

The Evil Eyes



Sain Sucha

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The Evil Eyes

Sain Sucha

Short Stories

Vudya Kitaban Förlag



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Dedicated
to
my co-travellers
on
The Life Train
who
made the journey
despite all the ups and downs
so pleasurable, so memorable
Those
who stepped off at their destinations
My gratitude, for their memories
Those
who are fellow companions
My thanks, for their nearness
Those
who are yet to board the train
Welcome, let us enjoy the ride

The Fourth Magus

The three of them had come out of the O'Learys and rushed to my cab. One settled on the front seat and the other two disappeared in the back.

“Follow that star!” said the one wearing a yellow shroud.

“Which one?” I asked.

“The blinking one, moving towards the north,” said the one who carried an Afro on his head, and pointed upwards.

“It is not a star. It is an aeroplane on its way to Arlanda airport,” I replied.

“Never mind that, follow it anyway!” came the command from the bearded one.

I started the cab, put the meter on and took the road to Arlanda.

“How far is it to this airport?”

“About forty kilometres.”

Thereafter silence prevailed.

They appeared to be rather confused about their destination, so I enquired: “What are you chasing?”

“A belief, hoping to see it turn into reality!” replied the Shroud, and added, “I am called Magus G.”

“Nice to meet you Mr. Magus!” I replied.

“Beside you is Magus M and behind you is sitting Magus B,” Magus G completed the introduction.

“You don’t look like brothers, or even related?” I could not hold my curiosity.

“But we are, we are brothers in deeds; if not by blood,” said Magus M.

“And what deeds are they? Taking a sip in O’Learys and following fake stars?” I wish I could hold my tongue, but people rushing into my cab and telling me to “Follow that ...” were not among my favourites. This was Stockholm not New York.

“Well, we want to be there when He arrives,” replied the bearded Magus.

“He *who*?”

“The one we are all waiting for,” said Magus B enthusiastically.

“I am not waiting for anyone other than those who come

into my cab, pay their bills at their destination and leave quietly,” I elucidated my position.

“No, no, no! We are not looking for any ordinary being. We are searching for the one who would remove all evil in this world and take us to our *home*.”

“Evil I know nothing of, but taking you home is no problem. That is what I do.... I mean professionally! Where is *your* home?”

Magus M in the front seat looked at the other two, then at me and said: “Mister, a taxi driver you might be but you look more lost than anyone we have met lately. Haven’t you heard of the great men who prophesied the coming of the greater one who would fulfil their promises?”

“All the great men I know who prophesied the coming of another one in the future were those who messed up things in their own time and took refuge behind a figure that would accomplish the feats that they had expected to do themselves.” I commented and then asked, “By the way, what does the B, G and M stands for in your names?”

“You don’t want to know them!”

“Why not?” I persisted

“You will end up ironing your tongue by the time you utter them correctly!”

I thought better of it and deleted the question from my list, and continued the journey.

We had just passed Kista and were nearing Sollentuna, when Magus B behind me saw the sign for McDonald’s and instructed me to get down there.

“Great men are seldom in a hurry, so there is no need for us to haste either. A little food for the stomach might stimulate the mind for better thinking,” was the assertion by him.

The other two seem to agree with him. As I parked the taxi I informed them, “The meter keeps running while you look after your stomach and your mind.”

“No problem! I hope you accept Master’s Card,” Magus M asked me

“You mean MASTERCARD, issued by a bank?” I was not taking any chances. People with their masters lurking in the distant past or expected in some unspecified future gave me creeps.

“Yes man, yes!” affirmed the Afro bearer, and added
“Do you want something to keep you running?”

“A Mcfeast would do nicely, and a cup of coffee,” I
was beginning to like Magus G.

“Why don’t you come in as well and give us
company?” he asked me.

“With the meter running!”

“Of course.”

We found an empty corner in the back of the large
restaurant in Akalla. Magus G and B went away to
purchase the food while I sat next to Magus M.

“The last time I heard about the three Magi it was
referred to a period some two thousand years ago,” I
very carefully probed Magus M in a friendly tone.

“That’s it – we are the same.” He replied me
confidently.

“Magi from year 0001?”

“Yes, haven’t you heard of intellectual cloning?” he
stared at me.

“You mean a sort of intellectual re-cycling with one’s
thoughts retained at the level of an alleged original
donor?”

“Of course, we have been doing it for centuries. Year after year, and batches after batches of infants who, from the moment of their birth, have their grey matter programmed after total deletion of what nature might have put on their hard discs ... I mean brains. Later on, you could show them whatever you like, teach them whatever you can and nothing goes in. We like to remain there where it all started. Neither the change in time nor any sort of so called progress is relevant to us. We have batches that are affixed to the era 1500 BC, era 0030 and 0700. Each of them equally confident of *their* truth and totally oblivious to any change that time may incur. *Thou shall not learn, knowledge is thy enemy*, is our motto.”

The other two Magi returned with overloaded trays and placed the burgers on the table.

“I could see that you have been briefing him!” said G to M.

Magus M eyed me suspiciously and said, “I have tried but he appears to be one of those freaks who is

resistant to our coaching. Well, well! What do we have here?”

Then, with a voracity that I would never have associated with an Indian Guru he attacked the burgers with his grinders, while he shook his head in some pleasant anticipation. I hoped that it wasn't *my* programming he planned. To avert his strike I decided to ask him some simple questions.

“Are you telling me that you believe that all that could be thought by a human being today has already been conceived several centuries ago?”

They nodded in affirmation, and then added, “We have a long list of A & Qs – answers and questions – that covers everything.”

“You meant a list of *questions* and *answers*?”

“No, no! Answers and questions he said. We have all the answers and it is up to you to formulate the correct questions!” Magus B smiled maliciously.

“And what happens if I ask a question that is outside the limits of your answers?”

“There is no *proper* question that is outside such limits.”

“Let us talk about an *improper* hypothetical question.”

“That would be blasphemy and and that is never treated kindly!”

We were back on square one. Sitting with those three clones in the back corner of a restaurant made me feel uneasy.

“The meter is still running. It is 6.35 kronor per minute, in case you are curious.” I informed.

“That does not matter. We have Visa and American Express too.”

“With appropriate expiry date as well as coverage in an acceptable currency?”

They nodded again in affirmative, but for some strange reason I remained doubtful about the validity of their credentials.

“Could I ask you to participate in a simple experiment?” I enquired.

They looked at me with alarm and then Magus G said, “It is *we* who do the necessary programming.”

“No, nothing like that. I just want to ask you some simple questions.”

After a moment of hesitation they looked at one another, and Mr. Afro said: “OK!”

“Just close your eyes and concentrate upon my question and then answer it one by one.” I instructed them.

Their suspicion grew. They took off their watches and rings, put them in the inner pockets, closed the buttons of their jackets and moved closer to each other. “You are not thinking of giving us a slip?” asked Magus M.

“Not before you pay my bill,” I gave an honest answer.

“Wait,” said the one with South Asian look, “I have to cross my legs in the lotus position before I do any thinking.” With that he removed his shoes and put his feet up on the chair. They closed their eyes and waited for my question.

“Describe me your great-grandfather – how he looked, how he lived and what more you *know* about him?”

“Know nothing about him,” said Magus M.

“Never heard of him from my parents,” answered Magus B.

Magus G took a bit longer and replied, “No, not much. My grandfather mentioned him once while he shivered severely at the same time. That stopped me from asking him any more questions.”

“Alright, then tell me what he *knew* about you – they way you live, where you live now and what are your needs?”

“Not much I guess. He could probably ...” Magus M replied first again.

“No, no guessing. I want you to describe what he *knew!*” I cut him short.

Magus M shrugged his shoulder and kept quiet.

Magus B shook his head in negative.

And Magus G was not any better.

“OK, one more question. Tell me what you know about your great-grandchildren – how they would live, where and what would be their needs?”

“What kind of silly questions are these? How could I know what would happen after sixty or seventy years! The way things change nowadays one does not even

know about tomorrow, and you are adamant to find out what we *know* about things to happen after decades,” Magus M was now annoyed.

“Good! If you concede that your great-grandfather, who probably lived only a century ago, *knew* nothing about you, and you *know* nothing about him; and you also concede that you do not have the ability to *see* things happening in a century ahead from now, then how come you *believe* that some person or persons many centuries ago could *know* all about you and determine your mode of life today – the way you should think, perform rituals and rites, treat other people and so on?”

“Mr. Taxi Driver! You are a trouble maker. You are asking us to think independently. That is not permissible.” Magus G asserted.

“You set a trap for us! What kind of taxi driver are you mister?” asked Magus B.

“The ordinary sort. I fetch people when they need me and take them to their destination,” I replied calmly.

“And what else do you do?” He continued.

“I *learn!*”

“You l-e-a-r-n! From whom and what is it that you *learn?*” this time more than curiosity, suspicion crept into his eyes.

“*Learn from anyone, anywhere and whatever you can*, is my motto. In my job I meet fifteen to twenty persons every day, six days a week and forty-eight weeks a year. That would make it above five thousand persons a year. Multiply it with thirty-four and you have about two hundred thousand *teachers* that I have had only in my job.”

Add fear to curiosity and suspicion, and that is the look they had on their faces!

“And what have you *learnt?*” This time it was Magus G who addressed me.

“I have learnt more than anything else that most of the people go around with beliefs in their heads of which they have no notion where did they get them from, the origin of those beliefs and the validity of their contents. People carry beliefs about their religion, other people, races, ethnicity and habits without any authenticity of those beliefs. I have also learnt that most of the beliefs held by people are those which give

them some sort of protective shield against fears, real or imagined, that require practical effort to verify their truthfulness.”

