

STOLEN DREAMS



The Karez Project Library
Volume 6.0

STOLEN DREAMS

“**Y**ou brought it back covered in mud.” The voice that woke him was but a coarse whisper in the dark. Yet Amin knew, without seeing his older brother’s face, that Amir was angry. Without another word, he sprang to his feet and followed Amir into the crisp Kabul dawn.

“I was going to clean it first thing this morning,” Amin began. “You know what the streets of Taimani are like after a rain. When I was dropping Saeed back home last night, the taxi slid into the jui. I’m sure it’s not damaged. But with only Saeed and Javed there to help lift it out, the wheels spun madly, slinging mud everywhere. If you think the car looks bad, you should have seen Saeed and Javed.”

Had he been looking, Amir would have been able to make out Amin’s tentative smile in the pale morning light. But he was marching towards the water pump with bucket and rag in hand. Grasping the hand pump, like one might have grasped a foe by the throat, Amir brought the flow of water to his bucket in four strokes.

“Let me do that,” Amin offered, clutching the pump handle.

Amir released his grip and stood back to let his brother finish filling the bucket. Once more Amin sought to appease his brother’s temper with an imploring, contrite glance. For the first time that day the two young men’s eyes met, eyes which served as windows to their minds, providing glimpses of their anguished stories. Even though the words had never been voiced, each knew his own hidden tale by heart, and each could also recite his brother’s story, at least from his own point of view.

“I should have remembered that Amir never misses namaz-i-subh,” Amin thought to himself. “He was bound to see his filthy taxi before I had a chance to clean it. I just wish that he did not take life so seriously. No, he will let this small thing ruin his day and will punish me by not talking to me – just like father would have done when he was alive. He’s so much like father in every way.”

“Everything is still such a game for Amin,” thought Amir. “Always out with his friends, never taking life seriously. When will he ever grow up and see the importance of caring properly for possessions? He has no idea of the load I carry as head of the family. This taxi represents our main source of income, yet he treats it so lightly. He must learn his lesson well. That’s what father would do – teach him a good lesson about how to care for things.”

“Amir Jan,” Amin ventured to speak as he walked back to the taxi carrying the water. “I’ll never let this happen again.”

“You’re right,” Amir said grabbing the bucket from Amin’s hands and splashing its contents against the mud-speckled side of the car. “I’ll never let you use this car again. Go get another bucket of water.”

Now it was Amin’s turn to be angry, it was his turn to grasp the hand pump ‘by the throat’.

STOLEN DREAMS

“Always dispensing justice, always handing down edicts,” thought Amin as he furiously pumped. “Amir relishes his role as family ruler. To him it is power and control. Who is he to deny me the right to drive the family car? Yes, he works long days driving the taxi, but it was father’s legacy to us, our security against an uncertain future. Amir has taken good care of the car, but he never had to work to gain it. He does not know how hard I work at my studies. And when I complete my degree, I too will earn a good wage; I too will provide support for the family. He is not the only one who thinks of our security. And what’s more, I’ll bring honor to us all through my position as a scholar. When that day comes, we’ll see if Amir still treats me like a child.”

In outward silence the two brothers washed away the filth that clung to the car. Yet inward, brooding thoughts soiled their hearts.

“He always works better when he is angry,” thought Amir. “Father said so once. Well, let him stay angry until the job is done.”

“Chai subh is ready,” their little sister called from the house.

“I must be off early, Amir called back. “No time today.”

“I’m not hungry,” Amin claimed as he poured the last bucket of water over the freshly cleaned car.

In a moment their mother came out of the house with a tray bearing two glasses of milky sweet tea and nan. “You two eat something, and don’t give me any excuses.”

The boys knew it would prove useless to refuse and so, instinctively, they obeyed their mother.

“A beautifully clear morning today, no?” she said as she watched her sons eat. “Every new day a fresh start.”

Her two sons were in no place to agree with her, but neither were they apt to contradict her simple, yet insightful wisdom. And so, with their mother looking on, the brothers exchanged polite salutations and departed; Amir in his taxi into the city, and Amin on his bicycle to the university. They never could have guessed how profoundly their lives would be changed that day, nor how, by the end the day, they would come to be closer than they ever had been before.



He looked forlorn as he sat next to Amir gazing into his hands, mindlessly rubbing his left palm with his right thumb. Boxes filled the taxi’s trunk and back seat. The trip to mandai would have been in total silence but that the pressure was too much to bear. He had to speak to someone about his plight, and the anonymous taxi driver was as good as anyone.

STOLEN DREAMS

“...my last day...” the passenger mumbled.

“Excuse me, “Amir said. “I didn’t hear you.”

