

Unlived Lives

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A few feet from the busy juncture stands a circle of silent men, their eyes wide open in disbelief and hearts pounding hard against the walls of their chests. Shutters are coming down and shopkeepers pouring in from all sides of the bazaar, stretching their necks trying to get a peek inside the circle.

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Three minutes ago when Raza turned the knob of his sound system, a green beam flashed across its screen and its loud rhythmic beats started to fill the air, drawing grateful looks and half-smiles from fellow shopkeepers. Among them were the two to his left, the middle-aged Salim and the old Hamdaan.

The voice in the high-pitched audio sang verses from a famous hymn, its every word bringing the listener closer to the divine.

After turning the knob, Raza laid back into his cozy chair behind a waist-high counter that displayed a wide variety of used smartphones. His eyes unthinkingly scanned the dusty sidewall on which hung a whole series of brand new phones and accessories, many of them too outdated to sell now but enough to give a semblance of a working mobile trade-and-repair shop, especially when taken together with the soldering station at the back table that was always turned on and the chips and circuit boards that lay scattered around it.

Raza has turned pious of late, wearing his rugged hoodie to join in the prayers at a nearby mosque a couple of times a day. The back of the hoodie bears the logo of a company that sells alcoholic beverages, but he doesn't know this and so far no one at the mosque has pointed it out to him partly because the color of the writing in the logo has somewhat faded after repeated wash-ups. The mosque is located in the middle of piercing noises, streams of dust and clouds of sulphuric emissions, and provides a safe space for the disoriented and the harassed. It is clean, calm, and quiet and Raza happily brings down his shutter multiple times a day to enter this abode of peace.

In his chair behind the counter, Raza sat idle, melting into the verses of the hymn and playing with a long metal key chain in his hand by spinning it around his fingers and occasionally flogging himself lightly at the back. He noticed a small boy creep into the crowd in front of a milk shop that sits fifty meters across. The head of the boy hardly reached the shoulders of most customers as he strived to make his way through the dense maze.

Meanwhile, Salim invited Raza's attention to a young schoolteacher coming back from work, adjusting her headscarf and trying to avoid getting hit by a car coming from behind. He knows her and she knows him, engaged as they were once in a prolonged transaction disguised as an intense romance wherein he supplied her with phone credit and she, in turn, sang songs in her nightingale voice, rehearsing for a singing contest that runs on national television and for which she once unsuccessfully auditioned without telling anyone in her family.

"Thief, thief...he's a son of a thief!" cried a large heavy man at the back of the crowd in his intimidating voice and brash village accent.

The very words recollected for Raza the wounding memory of being accosted by two boyish bandits on bikes, one of whom pressed the barrel of the gun against his ribs as they robbed him of his phone and all cash just two weeks back.

"My business was going ... good. It was all very good," grunts Raza to himself. "Then ... some years ago, things started to slip away..."

This question of a sudden drop in his customer base has vexed Raza for years now. He recalls the days when touch screens were a novelty, featuring in every gossip, joke, and

rumor that swirled in the streets, and when his shop was at the center of a buy-and-sell fever that gripped the neighborhood. The young and old of the area used to make a festival out of sliding and gliding their fingers across the glass, their faces animating with wonder as if they were climbing their way to a higher social class or evolving into biologically superior beings.

Those were also the days when Raza was saving money with the hope of getting a house on lease, and marrying the girl who was now dodging vehicles on the road while contending with the stares of every idle male in the vicinity.

A childhood friend of Raza who is a university graduate and works for the government often uses words like “business cycles,” “growth” and “recession” to explain this situation to him. Of late, he has also started talking about a certain corridor with magical qualities and assures Raza that once the Chinese are finished building their tracks through Pakistan, conditions will get better and people will again start coming to his shop.

“The Chinese will fix everything,” his friend would say. Raza doesn’t understand this at all but nods along every time as they light one cigarette after another every Sunday, before sunrise, standing beneath a giant street lamp whose soft yellow light adds a mystical dimension to the rare silence of the bazaar and the emptiness of the streets around it.

Instead of waiting for the Chinese fix, however, Raza has almost decided to burn his boats and shoot for the land of opportunity that sits north of the Mediterranean. “I don’t have anything left to lose,” he tells his educated friend.

The cries of “Thief...thief” involved this very friend who was standing in the first lane of the crowd looking to buy some milk. A sneaky hand had picked the wallet out of his pocket and people in the back had caught the culprit in the act.

In a fit of unthinking rage, Raza flung over the wooden counter, clasped the handle of the shutter, and rammed it down before darting towards the crowd to help his friend.

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Salim’s stall bulges out of his shop and encroaches on public land and his customers, when they do come in droves on some festive day, encroach on the road further, creating traffic jams and earning the wrath of his fellow shopkeepers.

Like his father before him, Salim sells dahi bhalla, a regional snack prepared by soaking fried balls of gram flour in beaten yoghurt and adding spices and salad to the mix. He loves to enact a rhythmic dance while preparing this snack, banging his big steel spoon against the

steel containers from which he draws the ready ingredients and making musical beats out of it.