“But we must have *beliefs* to make life possible. *Learning* is a very slow process. And while we gather the so called *knowledge* we must have something to believe upon to go on functioning,” asserted Magus B and the other two Magi nodded in his support.

“So very true!” I agreed and added, “But each belief that we hold must be weighed against the new things that we discover or thoughts that emerge during our progress in life ...”

“Progress!” this time Magus B cut me short and said, “All progress is just an illusion. Nothing ever changes! All that we see is *maya* – a deception for the eye or for the mind – if you prefer it that way. It is just a re-arrangement of the basic stuff, atoms or sub-atoms in the scientific language, and that is it.” Magus B was adamant.

“Then how come you are looking for the *one* who would remove all the evil in this world and take *you* to your *home*? If everything is merely an illusion for the

mind then why differentiate between *good* and *evil*, *pleasure* and *pain*, *right* or *wrong*; and more than anything else *this* home and *that* home?"

That caught him under the belt. Stark pain broke out on his face. Seeing him unsteady Magus B came to his help.

"But He knows the *truth* behind everything!" said Magus B.

"What *truth*. If everything is continuously in a state of change and only an illusion for the mind, *maya* as you call it, then there cannot be any static truths. What you call as a *truth* must be applicable to a state of affairs only and only when observed. Once you stop observing you cannot be sure that what you knew is still in the same state. Therefore all *truths* are transient truths! And the so called truths determined by our ancestors, holy or profane, were applicable only and only then. They could never have known how things would be after them, and surely not centuries after them. Thus, each of us is obliged to verify our truths, or beliefs, at all occasions in our existence. I agree that verifying each truth individually is practically

impossible, and that is why we have common knowledge and common sense to help each other go through existence. But as it follows, common knowledge and common sense is always open to scrutiny and verification; and, therefore, adjustable and when appropriate replaceable.”

The conversation was becoming heavy. The three Magi looked burdened by their own convictions and the added wait of scepticism I had placed on their heads.

“Are you suggesting that we should discard all our beliefs and function under only that we know?” asked Magus M.

“No, not that. I am suggesting that we should scrutinise all our beliefs under the light of new knowledge that we gain through our search and research, and discard all the blind beliefs that we hold because it is comfortable for us to hold them, and because they offer us a false sense of security in this world or in some imagined next one. We must not thrive upon mendacity!”

“And what about our ancestors and the knowledge that they have given us, and all the beliefs that make us function in our existence?”

“We should be grateful to our ancestors for their contribution in human knowledge and for providing us with a configuration of beliefs that help us go through life; but, none of that should be taken as permanent and irreversible if in the coming times their relevance or authenticity becomes doubtful. We must be prepared to accept changes in our knowledge, beliefs, tenets, rituals and culture with the passage of time, and suggest new ones in their place for their appropriateness.”

Suddenly everything stood still. Four of us sat there in complete silence and tried to sort out our thoughts.

“What about us calling you as Magus F?” asked me Magus M.

“Only if you give up mere *believing* in favour of scepticism and research, and join me in our search for knowledge!” was my answer, and I added “And after you have paid my bill!”

The Strategist

Stillness reigned in the room; such a stillness that the noise of the trucks outside merely hit the window-pane and rebounded.

Both of them have now sat silently for quite a while; once or twice they were about to speak almost simultaneously but no words escaped their mouths. Arshad continuously looked out of the window, while Nasim stared at him.

"Look, my promotion depends upon it. We have lived here for a few years, and if we remain inactive we would be stuck here forever" , eventually, Arshad broke the silence.

"And the path to your promotion runs through my thighs?"

" If the General has asked for you then you have to oblige."

"Why?"

Arshad grinned a bit and said: "The word *why* is not in use here. On given order we shoot the civilians, on

order we run towards the enemies approaching tanks, and when ordered we pull our trousers down and bend forwards. The whole of our life depends upon getting orders and obeying them."

Nasim replied in a heavy voice, "But I am a general's daughter."

"A retired general's daughter."

"But still, a general's daughter. Anyhow, I would go there, look straight into General Ghalib's eyes and talk to him."

"Whatever you do, try to please him, not offend," Arshad's voice pleaded with her.

General Ghalib was considered to be one of the best officers. All acknowledged his farsightedness in strategy. He was also renowned for his stiffness. It was also well-known that in his leisure time the General ravished the bottle and women, and was considered a connoisseur in pouring out of one hole and filling up the other.

And today it was going to be an occasion for the demonstration of General's farsightedness.

Ghalib filled his whiskey glass again and carefully listened to the sound of the approaching car. The vehicle stopped for a while and then drove away. The footsteps reached his door and then faded, as if someone was hesitant to ring the bell. But, then, the bell rang.

"Come in."

Nasim entered the room and went directly to the General.

"Have you asked for me?"

"Of course."

"You know that I am General Yahya's daughter."

"I know."

For a few instants a pitched battle took place between four eyes, and then Ghalib spoke in a very firm voice,

"You want Captain Arshad promoted? General Yahya too promoted me in a very similar room when my wife Nadira got laid by him."

Nasim kept on looking at Ghalib as if she was trying to digest the meanings of those words.

General took another mouthful of whiskey, and while he swallowed it slowly he opened the belt of his trousers and asked,

"Why are you so upset? You are opening the way to Captain Arshad's promotion. Well, it almost feels like a family matter, just take off your trousers."

Photo Finish

Peter cast a helpless look at Sandra, but there was not anything he could fetch. His suitcase, wide open and half-full, waited for the rest of its contents, but they had difficulty in finding their way to it. Suddenly little Tindra rushed in with protruding hands.

“I do not require all the three swimming trunks dear, but thanks anyhow!” said Peter.

“Dad would rather take your photograph with him, Tindra. Give him the school photo.”

Tindra turned towards her room. Sandra smiled and looked at Peter, who was shaking his head and said, “You know it very well, the spot I am off to I cannot have any photo with me!”

The taxi had already arrived at the front door. He closed his suitcase the way was it was, picked up his cameras and other photo equipment; he kissed Sandra, embraced Tindra and rushed towards the Taxi. Six crowns a minute waiting charge had enormous pull in it!

He needed a couple of minutes to feel comfortable in the cab. The journey from Östermalm to Airport normally took a little over thirty minutes. Peter felt glad that the taxi driver was a peaceful type who instead of terrorising his customers with dunka-dunk noise, played soft classical music from a cd, and concentrated upon the traffic.

Peter thought about Tindra who had offered him three swimming trunks. How could he tell her that he did not need any such trunks because the place he was going to had no water he could swim into ... there flowed only blood; warm and thick to start with, but later on only cold and clotty.

And how many rivers of blood he had seen? It started in Vietnam; where, as a novice photographer, he had met Death, face to face, in her red dress. And it was not a mirthful meeting! Still, passion and feeling for adventure within him had overcome the terror that Death always invokes. Instead of hearing, smelling and seeing the misery that abounded around him he had put his ears, nose and eyes in the service of his cameras which, frame after frame and in the fraction of a

second, arrested those ghastly happenings which a human brain might forget in the future if they were not, as black on white, saved as evidence that every war-photographer documents!

After Vietnam it was Cambodia; thereafter, Angola, Palestine, Bangladesh, Iraq and several more. Bosnia was a nightmare, followed by New York and Afghanistan. And now Iraq again.

If someone had asked him which of these places gave him sleepless nights, he had no direct answer to it. Each of these human tragedies had its own recipe for deprivation's stew where living beings were slaughtered and crumbled, and then broken down further and served as nutrition to the hungry mouths just under the outer crust of Mother Earth.

In an indescribable way his fever for adventure had given way to a chill that accompanied him on the later assignments. He was there, not as a person but as a extended lens to his cameras that merely looked at everything and transformed its impressions to a tiny plastic bit that had the ability to preserve all that he had seen.

He had accepted the assignment to Iraq rather unwillingly. He actually did not know what particular objective he had this time. According to the latest information a gang of evildoers would assault another bunch of evildoers at the end of March. Out of this misdeed, where evil should rape evil, would arise Goodness in her white costume of cotton bandages, bearing flagrant red and brown flowers of blood; she would have the sweet fragrance of burnt flesh and dynamite, and her merry laughter would remind us of thousand crying children who have just lost their parents. Peter always carried a great repulsion for murdering tyrants, but had no great attraction for murdering fools either! And now he felt that he was caught between the two. That is why he wanted to refrain from this undertaking. But Sandra had shown him a heap of unpaid bills; and that sufficed to mould his rejection into an affirmation.

It did not play any role which war he photographed; he always returned to Vietnam in his thoughts. Vietnam was his reference! And all other atrocities that were committed in various wars were graded against

that he had seen as a neophyte. Even the war-pictures from all over the world were compared with the dreadful pictures from the Vietnam. The strongest memory from that Vietnam War that he carried was a photograph he had taken of a woman and a little girl. The girl ran in front of her mother with out-stretched hands. Her hands were protruded in the same manner as those of Tindra when she had come to him with his swimming trunks. The Vietnamese girl had nothing in her hands. What did she offer? Perhaps hands are not always stretched to give; but sometimes they are there to receive something ... mercy, compassion, pity! Yet, that little girl got none of them. What she got was a shower of bullets and napalm. Seconds after he had taken that picture the mother and daughter were blown away in a blast. He wondered what their names were! Sandra and Tindra? No, no ... not them. But why not? They must have had names; then why not Sandra and Tindra!

