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Refugees In Recession

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REFUGEES IN RECESSION

Father always said he'd truly understood life during his time in the refugee camp. For me, it was the other way around: I learned about life after we left the camp. I guess that's because I was born there and Father wasn't.

If anything, it was after we moved out that Father completed his crash course—not on life, unfortunately, but on the subject of death. See, you don't have land mines in a refugee camp. No better teacher than experience, Father used to say. He died quickly, leaving me man-in-charge of the family.

Now, in spite of what everyone believes, a refugee camp isn't as bad a place as it's made out. Where we lived was a huge settlement in Peshawar. You could see and smell the sprawl of mud houses and tents, drains and sewers and garbage dumps all along the road leading to Hayatabad, a pretty, upmarket address, where our Pakistani hosts of the rich variety resided. I bet that's where Miss Sadia came from. It's a given—you can tell where someone lives or should by their looks. I never said God was fair when he doled out his largesse; and by the way, neither is He a communist, though the Soviets fought us ten years trying to prove He was.

Every Thursday a group of boys waited at the gate for Miss Sadia to drive into our compound. Then we'd rush for the classroom, vying to take the seats up front, best in the house on Miss Sadia days. How she came to decide a drama club would be of use to us, I have no idea. Still, there she was, week after week, teaching us about plays and acts and someone named Shakespeare, whom everyone called Sheikh Shabeer, just to get her back up.

Each time she brushed by, I'd sniff at her, keen as a hound, to catch a whiff of the flowery scent she wore. One day she turned her pretty face in my direction, bent close to inspect me, and said in her sweet, lilting manner, "Is that a naughty little cold I hear creeping up?"

I nodded my head, sniffed ever harder, promoted the sniff to a snivel, added a cough for good measure, and off she sent me to the nurse, an ugly, fat, and generally disliked specimen whose idea of medical care was to provide none.

Miss Sadia's zeal for quality (albeit frivolous) education rivaled that of the Tableeghi missionaries, who were sold on the idea of converting Muslims to Islam a second time around. I don't really fault them, since you can find only

so many infidels in Pakistan. They always crusaded in groups to lure us into the mosque for their evening “brain massage” specials.

Truth is, both Miss Sadia and the Tableeghis drilled us in subjects that offered no material benefit whatsoever for the here and now. The Tableeghis spoke occasionally of heaven but mostly focused on the eternal fires stoked with our lazy, non-pious bones, and eventually made the celestial breakthrough of frightening the hell out of us. As for Miss Sadia, she was pretty, and... well, she was pretty, but what she taught was downright useless when it came to real life. Truly, how would it help get food even if I mastered the art of swaying like a tree, singing lyrics and poetry and other gibberish? This much I'll say: it doesn't seem silly anymore. I understand my life better because of those drama classes. What worries me, however, is that if the Tableeghis also turn out to be right—man, there'll be consequences, some never-ending ones at that.

Bad time to focus on doom and gloom, so let me continue; better yet, allow me to restart at the beginning, the best part of my life.

After the Soviets left, the various Afghan factions started warring amongst themselves—that's what we do best when there are no foreigners left to fight. Commander A bombed Mullah B, who'd been busy launching rockets at Imam C, who was at the time sneaking behind Commander A, and so on. With this musical chairs of mayhem playing to the tune of background explosions, my father, being a man of peace, made the wise choice of abstaining from war, but did not practice abstinence of any other variety. A family man to the core, he particularly devoted time and energy to his marital duties, and in due process made Mother pregnant, with my own self as reward for his efforts.

Deciding it a sacred duty to give their yet-to-be-born son a head start in life, my parents left our home in Afghanistan for the safe environs of Pakistan. Mother did well to wait till the border before her water broke. She eventually thrust me into the welcome world of our refugee camp and thankfully not on the roadside or atop a mule cart, which, apart from being painful for her, might've caused documentation problems for me. It was here, in the camp, that she had her other children and the first of her quarrels with Father. This fight, and others that followed, all centered on Father's need for “meditation,” which Mother called “permanent hibernation.”

