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Two excerpts

(1) From the novel 'A Brief History of Beauty'

Prologue

My dear readers,

The author of this book of prose expresses his deepest apologies for the inconvenience that might cause you a slight sense of displeasure upon the revelation that this book was originally conceived as an epic. The author had planned this tale of unwavering courage, fortitude, and the extraordinary love based on some Homeric tell infused with the Qixotian craziness, to revive this noble genre in its dying tradition, and pay homage to the ancient Greek bard, the Roman poet, the master of Shahnama, and the nameless bards of oral lore whose tales of adventures, wars, and love survived, yet history never preserved their names. Fully aware of the demands that the art of the epic entails, the author had long understood that it required years of endurance and a relentless battle against the teasing thought, and in order to accomplish this, he first followed the ethics of praying to God to give him an unyielding patience and the incessant flow of thoughts, then, seated for many days with calm and thoughtful composure, wrote very few lines, however, he did not feel the warmth in his heart, which is normally the effect of the poetic lines, and as the pages unfolded, he observed that his expression is dull, and soon a cruel truth, with a lamentable realization, became clear to him that he is not a poet of merit, and if by some unforeseen chance, he were to complete an epic, it would surely descend into the annals of history as the most abysmal work ever conceived, therefore, the author relinquished his lofty aspirations of crafting an epic, suspended his work, and began to spend his days lamenting his inadequacy. This desolation, however, did not last long, and very quickly he felt the renewed desire to resume his endeavors in an uncharted manner. It gave the author an extraordinary delight when he learned from greater experience in reading that if the efforts made in the right manners required by this art, and if written well, the work of prose also produces effects as good the poetic lines, further, he deduced that prose, with its fluidity, suited his temperament. Thus, his initial disappointment that weighed upon his soul subsided to a good degree and now thinking in manner required by ethics of prose, he began writing the tale, and when he had completed a significant amount of work, he termed it, borrowing the words of an English novelist, stripping away the word "comic" that clung to the term, an "epic in prose."

The tale that will, very soon, be unfolded, concerns the adventures of a single man, or of an entire nation that sieged, or the struggle of those who defended, or the one who took away, or the one who pursued, took place in the state and its capital (where you will very soon discover a stranger with average wit and in ordinary clothes roaming the streets) not far from the territories where the Ancient Indus and Egyptian civilizations thrived over the exploits of war and the conquests. And where the old king,

Afrasiyab, had been ruling the state of Alfaliha for two decades, and where old hostility with the neighboring small state of Simat had eclipsed from the national memory, removed from the official archive, the ministers and subjects regarded the people of Simat as exceedingly friendly, and now the death of earlier king, Fatih Mohammadi, in a duel by former the king of Simat, is historically viewed as the incident of subjective rivalry over the love of a woman, and it did not reflect the sentiments of the entire nation, as it was perceived in the initial years, following the king's burial.

This peculiar state was a windowless conglomeration of cities, towns, and villages, separated from the rest of the world by a labyrinth of towering mountains and meandering rivers that flowed from the distant lands. Years before the advent of a new faith that converted them to the fold of Islam, they worshiped fire. The historical images of their ancestral beliefs are still etched upon the distant caverns with the dazzling maze, where lovers now only make love or where nocturnal thieves seek sanctuary in the wintry nights, where the river's course was altered with a massive investment, and where the enigmatic stranger, who has been previously alluded, erected his mansion, which was a rare example of architectural grandeur and where the forgotten goddess waited for her priests.