“My last day,” he said aloud. “It is my last day to sell these items. Tomorrow the sidewalk where I rent a space will be torn-up and I have no new place to set-up shop. But, even if I did, I’ve not sold anything in days. These new pots, just in from Iran, might sell today and fetch a fine profit. But if I don’t pay my rent tonight, my landlord has promised to put my family and me out on the street in the morning. I have five children, all less than seven years old. Too many mouths to feed...”

As his passenger droned on about his plight, Amir thought to himself, “Quite the shrewd businessman, aren’t you? Using the last of your cash to buy pots that may not sell in a shop that will vanish overnight, all the while you have hungry mouths to feed at home and a landlord threatening eviction. And here you take a taxi from the sarai to the market with your wares. No doubt you will eat a fine pilau for lunch while your family back home chews stale nan and drinks weak sugarless tea.”

“Sir, are you married?” he asked Amir.

“No. I’m putting money aside for that day.”

“I pray that that day never comes for you. Worries, my friend, never ending worries. That is what married life brings you. Oh, it is all joy in the beginning, expectations fulfilled. But very soon the nagging starts, and then the babies cry, there is no end to it. No, my friend, may God be merciful and spare you from marriage.”

“Though the mountain be high, my brother, there is path over it,” Amir replied.

“Yes, yes there is a way. You are right. But what worries along that path. My wife nags for the things she sees that others have. She has a constant pain in her legs, which I must hear about during every moment we are together. And if that’s not enough, she always wants to know why our neighbors have a television and we don’t. I never hear the end of it. My children do not cry only for bread. They cry from sickness as much as from hunger.

Amir wasn’t listening. He had heard it all before. He knew that his own life would be different. At least he had the taxi, and it was fully paid for. It brought in enough income to feed the family well, to pay their rent, to keep Amin at university, to set aside for a wedding (or two), and to enable him to go on hajj one day. No, his life would not follow this poor man’s road. Amir was on a different path.

“Brother, keep your money,” Amir said, placing the last of the boxes on the side of the road. “It doesn’t matter.”

Rather than hearing the usual protest, the pot vender just said, “Good!”

As Amir got back into his taxi he overheard the vender call out to the boy in the hotel behind his sidewalk shop, “Fried eggs this morning with green tea and don’t cheat me on the sugar today.”

STOLEN DREAMS



In mandai, four light blue burqas huddled into the back seat of the taxi. “Karte Parwan just below Bala Bagh.” It was the smallest burqa who spoke. “And can you turn off that silly Hindi music? I can’t understand what the boys see in those Bollywood bimbos.”

“I know what they see, at least what they look at,” exclaimed another voice to peals of high pitched laughter.

“Never mind that,” the leader continued. “Turn the radio to Sadaye Zane Afghan and let’s listen to something from our own women.”

“Pushy women in burqas. They’re the worst,” thought Amir as he turned the radio dial.

“Turn it up, I can hardly hear it,” came the demand from the back seat.

Amir touched the volume button without turning it and surveyed the blue phalanx in his rear view mirror. Just as he had thought! Within seconds the chatter began and no one was paying the least attention to the radio.

“My wife will be submissive,” Amir thought to himself, “and stay at home. None of this traipsing about the city with her friends, making a fool of herself, and bringing dishonor on the family. She will be like my mother, one who does not say too much, but one who says just the right thing.” He thought back to his early morning encounter, and to his mother’s words.

“Did you turn it up? I tell you I cannot hear a thing of what they are saying.”

Amir touched the button again and continued in his thoughts.

“When I have saved enough money for both Amin’s dowry and my own, then we will have a double wedding. Then he will no longer question the depth of his big brother’s love for him.”

The traffic came to a standstill beside the new Kabul Serena Hotel. “And if we can be patient, maybe we will have enough money to have our wedding in there. Imagine everyone’s envy and admiration.

Amir caressed the steering wheel, then ran his hand across the dashboard lost in his dreams. “Father did well to leave us this taxi. It’s our security, our future.”

A horn blasted from the bus behind him and Amir lurched forward, called back into the present, called back into earning that double wedding at the Kabul Serena one fare at a time.

“I won’t ask you again to turn up the radio,” came the voice from the back seat.

STOLEN DREAMS

“It’s an old radio. That’s as loud as it gets.” came the reply.



“Chinese shoes in lots of ten thousand pairs.”

“But who will buy them?” Amir inquired. “Don’t we make our own shoes here in Afghanistan?”

“Down Darul Aman on the left after Habibia School,” the trader noted. Amir turned at Deh Mazang.

The Pashtoon trader must have lived in Pakistan most of his life. He had adopted the custom of wearing an over-starched white shalwaz kamise, and by the size of his girth it appeared that he had acquired the habit of consuming a full chicken karahi at regular intervals.