Then one day—a day that had started off as fine as filtered honey—Father came home in an electric state, more alive than we'd ever seen him before, or

would ever see him again. He shouted for the family to gather around him. Instead of being his pensive and morose self, he twitched and trembled, the static keeping us on edge until he announced in a grumbling voice the start of our new lives:

“Those damn ungrateful Pakistanis want to throw *us* out of *our* camp, and after what we’ve done for them. That leech, Aziz Afridi, who drives around in that big car of his, used to come in on a bicycle when he first got the supply contract. And Gul Khan, the rat, I’ve seen him shoeless with my own eyes. And...” So he continued, naming various rodents and invertebrates until he ran out of species. Then he ordered Mother to start packing for Afghanistan, where the Americans would take good care of us. He himself vanished inside his room, exhausted by this jolt of excitement.

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The entire camp became alive with activity and rife with rumor. The Americans had invaded our country only a few years ago. Mr. Bush’s suggestion that the Afghan people return home and sleep in peace under the watchful gaze of his smoking guns didn’t strike much of a chord with us. Grandmother said she had already been sleeping easy, thank you very much—all she wanted was a dozen goats. Father said America was the land of freedom and plenty; surely a dozen goats were small fish for Mr. Bush, the most powerful man in the world. Grandmother snorted, then farted a loud, foul-smelling note of dissent against either Father’s ideas or Mother’s cooking—or, more likely, both in one big blow.

In any case, our family prepared to leave the camp. My parents made sure to remove the furniture, windows, doors, and doorframes of our house. Mother, unsure of what awaited us in Afghanistan, even packed old newspapers, though she hadn’t read them when they were new. Grandmother was pretty sore with Father—she had instructed him to remove a water tap or two from the public toilet, but by the time Father finished his meditation, there was plenty of water but no taps. For once, Grandmother and Mother were in total agreement, and he got an earful from both of them for his laziness, to which he replied with a yawn so sincere I felt like dozing off myself. When the two women glared at him, his warlike Pashtun spirit arose from slumber; he stared the women down and said, “Damn your greed. Why, if you could, you would even carry the mud into Afghanistan!”

As for me, I was thrilled at the prospect of travel to foreign lands. Pakistan had always seemed like “my country”; I had lived here all fifteen years of my life. Overnight, the Americans grew popular in our household for helping us

return to the land of our ancestors. That was before we found out how tough life was in a country with no jobs, no electricity, no water, no schools, and, worst of all, no refugee camps. We did have democracy in Kabul, but that didn't count for much in our village.

To my chagrin, I have learned in the short space of two years that Father had it all wrong. We've neither seen peace, nor heard of, or from, any free goats. However, the promised guns have stood their ground, even fired at us from the air. I further understand that blind trust is a trait we must kill off the second it raises its two-faced head. My family trusted Mr. Bush, and just look where we all ended up.

Well, here I am, sitting cozy as a hen's egg in an American jail in Afghanistan, which, if you stop to consider, is a seriously absurd concept. I mean, have you heard of an Afghan jail in America? That would be a laugh, though the Americans might not find it amusing, especially if they're on the inside.

Now, most people get all upset about being behind bars. Initially, so did I. Then things became easier, as I realized that being in prison is not very different from being in a refugee camp. Food is served on time, the menu is fixed, and you know what to expect every second of every day. Of course, you can't move around. But let me tell you: a full stomach sure beats the freedom of running haywire, scraping for food. Of course, there was no Miss Sadia to provide comic relief, but, as is the case with life, there was a replacement.

Bob was a big, broad-shouldered, baby-faced American soldier who always ended up on night duty. I think the other guards took advantage of his being a nice guy, and he willingly accommodated them. Grandmother warned me about being nice in life. She said it was an expensive deal to make, one for which you paid through the nose, both nostrils included. She was one tough lady, my grandmother. Anyway, she was damn right, as far as Bob was concerned.

I suppose he was feeling lonely, the way he lumbered along the corridor, crossing back and forth in front of my cell, as if looking for an excuse to talk. Without making much noise, he dragged a chair and sat himself down plumb outside my cell.

