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Excerpt from the novel *The Suicide Bomber*

I came out with Gulab's son. We waited near the Bibi Mahood Mausoleum. Cars were all around us. The police and army personnel were standing on both sides of the road too. Opposite the mausoleum, an American guard was looking down from a high concrete bunker, keeping an eye on the road.

My heart was throbbing with fear. I was afraid that the guard would suspect me. But Gulab's son reassured me that no one would recognize me. Like me, many others were also roaming around with wireless sets in their hands.

Gradually I began to feel better. I had a headache since the afternoon but now the pain was diminishing and I was feeling a bit exalted. There was no worry at all. All the happiness of the world was instilled in my heart. "You will feel the breeze of paradise at the time of martyrdom," I recalled Numani Sahib telling me.

Praise be to God, what a great blessing it is. What a carefree place paradise will be, full of happiness and joy, if its breeze alone could make me so happy. Really, there is nothing like pain, grief, worries and anxiety in paradise. I hadn't experienced such a good feeling at any time in my life. It was like swimming in the air. The passage of air through my nose as I was breathing in was in itself a source of joy. My body was warm. I wanted to remain delighted like that forever.

After half an hour or so, we heard the horns and sirens of traffic police vehicles. Gulab's son said goodbye to me and we parted. Soon, the police cars reached the place where I was standing. Then a convoy of cars appeared, carrying people in white uniforms. The convoy was followed by a long black motorcade. Drenched in sweat, I recited the holy verse taught to me by Numani Sahib: "O my God, may you accept my martyrdom."

When the distance between the car line and me was down to a hundred meters, I dipped my hand in the pocket of my trousers to take out the button of the fuse. But there was no button. Oh my God, where had the button gone? I put my hand in the other pocket but could not find the button there either. Oh, how many pockets can this suit have? I reached my back to find the wire of the fuse, then heard a gunshot. I felt myself flying in the air and lost consciousness.

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Chapter 4

I don't know how long I remained unconscious. I was unaware how, when and who took me to this place. There were four other beds in the room, with a patient on each. Some were awake, and some unconscious. Some of them had catheters in their noses, the faces of others were covered with oxygen masks. One of the patients was snoring with each irregular breath, another was moaning. All of them wore green clothes.

"Water," I whispered, as my throat was dry.

A girl accompanied by a doctor appeared at the door. Dressed in green clothes, the doctor was also wearing a green cap and a white coverall. He removed the green mask from his mouth, rubbed his black beard and signaled the girl with his eyes to give me water.

“He asks for water but doesn’t want to drink it with my help,” the girl said, handing over a glass of water to the doctor. He took the glass from her and poured a few spoonfuls into my mouth. I felt as if I had broken a fast after several days.

“Call the ward boys to shift the patient,” the doctor told the girl and she left. “Your good name, please,” the doctor asked me. I looked into his eyes, darkened with kohl. It seemed as if I had once seen those eyes in the past. The doctor seemed not only familiar but like a close friend.

“Abdul Sattar,” I replied in a low voice.

“Very good, my name is Mohammad Bilal. I operated on you. How do you feel now?”

“My head is heavy.”

“It is the effect of anesthesia. You will get better.”

The doctor turned to pick up some papers from a table. I looked at his back and saw that his long hair was trimmed in the Islamic way, like that of preachers.

Two ward boys came in and approached the head and foot of the bed. They pushed it down a long veranda and turned right to reach another, with large windows on both sides. It seemed as if the narrow veranda was hanging in the air. From its glass windows the road below the building was visible.

I closed my eyes.

I heard a scrunching sound and opened my eyes to see that the bed was being placed in front of a grey iron door. The ward boys pressed a button and the door opened to a small wooden room. The ward boys pushed the bed inside it. They kept standing beside the bed. The room began to move. I didn’t know whether it was going upward or downward. I remembered only its upright movement.

After a while, I opened my eyes and found myself in another room. I noticed my bed was placed near a window. The window was barred. The ward boys left and an armed man closed the door. I was all alone. There were no patients in the room except me. There were two chairs, and a small table beside my bed.