“Its not that we don’t have good watani shoes here,” he continued. “However, while we may have millions of workers, the Chinese have billions of workers. And they pay them nothing, I tell you, nothing! So, the shoes I import—in lots of ten thousand pairs—by overland route through Pakistan. Oh, it takes a few bribes on the way – what am I saying – maybe a hundred bribes on the way! But I have that all figured in – you have to in this business. What was I saying? Oh yes, those shoes work out to retail at the same price as the local product. ‘And do they sell?’ you ask. Well, Afghans always think that an imported item is better than the watani equivalent. So, there you have it. The Chinese shoes sell, and the profits go into my pocket. I tell you, I’m on to a good thing.”

“But will it last. Is it a secure investment for the future?” Amir asked, dodging the potholes along Darul Aman.

“You don’t think that I invest in just one thing, do you? No businessman would get ahead with that kind of thinking. Of course I have other investments. No, you have always to be looking into new ways of turning a profit. This is it. Turn in here.”

While the trader handed him crisp new afghanis for his fare, Amir reflected on his investment, his taxi. “Without it, what future would we have?” he thought.

But there was no time to think of that. Five students piled into the car and he was off to Sahre Nao.



Amir said his namaz-i-digar at Puli Khishti Mosque. He never missed prayers. If he drove past a mosque during the azan, he would stop there and then. He knew that living an ordered life called for faithful submission to God’s will. He reflected on the lives of some of the unfortunates he met in his line of work, and wondered if they had

STOLEN DREAMS

grasped that fundamental truth. If they had, then maybe their lives would not have been so fraught with trials.

As he arrived at his taxi, a Sufi was waiting for a ride to Qala-i-Fathullah. Amir was pleased that God had appointed such a person to approach him after prayers, a man with whom he might reflect on life, a God-given chance to seek answers to deep questions from the depth of his soul.

“Sir,” Amir began, “you are a hajji, no? Forgive me for asking, but did you save money for your hajj, or were you born into a family of means?”

“My brother, God willed that I made the hajj and thus He alone provided the means.”

“I too intend to make the hajj. It would be my crowning accomplishment in life. I set aside a portion of my earnings each day for this holy purpose.”

“You do well to set your heart to go on hajj.”

“In your understanding,” Amir continued, “will God then keep guard over my fortune if I faithfully perform my prayers, give alms, keep the fast, and set my heart to go on hajj?”

“Who can say what the plan of God is for any of His servants but that we each submit to His will?”

“But certainly, God will insure that our futures are secure if we are careful to worship Him?”

“You are right, my young friend, to seek to worship God.” The Sufi paused for a moment. “But, we must each one be careful to know within us the true motivation of our worship. Rabia has rightly prayed, ‘O Lord, if I worship you from the fear of hell, cast me into hell. If I worship you from desire for paradise, deny me paradise.’ Only God All-knowing, and your own heart within you, can tell what your true motivation is for any action you take.”

The two drove on in silence as the weight of the Sufi’s words penetrated Amir’s mind and heart.

As they approached Share Nao Park, a volleyball rolled in front of the taxi. Unconsciously, Amir came to a stop. A college student ran into the street to collect the ball. He looked up at Amir and waved thankfully, returning to his group of friends practicing their volleyball skills under the trees. Nearby, a group of young women sat eating ice cream, pretending not to notice the boys. Amir caught the scene with the glance of his eye and, for the first time all day, a smile crossed his face. He looked younger in that instant, more like his actual age. It was as if the cares of the world had fallen from his shoulders. For once, he thought nothing of his future and how he might secure it. For once, he thought only of that moment in the park, the boys playing volleyball and the girls eating ice cream – the now.

STOLEN DREAMS



Amir sat ashen-faced in the police office. The captain walked past him and dropped a thick book onto his desk. As he sat at his desk, he opened the book to a clean page and looked up at Amir.

“It often happens at dusk,” the police officer reported. “More difficult to chase them in the dark. They can have the car repainted by the morning, and then off to who knows where, Kandahar, Jalalabad, Mazar.”

Amin rushed into the police station wide-eyed with the car’s paper in hand, Saeed and Javed following close behind. Amir was thankful that they had arrived before he gave his statement to the police. Now Amin and his friends would hear it as well. He knew that it would be too painful to repeat. “Let them recount my agony,” he thought. “Once is enough for me.”

“It was during namaz-i-sham. The thieves took the car while I was at my prayers.”

“It was a great sin,” the officer noted, and all who heard him agreed. “Was the car locked?”

“Of course it was locked,” Amir responded in annoyance.

“Do you have the papers?”

Amin brought them forward and placed them on the officer’s desk.

“This model is very popular. There must be thousands of these Corollas in Kabul alone. We will do what we can to find it, but you must understand how understaffed we are. We have your number and we’ll call you if something comes our way.”

Saeed drove Amir and Amin home in his uncle’s car. In one fateful moment Amir’s independence had turned to dependence. His hopes for the future had turned to despair. His confidence that his compliance with God’s will insured his family’s financial security was shattered.

