

The Potter's Hands



The Karez Project Library
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Bursts of gunfire shattered the stillness of the morning setting a flock of resting swallows to flight. The boy froze in horror as the black turbaned gunman walked with slow deliberate steps to front of his father's shop. The butt of his Kalashnikov came crashing down on assorted pots, shattering weeks of work in one blow. Next it was the cowering shopkeeper's turn. As the Talib took aim, the boy instinctively cried, "Papa!" Before firing, his cold dark eyes looked back at the boy with a stare that revealed a heartless darkness within. Another burst of gunfire echoed in the streets. Another cry of "Papa!" followed. Another flock of birds took flight.

Najib woke with a start, tears flooding his eyes. The horror he had witnessed in his dream lingered as he passed into wakefulness. His body was drenched in sweat, not so much from the stifling heat of the breezeless night. His sweat was cold, provoked by the fears of yet another nightmare.

The fan slowly spun above family members sleeping around him. It only served to push the thick air back on Najib, offering no relief. "I must get out," he thought to himself as he rose and made his way for the door and up to the roof.

Najib moved silently past his sleeping neighbors who had carried their charpoys to the roof in order to escape the heat of their quarters below. He leaned against the water tank and surveyed the sleeping city.

Peshawar was where he lived, but it was not his home. Istalif was only a faint memory to him now. However, this he did remember. The air of the Shamali was pristine. The air of Peshawar was thick with the belching smoke of hundreds, no thousands, of trucks and taxis and rickshaws. Not only could you see the air in Peshawar, but you could taste it. Najib thought, "Living here gives new meaning to *awa khori!*"

Why had his life been so blighted? He was still young. But, the days of his youth would be passing soon. As an eighteen year old in Istalif, he would now have truly learned the craft of pottery from his father, providing support for his family through the work of his hands. However, here in Peshawar he had to take on any menial job in order to spare his family from a life, that was not a life, in the camps. Would he be a refugee for the rest of his life, an unwanted burden in an unwelcoming land?

If only his family had stayed in Afghanistan. If only he had grown up in Istalif, learning to be a potter like his father before him. His mind rushed back to his dream.

"It was not like that at all," he said out loud, recalling his nightmare. His family had left the war in Afghanistan long before the days of the Taliban. His father had died there in Peshawar, heartbroken, eking out a living in the camps. That was why Najib, now the head of the family, had convinced his mother, sister and younger brother to find a room in the city. "If we stay out here with no chance for work we will all die like father."

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“No, the dream was filled with symbols,” Najib thought. “It is from God – a sign to give me direction, or some lesson. It was so much like my other dream. What can God be trying to tell me?”

Najib thought back to his previous dream the week before. In many ways it had been like tonight's dream except for one detail. The flight of the birds, the Kalashnikov, the smashed pottery, all the same except that instead of a Taliban, a Russian soldier had killed his father. “The Russians destroyed our lives and sent us into exile here,” he thought.

Recollecting his first dream, Najib remembered the Russian soldier's eyes – not dark like the Talib's, but cool, blue, revealing the heart of one who has lost his way. The Talib in tonight's dream had killed out of hate, knowing what he wanted. The Russian in his first dream had killed out of fear, not knowing where he was going.

“The murder of my father was like the murder of my past. The smashing of the pots was like the smashing of my future. Why these symbols? How do they tell me more than I already know? My life is hopeless. Like that Russian soldier, I too have no direction.”

A cock crowed below him. A charpoy creaked as another dreamer turned over in his sleep. Off in the distance, pale light began to appear on the horizon, and the first muezzin called out into the fading darkness.



“Mother, tell me about my father.”

Ignoring his request, Najib's mother finished kneading the dough for the evening meal while his sister cleaned the rice.

“Noorzia, go up to the roof and tell your brother that the dough is ready to be taken to the nan-boyi.”

Maybe it was because of her work that she did not answer Najib's request. Or maybe there was a lingering hurt she did not want to touch.