However, this tale would not have been possible without the slanderous and malicious writer Nazir Bahlmi, who later became an extraordinary historian and man of refined demeanor and whose nonfiction treatise, "A Brief History of Beauty," chronicled the epic siege and the tumultuous events that preceded it, as well as the aftermath of ignominious retreat and the ensuing shame, but for many decades, this chronicle of passionate love and ferocious war lay dormant in dusty old libraries, until the author of this tale used it as the basis for a retelling, infusing the book's content with the imagination that is the sole tool of all creative minds and that has produced all the great tales in history. The most distinctive aspect of Nazir Bahlmi was that, for several years, he remained the only worshipper of the solitary goddess in the entire city. In the hushed predawn hours, before the slumbering city stirred to life, he would rise early and go straight to the goddess, which was an imperfect replica of the Roman goddess. He would sit before the goddess until the last ray of sunlight crept away from the goddess's eroding thorn, contemplating steadfastly, then he would reluctantly depart. For a ceaseless span of two years, he sat before the goddess, but he found no trace of positive emotions, after which, exhaustion wore him down, and his hopes were fading, then on one fateful day, out of invincible rage and mounting frustration, he ripped out the head of the goddess, which looked like a wolfish-goat or a goatish-wolf, defying the easy classification, and hung it on his wall as a testament of an old victory.

At home, Nazir Bahlmi was unwilling to listen to his wife's objections. She warned him that this would bring misfortune to the home, reminding him that if this goddess did not belong to them, it surely belonged to another people, and it was an act of sacrilege to remove the head of their goddess, however, Nazir Bahlmi was unwilling to be persuaded by any reasoning. And when the wandering priests, by a chance, passed by their forgotten goddess, they were enraged to see the headless form of their goddess. Filled with indignation, they travelled to the nearby city, which was the capital of Alfalija bearing the same name, and inquired about the missing head. They knocked on each door until the word reached to them, it was the wife of Mistry Nazir who, driven by spite towards her husband, revealed the secret that the head of their goddess was in their house, and this act of blasphemy was done, by no other man, but her unscrupulous husband who has the least regard for their scared goddess.

The irate priests arrived at his doorstep, sat down, resolute in their demand for the return of the severed head, making it clear that they would not budge an inch from his home, vowing to block his every exit until their demand was met. As the news spread, their numbers multiplied with the arrival of additional faithful followers, but after the continual denial that such an object exists in his residence, they tolled

the long formidable halls of emaciated king's court, complained to the king that Nazir Balhmi had severed the head of their most revered goddess, an act that had outraged them. They stated, On the one hand, he has committed a worse act of blasphemy, and on the other hand, he is reluctant to return the head, and he resorted to threats when we urged him, with polite words of reason, to return the stolen head.

However, to the king, it appeared as a trivial and inconsequential matter, devoid of substance, and not worthy of serious consideration. He had very clear understanding, that emerged from the neglected state of the goddess, that the goddess has long been abandoned and forgotten by the majority of its worshippers, and it was only by chance that these priests were going by this route and saw their decapitated goddess, which they deemed an act of blasphemy. Upon hearing the priests' impassioned plea, the king responded, I have listened to your discourse with great seriousness, though inwardly it was not in the least, and I have come to understand that you have fallen into a profound error, which is generally the fate of man due to his shallow reason, as I have found Nazir Bahlmi to be a highly respectable man, it is inconceivable to me that he would involve himself in such an act, or ever consider injuring your heart. The king even objected to them and added, Now I speak plainly, and do not be offended, though I understand that my words my pain you, Yet, it remains an undeniable fact that you hold no rightful claim to this goddess, since you had forsaken her for many years and her idol lay hidden beneath the layers of dust and neglect, and it was by mere chance, or perhaps intervention of an outsider, that you found your goddess in this shape, You, priests of some obscure place, must be reprimanded for this act of ignorance and forgetfulness as you have kept your goddess in seclusion for too many years, Nazir Bahlmi attended your goddess, paying her the tribute of deserved worship in your long absence, and concerning the head, I feel that your goddess looks more adorable without her wolfish-head, then the monarch made a diseased laugh and finished his argument.