Suddenly he saw how Sandra's hair was blown up by the wind when she tried to catch up with Tindra who ran ahead of her with Peter's swimming trunks in her

hands. There was horrible noise of explosions and flames all around them. He ran after them, but they were too swift for him who also carried all of his cameras. Then they disappeared in the crowd. It was chaos all around. He searched for them several hours. Then he saw a police station. Peter went in there. It was packed with people who sought after their beloved ones. When his turn came he described his wife and daughter to the policeman.

“Do you have a photograph of them?”

He had none.

“How do you expect us to find them out there?”

Peter did not say anything. He picked up his bags and went out into the square. Across the square he saw Sandra and Tindra again. A tank came in their direction. Peter saw that those two were the target.

“Stop!” he yelled.

“What?” exclaimed the taxi driver who was going full speed on the highway.

The two stared at each other.

“No, nothing,” said Peter.

“Are you not feeling well?” inquired the driver.

Peter noticed how sweat dripped from his forehead. He looked out of the car window and saw that there were nearing an exit on the E4.

“Take the right lane,” he said to the chauffeur.

“What?”

“Take the right lane,” Peter commanded.

The driver changed to the right lane and looked at Peter enquiringly.

“I have forgotten an important paper at home. Could you drive me back to my home and then to the airport?”

The driver did as he was told. Probably Peter was not the first wretched soul he had driven!

“Did you forget your passport again?” asked Sandra when she opened the door.

“No,” said Peter and added, “Do you remember the picture I took of you and Tindra last Midsummer Day?”

“Yes.”

“I would like to take it with me.”

“What?”

“I would like to carry your and Tindra’s photo with me,” replied Peter with tears in his eyes.

The Cheating Heart

He came out of the pharmacy Vallmon in a violent rage and knew someone would die today!

The process had already started two days earlier – he had awoken with one of those devastating migraine headaches. It felt as if a vibrating, long, red hot nail was hammered in his right frontal lobe; along with waves of undulating pain that started on his forehead and made their way, slowly but resolutely, to the back. Nausea lay deep in his stomach waiting for a chance to burst out of his mouth. He stayed in his bed and breathed slowly to appease different kind of assaults in progression in his body and mind. It would have helped had there not been those lamentations pouring in from the sitting room.

“What the hell is” he yelled as he came into the room, but was cut short by the waving hand of Inger who gleefully looked at those odd balls moving about ecstatically on the TV.

“Isn’t it amazing? What feeling, what grace!” she uttered as she stared at the screen and was not really interested to know what he thought of Pakistani Sufi music.

To Anders the concept music or song did not apply to those gangs of hand clapping and rhythmically chanting Sufis who crooned the same unintelligible verse again and again as if the phrase had gotten stuck in their throats, the way it used to happen with old vinyl records. He cursed the day he had decided to take Inger to two weeks holidays in Turkey. Her fervour for the Hard Rock was bad enough, but there in Turkey she had fallen, heart before head, for the whirling dervishes and the chants of Sufi singers. On her return to Sollentuna she had made vigorous inquiries and one day had come home with a black box called Jadoo. Had Jadoo existed in times of Pandora she might have preferred it to her little box. The number of miseries that little box released in the form of most awesome distortion of human voice and instrumental noise far exceeded the knowledge of Anders Andersson about what torture human beings could inflict in their effort

to appease their gods. He has been into soft jazz and ballads all his life. An occasional blast by Miles Davis was acceptable to him, but anything beyond that sound spectrum was decidedly noise!

For Inger the Sufis had a completely different message. Not only did she listen to them for hours, she had added their music to her exercise program – and that meant sitting in the same place for hours and occasionally falling into fits of violent jerking of her body in a sort of trance.

“How come you listen to them for hours?” Anders asked her.

“What do you mean?”

“What do they say? You don’t understand them, do you?” he enquired further.

“I don’t have to understand their words. I understand them with my heart!” replied Inger with full conviction.

A wave of resentment went through Anders. Inger had never said the same for him.

“How come you listen to them the whole day long?”

“I don’t!”

“Don’t you? You are here in front of the TV when I get up and still there when I go to bed.”

“Yes, but I listen to only those few performances that I like.”

“Then why sit here the whole day?”

“Because I do not know when they are shown here.”

“Don’t they give times for their broadcast?”

“Yes they do, but they are given according to the time in those countries.”

“But what it is that you like besides Sufi music. They are quarrelling and shouting in all their plays all the time?”

“They are not like us! They are very passionate people and behave accordingly,” replied Inger.

Passions were something Anders Andersson knew very little about. Brought up by a mother who belonged to the Pentecostal Church he, as a child, had a nerve shattering experience when one evening she, along with other members of the congregation in the church, in a fit of *glossolalia*, utterance of unintelligible languages, showed her rare passionate side. For the coming few weeks he had difficulty in sleeping in the same room

with her. Otherwise, in general life her attitude towards passions had been – I tried it once and did not like it!

Needless to say that he was her only child!

He was brought back to reality by Inger's reiteration "I said they were passionate people!"

"Yes, of course. But what pleasure do you get in seeing them yell at each other?"

"Oh, I don't pay any attention to that."

"What is it then you pay attention to?" asked a bewildered Anders.

"Their clothes and their make-up. Don't you see that in all that misery how well dressed they are, and mascara never flows out of their eyes even when they weep?"

Anders closed his eyes and tried not to think, but that was not easy. Actually he felt like asking her when did she do her domestic tasks, but that was inviting trouble because their house was always neat and clean; and the food always on time and well prepared. Still, sitting in front of the TV looking at programs she did not wish to

watch did not make sense to him, but for her it was fully logical. No, not logical – because logic or anything related to it was alien to her mind; but certain things always made sense to her that was completely illogical to him.

Another nail was pushed into his head a bit behind the first one. Quite involuntarily he put his hand on his head.

“Are you getting one of your severe attacks?” this time a trace of sympathy tinged her voice.

Anders nodded and went towards the kitchen to make himself a mug of black coffee.

“Perhaps you should go to the Emergency before it becomes as bad as the last time. You howled like a hoarse wolf!”

Anders took her advice and decided to go to Karolinska hospital. It was not so much to get some treatment, he knew that they would not do anything but to advise him to go home and rest, as it was to get away from Inger and her Jadoo. The moans of some sick and wounded

would be definitely at a much lower pitch than the howls of Inger's over-excited darlings, he had thought.

As he dressed he joyfully looked forward to several hours of relative tranquillity in the waiting room of the hospital.

The moment the receptionist saw him a smile appeared on her face.

“Are we hurting again today?”

“Not hurting again, it hurts all the time but today it is a horrible throbbing feeling. I feel my head would explode.”

“It won't! Or better put, it hasn't for the last forty years, so it should hold today as well.”

She took his free card, stamped it, added the necessary information in the computer and then pointed towards the waiting room.

After he had retired he has been a frequent visitor to the hospital. Both of the receptionists, who also lived in Sollentuna, knew him and were quite benign to him.

Anders found an empty chair in a far corner and settled down to have some prolonged peaceful moments.

After a while the sharp needle-pain in his head turned into a dead weight of about a ton or so. It still hurt but it was no longer a pulsating pain. It felt more like as if a scarf of coarse cotton was wrapped around his head and then tightened hard. Rather exhausted, he was almost falling asleep when he became aware of the faint fragrance. He looked around and saw the woman sitting beside him – she looked worn out and fatigued.

He smiled as a sign of sympathy and was going to ask her what he could do for her, when she enquired: “How are you feeling now?”

“Not so bad, and how is it with you?” he asked her in return.

“Can’t say the same. I have not slept for eighteen hours. It is tough here at the Emergency ward!”

He scrutinised her carefully – about thirty or so, pale in the face, probably hungry and decidedly very tired.

“You been here for eighteen hours and no one has attended you?”

“It is me attending others,” she replied.

He looked at her inquisitively.

“Oh, sorry! My name is Kathrine, Doctor Kathrine!” she introduced herself and extended a hand.

Quite reluctantly Anders took her hand and pondered hurriedly if it was wise to be examined by a doctor who was hungry, exhausted and perhaps half sleepy.

“Perhaps I could come back some other day...”

“No, no! It’s alright. I am like this all the time. With the shortage in nurses we doctors have to double up for them.”

Anders had read about the shortage of nurses. They were on strike asking for higher wages. The hospital management had refused to increase their salaries; instead they had decided to pay overtime to the doctors, an amount five times more expensive than the wages of nurses, and forced them to work extended hours. Anders wondered if Inger could get a job in the management. She would blend in so nicely!

They went to a small cabin where Anders repeated his history with migraine a thousandth time.

“Have you tried acupuncture?”

“I have a phobia for needles,” he informed Kathrine.

“What about Yoga?”

“Look lady, I was brought up in a decent Christian home. These pagan practices are nothing for me.”

“Yoga is not a religion, it is a way of meditation and concentration that could lead to decrease in stress and consequently lessen your headaches.”

“My migraine is not stress related. I get my attacks by the sudden change in the weather; or better put, by the sudden change in the atmospheric pressure.”

“You are rather well informed about migraine,....”

“Well, I had forty years to read ‘All You Want To Know About Migraine’.”

A faint smile crept over her face. She had beautiful teeth.

“Then why are you here? You probably know more about your ailment than I do?”

“I need someone to write my prescription. My Anervan’s stock finished yesterday. That is why I am in this bad shape. Besides it is so very relaxing here!”