"Kid," he said. They all called me "kid," never by my name, Saleh (pronounced *swa-leh*, with a very, very soft and rolled w). He held a beer can in his hand and appeared sad and happy at the same time. That's what alcohol does to you: leaves you unsure and you don't even know it.

“Know what’ll take me out of Afghanistan?”

“Mr. Bush,” I said, dredging up the “Mr.” with some effort and very little faith.

He pursed his lips, shook his heavy head, then gazed upwards, like that old man back in Peshawar who used to tell the future for ten rupees. By the way, that old gizzard never said I would end up in prison. This is just to make sure no one else pays him for his false readings.

Wanting to sound politically aware, I tried again, “Karzai?”

Now he laughed with some contempt. I don’t like Karzai either. Grandmother had said he was a Pashtun only in name; his soul was on rent to the highest bidder. Then she’d sighed, as if she would gladly change places with him.

Bob sipped his beer contemplatively. “The answer is,” he stared into the distance, “ree-seh-shun.” Then quicker: “Recession. Yes, kid, that baby’ll take me out of this shithole of a country.”

I didn’t like him bad-mouthing my motherland, though I’d only been here two years, most of which I’d spent in misery, including three months in jail. Yet, for a moment, I was tempted to answer in kind. Grandmother taught me never to abuse someone back—it was more convenient simply to kill them. More to the point, defending your virtue in prison has no merit, unless you fancy dogs sniffing up your behind.

I let bygones be bygones and focused on the matter at hand. “This recession, will it help me get out also?”

Bob laughed. He was funny that way, always laughed, even when you said something serious. “Kid, the only place you’ll end up is Gitmo.”

I didn’t understand him, but he got all upset for some reason and red in the face and moved around the chair as if his butt were on fire. Then he turned formal and awkward and stiffer than starch: “My friend, I apologize. I seriously hope we both get out of here, alive and well.”

He was a good man, Bob. He shouldn’t have been in the army.

“Whatever,” I said. Then I asked him to explain the recession better, if only for general knowledge; it seemed like a mighty, powerful thing. Father used to say I had more curiosity than a bumble of monkeys with nothing to do. Truth be told, he was the one who went off the road to take a better look at his country and got blown to pieces all over its side.

Bob busied himself opening a second beer and gulping it down. “You don’t know?” He took another swipe, then belched before saying, “It’s when peo-

ple lose their jobs, can't buy homes, or a car, or pay for the kids' education, and, well, you get the idea. It's rotten and smells bad. Shit, you can't even go to the movies; you just don't have the money."

I slapped my head for being an idiot. This I understood perfectly and proceeded to inform Bob that most of what he said applied to me. In fact, we had a recession in Afghanistan, and we'd had one in certain parts of Pakistan for as long as I could remember.

He looked at me with definite skepticism, and I quickly clarified that I'd been born in a refugee camp in Pakistan before we moved to our village. We never had any money, but that was understandable, since we sure didn't have any cinemas to spend our money on.

His silly smile disappeared, and he stood up. "That's not a recession. Refugee camps and villages aren't supposed to have movie theaters."

Bob sounded as if I didn't count when it came to movies or having fun; it was sort of like how the Tableeghis preached their one-point agenda of doom. Guess Miss Sadia with her frivolous games and songs did know a thing or two after all.

Then Bob started to ask all sorts of weird questions about my village and family, how we lived, the names of my father and all my relatives, including Mother—which wasn't all that polite of him. Thankfully, he stopped short of asking the color of my underwear, which I wasn't wearing.

Anyway, I told him the name of my village, that it had a population of, I guessed, five hundred folks and about the same number of animals.

"How many men?" Bob said.

"Two hundred or so."

"And how many lost their jobs?"

That was a tough one. I did the math first on my fingers, then on my knuckles, to make double sure that I didn't get things wrong, while Bob went at his beer. Finally I said, "None."

His mouth popped open. "No kidding. You don't have a slump, no layoffs. Fantastic. I could retire in this place!" He laughed, opened another can, and sank to the floor, against the bars.

