

IKRAMULLAH

A Picnic¹

THE three of us had tired of wandering around since morning. I don't know why we had come here, to this desolate place so far away from the city where there was nothing except an expanse of perfectly still water stretching as far as the eye could see. Wind gusts full of dirt and grit from its banks had blown over—actually, had just hung over—it all day long. The water, the grimy bluish air above it, and the dusty sky, in a desperate attempt to penetrate one another, had ultimately merged into an indistinguishable whole. Seen from up close, the still water seemed to be gently sliding and slipping under our feet, but on the other side, where it fell into the depth, it foamed and frothed and roared and bellowed, churning millions of tons of mountain earth within it. It gaped at the sky through the blind, helpless eyes of the eddies which formed and unformed on its surface, and ran madly through the desert like an injured mastodon. Staring at the sluggish current for a while, I felt as though I too was sliding away and so was the bridge. I grabbed onto the wall firmly, shook my head vigorously, and thanked God that it was just an illusion.

We'd been through such experiences almost from the moment we had arrived here in the morning. In fact, we had experienced them over and over. We knew that our feet didn't slip off the ground; any more than the bridge actually slid away. It only seemed that way. By now we had become quite used to it. But surely, someday the feet that merely seemed to be slipping would really slip, and the bridge would actually slide. There might not be anybody on the bridge at that time, and, alone, it might, all of it, just plop headlong into the water. After we got there we strolled a couple of times up and down the bridge. Then Jafar said, "Come on, folks, it's getting late. Let's get to work."

¹"Piknik," from the author's first collection of short stories *Jangal* (Lahore: Sang-e Meel Publications, 1980), 137–56.

We took our fishing rods out of the car, put on our caps, each adorned with a feather, and then collected our umbrellas, the thermos as big as a water-pitcher, and the picnic basket heavy with snacks. Jafar led the way. We followed him down the stairs and came to the water's edge where we began walking noisily in the direction of the current. We'd walked so far along the riverbank that we could listen to the noise of the water if we wanted to, or ignore it altogether, and our car, parked at one end of the dam, looked no larger than a little white toy abandoned by a child during play.

Weighed down by the paraphernalia of our comforts, we had broken into a fine sweat and were quite out of breath. Jafar had slung his shotgun over his shoulder and strapped the belt of cartridges around his waist. His ten-gallon hat conferred on him an even greater Western look. Rahman, opening his umbrella and driving the pole into the sand, asked him, "What—you want to fish with a gun?"

Jafar's white teeth flashed briefly before disappearing behind the thick cascade of his walrus moustache. Here the river was just limping along. With our backs bent forward, we were scanning the ground closely, like three earth-colored hens straining for grain, and we were walking round and round digging for earthworms in the crumbly soil. The dark brown, almost black, squirmy earthworms, about a finger-long, were trying to pull themselves out of the moist earth and haul the weight of their plump matchstick bodies somewhere or other in frantic haste. But they were actually getting nowhere. They were in such a big hurry that if they didn't have bodies they might well have gone beyond the seven heavens by now. But their bodies were forcing them to move around in circles on the same spot. Jafar snapped a twig off a brownish emaciated bush that was leafless. Despite much caution on his part, a thorn managed to prick his finger. The ensuing pain caused his forehead to furrow. He had an earthworm on the twig, its delicate, smooth transparent body slung across it, half on one side and half on the other, like a saddle across a camel's back. It was busily twitching and squirming, as its two ends crossed each other time and again, and it finally coiled into the shape of a figure "8" open at the top. Who else, at that moment, would have been wearier of its body, and who more desirous of life than that earthworm?

"Now I'll thread it on the hook and cast it into the water; the fish will rush to gobble it up and be caught," Jafar said, proceeding to string the worm onto the hook with the dexterity and care of a watchmaker. Whether or not our faces furrowed in visible empathy for the bait's agony I can't say, but the worm itself suddenly jerked and twisted into a circle

and that was that. A single drop the color of onionskin tumbled from it and was absorbed in the sand. “Guys, come on,” Jafar prompted us, “put the bait on and position yourselves about twenty feet apart along the bank. Fish don’t bite if you’re sitting close together.”

“Rahman, can you put the worm on my hook, please?”

“Do it yourself. It’s not a big deal.”