“What do you want to know?” she asked when Noorzia had left. “You were eight when he died. Don't you remember him?”

“Yes, but my memories are dim impressions. I remember a time when his hands were rough and yet the calluses turned soft over time when he had no work in the camp. I remember being held at night by his strong arms and running my fingers across his hands trying to recall the beautiful pottery those hands had made before – before our lives turned to ashes.”

Noorzia returned with her brother. “Take this basket to the nan-boyi Hakim – and I'm sending your sister along this time to make sure you don't get into trouble.”

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“What? What did I do?” protested Hakim.

“Go quickly and get a place in the queue. And remember, Noorzia is not there to hold your place but to report back on you. Here, Noorzia, take this chador.”

When they had left, she turned to her oldest son. “You’re too dreamy, Najib. You dream about what is past, what is lost. I have no time for such things. I worry about today – where our food will come from and how we will pay the rent.”

“Why don’t we go back to Istalif? We have a house there. We could start a new life.”

“It’s too soon. Maybe the Taliban will come back. Don’t you remember what they did in the Shamali?”

Najib knew the stories. Waging all out-war against the Lion of Panjsher, the Taliban had razed the Shamali Valley. It was unlikely that their house would still be standing.

Najib caught his mother’s eye. “Mother, I had another dream.”

“You and your dreams. Was it another horror to add to the horrors I have already lived? I don’t want to hear of your dreams.”

“But this one had a different ending.”

“Was it an American soldier who kills your father this time?” As tears welled up in his mother’s eyes, Najib understood for the first time how his dreams had affected his mother. “Spare me the torment,” she whispered.

Drying her eyes with a corner of her chador, she poured the rice into the deg and busied herself with preparing the evening meal.



Najib stood against the wall of the mosque as the worshippers slowly drifted back into the bright afternoon sunlight. Friday prayers were always a special time for him. He could almost pretend that he was back in Afghanistan. The sermon was in Dari, the men around him were all Tajiks, and there was always talk of the latest development in the war across the border.

Recent times had brought the most troubling developments in many years of struggle – and yet with them came a glimmer of hope. Najib’s community had been deeply grieved by the murder of Amed Shah Massoud, the Lion of Panjsher. Many in the mosque were Panjsheris and the loss seemed too much to bear. The grief permeated the very fiber of the ummah. And yet, with his death, the pace of history seemed to quicken – news of an attack on America, then invasion by the Americans on the side of the Northern Alliance, and then the swift downfall of the Taliban. The range of emotions had run the full spectrum leading to talk of return; not *if* they would return, but *when*.

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The marble felt cool against Najib's back as he waited for the white-bearded men to finish their important conversations. Sensing Najib's eyes were fixed on him, Amanullah knew that the young man sought to meet with him. With a final series of salutations, the kindly mullah turned to Najib and greeted him.

"Najibullah. Peace be on you. Are you well? Is your family well?"

"Peace be with you. Yes, Sahib, I am well. How are you? How is your health?"

"I sense you seek my counsel."

"Yes, Sahib. I have been having dreams of late."

"Excuse me." Amanullah turned and called out to an elder as he was leaving the mosque. "Sufi Sahib, do you mind joining us for a moment?"

Sitting together on the cool pavement, Amanullah introduced Najib to the venerable Sufi who had been among their community for some time. It was a tremendous honor to be in his presence. He knew for certain now that God would give him the interpretation of his dreams. With his heart in his throat, Najib recounted his first two dreams.

"And then last night, I dreamt again. The setting was as before, but my senses were very different. In my previous dreams I had a deep sense of foreboding. But as this dream began I had a feeling of well-being and peace, such as I had never known before. And the story was different. I was alone. There was no soldier, no one with a gun. My father was nowhere to be seen. I stood before my father's shop gazing upon broken potsherds lying at my feet. And then a hand was placed upon my shoulder. A feeling of warmth and love somehow emanated from this touch and I knew that everything was going to be all right. I wanted to look up and behold the face of the man who was suddenly standing beside me, but I could look only at the broken bits of pottery. This nameless man knelt beside me and began to pick-up the broken pieces. And before my wondering eyes, he brought the pieces together and they became one again. One by one he collected all the potsherds and made each vessel whole as I watched in amazement. Pondering how this could be, I awoke with the sense that I had been in the very presence of God Almighty."