Kathrine looked around at all the people with broken bones, dislocated shoulders and other damages that surrounded them and was about to ask Anders about

the relaxing part of his comment but thought better of it and instead said, "Alright then, I would write you a packet for thirty ..."

"No, please. I need the one with hundred, that would save me from bothering you for a whole year." Anders said to her convincingly.

Dr. Kathrine wrote the prescription and asked, "Should I put it into the computer or do you want it now?"

"As I am here I might as well take it."

Anders came out of the hospital and walked very carefully to his car. It had snowed heavily two days earlier, then rained and frozen again putting Stockholm under a thin sheath of black ice. That meant a large number of people with broken arms and legs on their way to the Emergency wards of various hospitals. He did not intend to be one of them.

He was feeling quite weary, so he went directly to his home. Not intending to disturb Inger and her companions Anders very softly tip-toed to the sleeping room, took two tablets of aspirin and joined his bed.

The following morning things were not any better. His head still ached violently and whole of his body ached. He forced himself to eat a sandwich and then took a mug of coffee. Thereafter, he drove to the chemist in Rotebro. The lady who attended him was nice and friendly. That bothered him. The staff at Vallmon was not renowned for its friendliness.

She looked at the prescription and then at the computer screen and said, “We do not have a package of hundred in the store, could you take thirty?”

“No, dear; I would prefer one with hundred because that lasts for a whole year for me. That would save me three visits to you.”

The woman nodded and said, “That is good. I would place an order with our suppliers and you could come back tomorrow in the afternoon to fetch it.”

The next day, today, he drove to the chemist, bought his medicine and rushed home. Anervan was actually a pre-emptive treatment for migraine – it was most useful when taken at the first signs of a migraine

attack. But in the case of Anders it helped him even after an attack had started. He fetched a glass of water and was about to open the package when his eyes caught the expiry date information. It said 08/2012. It was already the end of March, 2012. That meant that the medicine that should have lasted him for a year would expire in five months. A wave of anger hit him hard. Anervan was not cheap, and a package of Anervan when it was less than half used and would become officially useless in five months was definitely very expensive!

By the time he reached the chemist his head was replete with fury and hurt. The lady who had attended him earlier was nowhere to be seen. He took a number from the machine and waited for his turn. The man who called his number in no way behaved friendly.

“What can I do for you?” he asked in an aggressive tone.

“I bought this medicine about an hour ago.”

“So?”

“It has an expiry date only after five months, while I need it for a year.”

“How could we know how long you would use a medicine? You place an order and we get you the prescribed medicine.”

“But I said to the lady who attended me that I would need it for a whole year.”

“She knows nothing about the expiry dates on various medicines that are sent to us by the suppliers. You placed an order and you got your medicine, and with that our responsibility is over.”

“I have not opened the package; can I return it to you?”

“Sorry, medicines once sold over the counter can not be returned.”

“Why not?”

“Such is the law.”

“What law?”

A strong look of resentment appeared on the face of the man behind the counter. He already looked repulsive but now he was undoubtedly obnoxious.

Anders picked up his half useful package of Anervan and came out of Vallmon. He had just discovered that

his migraine was not weather related only. It was stress related as well, because now not only it hurt badly in his head, he also heard whining sounds in his ears and millions of brilliant particles shone before his eyes.

Somehow, he reached his car, opened the door and sat there for a while. He understood that a chemist, like every one else, was there to make money. He had no problem with that, but he had always difficulty in understanding those institutes who deal with people in need – doctors, lawyers, bankers, chemists and several others in the service sector – and take advantage of such persons who trust them for their expertise in helping them resolve their problems. Here he expected a better code of ethics than other enterprisers did.

He also wondered about the expiry dates of all the medicine.

According to the available information a law, on the demand of its military, was passed in 1979 in USA about stamping the production as well as the expiry date on all the drugs that guaranteed the potency of the drug during that period. And that started one of the widest legal swindle in modern times.

As he had heard, in Sweden it was arbitrarily decided by a commission of advisers to restrict this period for two to five years from the production date. Why two to five years? Nobody knows why, because majority of the drugs manufactured in the world are fully useable even fifteen years or longer after their date of production. It just happened that after the elapse of forty minutes in a meeting which was scheduled to be held for forty-five minutes, when no pharmaceutical parameters could provide any logical solution, a lady uttered on the forty-first minute “What about two to five years?” They all had looked at each other and then nodded in affirmation. And two to five years it had become since then. If the members of that advisory committee put all their money into share of drug companies after that fixation no one knows; but had they done it they would have become millionaires by this time. That one single utterance had guaranteed the disposal and re-manufacturing of drugs worth multi-billions of dollars, which were completely useable if only one could erase the expiry date from their containers, within a period of two to five years.

Anders started the car but did not drive straight home. He drove to Edsberg Slott, parked the car and went for a slow stroll by the lake side. It was risky to walk on the slippery ice but he did not care. They had put gravel on the area between the two walking streaks. There were almost no enthusiasts out there walking in that cold wind that hit him hard on his cheeks. He felt miserable, angry and very, very agitated. After a while he made his way up to the wooden platform that protruded over the water. It was getting dark now. He bent over the frame and looked into the lake when he heard someone say, "It is not cold enough."

"Cold enough for what?" Anders asked without looking back.

"To jump into the water and do whatever you intend to do!"

He turned around and looked at the old lady who stood behind him.

"What did you think I intended to do?"

“Well, you don’t look very well. You have gone to and fro on the same patch for the last fifteen minutes mumbling to yourself and at times waving wildly”

“Have you been watching me?”

“Yes, I sat there by the wall. Then I saw you going towards the platform very purposefully so I thought I ought to stop you.”

“Stop me from doing what?”

“Committing suicide, what else,” she replied confidently.

“I do not intend to kill *myself*, I wish to kill *someone* else.”

“Who?”

“Anyone, just anyone to get rid of my aggression!”

A worried look wiped out the confidence from her face. “I hope it is not me,” she said now apprehensively.

Anders took a good look at her – about eighty, lean and fragile.

“Why not?” he asked her after a short while.

“What’s the point? I have done you no harm. I just came here to walk my dog.”

That alarmed Anders. He had seen no dog, and had never liked them either.

“Where is your dog?” he enquired.

“Oh, it died a month ago.”

“You came here to walk a dog that died a month ago?”

“Well, you won’t understand,” she replied him hesitantly.

“Try it anyhow?”

“I had Jolly for many years, and everyday by this time I came here with him for a walk. He died a month ago, but I am so used to walking here at this hour that I come here anyhow assuming that jolly is with me.” Sadness ruled her face.

They looked at each other for a while and then Anders asked her, “What about joining Jolly?”

“Not possible. It was not baptised so I presume it has not gone to where I would be going. Besides I must live at least another five months.”

“Why must you live another five months?” he asked her.

“Well, that is sort of complicated. My grandmother died when she was eighty-four years and three months. Before she passed away I had put a bet with her that I would live longer than her. I am now eighty-three and eleven months. So as you see I have to live five months more to win.”

It has started to hammer in his head again. The cold wind had not been conducive to any relief; instead, he felt sweaty under his clothes and dry in his mouth.

“What about we meeting here in six months?” he asked her as she turned to leave.

“Well, yes; why not. That gives me the incentive I need.”

“What incentive?” asked Anders.

“I have liver cancer and my doctor says I have only three months left to live. But if I make you a promise to meet you here in six months then perhaps I could keep myself ticking until then. In this way both of us would get what we want!” were her last words as she disappeared into the distance.

Anders Andersson very gently turned towards in the direction of his parked car. It was throbbing heavily in his head but then an explosion occurred in his chest, waves of scorching pain made their way to his left arm and an exit through his fingertips. He sat down on the floor of the platform, put his head on the wooden bench and tried to catch a last breath.

After a few seconds he had fallen fast asleep – forever.

The only time in Mr. Andersson's life when his heart took over command from his head it had failed him!

The Evil Eyes

It was a splendid evening – in Farakh Sahib’s home there was plenty of food, beverages and laughter, and from behind the wall of the sitting room the mirth of his ba-hijab frivolous daughter sounded as if a damsel was on her way to meet her lover at the break of dawn wearing ghungroos on her ankles. On the way home despite the pitch-dark road and pervading silence, my mind felt cheerful and happy by the memory of their glee.

That is why when my car, after such a delightful evening, first trembled like a malaria patient, then coughed as if suffering from tuberculosis and then ceased to breathe after the plague hit her I sat there dumbfounded staring out of the windshield. I had bought this car only a few months ago. Although it was not new, still its succumbing to those three deadly sicknesses followed by its surrender on a desolate road did not appeal to me. I had now lived a long time in the West, yet my early youth in Mozang still provided me

with a reservoir of those adjectives that are never bestowed by one gentleman upon another; but, at that moment neither I felt like a gentleman nor did the seller of that car have any right to consider himself a gentleman. Thus, relying upon my memory I showered upon him a load of profanities that he would have never dreamt of – but that made me feel much relieved. Thereafter, I called the agency that helps the needy in destitute situations. After about half hour arrived the truck from the Road Assistance and out of it came an extremely stout person. I handed over the keys to him, informed him about the repair centre near my home and looked at him with pleading eyes. He was a gentleman – he nodded to me to get into the truck, loaded my car on his vehicle and after leaving it at the repair centre drove me home. He deserved my blessings and received plenty of them too.

It was a strange day – I had gained my peace of mind by two different and opposite ways!