“It turns my stomach.”

Circling his line over his head and flinging it far into the river, Jafar retorted sarcastically, “But eating the fish doesn’t turn your stomach, does it?”

We sat under our umbrellas with the patient immobility of herons, waiting for the fish to take the bait. Our lines were moving, leaning a little in the direction of the flow, with their reed floats visible in front. Hot, gusting wind was slapping sand onto our perspiring faces. As it flowed forward the turbid water was churning itself up and down like liquid about to come to a boil. The opposite bank also looked as barren and desolate as this one: it had none of the proverbial seductive lure of the “other side.” I asked Rahman, who was positioned between me and Jafar, if it was all right to go have a drink of water.

“Pull your line out so a fish doesn’t make off with it.”

The thermos bottle and the basket of snacks lay under Jafar’s umbrella. When he saw me he said, “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. I just came to have a drink of water.”

“What is it with you guys? Getting thirsty every two minutes, like kids?”

Just then there was the sound of a splash near his line. Jafar became alert and sat up straight. Without thinking he began to run his tongue over his lips. If he could have, he would’ve jumped into the water, caught the fish with his bare hands and walked out with it.

After I had my drink I stood by watching him. When I was about to leave he said, “After all this waiting it looked like I might catch a fish after all. But you ruined it for me ... by making me talk. Now there isn’t a hope in hell. The entire sport depends on patience and remaining cool, but nature has denied both of those to you guys.”

Feeling a bit embarrassed, like a bad student after a scolding from the teacher, I returned and sat down again with the rod in my hand. A little later Jafar called, “Folks, pull your rods out and see if the baits are intact.”

They were, still undergoing their ordeal strung helplessly on the hooks. They must have been pretty repulsive creatures for no fish had been tempted to bite. Rahman suggested we should perhaps put an addi-

tional worm on each hook. Jafar readily agreed, "Yes, yes. In fact we should toss these old ones and put two fresh ones on. These may have become stale. The fish would find the smell of fresh ones more tempting."

Soon the mangled bodies of the failed worms were off the hooks and lying in the mud. Had they been very successful, they still couldn't have done more than get stuck in the gullets of the fish. We weighted the hooks on the lines, whirled them above our heads and dropped them back into the river. Bracing ourselves with renewed determination to remain absolutely quiet and alert, we sat under our umbrellas stalking the fish.

It was now two in the afternoon. No line had felt any tug, nor had any float dipped. I was beginning to feel pretty fed up. Apparently Rahman too had had enough. The second I said, "Forget it, Rahman. Doesn't look like we're going to catch any," he yelled, "Yes, the game's over," and started reeling in his line.

We tucked our umbrellas and fishing rods under our arms and walked over to Jafar who said, "Sometimes people sit for days on end and nothing happens. Then, when things begin to happen, there's no stopping them. Actually, patience and waiting are what this sport's all about. You, on the other hand, have given up so soon. A person doesn't just give up hope like that, does he?"

"Look, Jafar," Rahman tried to reason with him, "let's face it, there aren't any fish here. Why waste time? Come on, let's go. If there really were any fish here, we would've seen some sign of them by now, wouldn't we have?"

Jafar flared up, "Don't talk like an idiot. You really think a river as big as this one, so big its other bank is hardly even visible, would be without fish? You think all this water is flowing along without fish in it? Even if you let rainwater stand in a puddle for a few days fish inevitably appear in it. What makes you think there aren't any fish in this? All right, ask Afzal. Afzal, didn't you hear a splash just as you were coming here to get a drink of water? So what was that? My friends, please wait a little while longer—for my sake. Now that the time's come for the fish to be caught, you shouldn't give up hope. Why are you squandering all the effort you've already put into it?"

"One can't bank one's whole life on a single splash. And who can tell whether that was indeed a fish's splash? Couldn't it have been a big fat frog jumping? Or maybe it was the splash made by a piece of cheese slipping out of a crow's beak into the water when it opened its beak to caw.

Or maybe it was a gold nugget a kite was carrying in its claws to open the eyes of its young that dropped. Or it could have been a lively turtle making a playful somersault. God knows, there can be a thousand reasons for a splash. How can you claim it was made by a fish?”

“But I saw the fish myself,” Jafar said to Rahman irritably.