I confessed that he knew more about recessions than I did, and if he said we didn't have one, most likely he was right. Since I liked Bob, I added that although we didn't have a recession, we did have other problems, and he should probably review any plans to prolong his stay.

"Can't be no bigger problem than a recession," he pronounced.

So I gave him the stats: eight people had died of fever; fifteen of diarrhea or some such disease; ten men, including my father, had blown up land mines along with themselves; and some twenty had been killed by enemy fire. Depending on who was telling the story, the enemy could be the Taliban, or American soldiers, or ourselves—one of those silly blood feuds we were always fighting for honor. Then I puffed up my chest in defense of the same invisible honor and said with genuine pride that, in spite of all this, I was happy. At least now I knew my country didn't have a recession. The word did have a dirty sound to it.

"Man, there's some serious shit down here." Bob grew somber and withdrew into himself.

I waited for him to turn normal. However, Bob was now on a binge, quietly drinking away whatever thoughts plagued him. Since I enjoyed his chatter, I nudged him, and when he turned to me, I politely asked for further details on this recession.

He thought awhile, then held his can at face level. "This beer, say it costs five dollars back home, and I buy two a day. Now, in hard times I wouldn't even buy one."

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To get a better handle on things, I asked how many sacks of flour a beer could buy. After doing some calculations, I summed up the results and told Bob that he held in his hand half a sack of flour, which was a fortnight's ration of bread for my family.

"No kidding," he said.

None whatsoever, I replied. I'd grown damn serious about money since learning we had a recession.

By now, my throat was dry as an un-oiled truck engine. Though I was risking round-the-clock overheating in the afterlife and some minor embarrassment if Bob refused, the shiny green can appeared worth a try. I scrounged up my courage and said that I understood things were bad, what with the recession and everything, but nevertheless, would he mind sharing a beer with me, same as the price of a sack of flour?

Of course I meant this as a joke, but Bob didn't laugh. He opened fresh beers, though he sipped at his more slowly now and with a guilty face. For some reason, he even chewed at it a few times.

Bob then asked how I got here.

I'd been confused before, I said, but thanks to him, the reasons were now obvious: it was all due to the recession. My family needed food.

After Father's death, Grandmother declared that I was to be family head. It wasn't because she particularly trusted me. In fact, her litany of complaints made me a close relative of the devil—a very close relative—but not the devil himself, since that honor belonged solely to Mother, who reciprocated Grandmother's opinion in equal measure. Like matching poles of two magnets that found themselves head to head, they had to oppose each other.

It was rather silly, the whole scene over the matter of who should wear the mantle of family head, as if the two had been fighting over the throne of Kandahar. Mother didn't offer any real opinions on the matter of Father's replacement. She simply repeated that I was too young and naive to take on this burden and should be spared the bother, since there were adults, meaning herself, available.

Grandmother replied that when Grandfather had left home to fight the Russians, she, too, had protected her son, my father, from his responsibilities because of his youth. Grandmother then lowered her head and vigorously wiped her dry eyes before saying that when the time had come to take charge, where had Father ended up because of this overdose of maternal love? Nowhere but a land mine—and that after spending a lifetime in “meditation,” by all means a respectable activity, especially for the dead.

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Anyway, the argument heated up nicely, engulfing the house in a chorus of hard debate. So much so that the womenfolk of the village soon gathered in our home; they seated me in the middle as if I were the center of the universe and started revolving around me like planets in the Milky Way, all the while biting each other's heads off.

Exhausted, they finally decided to resolve the matter through a vote. The younger women raised their hands in Mother's favor, clearly outnumbering the older lot, who supported Grandmother. Grandmother screwed up her already screwed-up face and sat stoic and silent. There was more at play here than my inheritance of a title. This case would determine forever the equation of power in our village between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, in the New World Order of Mr. Bush.

Grandmother appeared ready to concede defeat when in walked Haji Sahib. Haji Sahib had lost one eye in the Soviet War. He wore his turban at an angle to cover the hole on the left side of his face. His missing, martyred eye had gained him enormous respect amongst the villagers.