The mullah and Sufi said nothing. Finally the silence was broken. Amanullah reached over and touched the Sufi's arm and said quietly, "This boy's father was also a dreamer."

At last the Sufi spoke. "Najib-jan, what do you think that these dreams mean?"

"I used to think that my life was hopeless and that both my past and future had been taken from me. But now, I don't know. I think that God is telling me that it is time to return home to Istalif – that everything will be fine – that the pieces of my life will be put back together."

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“That is the clear interpretation,” said the Sufi. “I wonder if there are even deeper meanings. Have you told us everything you saw? Have you left out any details from your dream?”

“Sahib, I believe I have recounted everything. At least I think I have.”

“This sense of God's presence I find very interesting,” noted the Sufi. “Do you know the work of Rumi?”

“I have only heard tell of him Sahib; I cannot quote any of his writings.”

“He penned these words. ‘I looked upon every Cross, in every church, yet He was not there. I went to the temples of India and the shrines of China yet He was not there... Then I looked within my own heart and there I found Him – He was nowhere else.’ Who do you think Rumi was referring to?”

“God, of course.”

“You are very close to the Sufi way, Najibullah. I sense that the full meaning of this final dream eludes us now for a reason. However, in part I believe that it has to do with you finding the nearness of God within. And, somehow, that knowledge will guide you as the broken pieces of your life are mended. It may not be an easy path, but as you follow the voice within, you will find the way.”

Their meeting was over. Like awakening from one of his dreams, Najib bid farewell to his masters and stepped back into the world.



“Why are you trying to kill us? We are your own flesh and blood. I bore you into this world, and now you bring me to the brink of death.”

Winter was quickly approaching. The tent city for returning refugees, set up at the edge of Kabul, was meant to be only temporary housing. No one knew that so many would return so soon. Kabul could not cope with the numbers. Housing could not be found and food was in short supply.

“This was your idea Najib,” his mother began again. “I told you to wait for the new year, but you came back from a meeting with a few holy men to say that God had directed us to return now. I guess it was the Almighty's intention to kill us here in our homeland. I guess the soil of Pakistan has had its fill of our kinsmen.”

“Mother, please try to be strong. The Russians were in the camp today registering families for aid. I now have a card. They are giving out grain at their embassy. Hakim and I will go in early tomorrow morning and see what we can collect.”

“I will starve myself before I eat nan made with Russian wheat,” Najib's mother retorted.

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Najib and Hakim set out early for the city. But, despite their efforts to arrive before the crowds, the queue at the embassy gate was more like a mob. It poured into Darul-Aman, stopping all traffic. As it happened, many were sent away because they did not hold registration cards.

With card in hand, the two brothers entered the compound in great hopes that they would soon receive aid. Yet hours passed before any distribution began. And when it did, scuffles frequently broke out at the front of the queue, causing the distribution to be halted for a time until order could be restored.

As Najib and Hakim neared their goal, Najib stopped dead in his tracks. His gaze had been fixed on something, or someone, ahead of them. He thrust the registration card into Hakim's hand and said, "Collect the grain and meet me by the gate." Before Hakim could protest or question him, Najib had disappeared into the unruly crowd.

It seemed as though hours had passed before Hakim approached Najib, forlorn and empty-handed, begging his brother to not be angry. "The grain is finished for today. They told us to return tomorrow." Najib seemed to not be listening. "Did you hear me? Najib, what's the matter? You look like you have seen a ghost."

"I have, Hakim. Let's go, quickly."

But before they could move outside the compound gates, a strong hand fell on Najib's shoulder and a voice whispered in his ear, "I can find you some grain today if you just wait to the side of the gate." Najib did not look, but he knew who had spoken.