'I would've made an excellent drummer', he often sighs to himself while chewing on tobacco and looking at the framed photograph of his younger self that hung on the back wall.

The portrait shows a smartly dressed whimsical spirit with curl in his hair and shine in his eyes. He gazes at this photo for minutes sometimes, then notices the paint coming off the yellow wall made red by squirts of tobacco spit, and the grimy floor that needs a scrub.

Unlike other shopkeepers who live in nearby streets, his house is seven miles away and he commutes to work on a bicycle, this distance producing for him another reason to feel out of place.

Salim is in his early forties, the father of a child studying in the fourth grade. Oftentimes he gets bouts of anxiety about the future of his son whose educational and other expenses are increasing by the day while the volume of his sales stagnates. Unlike Raza, he has chosen melancholy over rage and escape over endurance, drowning his gloom in droughts of locally made liquor which he procures from his underground connections, fully aware that the law of the landmarks drinking as a criminal offence, especially for the poor.

He balances out the expenses on liquor by advancing an herbal remedy for 'manly weakness,' a side trade which he inherited from his father, of all people, along with many of his initial clients. Whether or not the remedy works is yet to be proven, but Salim had figured out long ago that what his clients really want is privacy and compassion, and encouraging words like "You're not alone in this." Shopkeepers have noticed how some of his male customers tend to whisper in his ear instead of speaking from a distance, but he has kept these dealings a secret so far and none of the traders around him have a clue.

Salim has kept another secret from his fellows in the bazaar: eight years ago, his wife Fatima, an enterprising lady who manages the local chapter of a national maternal welfare scheme, adopted a two-year-old boy before their own son was born. Fatima had started insisting on this adoption shortly after their marriage. She also took the lead in the choice of the orphanage and knew exactly which boy to adopt from that institution.

A few months back, despite Fatima's disapproval, Salim decided to consign the child to a boarding seminary citing budget constraints. "The seminary will be ideal for the boy. It will provide him with food, clothes, and shelter, and he can always visit us on the weekends," Salim's explanation went.

Fatima's little boy has grown enough now to know that Salim and Fatima are not his parents and that Salim only cares for his biological son whom he placed in a private English-medium school that tends to increase the tuition fee every year. But the boy still loves Fatima

and continues to call her “Mama” and is full of feelings of gratitude and respect for her, sharing with her all the details of his life in the seminary while avoiding contact with Salim, visiting home only when Salim is away at work.

Fatima has seen the boy grow with an Arabized accent and loud, melodious voice in which he recites the memorized verses of the holy book. The boy greets every elder by reverently applying both his hands to their right hand, bowing a little and slowly bringing his hands back to rest on his chest. But of late he has fallen quiet and disturbed, feeling fearful of the seminary in which he once seemed to adjust well. He doesn’t look Fatima in the eye anymore, doesn’t take the lead in initiating discussion on any topic or telling stories of his friends in the seminary.

Last week, without telling Salim, Fatima conducted a meeting with the principal at the seminary in her capacity as the boy’s guardian. With this coming to nothing, she decided to discuss the matter with an acquaintance who is studying to be a psychologist, without involving the boy or Salim in these meetings. Since then, the boy hasn’t visited home and Fatima continues to be traumatized by dreadful thoughts and sleepless nights.

Back at the stall, Salim indulged himself in banter with Baba Hamdaan, the sixty two-year-old shopkeeper to his left who sells cigarettes and paan, a delicacy prepared by folding areca nut into betel leaves along with coconut flakes, rose-petal jam, fennel seeds, and various other ingredients for color, taste, and smell. Paan is an addictive breath freshener and a delicious digestive, and Salim is one of Hamdaan’s regular customers.

Across the street, the brawl in front of the milk shop intensified and both Salim and Hamdaan could see Raza and several other angry men delivering kicks and slogs to someone in the crowd. Salim left the stall to calm Raza down, and to find out what exactly was going on.

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Hamdaan folded the paan leaf and placed it between his jaws, letting its juice seep into his mouth and its scent lull his senses. He has seen so many brawls over the decades that he has neither the interest nor the energy to leave his chair and get involved in this one.

Like his shop, Hamadan’s house is quiet, dark, and filled with the smell of expired paan ingredients. While others pay rent to get a roof above their head, he is lucky enough to get paid to live in a house owned by his younger cousin who runs a business in the Gulf and is keeping this house for retirement. The cousin cannot take the risk of renting the house to a

stranger while residing in Dubai. He understands the workings of land grabbers in the city and so pays Hamdaan a quarterly stipend to occupy the house in the meantime and keep the utility connections running. The stipend is enough to pay the bills, put food on the table, and even keep Hamdaan's gambling habits alive. The shop for him is not an economic venture but a respite from the lonely house in which his wife Halima died a natural death a few years ago, and whose walls stare at him in a farewell mode as if counting his days to the grave.

Another reason Hamdaan keeps going to work is his lost grandson Afaaq whom he hopes will one day magically appear before his counter, having discovered his grandfather's shop.