“Haji Sahib,” Grandmother cried out, “do you want democracy and voting to take over the legacy of tribe and tradition? Oh, what agony they must be in, our dead but wise elders!”

Haji Sahib listened to the controversy with what appeared like great wisdom; all the while, his one eye roved over me, disapprovingly, I fear. Then he cleared his throat to announce the verdict. The women hushed up. Grandmother sat tense as a guitar string, almost squeaky in her silence.

Finally, in his gruff voice, Haji Sahib gave a grand speech, declaring that Mother’s youth and exuberance were no match for Grandmother’s experience and political acumen. Grandmother, he proclaimed, had been born in the era of true tribal culture, had gotten married in Kabul under the kingship of Zahir Shah, had survived Soviet communism, had tasted alternating doses of military dictatorship and democracy in Pakistan, and was now guiding her family in the face of American imperialism. Had she not been a woman, said Haji Sahib, growing louder, Grandmother could have taken Father’s position. He scolded Mother for her ambitions and firmly put her in her place—while I was placed in mine, as the leader of the family. Having been taught never to question God’s blessings, I happily accepted Mother’s ire and angry glances and stepped into the preordained role that would eventually be my undoing.

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The real victims of this transition of power were my younger brother and sister, whom I turned into serfs and bossed around all the time. It was at this point that I began to understand Father; the value of his meditation techniques became apparent to me, and I spent considerable time exercising the finer points of his methods during my long siestas.

There wasn’t much to do as family head—or if there was, I never found out. The government, the United Nations, or someone would deliver food rations to our village on a regular basis. All I had to do was stand in line, collect the sacks, hand them to my younger brother, and walk him back like a donkey, an animal I admire greatly.

Then, like an old watch that had run out of time for no apparent reason, the ration trucks stopped suddenly. Guess they got hit by the recession as well. After we ran out of food and ideas, Mother decided that the easiest way was to cross the border into Pakistan and buy what we needed. She took off her gold ring and placed this last bit of her husband into my hands, as gingerly as if she were passing me the Olympic torch.

Crossing into Pakistan was no problem. I had only to climb over the mountaintop that I figured to be the border, and with God’s help, I found myself

in a village. As luck would have it, the village had a small shop stocked with eatables. Well, I told the shopkeeper, I wanted to barter the ring for food. He observed me with sleepy eyes.

“What was your grandfather’s name?” He caressed his white beard with a slow, loving hand.

“Toofan Khan.”

“Your father?”

“Namkeen Khan.”

He stopped fussing with his beard and scratched his head instead. “Namkeen Khan? Wasn’t he the cousin of Ajab Khan and the nephew of Hatim Khan’s second wife?”

I nodded.

He stood up from his seat and hugged me. “I have heard great tales of your father, that he died fighting the Americans, died for his soil. What a man, a soldier till the end.”

Evidently, Father had become famous after his death. Miss Sadia said this happened to most great men in history; the world was stingy in honoring the living. I received this unexpected glory with grace, humility, and silence, as befitting the son of a great warrior.

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I am sure the shopkeeper was impressed with my conduct, for when he heard how the family was faring, he shook his head in genuine grief. Then he brightened and said that the UN trucks were to resume their supplies shortly.

“Your grandfather and father both died fighting foreigners. How can I accept money from you, the heir of sacred blood, a martyr’s son? Keep the ring and save it for the future,” he advised. He then gave me a small sack of flour to help tide us over the next few days and promised more aid in the future.

For the first time, I felt in my heart that I had indeed earned the right to lead my family. With the sack flung over my shoulder, I started back, proud and triumphant at saving Mother’s gold, which was also solid evidence of my legitimate birth, a touchy subject during wars and in refugee camps.

And that’s when they caught me, the Americans, just as I was crossing the border. They saw the sack in my hands, and out came the guns and the punches, followed by a few solid kicks in the behind. But that’s okay in a war. When they had me fully covered, one of them opened the sack and signaled to someone else, who then called out to another fellow, and so on,

till it seemed a whole battalion was there. Soon the soldiers were sniffing and tasting my flour, spilling it all over the place. Good thing I got it for free.

