nervously turning the TV's remote control in her hands. For the past two days, she has been watching the TV for an update. She sobs for a while, her chest rises slightly, and then she calms down, letting the tears run freely.

I have known Lyla for seventeen years, and we have been married for sixteen. Lyla has always been such a strong woman, but at this moment, she seems like a

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fragile young girl. It hurts to see her like this, and I think, “Maybe I can endure this trauma, but she might barely survive.”

Tough, contained and assuredly calm from outside, when I feel the effects of a heavy dose of tranquilizer the doctor gave me. It numbs my loss at this moment. I know somebody has to handle the situation in crises like this. Being tranquil until everyone has been drained out of their grief seems attractive. This medication helps.

The TV news channel is switching from the news into a discussion. A reported says, “New information is coming up regarding the German Airbus 320, which was flying from Barcelona to Dusseldorf and crashed in the French Alps two days ago. Investigators believe that the twenty-seven-year-old German co-pilot of Flight 9525, who had been under psychiatric treatment, locked the Captain out of the cockpit and deliberately slammed the plane into an alpine ridge, killing all 144 passengers and 6 crew members...”

My sister-in-law sits by Lyla and tries to comfort her. She insists they go into another room to eat. Lyla has not eaten anything since the news came on.

Wajid, my brother, is sitting on another sofa, facing me. His fifteen-year-old daughter, Faiza, who is the same age as my son Mobisher Khan, is curled up with her head in his lap. Faiza’s presence clearly adds to Lyla’s distress because she is a reminder of Mobi. Wajid is caressing Faiza’s long black hair. She moves her arm across her face and wipes her tears, then hides her face back in his lap.

“I was surfing the internet when I found out about the plane,” says Wajid in a rasp and slow tone. “Mobi had emailed me before he boarded the plane. He wanted to tell me about his time in Spain, but decided to wait until he was back. He promised that we would chat on the web cam.” Faiza gets up, wipes another stream of tears with her sleeve, and runs into another room. Wajid hides his face in his palms and slowly rubs it up and down. After a long moment, he glances at me and asks, “When are you leaving?”

I gaze at Lyla, moving closer to her and wrapping my arm around her. She puts her head on my shoulder and sobs. I stroke her forearm gently and this simple consoling act seems to help. “Once she is ready to take a trip, we will leave.” I say looking at my brother and then add, “Stay put, we will be back soon.”

“...French investigators said that the Captain and co-pilot seemed to have spoken in a cheerful and courteous manner until the Captain left the cockpit for a ‘call of nature’...”

Looking at my wife, I think, maybe I am more fortunate than she is because I am numb and can’t feel my own sorrow right now. Sobbing, she is still staring at the TV. Somehow seeing her makes me think perhaps that this is her way of feeling her loss. Earlier, she refused to take any medication and wanted to stay brave. Now, she is expressing it outwardly, and I am keeping it within.

Fifteen-year-old terrible news is as fresh as yesterday for us, and I remember it in this sudden loss. I realize that she can’t have another child. As soon as Mobi was born, the doctors had found a tumor in her uterus, which left her with only one choice – hysterectomy. Feeling how much her fragile soul could have been broken into a thousand pieces at this moment, I began stroking her arm again.

The parrot in the cage by the window is impatiently jumping, twisting his head and looking around. Only three weeks ago, Mobi trimmed his wings while I held

him. My mother is in the kitchen, and once in a while she comes out with a white apron tied around her waist. She gives me a reassuring look, as if to say, “There is nothing we can do – except be here for one another.”

Wajid gets up and responds to the door bell ringing, letting Lindsay Strawinski in. The manager at work had said she would come. The local social services offices have assigned Ms. Strawinski to us to help deal with this tragedy.

What could she do for my family? When I asked her this, she responded, “Oh there are cultural difficulties, so we want to help make inquiries, and deal with insurance and legalities.” She glances at my wife and then at me. I can read her expression. Is she thinking that Lyla might not understand German culture? “I have been in Germany for the past twenty years and speak this language very well,” I offer. She hesitates a bit, then glances again at my wife and then almost whispers under her breath, “Mrs. Khan might be considered for some support from the community.”

I study Ms. Strawinski for a moment. She could have skipped this difficult meeting. She looks young, and her voice suggests she has just finished some minor college.

My mother brings some tea for our guest, and she politely refuses it, but I insist.

She looks toward my wife, and I nod. I get up and sit next to my brother. Ms. Strawinski sits by Lyla and politely puts her hand on her shoulder. My wife keeps her eyes on the TV and says softly in perfect German, “I am fine, Miss. There is nothing you can do now to bring my Mobi back.”

Ms. Strawinski surprisingly looks at me. Perhaps she didn’t know that my wife has studied in German for a long time. I couldn’t resist giving my guest a false smile.

“...The flight data recorder exposed that the co-pilot activated the auto-pilot setting from the altitude of 30,000 feet to about 100 feet. The flight gradually descended and within 7 to 9 minutes crashed into the French Alps...”