About ten years ago, Hamdaan's only daughter fell in love with a man who belonged to a different denomination of the faith. While Hamdaan himself cared little about such details, Halima was sternly opposed to the union. His daughter had to resort to a court marriage in a quiet and simple manner, unknown to Halima but with blessings and approval from Hamdaan.

Slowly and begrudgingly Halima also came to accept her daughter's choice and their relations normalized after the birth of her grandson Afaaq. The infant brought immense happiness to a dull household and was raised in the love and affection of three women: his mother, his grandmother Halima, and a neighboring lady who was a high school friend and close confidante of his mother.

When Afaaq was only thirteen months old, his parents died in a bus accident in the outskirts of the city. Halima wrestled hard to secure the guardianship of the baby and keep him away from his paternal grandparents, ultimately succeeding in upholding her sectarian convictions.

For the next few months, with help from the neighboring lady whom she now considered her daughter, Halima raised Afaaq until her old age started to weaken her resolve. The death of Halima and the marriage of the neighboring lady came at about the same time, but not before Halima had taken the drastic step of putting Afaaq in an orphanage, bypassing her husband whose wasteful lifestyle and gambling addictions she feared would ruin Afaaq's childhood.

So these days, Hamdaan sits at his counter waiting for the boy, too embarrassed to share this part of his story. To anyone who asks about his daughter's child, he gives a vague, mumbling reply about the boy being in the care of his paternal grandparents. Counting the numerals on the calendar, in hope and trepidation, he is convinced he will get to hug his grandson one more time before he dies.

Salim's passage to the milk shop was interrupted by a traffic jam, by vehicles lined in front of him bumper to bumper and wheel to wheel.

Salim struggled to find his way through the clog as he witnessed Raza, and the large heavy man who was the first to cry "Thief," humiliatingly drag the culprit by holding him from the collar. The boy surrendered to the mob, giving up any hope of resistance or escape. The buttons of the boy's shirt dropped sequentially and his prayer cap lost itself in the feet of the bystanders. The skirmish continued even after Raza's friend and others called for the diffusion of tension after the wallet's recovery. One of Raza's weighty blows landed on the empty stomach of the boy. The poor soul instantly fell flat on the ground, unconscious, as the skin of his right arm received a piercing rub against the tarred surface of the road.

Raza still held the collar of the boy, trying to lift the unconscious body back up when three men, all of them only bystanders until then, charged ahead to decisively stop Raza's madness by clutching his arms and shoulders from behind. In the ensuing scuffle, one of them tripped over Raza and fell right on top of the prey, rendering him breathless.

By the time Salim reached Raza, everyone had taken a few steps back. Laying there with his face pressed against the ground was a boy, a small boy. Silent. Salim recognized the beige-colored uniform from the seminary.

A man in the crowd stepped forward, came up to the body, and turned its face upward, making the face of the murdered visible to all.

"Afaaq!" cried Salim, as images of the boy playing with Fatima washed over him. Two days ago Fatima had shared with Salim the boy's story of the advances of a teacher at the all-male seminary. Terrified and unhinged, the boy had sought to flee the place, the house, and the entire neighborhood.

Back at the counter, a man informed Hamdaan of a random seminary boy who got lynched in the milk line for stealing a wallet. After Salim's cry, successive spectators repeated the boy's name in an inquisitive tone, and it became loud enough to fall on Hamdaan's ears.

A stroke of pain pierced through Hamdaan's chest as he hurriedly took hold of his cane and began his long walk to the crowd. "Afaaq ... Did someone say Afaaq?" clamored Hamdaan, as his mind fixated on his grandson's sweet name ringing in his ears. With every stumbling step, Hamdaan felt a drowning sense of loss tinged with a suspicion of failure. Just when he thought he had reached the circle, he felt his arteries clog and his heart implode. "Afaaq, my boy!" cried Hamdaan before his bony frame dropped in a free fall.

Salim's mouth was still filled with tobacco as he squatted on the road beside the boy's body. On noticing Hamdaan's clamor for Afaaq, Salim's eyebrows frowned in inquisition for a moment. "Did Hamdaan know about Afaaq?" Salim quizzed himself, wondering if he had at some point accidentally revealed to Hamdaan his reluctant tale of adopting a child.

With a reel of images swirling in his head, Salim labored to pick himself back up and turned his neck around in all directions. He found no trace of Raza in the crowd or at the shop. It was as if Raza had disappeared into thin air. The other men involved in the scuffle had also made themselves invisible, skulking off into the thicket of the crowd.

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In the distance, loud honks from cars, bikes, and rickshaws banged about and made the air more agitated. For the people gathered around, it was a spectacle. An out-of-the-ordinary event in the predictable daily life of the bazaar.

The spectators could now participate in the intrigue by narrating the account to others and bragging about having witnessed it firsthand. They would bend the tale to their whims and induce in their listeners a sense of regret for missing out on the action. They would place themselves in the story and pretend they knew all there was to know. But how wrong would they be! For even those bound by it couldn't see the thread of life that had woven them together all along.