Then someone whom everyone saluted and addressed as “Major” came along. He headed straight at me like a missile on target and gave me a weird look: “Everyone takes that stuff into Pakistan, not out of it.”

I told him he was wrong. Everyone brought the “stuff” from Pakistan, and even paid a premium; justifiably so, since we were busy growing poppies.

The major was a real tight ass, for he kicked me in the buns for being funny, and said I couldn’t lie my way out of dope charges. Everyone knew the “stuff” went from Afghanistan to Pakistan, and then on to Europe and the streets of America.

In my ignorance, I didn’t understand him; that’s because I hadn’t yet met Bob and learned there was a recession going on in America, which meant that the Americans probably needed the flour as bad as we did.

178 In any case, I kept my nerve, laughed to cool things down, flattered the major profusely, and said no, no, Mr. Bush was kind enough to send food and supplies to Afghanistan, along with all the nice army people. This really pissed the major off. He kicked me again and said that Americans weren’t involved in any shady deals, that I was spreading rumors about him, his men, his army, and his country.

Either way, we weren’t able to resolve the issue amicably. I pleaded with the major to let me go. My grandmother, mother, and young ones were waiting. If they didn’t get their share soon, they might die. The major stared at me with great suspicion, demanded that the contents of the bag be sent to a lab for testing, and ordered my arrest.

Bob looked at me for some time. Then he asked me to swear I was telling the truth. I said I was. He made me swear all over again, which I did. He still wouldn’t believe me, so he placed the beer in front of me: “Swear on our friendship.”

Under duress, I took the oath on a can of alcohol. I am sure God will understand, though the Tableeghis will probably damn me to hell for a thousand eternities if only to keep heaven and its lottery winners safe for as long as possible.

That’s when Bob believed me and said, “The major, did he give you the Miranda?”

I told him the major offered no Miranda, Pepsi, or 7-Up, not even a glass of water, which was sort of mean, considering he'd taken away my flour. Bob shook his head. "The Miranda isn't a drink. It's a law..." He paused, then said, "Shit, you guys in the third world don't have any rights."

That piqued my interest—not what rights I had or didn't, but how many worlds there were. In fact, for some odd reason, it was the second world that interested me. Bob said he only knew about the first and the third.

When I pushed him for an answer, he said, "You don't know or don't care why you're in prison?"

I told Bob I'd clarified my story to the army men. I was pretty certain they'd let me go once they dug out the truth, even though truth did have a problem poking its silly head out in dangerous times like these.

Bob looked exasperated. "You're behind bars, on charges of drug trafficking—heroin, to be precise." He paused. "They're also looking for the gang you're linked with."

I laughed hard at that, real hard. Then I sobered down and said I was no smuggler, no matter what the major said. Someone would believe me.

"You're innocent, kid, and in trouble."

I said I was in less trouble than my family was, since I was getting food, beer, and an education, all for free, while they were, without doubt, hungrier than ants during the monsoons.

Bob stared at me for a while, and then, without considering the circumstances, he did the unthinkable. He emptied the beer over his head, drenching himself from head to toe, and said, "Well, I'll be damned."

That shocked me. Even more so, I was very, very angry. When I shouted at him, he looked up, anxious. "What's wrong?"

I pointed to the beer all over his clothes. "That was a sack of flour!" I said. "There's a recession on, don't you know?"

Confused and agitated, Bob slumped in his chair and stared at me. "I have no idea what you're saying."

"The recession..."

He cut me off with a wave of his hand. He had a weary look, one you see on wizened old men sitting on street corners with nothing to do, men who've seen the earthly world and are about to see the other, but can't do much to change either one.

"Kid," he said finally, "recession or not, it's time both of us left—time to go home."

I peered at Bob's sad, faraway face. I wondered if Grandmother and Mother would still be fighting, whether my no-good brother had usurped my crown, and what mischief Haji Sahib might have caused with his one and only hyperactive eye; then I decided that none of it mattered. It *was* time to go. After all, I was the head of the family, and now that we had a recession, I had to do something.