

INTIZAR HUSAIN

Sleep*

ZAFAR WAS AMAZED at the sight of him. “Arre, Salman! You? You’ve come back? But how?”

“Don’t ask how. I’ve come back. That’s all.”

Zafar didn’t know what to say next. “To come back alive from there ... it’s a miracle!”

“Yes, consider it a miracle. I was meant to live some more, so I’ve returned.”

It wasn’t just Zafar who was amazed at his return; he himself could barely be convinced of it. “I can’t believe that I’ve come away from that place.”

Zafar couldn’t take his eyes off Salman. Salman was the only person he knew who had come back alive from there. He looked at Salman from head to toe and asked incredulously, “But, tell me, Salman, how *did* you escape?”

“How did I escape,” he mumbled. For a moment he felt like spewing out the entire tale in one breath. He looked around, then said, “I can’t tell you in a few words; it would require a marathon storytelling session. You’ll lose your senses if you hear all the details.”

“You’re right, my friend. The little that we have heard is horrifying, whereas you—you’ve seen it all with your own eyes.”

He drew a long breath and sighed, “Yes, yes, I’ve seen it all with my own eyes.”

Countless macabre scenes danced before his eyes. “I’ve seen so much that ... Let’s just say I’ve seen it all.”

“Tell me.”

*“Niñd,” from the author’s collection *Kačʰvĕ* (Lahore: Maṭbū‘āt, 1981), pp. 67–72.

Once again, Salman felt the urge to spit it all out, but he looked around and checked himself, "I have a lot to tell you, but how can I, standing here like this."

Zafar paused to think, then asked, "What are you doing this evening?"

"Morning or evening, nothing matters to me ... they're the same."

"Then come to my home this evening."

"All right, I'll be there."

"I'll phone Aslam. He'll come too."

"Aslam the Argumentative. Is he around?"

"Nothing ever happens to people like him; they're spared both living and dying. Where would he go?"

"What about Zaidi?"

"I'll call that big-talker too. So, is it set for this evening?"

"Yes, it is."

Zafar reached home and quickly dialed a number. "Hello? Aslam? Yaar, it's me ... Zafar. Yaar, Salman has come."

"Salman? What are you saying, yaar!"

"Yes, yes. He's come."

"You mean, he escaped from there? Alive? But how?"

"Come to my home this evening and ask him yourself."

"I'll be there."

Then Zafar called Zaidi at his office. "Hello, Zaidi, ... Please call Zaidi. Hello, Zaidi? It's me, Zafar. Shall I tell you something ..."

"Tell me."

"Salman has come."

"Salman! ... No way, man!"

"Yes, yaar, he managed to get away."

"What a tough guy! Where is he now?"

"Come to my home this evening. He'll be there."

"I'll come."

All four friends met in the evening. The three looked at Salman with sheer amazement, and Salman looked at them, equally bemused. Aslam expressed their collective astonishment at his escape, then spoke of his sorrow at the state of affairs there. As he spoke, his anger grew. "How they've tortured people over there ... They've killed and maimed the old ... the children ... the women ... Barbarians ... Animals ... If I had my way, I would ..." He gritted his teeth.

"This is precisely what they should have done," Zaidi declared.

"Done this?" Aslam spluttered in angry disbelief.

“After what we’ve been doing to them for twenty-five years, this is exactly what they should have done.”

“And what have we been doing? What did we do to them?” Aslam shouted.

Then, on the basis of several sensational newspaper reports, he launched into a long tirade about all the atrocities committed by them. Zaidi countered each one of the allegations and, in turn, listed all the cruelties that had been perpetrated against them. Salman gave a big yawn. Zafar looked at him and asked, “What do you think, Salman?”

Aslam pounced, “Yes, let’s ask Salman. He has lived there for so many years. He has seen everything with his own eyes. What do you think, Salman?”

“I think,” Salman said, and then fell into a contemplative silence.

Seeing him go quiet like this, Zafar became impatient. He prodded, “Yes, come on, tell us. Say something.”