"What did he say?" Hakim asked, "That was one of the guards."

"I know. Let's wait here. I think if we wait until the crowds are gone we might get some grain today."

Soon, the guard returned and asked them to follow him. Najib looked to the ground and followed obediently. The soldier led them to a corner of the compound. Behind a container, there sat a sack of grain. At this moment Najib looked into the face of his benefactor. It was as he thought. He was the Russian soldier in his dream.

"Why did you do this?" Najib asked. "What did you help us in this way?"

"You might also ask how it is that a Russian speaks Dari."

Having said this, the memory of the soldier's first days in Afghanistan filled his mind. Those were days when he still believed in Communist ideals. He hoped that by learning Dari he would be able to express those ideals. But he never had the opportunity. He expected that he would win converts in the land of the Afghans. But, when he left, it was he who had changed, and he loathed himself for what he had become.

"Many questions have crossed my mind today", Najib replied. "Not the least of which being why people, so intent on destroying my life when I was a child, could be so intent on helping me now?"

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“I was a young soldier fifteen years ago here in Afghanistan. I learned many things about myself in those terrible days. I learned that I had within me the capacity for incredible cruelty. I never thought that I was a bad person until I fought here. I also learned that my nation's leaders could be wrong. I never had questioned my nation's motives or its leaders until I fought here. I can never make up for all the hurt inflicted by me and my people. But I can ask you, one person among many, to forgive me, to forgive us.”

“What you ask is beyond my capacity to give. I don't know how to begin to even comprehend your words.”

As Najib looked into the face that had haunted him in his dream, he noticed that he no longer feared the soldier. He later pondered whether his reaction was because of the soldier's words, or because of something else, something different in his eyes. His eyes were no longer the eyes of a lost soul. They now revealed a person at peace within, someone who knew where he was going.

“I know I ask much – maybe too much. Here, let me help you with this sack.”

Hoisting the sack onto the brother's shoulders, the soldier went on ahead to Darul-Aman. He stopped a taxi and turned to Najib and Hakim.

“Will you be taking this to sell in mandai today?” the soldier asked.

“Yes, but we cannot afford a taxi.”

“Take these two men to the grain market in mandai quickly. Here is enough to cover their fare.” The soldier handed a stack of afs to the driver as Najib and Hakim loaded the sack into the boot.

One last time, Najib looked into the soldier's face. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

As the taxi begin to drive off, the soldier called out, “Go with God.”

Najib sat back in silence for a moment, and then instinctively turned to look out the back window. The soldier was still standing and staring at the taxi as it raced down the wide road, dodging pot holes all the way.

Turning to Hakim, Najib said with a smile, “When we have sold this grain for a good price, we will buy supplies and freshly ground flour for tonight's nan.”

“What if the flour has come from Russian wheat?” Hakim asked.

“We won't tell our mother.”



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“Our house still stands,” Najib announced triumphantly as he entered the tent. “At least, most of the walls are standing and two rooms still have roofs. The shop has been gutted but father’s potter’s wheel still works. After all these years, I could get it to turn. It will take time, but one day I will follow my father in much more than his dreaming.”

“Good. We go tomorrow,” Najib’s mother announced. “Noorzia, Hakim, start packing. Najib, go and arrange for transport. We will not stay in this camp one more day than we need to.”

“Mother, before we take one more step, I have to tell you something. Someone is living in the house.”

“Who is it? A relative? Is one of our relatives watching over it for us?”

“No, mother. They are not from our village. Few houses remain. Only ten families have returned so far, and they had been in Kabul. No, a widow and her young son have been living in our house. She’s a Pashtoon. And her husband was a Taliban.”

“So they will leave when we arrive. She can go to Qandahar.”

“No mother, the boy is very sick and cannot be moved. He may die soon. I told her that I will bring medicines from Kabul and that they can stay in one of the rooms until the boy is well.”