“What’s this for?” Saeed asked, stuffing the money back into Amir’s pocket.

“Between brothers, accounts should be paid,” Amir replied, pulling the notes from his pocket. “You have helped Amin and me when we needed your help most. Take this to pay for your uncle’s petrol.”

“Don’t be foolish,” Saeed replied. “You truly are my brother and my uncle’s car is your own. Do not think that we would offer any kindness to one of our own and expect to be paid. Furthermore, if accounts are to be made equal, I owe you a thousand times this amount for all your kindnesses. Keep your money, Amir-Jan, and remain my big brother.”

“You are kind, Saeed-Jan.”

STOLEN DREAMS

“God is kind,” Saeed replied, as the four entered the house.

Amir’s mother knew what to say, and what not to say. She had lived for twenty-five years with Amir’s father before his death, and through the years had gained a unique skill at reading his moods. She saw so much of her husband in his son, so she knew how to greet this tragic news. Amir was grateful to his mother and sister for greeting him in silence when he arrived home. It was a welcoming silence, one that spoke of grief and love.

Amin also knew that his brother would prefer not to talk, so he did enough talking for everyone.

“We must do our own investigation. The police forgot about us as soon as we walked out the door. If we don’t start asking questions tonight, tomorrow will be too late.”

“It is too late already, Amin-Jan,” Amir inserted. “Accept it. We will never see that car again.”

“It is too much for you to think of, Amir,” Javed offered. “We will go and see what information we can gather.”

“Not before you drink some tea,” Amir’s mother said bringing in a tray.

“Thank you auntie, but we must go now,” Saeed said pulling the car keys from his pocket.

“I’m going too,” Amin said looking back at Amir.

“As you please,” Amir replied. “I will remain here with my thoughts.”

Amir’s mother poured out a cup of tea for Amir and silently sat with him in his misery. His sister sat in the corner, mute as well, knowing that tonight would be a night long remembered. It seemed like an eternity before anyone spoke. And then, finally, Amir gave voice to his pain.

“My future, our future, has been lost. I don’t know what I am going to do. Like so many in this city, we will become poorer and poorer as time goes by. Amin will have to give up his studies to find work. Who knows where he and I will find work? I don’t want you to work, mother. Who knows what will become of this family I am now responsible for?”

“God knows,” his mother replied.

“Yes, God is All-knowing,” Amir agreed.

“And, All-compassionate. Amir-Jan, you know that for most of our life we did not have that car? Only for the past few years has it been the object of our adoration. What did we have before then?”

STOLEN DREAMS

Amir gave no reply, although she knew that he was listening.

“We had each other. And that was enough.”

“I know,” Amir responded in a whisper.

Placing her hand on his arm she continued, “And we still have each other.”

Amir wondered if that really was enough. He reflected back on his day, on all the people he had met. “I judged my life against theirs,” he thought. “I thought that because of my taxi my life was secure. And now I have nothing more than what I had when I entered this world – just my family. Yes, I still have them. But what of my faith in God? Do I still have that?”

Amir knew better than to answer that question. But he still had to ask it. And with the asking, the Sufi’s words flooded back into his mind. It was as if another question, from somewhere outside of himself, echoed in response. “Why do you worship God, why do you pray?”

Amin, Saeed, and Javed returned with little information. Amir had known that they would come up empty in their investigation. They told him that it was too late to find out anything tonight. They would start again in the morning.

Saeed and Javed were driving off when the call to prayer for namaz-i-khuftan rang out from the local mosque. Having bid their friends goodnight, Amir and Amin stood in the courtyard where the car once stood. The empty courtyard mirrored the emptiness they each felt. Clots of dried mud formed an outline where the car had been given its last cleaning. The bucket was still there, with the rag draped across it. Amir sat down on the side of the porch to survey the scene. His younger brother sat beside him.

“So, you really will never drive that car again,” Amir reflected.

“No,” Amin agreed in a whisper.

He knew that Amir was sorry for his harsh words that morning. It wasn’t in what he said that told Amin that, it was the way he spoke. And in that moment Amin knew just how much his brother loved him.

“So,” said Amin, standing up suddenly. “Shall we go to prayers? We don’t want to be the last ones there.”

Amir did not stand, nor did he look up at his brother. Amin had no idea of the inner battle being waged in Amir’s heart.

“How can I go worship God?” Amir thought. “I have too many unanswered questions. Why didn’t God protect the car? What will come of us? Where’s my security now?”

Amin brought Amir’s thoughts back to earth.

STOLEN DREAMS

“Come, big brother. All that we now own cannot be stolen while we are at prayers.”

“You are right, little brother. Our greatest possessions cannot be taken from us.” Amir paused and then, standing, added, “But, we can still lose them if we are not careful.”

The two brothers entered the street and slowly made their way to the mosque.