The night passed on. The morning might have arrived with new problems, but I took refuge in my extended sleep. When my body refused to burden the

bed any longer I got up around ten. After going through the essential I reached the moment that I did not cherish. With a turbulent heart but hopeful mind, I called the Centre where my car was admitted as a patient. I feared its demise! The heart won over the mind. The mechanics after uttering some sympathetic words added that instead of trying to wake up the dead I should contact my bank and ask for assistance in acquiring a new life.

After consuming two extra cups of tea I was on my way to the bank. Luckily the railway station is very close to my house. The train showed up only seconds after my arrival. The first two compartments were fully packed, but in the third there was plenty of space. I parked myself on a seat by the window. The same in and out took place at the next station. I had always wondered why people always prefer to board the first two compartments that are normally congested when there is often much space available in the remaining cabins. One reason could be that they think that in this way they would quickly leave the train and station. But

what kind of hurry is this that one prefers to force one's way in a cabin where one can neither stand nor breathe. Then one day a friend of mine, who himself loved to board the crammed cabins, gave me an explanation that made some sense – according to him if one feels tense in the body then in that crowd a needy person gets that massage from the front and back that makes him feel good on leaving the train, with the accompanying expectation that if a day has started well then it would end well too.

That is why her arrival, her chosen direction of travel and a definite jerk to enter the second compartment seemed a bit odd. Although, in Sweden, there live several thousand compatriots from my abandoned homeland, yet to see a beautiful girl dressed in shalwar-kamiz was rather unusual in this area. Still, I thanked those moments that had imbued my eyes with dazzle and added some heat to my blood.

On reaching Sollentuna, I took time to leave my seat. The people in the first cabin were almost falling out because of the pressure from inside. To clear way for others I hurriedly moved a bit towards the left and

collided with the person coming from behind. When I turned to apologise the woman was looking at me quite irritated. Nevertheless, the moment our eyes met that irritation mellowed into a beautiful smile.

"Uncle, what are you doing on this train?"

She had addressed me in a very familiar manner, but her calling me uncle felt highly inappropriate. OK, I have a little bit of silver on my temples, but has the grey of hair ever faded the redness of anyone's blood? My memory could not respond to her familiar attitude either. In order to facilitate further discourse I asked her,

"What are you doing here?"

"There are swimming competitions in Sollentuna today. I am taking part there." She said candidly.

She had already called me uncle, so a flaw in my memory did not feel awkward, –"Excuse me, I do not remember your ...?"

She burst out in laughter.

I heard ghungroos jingle in my ears again.

"Oy, I forgot that you have never seen our faces. You visited us yesterday ... I am Farakh Sahib's middle daughter."

I knew Farakh had three daughters. But Farakh was a strict Muslim! Whenever we visited him, the women in the house never sat with us. We only heard them talk or laugh from the adjoining room. However, here this beautiful girl with fearless eyes claimed to participate in an international swimming gala. A very peculiar picture emerged in my mind – an empty swimming pool, hundreds of spectators on the side; five girls who would make you think that there is a dearth of clothes in the universe, and their three challengers who stood for the abundance of cloth in this world, and then all of them jumped together in the pool. What a scene it was when the commentator sometimes mentioned a name and sometimes the colour of a Burqa .

I was fully enjoying that spectacle in my mind when I heard,

"Uncle, where are you?"

It was time to speak the truth.

"I was thinking that Farakh Sahib strictly believes in purdah . How come he allowed you to swim?"

She giggled again,

"Daddy is not only open-minded by his name but also in his thinking. He says that to make advance in this life we must engage in all healthy competitions. He told us that among Swede's and other white people we do not need to observe purdah, because these people are taught from the very beginning that other than physical attributes there is no difference between men and women. These people do not judge the other by their nakedness but by the state of their mind in determining if one is decent or indecent. People are assessed here by their actions and performance. Purdah is applicable among people who have the evil eye – people who consider woman's obedience to men as a merit for her, like to see subservient women with bowed heads and eyes, and after imprisoning them in four walls tell them that they should feel safe. Such bastards who would molest a young girl publicly and then boast about their manliness."

"Then you observe purdah only from your father's friends?"

"Of course, only when daddy's friends from his old country visit us that we hide ourselves. After all, everyone ought to protect oneself from the evil eyes!"

The Rosary

The whole day long there was lively gaiety in Rafiq's house and the adjacent villa.

Nasira was married away two years ago; and, then, those who had spent years together, on the utterance of a few words by a priest in an alien land, were estranged from each other. Not only estranged, but they became strangers to each other. And now, when she had returned to her parental house two day ago, she had also started keeping Hijab. Obviously, when you give your daughter to someone from Bahawalpur, then what else could be expected. Rafiq was very hurt when he had heard about her marriage, but who cared about the feelings of a teenager. His heart kept on bleeding, Nasira was married away and a complete outsider became much more intimate with Nasira. In this way, Kadir's name became literally true.

The clock showed two at night. Despite his best defiance, sleep continued its onslaught on him; but, he did not want to fall asleep – he had promised Kadir to

drive him to the airport at four in the morning. Kadir was going to Germany for only two days to conduct some business there. The guests had slowly disappeared from the villa's courtyard. Only a few half enthusiastic coals still smouldered in the fire as if they were drawing their energy from his memories. Instead of going to his room, where the guests had occupied the adjacent room, he went across the little garden to the library. From his childhood, the library was his refuge, whenever there was too much noise in the house. The library, where the upper room also functioned as a guest room, contained some chairs and a bed, besides all the bookshelves in it. To get some fresh air, Rafiq opened the window of the guest room, pulled the bed close to it, set the alarm on his cell phone to three-thirty, and then closed his eyes for some rest. It had started to be a bit chilly in the room, and soon sleep started creeping upon him.

The basic layout of his villa and that of Nasira was the same, but like a mirror image. About ten meters separated the two building, with a hedge growing between them. He was only half asleep when someone's

moaning awakened him. Very quietly Rafiq got up from his bed and then looked down from the window. No one was there. On deliberation, he realised that those moaning and soft whispers came from the window of the room across the hedge. Unfamiliar as those sounds were, he felt that his mouth had turned dry and his legs were shaking. He wanted to retreat, but some powerful magnet held him fast by the window. He was still listening to those sensual sounds when they suddenly subsided and then the light was switched on. He took a quick step back, but his eyes remained focused on that window. Kadir was going to the bathroom; and, then, slowly Nasira came into his vision. She was wearing a very thin golden dress of the electric rays, under which two marvellous youthful mounds displayed their splendid beauty. For a moment Nasira lifted her eyes and look across her window, smiled coyishly, and then the light went off.

Rafiq and Nasira's mothers were very close friends. They have been living for many years side by side on Skansvägen in Sollentuna. Despite the cordial relations between the two women, their husbands never became

friendly – just formal greetings sufficed. Actually, Rafiq's father was a follower of evolution and logical planning; whereas, Nasira's father believed in creation and fate. Therefore, their paths, despite the physical nearness, never crossed each other.

Two years ago, when Nasira accompanied her parents to Multan for the summer holidays she never returned. The news was that she has been married. That was the first time Rafiq's father had called Nasira's father as a bastard, and the distance between the two elders became wider. Rafiq was much upset, but what could he do! There was no direct bond between Rafiq and Nasira; they just knew each other from early childhood; still, an abrupt break in their relationship did not feel fair either. At least they could ask him! Ask him what? Of that, he had no idea.

And today he had seen Nasira, according to her father's belief, the way the creator had moulded her, and that creation he really liked. After a while, his pulse started throbbing normal again. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and looked at his watch. It was a

quarter to four. Rafiq got up, brushed his clothes and went out to fetch the car.

Normally, it took about twenty minutes to drive from Sollentuna to the airport, but today he had used only thirty-six minutes for the return journey – this early there was no traffic. Rafiq had driven Kadir to Arlanda but he did not stay with him.

When he returned it was dead quiet. Who gets up so early after a festive night!

Very gently he went to the guest room, took off his shoes and was about to turn when his nostrils caught the whiff of a familiar scent. He gazed into the room. Nasira sat on his bed and stared at him.

"How did you get here?"

"That little gap in the hedge is still there, and you never lock this room."

"What are you going here?"

"Waiting for you, what else."

"Why?"

"You watched us secretly, so I thought that I might as well come here."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"What I go through daily, who wouldn't lose her mind!"

"What do you mean?"

"Two years ago I was an innocent girl. Then I was cheated into going to Multan, and before I could say anything I was someone's wife and in his bed. I was deprived of whatever I had learnt in Sweden about my human rights in just one night. Instead, I was initiated into new duties and tricks."

"What tricks?"

In that semi-dark room, Rafiq could see the glint in Nasira's eyes. Very gently she got off the bed, dropped the shawl from her shoulders and stood there naked with only her headscarf.

"They tell me that you are a stranger now; and, the tradition is to cover one's face and head when one encounters a stranger."

Not only Rafiq's head but everything else was running wild. Difficulty with his breathing was one thing, but now all his clothes had tightened upon him. Nasira first took off his shirt, and then everything else too.

"What are you doing?"

"You asked me about the tricks that I have learnt. Now I will show you all the tricks in detail that I have learnt in the last two years".

In the next two hours, Rafiq traversed through deep valleys and rising mounds where sometimes the earth under him shook, at times the rivulets of sweat broke out and then the boiling lava erupted. When the journey was over and the destination was reached they lay side by side listening to each other's heartbeat.

After a long stretch of silence, Nasira whispered:

"Now I can also close my eyes!"

"When?"