Disheartened by the king's damning response, the priests returned with sad faces and cursing murmurs. In the aftermath of this ordeal, the goddess became the object of collective tempering, and after a few months, it had only one leg, one thorn, one eye, no tail, an empty stomach, an immortal arrow in one eye, and no sockets in the other eye. After that, Nazir Bahlmi lived as an atheist for many years, believing that there is no god. Very few people were aware that this historian had abandoned religion in favor of something he viewed as intellectually grounded alternative and which provided him with more rational solutions to the perplexing quandaries that plagued his inquisitive mind. But these transformations of his beliefs and losing and regaining the faith in God continued, and many years later he once again converted to monotheistic religion, but by then he was old, but prominent figure, renowned throughout the entire state as the sole surviving historian, and when he saw a man from lowly origin, a salve, ascending to the remarkable heights, surpassing the fame of kings, priests, and those who had gained notoriety through worldly power, opulent displays, or material wealth, he discerned that there is constant intervention in the evolving destinies of human beings.

However, Nazir Bahlmi would never have been a famous historian, if aforementioned stranger had not come to this land. He was in his mid-thirties, with a robust constitution, a twined beard, a towering stature, and exceptionally huge hands, who has spent his youth in some mischievous but secret exploits, among which some may be classified as acts of velour that the average person would not dare to approach, ever refusing to divulge their secrets regardless of the price he is offered, and he was dressed in a manner that gave him the appearance of a thief or a deposed king, or a man from whom wandering dacoits had plundered his possessions, subjecting him to mistreatment, or a long-exiled individual who

has returned to his people in disguise. His feet were all clad in the layers of dust, traces of which also lingered in his beard, and it appeared he had travelled long distances to arrive in this unfamiliar land. Little did the people know that this unassuming figure, wandering in the streets of this prosperous and romantic city would one day alter the course of history, and inspire two large volumes of A Brief History of Beauty, for whom Nazir Bhalmi once wrote that he influenced the destinies of people in Alfaliha.

Nor did anybody imagine that many generations, after his death, would hold him in the highest regard, admiring his resilience for surviving the most complex water disease. And his actions and resolve will one day be regarded as exemplary, and the clothing currently covering his body will one day find a place of honor in the museum of war, becoming the relic of love, attracting visitors from great distances to behold this token, then they will be surprised to see that this is the very robe he wore upon his arrival in Alfaliha.

He had spent the previous night on a distant hill overlooking the city, where he could see that the city offered very peaceful views. However, he had a mysterious premonition that this peace would not last long and that the city would suddenly face an unprecedented wave of panic that it had never encountered in its entire history. When this man was walking through labyrinthine streets the city, he inquired about each street he crossed, as if he were in search of a particular street, or a place, or a house for which he had journeyed a great distance on the dusty tracks, and from the manner in which he approached a peddler to inquire something, his extraordinary confidence was evident, and when the peddler asked his name, with the reason that he appeared to be new in the city and he had never seen him before, he said in a very low voice, as if he imparted a sacred secret, Suleiman Abdullah.

(2) from *Black Bird in a White Cage* (novel, 2016)

His name was Dildar. On Thursday evening, he returned to his village for a two-day break. He was extremely tired and in need of respite from his demanding life as a police officer. He believed that Friday, Saturday, and Sunday would be enough to provide him with the rest he desired. However, things turned out to be quite different from his expectations. In fact, they were almost the opposite. He found himself trapped with no apparent solution in sight. His life had come to a halt, resembling the motionless sails of a ship on a dry and windless day. Word of his arrival spread throughout the village at night, treating him like a prominent figure, similar to breaking news. Each household whispered the same message, "Sahib is here." Everyone held him in high regard, while some were even afraid of him, despite his harmless nature.

On Friday morning, Dildar sat on a charpoy, a traditional woven bed, under the shade of the eastern wall of his modest village house. There was no garden, no plants, and no flowers. The courtyard was dusty, marked with dry footprints that lingered from winter or summer rains. Whenever it rained, the courtyard would transform into a sticky, muddy mess. As they trudged through the swampy courtyard, their feet would leave muddy footprints.