Lyla points at the TV and says to Ms. Strawinski, “They’re doing all the investigations, but why? They can’t bring back our loved ones.” And then Lyla gets up and quietly leaves the room.

“Mr. Khan, we are trying our best to avoid any mishaps,” she says. I start at the TV and then at her.

She shifts her weight on the sofa and as if aware of what is being said on the news, she says, “Mr. Khan, I don’t know much of the details yet. Plus, I am not aware of technical issues. I really want to help your family. You seem to manage this terrible news well. Can I stay in touch with you for further updates?”

I want to tell her that I look calm from the outside, but I don’t find any reason for the explanation, so I say, “Yes, you can call me here at my business anytime.”

Wajid walks her to the door, and when he comes back, he says, “she wants us to trust her, but she is so young she does not even know what is going on. She doesn’t even know what she is doing.”

Next afternoon in the remote village of Sayne, where a base camp has been established by emergency workers in the French Alps, the scene seems to run at slow motion. The bus has brought us here with heavy security. The huge mountains are covered with ice. As I struggle to look past them, their presence prevents me. They look like a huge white monster peacefully sleeping who perhaps didn’t notice when

his big belly swallowed the plane. Helplessly muffled screams of the 150 souls trapped inside the plane, which might have slammed in this monster with a deadening quiet and turned into a fireball. I wonder how people would have felt when the plane made out of steel or hard plastic crushed those horrified creatures within.

The site of the crash is too deep in the bottom of a huge mountain slope. Rescue workers are performing their task with extreme difficulty. Lyla seems to recover a bit and holds my hand. Moving forward slowly, she nods in polite understanding of the French people. Our guide from Germany explains all the process in detail. He tells us to check the makeshift lab before we leave so the doctors can collect our DNA to help find any body parts of the victims.

Lyla seems to struggle less and regain her energy slowly, as if the physical site of the crash is giving her some comfort

A German journalist comes up to us and addresses me with my full name. He was on the plane with us, and I wonder how many names and faces he has remembered so far. “Mr. Waseem Khan,” he says, “we are trying to gather information from all the families who want to urge the German government to reassess cockpit rules so as to prevent such tragedies from occurring in the future. Would you like to add your name on the list?”

I look at Lyla who is gazing at the crash site. She stares at me angrily as if saying that peace is not in the campaign for new rules.

Our guide is saying something. I look at him. He is pointing at a little girl and saying, “She has lost her twin sister. She doesn’t know exactly how serious the situation is. She is wandering around with her mother and keeps asking, “Where is Ashley hiding, mama?””

I wonder how difficult it would be for a mother to tell a five-year-old child that she will not see her sister and father again. The little girl is embracing two small dolls with her left arm and sucking on her right thumb. She comes close to us, moves her thumb, and says, “Can you help find Ashley? She is hiding here somewhere with papa.”

The girls’ mother picks up his daughter, hugs her, and apologizes; all while tears are running down her cheeks. Instinctively, Lyla hugs me and whispers to leave, wiping her own tears with a tissue. After stopping at the makeshift lab, we leave the scene.

Back in the hotel room, she turns the TV on and sits on the sofa, folding her legs underneath her while wrapping herself in a blanket.

“...The black box reads emergency alarms going off and the loud noises of the Captain knocking on the cockpit door. The co-pilot’s calm breather could be heard and he stays quiet when Marseille air-traffic control repeatedly contacted Flight 9525. Then another loud noise comes up as the plane crashed...”

Out through the window, the view seems calm, yet somehow menacing. The right half is brightened with night lights, and the left half is darkened by the Alps. Nothing exists but void, and snow seems like a dot of light. That light comes from the crash site, and soon, when all the remains are recovered, no light will shine there.

After few moments, I sit next to her and try to be with her emotionally. Then she cries freely and I hold her in my arms supporting her. When she composes herself, she tells me to take her back to Germany.

The following morning, our living room seems the same as when we left. My brother is sitting on the sofa, and the TV is set on the news, as if nothing has changed. Lyla seems worn out, but more relaxed. Perhaps her initial show at the news has passed. She looked at me and then sees the bird in the cage. The parrot's head is turned toward Mobi's empty room. The bowl of food in the cage seems untouched. I wonder how many times my mother has changed that bowl for him.

I follow Lyla to the cage. The parrot looks at us. She whispers that she wants to let him go. This time, I don't want to assume anything. So I tenderly wrap my arms around her and assist her hands. The parrot comes out of the cage and idly walks toward the porch.

My mother comes around and gently grabs Lyla's hand from mine and takes her in the kitchen.

"...European Aviation is considering a mandate requiring two crew members on the flight deck all the time. The United States has been implementing a 'two crew member rule' since 9/11, when four Boeing jetliners were hijacked and crashed into the twin towers..."

I want to sit there with the family, but my loneliness, anger, and denial are conflicting with me. I go to the study room.

The phone rings.

It's the French lab, and they have a match. They've found the remains with a 30% match. If there is a bone they can run another test and then get back to us.