"Whenever I want you close to me."

Rafiq Looked at her questioningly.

"Do you know how it feels to lie under a stranger?"

Rafiq shook his head in negation and asked:

"Is Kadir still a stranger for you?"

"He is a stranger, and always will be. Here in Sweden, he has for the first time called me by my name. In Multan, my name is number Three."

"Number Three?"

"Yes, number Three. I am his third wife. The night we were wedded, both of his wives were there and they helped with everything."

"Helped with everything, how?"

Nasira's conversation was a bit too cryptic for Rafiq.

Nasira burst into laughter.

"You were always a simpleton and still are. Why were you watching us from the window?"

"You were making such a noise. Why all this Hai Hai, and Oui Oui?"

"I have to make these sound otherwise my master is not satisfied."

"Don't you feel ashamed that someone would hear you?"

"Mr. Simpleton, these sounds are made to be heard! And what should I be ashamed of? My husband sleeps with all three wives in a large room. And of all the holy traditions there is only one that Kadir likes most. That is why I make these sounds every night, and hear them too."

"And what did you say about closing your eyes?"

"Yes, I almost forgot that. In Multan I knew no one, except aunty Hamida. Do you remember uncle and aunty Hamida, they returned to Multan from Sweden? I knew her since my childhood."

The picture of a rather chubby man and his quite fragile wife emerged in my mind.

"I remember, she always used to have a rosary in her hand."

"Precisely, and do you know why she kept the rosary in her hand? Well, forget that. A few weeks after my wedding I met her, and when we were alone I told her about my plight and asked her if she could help me in some way."

"What did she reply?"

"First, she went into some deep thoughts and then she said, " My dear girl, here in Multan there is no way to get you out of the clutches of your husband. I cannot help you in escaping from him, but I could tell you how you could turn your suffering into pleasure." "How?" I asked impatiently. "By closing your eyes!" she answered. "By closing my eyes?" I asked, now quite surprised. "Yes, my daughter! We, women, have been

used for centuries for the egoistic satisfaction of the male bastards. Some really obnoxious men, who were so keen to exhibit their manliness, after trespassing all the boundaries set by humanity have trampled upon countless young blossoms by forced copulation throughout history. For them, it does not matter if an underage girl is the daughter of their friend, or the wife of his adopted son, a recent widow of a slain opponent, a little girl playing in the street or an innocent girl who came for her holidays with her parents. Whatever it takes they want them in their bed. These idiots do not realise that you can buy a body but not anyone's love. Love only awakens when the mere eye contact brakes the sweat. Lucky are the girls who could choose their life partners, or they get wedded to someone who raises their pulse; otherwise, in our culture, due to economic reasons or other difficulties, many girls are handed over to men who are quite repulsive to them. Although I have never met any, but I have heard that there are men in this world who do not consider their wives as mere decoration for their bed but treat them as equal

life partners. I doubt if your husband would tolerate an accusation of being such a humane person".

"But what does all this talk has to do with closing one's eyes?" Rafiq interrupted Nasira long speech.

"Just a moment. I also put aunty Hamida the same question. She had replied, " Girl, when your man on top of you is busy displaying his masculinity, you could close your eyes and escape from that room into another place with your lover. Let your macho-man do the hard work, while you, after mentally abandoning him, enjoy the intimacy of your lover. Listen to me Nasira, as a captive, it is your duty to break the chains and seek liberty. To live a miserable life or die slowly is only treating yourself poorly. The important thing is whose intimacy you are enjoying, not who is riding you in the bed.

"I do not know how old were aunty Hamida's memories that she was ventilating, but eventually, I asked her. "Did you have a lover too, do you also close your eyes?" After some hesitation she said; "Yes daughter, I close my eyes too. And that rosary in my hand! Whose name do you think I recite on it?"

Complete silence reigned over the room. Then Nasira said,

"I had no lover in Multan with whom I could escape! But after tonight I would be able to close my eyes too."

Another session of silence overtook the room.

Then Nasira got up, stared straight into Rafiq's eyes and said:

"Rafiq, we should have been united who know each other's likes and dislikes, pains and pleasures. But I was sold away!"

"Sold how? Now you are in Sweden, why do you not reclaim your freedom? Kadir has no grip on you over here."

"He does. My son is in Multan, and I have to settle my father's old debts; otherwise, hell would break loose in our village and our relatives suffer much."

"Then why do you not start loving Kadir?"

"One cannot motivate oneself to love someone. Loving is a natural feeling. And then, Kadir has no place for loving, he is a businessman – he only knows how to buy things and utilise them."

After a short interval, Nasira said:

"But I shall prove that this time what he has invested into is a sheer loss."

"How?"

"If your tonight's affection bore fruit then you would be physically with me; otherwise, whenever he touches me in the future I would close my eyes and ask you to join me."

On the way out Nasira promised,

"Whenever I get a chance I would send you my blessings on the rosary, and curse him till my last breath!"

The Final Challenge

The fiery one looked at the Lord and said:

"You had created him out of clay and called him superior to those who are made of fire. And look what he did and got himself thrown out of your garden. Still, out of your creation you have given him the best of all planets, actually the only planet outside your kingdom that bears life. I challenge you! I will make clones of these puppets of clay in Gehanna*, the valley of Hinnom, by fire. I will teach them your name and in your name they would commit crimes to break all your command. They would be my disciples with the temperament of fire, hate in their hearts and evil in all their actions. They would cross waters to find abode in the deserts, turn tables in your holy temples, and legalize all cardinal crimes – murder, rape, robbery, the conquest of innocents, enslavement, paedophilia, extortion and subjugation – if they are committed in your name. They will divide people, cause chaos and instate anarchy. They would develop weapons that

would destroy your stars. And eventually, these figures of fire would annihilate your puppets of clay.”

"And why would they do it?" Asked the Lord.

"Because they believe in me," replied Lucifer.

"You are wrong," replied the Lord and continued,

"you forgot that upon these so-called puppets of clay I bestowed mind and conscientiousness. I gave them free will and the ability to choose between right and wrong, good and evil, and darkness or light. I gave them the faculty to think, talk, hear, smell and feel so that they may use these gifts to converse, sing, compose music, dance, evolve sciences to solve my mysteries and reach my nearness by experiences that lead to ecstasy. You will see that these men of clay would triumph through their knowledge over you men of fire who act only upon blind beliefs."

"How could persons who are torn between right and wrong, or good and evil triumph over those who have unshakable beliefs and execute their actions without remorse and pity?" Asked Lucifer now aglow with fury.

"Because knowledge teaches them how to ward off the fire with a sound protective argument, heal the

injury with gentle words and tame the wild with resilience and kindness," answered the Lord in a calm tone and added,

"And when needed they would wipe out the darkness of ill-will with the light of wisdom."

"Then it is a battle between belief and knowledge!"
Said Lucifer.

"It is a battle between blind beliefs borne out of ignorance, arrogance and distortion, and knowledge drawn from honest research, verifiable facts and genuine scrutiny." Was the answer from the All-knowing.

*Gehenna

- In Judaism - a fiery place of judgment, named after the Hinnom, a valley outside Jerusalem.

- In Christianity - one of two words translated "Hell" in the New Testament. The other word is Hades

- The Islamic equivalent is Jahannam

The Ring

(I)

Sufi Tamanna was inclined towards plainness in his appearance, the reality in his attitude and romance in his nature! That is why, at an early age in his life he had abandoned The Land of Pure, after declaring, "Whatever address the Almighty declares for his home, I would rather stay where He is found", and in search of his creator he had migrated to Europe. Neither London's fog met his taste nor did he like the ambiance in smoky Birmingham. After some wandering here and there he reached Stockholm; looked appreciatively at the verdant valleys, fresh water, and abundant granite rock, and in his heart declared Sweden as his new country and one of Stockholm's suburbs, Sollentuna, his home. In the sixties, the prevailing atmosphere in Sweden was such that the youth had started to open itself rather early to take in new experiences. Thus, Sufi Tamanna spent the first three decades of his life in embracing the beautiful gifts sent to him by God by open arms; and, without any personal addition to his

creator's world, and as a dedicated volunteer, he did his best to engage himself in creating intimate relations with members of different nations.

Then came a period when people started asking him strange and uncomfortable questions --

"Why are you still single?"

"Why are you not married?"

The correct answers to these questions were --

"Sir, it is very seldom I am single."

and,

"If by marriage you mean being coupled together, then there is no dearth of it; though I refuse the intrusion by a priest."

But, the faces of those enquirers were so morbid that telling the truth felt so inappropriate. Therefore, Sufi Tamanna stopped frequenting places where sneaky elders used to roam about to get young men like him trapped in the web of traditions or hook them on a bait of rites.

Still, one early morning he was caught unprepared when the mirror posed him the same questions. The worst of all, that damned mirror had acquired a face in

it that reminded him so strongly of his father – just like him, deep wrinkles etched by experiences around the eyes, and some thin strands of silver in the hair.

Three months later, Sufi Tamanna had married Nafees Bibi, daughter of Doctor Baidar Bukht, originating from his ancestral city of Sialkot. On the first look, Nafees Bibi gave the impression of being his junior in age, broader in volume, longer in height but lesser in her intellect -- but the first look was just the first look; what time would prove no one knew about it.

But, one thing was for certain – the moment Nafees Bibi saw Sufi Tamanna she fell in undying love with him. And when someone's husband is also her beloved then what else is required. In the next few years, Nafees Bibi studied the habits of Sufi Tamanna and, after some crucial alterations, moulded her own lifestyle into his manners. However, one habit of Sufi Tamanna she could never grasp – every night Sufi Tamanna took off his wedding ring, put it under his pillow and wore it again in the morning.