Rahman looked at me and asked, “Afzal, did you see any fish jump?”

“I was busy drinking water at the time. I don’t even recall hearing a splash.”

Jafar became genuinely angry. “If you want to go and leave me here alone, you’re welcome to do so. Just don’t make those damned excuses. I’m staying here and *will* stay here until I’ve caught that very same fish and showed it to you. What, do you think I was dreaming with my eyes open? That it wasn’t a fish? That it was a ghost, a mere illusion?”

“All right, all right,” Rahman said, “no need to get all worked up. We’ll go by our watches. We’ll wait for another half hour. If you catch a fish within that time, fine; if not, we all go back.”

“Excellent suggestion,” I said.

“All right, we’ll see,” Jafar gave in. “But for God’s sake stop shouting so much. With that much noise the fish won’t bite even if they want to.”

Rahman and I huddled under our umbrellas nearby. We took some chicken pieces and tomato-and-egg sandwiches out of the picnic basket and began eating them with a catlike quietness. Hot grit, fired by the sun, blew over us piercing our foreheads, faces, and necks, and our bodies stung under our shirts. Jafar, his eyes bulging out behind his glasses, waited in patient ambush for the fish, totally oblivious to everything else around. The line was moving in the water at a tangent, the float standing upright in the flowing river. The filthy sky was vaulting over us like a formidable dome. The only sound came from our moving jaws; everything else around was as quiet and static as a painting. Halting his moving jaws half way, Rahman asked gently, “Hey Jafar, have you ever caught a fish before?”

Jafar spun around and glowered at Rahman, as though he had uttered a swearword, a really filthy and vulgar swearword. “No,” he said. “But what difference does that make? Even the most accomplished fisherman has to start with a first catch.”

“Have you ever tried fishing before?”

“No,” he answered gravely.

“So where did you learn all this about fishing?”

“From an uncle of mine who’s now deceased.”

“But, moron, if you were so keen on it, why didn’t you ever go fishing with him?”

He thought for a bit and then explained very sedately, “The thing is, he himself had never once gone fishing, he’d only heard everything there is to know about it from a friend of his. That guy was really a first-rate fisherman.”

We broke into a roaring laugh.

Jafar became a bit more serious, clutched his fishing rod more firmly than before, and focused all his attention on the float.

Rahman said, “Yeah, I was also wondering about this. I had heard that fish were easier to catch in relatively calm waters and also that fish never came down the dam, but I didn’t dare open my mouth because I thought you were an experienced fisherman. All right, get up. Let’s go to the other side of the dam where the water stands as still as in a lake. Let’s help you catch a fish there. That’ll be our treat for you.”

Jafar heaved a deep sigh and in embarrassment allowed a wan smile to spread across his face. “Yes, I fouled it up big time, didn’t I?” he said. “Why didn’t I think about that? All right, let’s go over to the other side. But wait, let me first grab a bite. Suddenly I feel terribly hungry. Good heavens! You only left two picked over chicken carcasses and these few dried up sandwiches for me? Did you gobble ’em all up?”

We trudged off toward the bridge dragging our boots in the sand as it gave way under our feet. Up ahead the bridge lay splayed out like a centipede across the entire width of the river. It seemed as if its feet, those slender columns, would suddenly come to life and that it would walk across the river. It was late afternoon now. In the dusty sky a sickly-looking sun traveled along almost abreast with our left shoulders. Drenched in sweat, panting and heaving, throats parched, we lumbered on toward the bridge exhausted and drained. Once there, we plunked down on a patch of green, a corner of which was shaded by the top of a steel structure which ran parallel to the bridge for about fifteen feet. This structure, small and about four feet wide, had been fitted with thick ropes to raise and lower the huge iron floodgates of the dam. We took our shirts off, tossed our feathered caps aside and pulled off our shoes. Then, like excited, playful puppies, we began rubbing our overheated faces and bodies in the soft grass, trying to soak up its comforting coolness. Jafar said, “I remember seeing a hand-pump somewhere nearby. Would somebody go and fill up the thermos?”

Rahman said, “Let’s take a short break first, then we’ll all go.”