In his twenty-eight years of life, Dildar had gained a great deal of knowledge. He was aware of the unpredictable nature of the breeze in Sukkur. In the morning, it would bring relief, but by noon, it would become scorching and unpleasant, leaving a discomforting odor in the air. He understood that summer reigned supreme, dominating the entire year, with only brief interludes for winter, autumn, and spring. Winter in Sukkur lasted a little over two weeks but less than a month. Autumn was hardly noticeable to the people of Sukkur, and spring failed to bring the true essence of its rejuvenation to those worn out by summer. It fell short of fulfilling its promise.

The sun lazily moved lower in the sky, casting longer shadows as it descended. Crows and starlings gathered on the southern wall, arranged in orderly lines akin to a morning school assembly. Like students of different grades in their designated rows, the crows and starlings eagerly anticipated the remnants of last night's meal. It consisted of white rice, a dish his mother would prepare nightly. The crows emitted their familiar and somewhat irritating caw, a sound that Dildar had been familiar with since his childhood, when he was just a six-year-old, listening to it from a siris tree.

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"Tomorrow, you will cut down this siris tree, it is haunted," his mother had said to his father twenty-two years ago. His father, Nawab Khan, was preparing for the arrival of their third child, which, unfortunately, they were unsuccessful in conceiving. The next morning, the tree was mercilessly felled. It was the same tree where Dildar and his younger sister, Abida, had fashioned a swing using a long rope. It was the same tree that would shed countless pods whenever a strong wind blew. Someone had whispered in their mother's ear, "They are djinns," referring to the spirits believed to have entered their house. She had

come to believe that hundreds of djinns had taken refuge in the tree. Thus, when the tree was axed down, she felt relieved. However, both Dildar and Abida felt a deep sadness that day. They held their rope tightly in their small, slender hands, searching for a suitable replacement. Their only park had been reduced to nothing. For several days after the tree was cut down, they would walk in circles around its uprooted base, mimicking the sound of a motorcycle engine.

But soon, the charm wore off, and they had to find a new playground. They settled for a common women's toilet: a flat, dusty area behind their uncle's house. Human excrement was visible everywhere, but they had become so accustomed to the surroundings that the foul odor had lost its pungency. It was a time when bathrooms and lavatories were considered expensive luxuries that only the affluent could afford. Men would venture into the fields in the morning to relieve themselves, while a flat, dusty area encircled by bushes or adobe walls was designated for women by joint families. On that dusty ground stood a small jujube tree. Abida would climb up to pluck red dates, while Dildar would stand beneath, extending the hem of his kameez. She would toss the red dates down into his makeshift pouch, and once she descended from the tree, they would crouch together in the shadow of the wall, side by side, brother and sister, with a natural one-year age gap between them. They would nibble on the red dates until none remained.

As they grew older, they acquired more knowledge. "No, no, you can't come, you're a girl," Dildar once told his sister. He hurriedly joined his cousin and other boys, venturing far away to an acacia tree near the government well. He learned that "girls should not wander far," as one of the boys informed him. This was an ancient wisdom passed down from fathers to sons, spanning generations that stretched back thousands of years. The orders and practices of their ancestors, though long gone, remained alive in their memories. They were faithfully upheld and passed on to the next generation without any alterations. Old traditions persisted, locked away like a rusty treasure in wooden boxes, protected and revered with unwavering obedience.

On that day, Abida anxiously awaited her brother, shuttling between her small house and the large rectangular main wooden door that served as the entrance for their entire family. Since her birth, she had been docile and content, never complaining about anything. She scurried back and forth, constantly scanning the lands for any sign of her brother and the other boys. "They must be playing somewhere in the fields. They might have climbed that gum berry tree. Dildar will be down; he doesn't climb. His team must have gathered pockets full of gum berries. Soon, there will be a fierce battle, as each side pelts the other with squeezed gum berries. The sticky residue will stain their kameezes and salwars. Amma says, 'I've grown up; I'm nine years old. I can't go there. I'm a girl, and there are ghosts, many ghosts that cling to my hair. I'm wearing Chappal now, so my feet won't get dirty.'"

Abida slouched by the door, feeling a deep sadness. Her face was marked by a sense of longing. It was a time when a new understanding was dawning upon her. Her world was confined to the space between her house and the main door, through which she could only catch glimpses of the outside world. From the seam of their door, she could only observe the shadows of people passing by.