The very first week Nafees Bibi wanted to ask her husband the reason why he did that, but modesty dampened her curiosity and she refrained; thereafter, that habit was no longer a surprise, though it always bothered her.

And most probably she would never have learnt about that reason had not Sufi Tabassam gone to Oslo to his friend in order to attend a poetry session. Even there, when he at the sleeping time took off his ring the third night in front of his friend Shahid, he could not refrain from asking Tamanna about that strange habit.

Tamanna's mature face was suddenly overwhelmed by the youthful blush of an innocent. Rather shyly he said to Shahid, "Well, it is like this – while I am awake I know whom I am married to and what are my obligations, but I have no idea who might turn up in my dream, and then a ring on my finger could be embarrassing!"

This conversation had taken place between two friends; and obviously, it should have stayed there. But, it is said that even walls can have ears; and, where

small ears lay dormant there also exist very eager tongues! Especially those walls in which telephone lines are embedded!

The next day that small talk, by chance, slipped from Shahid's tongue and was caught by his wife; who, accidentally, mentioned it to one of her friends; who, in turn, could not resist calling Nafees Bibi's elder sister, and before the evening abandoned Sollentuna Sufi Tamanna's habit had no longer any secrecy left to it.

"Is it so!" these three words were all Nafees uttered and then she put a stop to all speculations, but a mischievous smile kept on playing on her face.

On Tamanna's return, what happened to be now an open secret, she maintained it as an enigma within her house; but, she made an crucial change in her daily routine – Tamanna used to take a cup of green tea before he slept, which was prepared with great care by Nafees Bibi. She kept on preparing the tea as before but, as a daughter of Dr. Baidar Bukht, she began adding a tiny sleeping pill along with sugar in the cup. After a few weeks, not only the body but even the mind of Tamanna got used to a rather deep sleep. Thereafter,

although Sufi Tamanna took favours of many nights, still all those sensual figures he had always waited for in his expected dreams never arrived.

(II)

Time passed on, then one night when Tamanna went to sleep he never woke up in the morning. Before his last ritual bath, Nafees Bibi called in Uncle Ahsan, who used to bathe the dead bodies, and in front of her elder sister told him about her wish.

"But there is no such ritual in our religion", protested Uncle Ahsan.

"Uncle, you are a pious person and when the time comes you would obviously go to paradise", said Nafees Bibi, carrying the collective impact of her volume, height, and weight in her eyes.

"Yes, of course," Uncle Ahsan, who was living so blissfully in this sinful world and had no hurry in moving on to paradise, replied in a rather clumsy manner.

"And no doubt you would receive many rewards in paradise, but I hope you don't mind receiving a little

gift here too!" after saying that Nafees Bibi deposited a nice bundle of notes in Ahsan's palm.

Uncle Ahsan was an veteran performer and immediately realized that when the favours come from above he should be grateful. He took Tamanna's ring from Nafees Bibi and quietly went out.

The elder sister was very curious but considering the sensitivity of the situation, she avoided asking anything.

After giving the ritual bath to Sufi Tamanna, and while wrapping the white coffin sheath on the body, Uncle Ahsan had a strong impulse to withhold the ring in his hand, but he recalled the conversation that had taken place between six eyes; and bearing in mind that the affairs at hand had to do with the final settlements of one's deeds in life, he kept his hands clean and very adroitly slipped the ring on Tamanna's finger, when no one else was watching.

On the way back from the graveyard he nodded his head very gently when he passed by Nafees Bibi's window, telling her that her wish was fulfilled.

When all the mourners had departed and both sisters were left alone, the elder sister could no longer hold back her curiosity.

"Nafees, why did you waste such a valuable ring?" she asked.

A very mystic smile manifested itself on Nafees' face, and she replied gently, "Dear sister, Tamanna was a very decent person in his deeds, and he would no doubt go to paradise; and surely I would also end up there too because until today all the absolutions that I have performed were for the sins that I never got a chance to commit."

"Then what?"

"Well, I look forward to the reaction of all those seventy-two Houris, which Tamanna would get as a reward when they see my ring on his finger!"

The Sixth Sense

He parked the car near The Sollentuna Swimming Hall, slowly strolled through the lush green field on the way to the Edsberg Slott, circled the grand building and proceeded towards the promenade by the Edsviken. He needed tranquillity as well as time to think. Oblivious of the joggers who passed him every now and then he tried to concentrate on the problem that needed a quick but definite solution. He touched the paper in his pocket to ascertain himself that the task at hand, or rather in his hand, was real. Just opposite Vallen, the sports arena, he sat down on a large rock by the bank of the lake. Some ducks took him to be one of their benefactors who regularly fed them and hurriedly swam towards him, but then abandoned their hope as his hands remained in his lap. They could see that he wasn't *really* there.

And he wasn't!

He had glided into the realm of thoughts, expanded ten short seconds into a long stretch of time and was examining each milli-moment separately. He was

looking at every instant, recalling every small whisper, recapturing incidents that had taken place in those short, but for him unforgettable, ten seconds:

A male voice, turning of his head, the black hole in the metal gazing at him, his abrupt burst into activity to confuse the aggressor, his intentional erratic car driving, a hit on his head from behind by a metallic object, how he had inhaled deeply and hit the man in the passenger seat with full force by his elbow just under his ear; thereafter, how he had applied full breaks and leapt out of the car hitting his head against the road; and, finally, how darkness swallowed him!

All that and a lot more had happened in those second – three persons had become so deeply involved that they would never forget each other for the rest of their lives. If his aggressors had known how intimately he was acquainted with Death, then would they have tried that threat on him? Did they know how close to dying they had come? Two young idiots trying to make a quick earning had almost killed and nearly got killed themselves!

He took a deep breath and returned to the real world. Slowly he pulled the paper from the prison authority and read it again. It had warned him that Guntis Kajons had served his term and would be released from the jail on the ninth September.

Today it was ninth September and he remembered Guntis very well. He was the older of the two, and the experienced one – the one who had sat beside him and pulled the pistol on him. He was the one he had secretly named as the Snake Eyes, because of his stare. They had met in the court in Sollentuna. All during the court proceedings Guntis had stared at him without a single blink. Just before they vacated the court room and Guntis, accompanied by two guards, had gone out with a slight limp in his left leg their eyes met for a very brief but intense instant and he knew, there and then, that they would meet again.

The younger one was sentenced to six months imprisonment, while Snake Eyes got one year.

It was a fine day. The sun had just finished painting the Edsberg Slott golden yellow. The fountain in the

lake bestowed a fine spray of brilliants to its surrounding water. Over the rocks of Falkenberg a sea gull screeched, suddenly breaking the spell of the afternoon's lull. A pair of majestic swans indignantly looked at the rude noisy bird and then continued their regal float on the silvery water chest.

Jason closed his eyes again and retreated to his reflective state of mind. He felt agitated. Anger bounced in his mind! He had been angry for over a year now. Actually he had been angry from the moment he had leapt out of his taxi and hit the ground. How could he, the hunter, become the prey? How could he miss the danger signals after all the elite training that he had received? How could his sixth sense, the one that had kept him alive in the jungles of Vietnam, abandon him when he needed it the most? Or had he discarded his sixth sense? No, that he couldn't have done. The sixth sense is not something that one acquires or discards; either one has it or does not possess it! And that he had the sixth sense, he was sure of. Because, without it he wouldn't be sitting there.

He was in his merely twenty when he was drafted by the American army. In only six months he was deprived of his humanity and turned into a killing machine that lacked all sense of morality or justice. He was brainwashed to kill on command ... kill anyone and anywhere. And he had felt good. He felt good to belong to the 'most efficient killing gang of the world'. Just the experience of holding the automatic gun in his hand and the knowledge that he had the potential to take life made him feel euphoric. According to his faith it was God that gave and took life! And when one may do the half of what only God could do then wasn't that one a demigod? And that was what Americans had sent to the peasants of Vietnam ... thousands and thousands of demigods who did what God would do in his worst temper. They had killed, burnt, and destroyed all that had come in their way. Without asking themselves, who did they kill and why? They actually relished that orgy of death.

And then he was ordered for a short rest of a month. He had hated leaving his pals in action but the field psychologist had insisted that he *needed* a break. And

while he was on that break something broke within him. It happened when one of the newly arrived nurses at the hospital had asked him: "What do these gooks look like?" And he could not answer. He had seen no GOOK. He had killed them – men, women, children, dogs, cats and hens – but he could remember no faces, no voices. All he remembered was the burst of bullets, blast of bombs, smell of explosives, flash of bayonets, shrieks of pain, bodies in the mud, and the abundant purple red of blood staining the green foliage of the jungle.

All those months he was there they were sent on quick raids followed by a quicker retreat to his comrades-in-arms. He had never actually seen the enemy in his eyes at anytime. Then, how could he describe what did they look like!

When he did not utter any word the nurse had withdrawn herself believing him to suffer from the battle fatigue. But he had kept on thinking the whole night long about who were his real enemies. Then a torrent of salt water had burst out of his eyes. In the darkness of the night he had cursed all the Kennedys,

Nixons, and Johnssons who had robbed him and thousands of other youngsters of their boyhood and transformed then into murdering robots. He had killed people who had never hurt him; and he had killed for the people who profited more by selling lead than selling gold, by devising machines that turn lead into a precious metal as bullets that are meant for human bodies. The next morning when he got up he looked at the world by different eyes.