We questioned ourselves: why had we come here to this desolate spot so far from the city? To fish? But you could buy fish in the city, as much as you wanted, whenever you wanted. What was so special about this muddy water, this dusty sky, this awful noise? Were we tired of sitting around in our chairs? Did we want to bond with nature? To experience the way our great-grandparents, indeed our forefathers from thousands of years ago, lived? To reestablish our broken links with nature? With our forefathers? Or both? Were we envoys from the present seeking entry into the past? What was the need for this formality anyway, for such a direct, face-to-face encounter? In any case, the past was all around us, like the air. We could feel it wherever and whenever we wanted. And if we couldn't, it wouldn't even be perceptible here.

Revived by a drink of the cool refreshing water, we took hold of our fishing rods, locked the empty basket and the thermos in the trunk of the car, stuffed the leftover sandwiches from Jafar's basket into our pockets, and began walking briskly over the bridge, against the flow of the current. We were new men now. Those weary, thirst-exhausted men from a while ago had completely disappeared. Jafar was whistling the bars of some racy Western song while we were walking in unison to its beat, like soldiers marching onward conquering new lands, new kingdoms.

The water was perfectly calm, as in a lake, in this spot. Afraid of repeating our earlier experience of the morning, we moved as far away as we could from the dam. Jafar took out the sandwiches from his pocket and gave them to us royally as if he were doling out treasure. Suddenly he rested on his heel and pirouetted and then continued walking, whistling again and waving his arms in the air. We laughed. We had come quite far now. The red ball of the sun had tumbled and was stuck in the horizon just above the other bank. The water was still perfectly calm. Rahman said, "Stop. Let's try our luck here. Maybe we'll catch some fish after all."

Becoming suddenly very serious, Jafar said, "No matter what happens today, I just am not going to leave here until I've caught a fish, even if I have to stay here the whole night."

Rahman pointed out to him, "I seem to remember hearing that you can't fish in the dark unless you use a gas lamp."

Jafar looked bewildered. "Really? There's only a little time left. The sun is about to go down. Why didn't you tell me earlier? We lolled about so long on the grass for nothing. We could've come here right away."

Just then a splash was heard very near the bank. A fish sprang from the water, arched its body into a crescent and then promptly dropped back down.

Jafar screamed, "Did you see? That was a fish, wasn't it? A real fish, eh? That wasn't my imagination, or the ghost of a fish, was it?"

Another splash was heard in the middle of the river, followed by more of the same to the right and left of this fish. A whole school was jumping around everywhere now and splashes could be heard intermittently. Jafar's face was flushed with joy; he seemed intoxicated, his insides churning with terrible excitement. "Come on, folks. What are you waiting for? Get the hooks ready. Cast the lines and get on with catching fish—so many that we can have a pile of them."

Now we launched a search for earthworms. We scraped at the earth and moved forward and scraped again, while Jafar, who was himself scraping the earth madly with his bare nails, kept yelling, "For God's sake, hurry up. There isn't much time left. And where have the damned worms disappeared?"

Everyone was busy digging as if overwhelmed by a relentless frenzy, but perhaps there weren't any worms in the hard, dry earth of the embankment. Those innocent, rusty-looking, brown creatures with clear, translucent bodies weren't there to offer themselves up to the hooks. Blood had now begun to ooze out from around our nails after all that scraping and digging. Finally, exhausted from the effort and feeling faint, we stood upright in weary immobility. Meanwhile the sun tumbled further down the horizon. Jafar was still shouting, "Here we have all these fish but no worms; back there, the place was littered with worms but it had no fish. Nobody can go there now and bring some. It would be dark before anyone even got there. And who can tell whether they're still there. Bloody worms—how they've let us down! Just when we need them most! It's their fate to be strung on hooks—isn't it?—so why don't they just accept their fate? Well, they can't hide forever! I'll get them! Come on, look for them. Look for them again. And listen, do you suppose they've colluded with the fish against ...?" He paused abruptly, as if remembering something, and stuck his hand in his pants pocket. After a bit of fumbling around, his hand emerged with a wedge of tomato and a piece of dried bread. "Do fish eat tomatoes?" he asked.

"No."

"What about bread?"

"It's such a small piece. It won't even stay put on the hook in water."