After a few moments, the door opened and a man wearing a black uniform and holding a grey plastic file and a black wireless set came in. He placed his things on the table and produced a small tape recorder from his pocket, then inserted an audio cassette, no larger than a matchbox, into the tape recorder. The door opened again. This time it was Doctor Bilal.

“Everything okay, chief?” he asked the man.

The man, busy adjusting wires of his tape recorder, glanced at me and said, “I want to interrogate him.”

“But he has just recovered from anesthesia,” the doctor said.

“So what?” he showed his teeth.

“I won’t allow you to bother him.”

“He is a terrorist.”

“He is also a human being.”

“You know what he was intending to do? He is an enemy of our motherland.”

“My profession doesn’t differentiate between a friend and foe. As a doctor I won’t allow you to interrogate him right now.”

The man collected his things from the table and left, closing the door with a bang.

The girl came in.

“Check his pulse,” the doctor told her.

The girl adjusted the blood pressure cuff around my arm, then put a pen-like glass stick in my mouth and placed her thumb on my wrist.

I tried to jerk my arm and release it from her grip but it was fastened to the bed. I looked at her angrily. The girl blushed and stepped back.

“It is okay. I will check his pulse,” said the doctor, understanding the situation.

He gazed at his watch for few moments and then said, ‘ninety four.’

The girl fixed her eyes at my chest as if she wanted to count my breath, then wrote something in the chart.

Someone opened the door again. An aged person entered the room, followed by the man in black suit.

“Specialist Sahib, this man has a complaint against you,” he told the doctor.

“Sir, I have told him that the patient has just recovered from anesthesia and can’t answer his queries. But he is adamant about interrogating him right now,” the doctor replied.

“You haven’t told me this. The doctor is right. The patient can’t run away. Guards are deployed here. You can do your job whenever the doctor gives you a permission,” the in-charge of the hospital turned towards the man in black suit.

“Okay. But the names of his doctor, nurse and even ward boys should be submitted to us. Other doctors will not be allowed to enter this room,” the man said.

“Write it right now. I am Bilal Irfan, his doctor. Meena is the nurse,” said the doctor and looked at her.

“Who is the most efficient ward boy?” he asked her.

“Salim,” she replied.

“Write it down. Ward boy Mohammad Salim,” the doctor told the man.

“I will give special passes to the three of you,” the man said.

It was a 400-bed military hospital. Sensing my intention, the American guard had shot at me when I was searching my pockets for the fuse button. The bullet had pierced my left thigh. I think there must have been some kind of anesthetic in it, as it had made me unconscious immediately. I was admitted to the hospital and kept at the second floor of the magnificent building. A branch of national security—known to us Pakistanis as ISI—was opposite my room.

“Look my friend, Abdul Sattar, show some flexibility. You are a patient and Meena is a nurse. I have chosen her for your care because she has a vast experience,” the doctor said when we were alone.

“To hell with her and her experience. It is derogatory for a man to be touched by a female stranger,” I replied.

“Is a male doctor not a stranger for women patients?” he asked.

“Not if he is a competent Muslim doctor,” I said.

“Yes, and so is the case of a female nurse for a male patient. I have told you that she is truly experienced. In our profession, importance is accorded only to human beings. We treat everyone including male, female, Muslim and infidel. I myself have conducted surgery on hundreds of women patients. But I can swear on my God that I don’t know if I am a man or a woman during checkup of patients. Rehman Baba says *it is not a sin to look at a beautiful face if your heart is pure*,” the doctor laughed.

I was getting angry. *I have had religious education but he is giving me sermons.*

“Who the hell are you to advise me?” I said angrily.

“Your doctor,” he smiled, rubbing his trimmed moustache.
“You are delivering a sermon after depriving me of martyrdom,” I said.
He was silent.
“Had you left me alone, I would have been a martyr now,” I said.

Translated from the Pashto by Rashid Khattak