And as the years went by, the children transitioned into distinct genders—boys and girls—and eventually into men and women. Puberty brought along its own set of complexities. The boys speculated about the peculiar hair growth between their legs and secretly visited the wholesale stalls, where everything was sold for ten rupees. There, they would linger, purchasing unnecessary items until no other customers remained. It would be just them and the vendor. Finally, they would buy a low-quality razor for the fixed sum of ten rupees. As they shed their childhood innocence, they found themselves entering the new boundaries of adulthood. It became advisable for them to sit in the company of grown men, distinguished from the boys by their greater wisdom—wisdom inherited from the past.

There came a time when girls began to experience an unexpected and intense pain. They would weep upon witnessing the sudden eruption of red clots and finding their salwars stained with red flecks. They wept for hours until they confided in their mothers or elder sisters, whispering their worries and fears. Their tears would only cease when they were assured that it was a natural occurrence, and a folded cloth was provided to them. It was during this time that they began to dream about their future husbands, speculating on possibilities such as their uncle's son or their aunt's son—a potential match from within the extended family.

This was a period when fathers became like traffic signals, signaling green for boys and red for girls—a time of segregation and clear gender divisions. It was during this period that Abida learned she was a girl, and that there were spirits residing in the acacia tree who might cling to her hair. She also learned that she should never walk without flip-flops, as her feet would grow long and no footwear would fit her. Her mother imparted this wisdom to her, which had been inherited from her own mother, who had received it from another mother. The line of wisdom extended back to mothers who lived five thousand years ago, now deceased but their wisdom still alive in the memories of their descendants. Not a single word lost or added, all preserved and faithfully transferred to the daughters—commandments, holy scripts, meticulously safeguarded.

Abida had been oblivious to this ancient wisdom when she turned her back on her future husband as they played with other boys and girls. But a fellow girl whispered in her ear, "No, no, he is your future husband, never turn your back on him." At that time, she was less than nine years old, and she could freely play with the boys. Since then, she had never turned her back on the son of Uncle Shams, her destined life partner. Those whispered warnings taught her valuable lessons, enabling her to unravel many mysteries on her own, relying on her own intuition.

Beyond the main door, there stood more than ten houses belonging to uncles and their families. Abida waited for hours, her face filled with sadness, reminiscent of the expression her mother wore when she was born. Her mother believed in an old superstition, that the first toe of her feet, smaller than her thumb, signified that she would always be dominated by her future husband. It was a belief deeply ingrained in her mother's mind, unaware that it was merely a superstition. There were other superstitions as well. Prior to Abida's marriage, when someone mentioned that "Uncle Shams and his family have cold hands," it filled her with distress. She firmly believed that cold hands were a sign of dishonesty. On the morning of her marriage, her fear intensified when she noticed the faded henna on Abida's hands, which did not darken quickly. Her mother became worried, convinced that there would

be a weak relationship between husband and wife, with the husband constantly exerting dominance and intimidation.

As Dildar hurried back, sticky gum stains were clearly visible on his camel-colored school kameez. He brought a nest that resembled the dwelling of a ghost—a long, sturdy structure made of straw. Abida placed it on her head like a cap. However, the intricate design of the nest remained a mystery to her, just as the mystery of the female rosy sterling had been when she and her mother removed its feathers. Nawab Khan, her father, had hunted the bird with his single-barrel gun. She gazed at the naked, featherless body of the rosy sterling, devoid of any bloodstains or signs of being shot. After many years, the mystery was finally unveiled when her friend passed away. Someone revealed, "Her heart burst upon seeing the gun as her esteemed white-honored brother loaded two cartridges into his double-barrel gun to kill his black-honored sister." On that day, the truth became clear to her. The rosy sterling was female, and it perished in horror just like her friend did upon witnessing the gun. She comprehended the lesson that killing didn't always require inflicting physical harm, as sometimes the mere sound of a gunshot could shatter lives.

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