In hopeless dismay he tossed them both in the water. The second the chunk of bread touched the surface of the water and floated off, a fish quickly nabbed it. Jafar jerked around as though the fish had clutched at a part of his soul. He glowered at us. There was a wild look in his eyes and

it seemed that he would pounce on us like a tiger. “You didn’t let me put it on the hook,” his voice was full of scorn. “You haven’t colluded with the worms and the fish against me—have you?”

Rahman was put out. “Are you crazy?” he howled. “Here, look at our nails? Aren’t they bleeding more than yours? You really think we’d team up with the worms or the fish? Don’t we also want to fish? Don’t we want the fish to be caught? You ought to be ashamed of yourself for suspecting us. Really.”

Half of the sun had already sunk below the horizon. Standing perfectly erect a little ahead of us near the edge of the riverbank, Jafar was staring wide-eyed at the fish leaping right in front of him. He kept on staring. Then, as suddenly as a flash of lightning, he swiveled on his heels, swooped down and grabbed his gun, pulled out two cartridges from his belt with shaking hands, and slipped them into the chamber. Confounded, the two of us ran for our lives. He aimed at the river and fired twice. The report shook up the whole place. A few sparrows took off nervously. The flooding sound waves crashed against everything in the air and then rained down on us. If there was a worm here at all, it must have shriveled up underground from fear. But according to Jafar worms weren’t fitted with nervous systems, so, most likely, they wouldn’t have been frightened by the blasts. All worms ever did was coil around once when fishing hooks went piercing through their bodies. That’s all.

A trace of blood appeared just below the surface of the water, percolated up, and spread out. A fish, about twenty pounds in weight, surfaced and began to glide helplessly toward the dam. Jafar watched it, spellbound, his gun still pointed at the middle of the river. He stood there almost bent over, shaking violently and drenched in sweat, holding the gun with both hands. When Rahman moved forward and took his gun away, he seemed to be startled out of his reverie. “There, I finally got a fish.” he said. “I told you that I would, one day, didn’t I?”

Then he leapt several feet into the air and yelled through a torrent of wild laughter, “Guys, look! I got a fish.”

He was getting more and more excited. “Now I’ll catch fish. I’ll catch fish every day, lots of fish. Now I know how to fish. I know all the ins and outs of successful fishing. It’s so easy, so damn easy!”

By now the dead fish had floated a good twenty feet away, leaving a trail of blood in its wake. Jafar ran along the bank and caught up with it. In the middle of that vast expanse of water, far away, the fish was sliding downward in a straight line. The sun had completely disappeared. The melancholic gray of the evening had begun to thicken all around. In

front, as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but water, its muddy gray rapidly becoming a deep dark color. We too drifted along with Jafar. He called to the fish: “Fish, O fish, where’re you going? You’re my first catch. Please come back to me.”

“Your first catch,” I said to him, “were those earthworms, weren’t they—the ones you left back there in the mud.”

“No, they weren’t. They couldn’t have been. Creatures you dig out of the earth can’t really be called a ‘catch,’ can they?”

“All right, then what about the *soon* sparrow you shot this afternoon on the way back to the dam, the one whose dead body is still lying inside your pants pocket, wrapped in its own colorful plumage?”

“Stop this nonsense. Nothing seems to get through to you. I’m talking about the fish. The fish.”

The gray-colored bridge that looked perfectly ridiculous during the day had now turned ominously dark and sinister in the encroaching evening, seemingly loosing control over its dreadful, hideous limbs. A man in white, his head almost touching the sky, was walking about on top of it. Now and then the man would jump up as if he were goading this spider-like structure to go to some other location. The shadow of the fish just kept moving forward. Jafar was thumping his breast and shouting, “I’ve killed you, so you belong to me not to this dark water. I’ve caught you, not these two, so you’re mine—only mine. I *am* responsible for your death—yes, me. You should come over to this bank, to me, here, where I’m standing. Look, the dam is getting closer and closer. Who’ll be able to find you there in this thickening darkness? ... All right, I’ll come and get you myself.”

Rahman cautioned him, “If you just took your eyes off that damned fish and looked, I mean really looked, at the immensity of the water in front of you, you wouldn’t see anything in the entire universe except that—bottomless endless water. And if you cared to look a while longer, you’d realize that your sight—not to mention your body—would disappear irretrievably into the depth of this water that appears to be so malleable.”