“Listen, Najib,” she said, grabbing his arm. “How can you say these things? We can barely feed our own family, much less the family of our enemy. These are the people who destroyed our village. How can you show them mercy? What if this boy’s disease comes upon us? I cannot believe that you gave her permission to stay. Winter is coming. How will we heat two rooms? Najib, we cannot do this.”

Najib answered slowly, “If *we* have received mercy, why can we not show mercy to another? If others are ruled by hate, must we hate in return? We have been refugees in a place not our own. Will we turn this woman out into the cold in her time of need, sending her son to a certain death? No mother, my heart tells me that this is the right thing to do. And your heart will tell you the same, if you will but listen to it.”

“My heart is dead,” she replied in a hoarse whisper.

Frost still blanketed the shadows of Istalif’s tall trees when Najib’s family returned home. After terse introductions with their house guests were made, Najib and Hakim set to securing the compound’s gate. When their things had been unpacked, Najib’s mother attended to the sick child, administering the medicines without a word. She was sure that the young mother knew little about caring for a sick child.

As the matriarch of the house, she did not make life easy for the Talib’s widow. But she took precautions never to say anything unkind when she thought that Najib could hear.

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Slowly young Farid began to recover. But just as surely as health returned to him, it began to fade from his mother. Possibly it was the prospect before her of living in a house where she knew she had no future. Or maybe her young life had seen more sorrow and hardship than she could bear. As the young woman's strength failed, her one comfort was the hope that Farid might grow up in a world not dominated by hate.

At first, Najib's mother nursed the Talib's wife in the hope that Farid would not be left in their care – only another mouth to feed. Yet, as she sat all night with the young widow, something awoke within her. Her compassion came too late, and was not enough to save Farid's mother. As she wept at the poor girl's passing, she came to realize that her heart was, in fact, not dead. She still had room for grief.

"Mother, why are you going through her things?"

"I want to know more about her," she said, looking up from the dead woman's box of treasures. "There is nothing of value. Only a few bits of cloth, their significance lost with her passing, and some old photographs. I thought that the Taliban had forbidden pictures of living things."

Najib flicked through the photos. "Mother, I never told you about my last dream. It was one of hope – not of despair. Please let me tell you."

She offered no objections. Neither did she ask Najib to continue. She just sat silently, lost in her thoughts, folding and refolding the treasured pieces of cloth.

"Like the other dreams, it took place right here, in front of our house by the pottery shop. I was alone standing among broken potsherds. However, unlike my other dreams, I had no sense of fear – only peace. A man's hand was placed upon my shoulder – it was the moment when I first realized that I was not alone. Warmth and love flowed from this man's touch. It was unlike anything I had ever known. Even now I sometimes try hard to remember his touch in order to evoke that feeling again. I wanted to look upon his face, but for some reason I did not. I only stared at the broken pottery at my feet. Then the most remarkable thing happened. He knelt down and, picking up two broken pieces, he placed them together and they became whole. One by one he mended all the broken pots with nothing but the touch of his hands."

Najib's mother said nothing. She sat spellbound, tracing the pattern on the lace edging of the cloth before her. "How could their world be mended?" she thought in silence.

"Do you not see, Mother? Our life is slowly beginning to be pieced back together again. But while that happens, while we put our life back in order here in our home, our hearts must make a journey as well. Do you see this photo of Farid's father? He was the Talib in my dream. Now we will raise his son as one of our own."

A long silence followed before his mother spoke again. "Yes, Najib Jan, and more than that," she said placing the photos back into the box. "We will make sure he knows his own story. These photos are his. One day he will treasure them as I now do these, his mother's cloths."

Mother and son sat in silence for a moment.

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“Najib, did you not see this man's face – the one who brought you such peace? Certainly, if the other men in your dreams were real, this man must be real also. If so, then you will meet him one day.”

“I never saw his face. But now that you ask, I remember something I had forgotten. His hands – they were scarred as if they both had been pierced. How remarkable that one so wounded could heal so completely. You're right, one day I may meet this man. And then I'll know him by the scars on his hands.”