“What shall I say?”

Zaidi sneered, “Scared of committing yourself?”

“Committing myself?” Salman stared blankly.

Aslam spoke forcefully, “Let’s hear what you have to say about the situation there.”

Somewhat uncertainly, Salman said, “Yaar, I don’t know what to make of it.”

Zafar glared at him. “The last time you were here, you left me senseless by going on and on about that place.”

Salman just looked at Zafar, then he said in a muffled voice, “At that time I had the mistaken belief that I understood the situation.”

“Forget all that. Tell us what happened there.”

“Yes, that I can tell you,” he said with complete conviction.

“I’ve seen so much there. If I begin to describe all the things I’ve seen, you’ll get goose bumps,” he said, then he grew silent, as though he was preparing to launch into a very long epic. The three friends sat up attentively. They waited for him to continue. But he just sat there. When he didn’t utter another word, Zafar prompted him, “Yaar, you haven’t told us anything yet.”

“Yes, yaar,” he fumbled, “Yaar, I don’t know what to say. I can’t remember anything.”

Both Aslam and Zaidi glared at him, then turned away and started talking to each other as if they didn’t know him.

The three friends talked and argued and squabbled among themselves. Things began to heat up. Tempers rose. Volleys of sarcasm jetted

back and forth. Resounding abuse burst from Zafar, sometimes about people on that side, sometimes about people on this side. Salman looked at one friend, then at the other. He listened without saying a word. His eyelids began to droop. Once or twice, he nearly dozed off. Then he pulled himself up and tried to listen attentively to every contentious word that was being said. Again his lids grew heavy and his eyes began to close.

“Bastards! Democratic dogs!” Zaidi banged the table with his fist.

“Bunch of bloody traitors! They’re all Indian agents!” Aslam hissed. Salman looked at them with drowsy eyes and drifted back to sleep.

He opened his eyes when tea was placed in front of them and Zafar nudged him, “Salman, here’s your tea.” He woke with a start, looked apologetically at his friends and sat up straight. Softly, he ran his fingers over his eyes, then took a sip of tea. As he drank the tea, he could feel the sleep leaving his eyes. Now he felt refreshed. As though the doors and windows of his mind were opening. He said, “The way I dozed off just now reminds me of an incident from those days. That night I hadn’t slept a wink.” As he spoke, countless terrifying visions began to dance before his eyes and a subhuman scream ricocheted through his brain.

“Which night are you talking about? Was it before the fall?” Aslam asked.

Salman thought for a moment, then said, “I can’t remember which night it was, but those nights were all the same, except that ...” and he fell silent. Aslam, Zaidi and Zafar—all three—had been listening attentively. Disconcerted by their rapt attention, Salman skittered, “I’ve forgotten what I was about to say. Anyhow, after that, I wasn’t able to sleep all night.” He paused, then said, “And after that, sleep became a rarity. Perhaps I haven’t slept at all ever since ... or maybe I have on one or two occasions ...”

Aslam, Zaidi and Zafar listened indifferently. Then they became engrossed in their own conversation. Back and forth, the arguments raged—did people from the other side exploit them or did our own people betray us. Salman just sat there and tried to recall whether he had slept at all during any of those endless nights that had passed. He couldn’t remember. And what about since coming here? He couldn’t figure that out either.

Tired of his futile figuring, he tried to concentrate on the argument raging between Zafar, Zaidi and Aslam. He kept listening until a yawn caught him unawares and he looked at Zafar with his eyelids drooping and said “Yaar, I’m feeling sleepy.”

Zafar gave him an insipid look and said, “So why don’t you sleep.”

“Yes, yaar, I’m going to sleep,” he mumbled drowsily as his eyes began to close. He slid farther down on the sofa and rested his head on the back with his feet up on the table. With one worn-out slipper resting near Aslam and the toe of the other nudging Zaidi, he began to snore. □

—*Translated by Rakshanda Jalil*