In the next few days he met some other boys who were also wondering what were they doing there, and why?

Thirty eight years ago he had landed in Sweden along with eleven other American deserters. It was the July of 1968, and the schools and the universities were closed for the summer vacation. As many students return to their parental homes in the summer there were plenty of temporarily vacant accommodations in Kungshamra, a student hostel on the periphery of Stockholm city. They were boarded there on their arrival. In the tavern of the student house he had met Ingrid who had held

his hand and listened to his story. He never let go of her hand and after she had completed her studies they had moved to Törnaskogen in Sollentuna, in a villa that Ingrid had acquired from her retiring parents, who had moved on to an apartment in the nearby Häggvik.

From the moment Ingrid had met him she had known that he was a good but tormented soul, and after listening to his stories she knew why. But she was patient by nature, and kind at heart. That had helped.

After trying various jobs he had settled for driving taxi. To sit and work all day long in some room was claustrophobic for him, but he possessed no higher education to qualify for some responsible field job. Taxi brought him relief. Meeting different people, talking to them, looking into their eyes, listening to their talk comforted him.

He had also managed to de-brainwash himself from the filth that was poured into his mind by the American army. He kept no weapon in his home and his three children were never encouraged to play with guns. The only relic he had left from the army was his hunting knife that he had held on to.

Years continued to pass by peacefully, and then came the day he met the two very special clients in Frihamnen in Stockholm. One had jumped onto the front seat and the other in the seat behind him.

"To Åkersberga," the one in the front had said.

And towards Åkersberga he had driven. It was a normal summer afternoon and the journey towards Österskär had gone smoothly. Despite the hard labour by the air conditioner the August heat remained invincible. The passenger in the front seat was a bit uncomfortable; otherwise, there was no other sign of trouble.

Then Jason heard him say something and point towards a forest path just before Stava.

That what followed was like a nightmare; the details of which overwhelmed his mind from time to time. How many times had he re-run that memory-film? Each time becoming angry at the ending! It was he who had to run to save his life; whereas in a well directed film it should have been those two hoodlums who should have begged for mercy!

However much he tried he could not change that ending.

And now the Snake Eyes was being released after the completion of his sentence. And Jason's sixth sense had come into play. Since he had received the letter he had felt that turbulence in his body that always preceded his storms. Sitting there in the picturesque surroundings of Edsviken his whole being knew that something awful was about to happen, and that it would happen today.

Yesterday he had sent Ingrid and the two young ones to her parent's summer house in the countryside. She had sensed his unrest but was astute enough to not to ask him any questions. "Call us when it is time for you to return to us," had she said after she kissed him to bid farewell.

Instead of parking the car in the porch he placed it outside on the street – he wanted to keep the path clear in front of his main door for all eventualities. It was still light outside; days are incredibly long in Sweden in

the summer. He prepared himself a salad and toast with cheese and consumed it with mineral water. Anything that might dull his reactions was strictly kept at a distance. He pushed a collection of Mahler's discs in the player, settled down in the armchair in the hall facing the entrance and listened to the music. Mahler matched the turmoil within him. Time passed, very very slowly to begin with, but when his pulse abruptly quickened the time started rushing away. He had seen the lights of a car that had gone by his villa, but the sound of tires had died rather quickly. RED ALERT!. He got up from his chair, pulled the hunter's knife from its sheath and placed the shaft flatly in the palm of his right hand, took three sharp steps and about a meter from the main door sank on the floor on his knees. Through the glass plate on the side of the door he saw a figure approach the door with a limp. Jason's right arm was stretched backwards, balancing the knife in his hand for a throw. Outside another hand was protruded, but before it touched the handle of the door Jason pushed the door outwards that startled the man standing there. Before the stranger could regain his

wits and move the arm that hid behind his back Jason jerked his hand and released the sharp knife that hit the man on his breast, piercing his heart. A hissing sound escaped from the mouth of Snake Eyes as he fell backwards. Jason got up and cautiously went towards the fallen man. Then he bent down to take away the weapon from the hidden hand of Snake Eyes. He turned him on his side. The hand of the dying man held a bunch of roses.

"What have you done?" an anxious voice broke the spell.

Jason looked at the man in taxi uniform who stared at him.

"Why did you knife him?" asked his colleague as he lifted his eyes from Snake Eyes to Jason,

"He ... he ... he wanted to ..."

"He wanted to give you some roses!"

"R...o...s...es?" asked Jason.

"Yes, I helped him buy them for you. He was on his way to the airport, and he said to me in English that he had to apologise to someone before he leaves Sweden.

He showed me an old paper from the court that had your address on it. So I drove him here."

"Why would he give me flowers?" asked Jason

"He told me that he had done an old man great harm. A year confronting himself was a long period! He had thought about the events in the jail and felt very bad. He said he had changed; and as I said before, he just wanted to apologise to you!"

Jason thought about his sixth sense. Once again it had made him kill someone who was not really an enemy.

An Innocent Question

Shah Ji, as usual, before his breakfast had just finished with his religious rites, when Nanna abruptly stopped on his way out to the school and asked him,

"Grandpa, have you offered absolutions for your sins, today as well?"

"My boy, that we should offer every day."

Curiosity grew deeper in the boy's eyes,

"Grandpa, which sins have you committed that you must seek for forgiveness daily?"

For a moment Shah Ji was taken aback. He did not have any clue what should he answer the boy. The first reply that came to his mind was, "Children do not ask such questions", but these words, instead of becoming an audible sentence, keep on rolling back in his throat. So much so that twice he had to swallow them with his saliva.

The child was still staring at him.

"Son, go to your school now. We shall talk in the evening."

He tried to get rid of the difficult situation at hand.

"Alright Grandpa, this evening it is!"

Said the boy and went out with his eyes still full of curiosity.

Shah Ji closed his eyes and took some deep breaths, and then look around to see who else was listening. He did not observe anyone, except the parrot in the cage. The parrot looked at him very intensively, and that Shah Ji did not like very much. Who could trust a talkative parrot, who might say whatever comes to his mind?

Shah Ji could not recall when did he commit his first sin. It could have not been in his childhood or early teens because the conditions in his father's home allowed no such slips. Shah Ji senior, after he had inscribed the name of his creator in golden ink, had it framed in expensive wood, and hung that frame in the sitting room. Under that frame, an extra-large tire-sole boot was nailed to the wall! Therefore, never mind Satan, not even one of his disciple was likely to enter that room. He had never asked a mullah to visit his

house, he performed all the religious rituals himself. Nor were there any chances that some inappropriate deed might occur to the left or the right of that house – on the left lived aunty Shamim, and on the right aunt Zubaida. She and her daughters had such a guise that any wish to commit a sin never enticed Shah Ji's simple mind. And ever since Zubaida's eldest daughter had swung Shah Ji over her shoulder in a bout and sent him flying to the wall not only Shah Ji had started doubting his own masculinity but also had lost all trust that Shahida was a modest girl. His own appearance gave the impression that his creator had been rather a stingy with his charity in all that was given to Shah Ji. His face did not look ugly, but handsome was also a description that did not apply well, he was just about acceptable. His constitution was such that anyone intending to be unkind to him had to think carefully before he exercised his intention, lest he should be accused of manslaughter.

Even the years that he spent in school and college, when most of the kids indulged in youthful slipups,

Shah Ji had kept himself unsoiled, mentally and physically.

Shah Ji was still in a state of bewilderment when his wife, Shahni, approached him and asked,

"What's happening, you are in rather deep thoughts today?"

"Yes, you see You see, Nanna asked me quite an innocent question today and I do not know what answer I should give him."

"What question?"

"He was asking me what sins have I committed."

"You committed sins!"

Shahni looked at her husband the way a hen would look at her newly hatched chicken who has been accused of mobbing the moment it was born.

"Yes, he wanted to know about the sins that I offer absolutions for every morning."

Shyness brought a flash of red on Sahni's face, as she returned to the kitchen she said,

"Don't forget telling me if you find any such lapse!"

If Shah Ji were not lost in deep thoughts he would have heard the implied sarcasm in his wife's tone.

It was his father's feat that, through his contacts, he not only arranged a job for his son but also provided the home with a well-natured daughter-in-law. In other words, without any exertion, Shah Ji became well supplied with the amenities at home. Even during the nuptial night, he had kept his mind focused on the essentials and free from all devious side activities. His biggest problem that night was to remember all the verses from Quran that uncle Ahsan had taught him, and how to gently blow his breath after each verse on each formal occasion. That is why the next morning Shahni had asked him quite bashfully if he suffered from asthma.

With the passage of time, not only a son was born to them but, later on, a grandson too. It was Shah Ji's habit that after the morning prayer he would spend some more time in worship and absolutions. His own son never showed any interest in his religious activities,

but the grandson on several occasions had asked what did he mumble with closed eyes. At various occasions, Shah Ji had given different answers to the boy, one of them being that he asks for the pardon for his sins.

And today, when the child had asked him he could not recall which sins made him seek pardon.

In the evening, when Nanna returned from his school he went straight to his grandfather and stood there with prying eyes and a mischievous smile on the face.

Shah Ji looked at the innocent face of the child and then addressed him affectionately,

"Son, you had asked me about the sins that I ask pardon for!"

"Yes, Grandpa."

"Look, I used to have a prayer rug lying here on which I sat and offered my absolutions. Today, after rolling it I have put it away. It has been lying here all these years without any need for it!"

The Evil Eyes
(Sain Sucha)