The shadow of the fish was gliding even faster now, making it impossible for us to keep pace with it. We tried though, but we fell behind and literally had to run to keep up with it. We were quite breathless, but still running. The fish stuck to its course smack in the middle of the river, gliding faster and faster. We were sprinting now, panting for breath like overloaded donkeys. No matter how fast we ran, the fish somehow managed to stay ahead of us until it slid down under the steel structure. It

must have cascaded down and gone on through the gate, churned around violently by the water. Mustering the last of our energy, we made a dash across the bridge wondering whether the fish had passed through this gate or the next one, or neither, for we hadn't yet made it to the middle of the bridge. We continued peering down each gate and soon we reached the last one. Ahead of us there was only the sandy beach. We hadn't spotted our fish anywhere. How could we? Still, scanning the now almost invisible, dark gates of the dam, we turned back, walking slowly, surrounded by the tireless roar of the water.

Above us, a dark sky, as though washed clean of its impurities, was glittering with stars. Away from the riverbank, we gathered around the car and stood in peaceful immobility, panting like exhausted water buffaloes. We were sinking slowly under the mounting sadness and disappointment, with no desire whatsoever to engage in any kind of conversation. For a long while we just stood rooted to the ground, drained of our ability to talk to each other, to think, or even to comprehend anything. Finally, I plucked up enough courage to move my lips and break the spell, "Let's go."

"Go where?" Rahman asked.

"Home."

Jafar turned around, walked over to us and asked, "Why?"

"There's nothing left to do here now. The picnic's over."

"No it's not," Jafar said.

"Well then, let's sit down here on the grass," Rahman suggested.

"No," Jafar countered. "What if there's a snake here? Let's go sit on the bridge instead."

We started walking on the iron sheeting of the bridge making thumping noises. On our left lay the centipede of the bridge, on our right the black expanse of water. We had walked on the bridge almost to the middle of the river, both banks of which had now disappeared from sight. From below rose the booming roar of the falling water. All three of us plunked down on the bridge and crossed our legs, soaking up the coolness oozing from it. Almost the minute we sat down our tired limbs sank into a pleasurable feeling of comfort and ease. Rahman thought of something, "What a shame! We screwed up. It was pointless to run along beside the fish. We should have come here first thing, even before the fish could get here, then we could have picked it up with something as it slid down under here."

"Picked it up? With what?" Jafar interjected. "Maybe we should have gotten here before the fish did, lowered the floodgates to stop the water,

and then picked it up with our bare hands when it rose up with the water. But what's the use now?"

"And risk bursting the dam?" I said. "Isn't that so?"

"Come on, what does that mean? You take a risk in every job. Can you do anything without taking some risk?"

A cool, clean, somewhat heavy breeze was blowing over the bridge. The three of us were all lost in the world of our own thoughts.

The breeze played with our ruffled hair, caressing it ever so gently. "We can't be sure it was a fish—can we?" Rahman ruminated darkly. "It may well have been a piece of wood that we mistook for a fish and ran after it. After all it was getting dark and nothing could be seen clearly.

Jafar sat up, straightening himself a bit, and asked, "Then where did all that blood come from?"

"It could've been the color of the sun at dusk," Rahman speculated.

"That may be so, but then why did we see it only in one place? It should have been visible across the entire length of the river."

"Perhaps from where we stood the redness only showed in one spot."

"That's not true. You're lying. You would still have to explain the red streak trailing behind the fish?"

"All right, that *was* blood. But where did you ever see fish bleed so much? It must be a baby alligator."

I said, "It would have been a lot of fun if we had caught it after bringing the whole dam down and then, instead of a fish, it had turned out to be an injured baby alligator who might have bitten us and then gone its merry way laughing."

Jafar seethed with anger and howled, "Since the two of you failed to catch any fish, you're taking your irritation out on me. You don't want me to have this distinction. I know how mean-spirited you can be."

"No, it's not that at all. We only want to establish if indeed it was a fish."

"Throughout my life I've always succeeded in getting what I've wanted," Jafar said.

Both Rahman and I broke out laughing.

"You think I'm lying?"

"But you didn't get what you now insist on calling a fish, the one you said was your first catch."

"You think I've given up the idea of retrieving that fish today? I don't give up easily you know."

"In that case you should've jumped into the river and pulled it out."

“You think I’m a coward, don’t you? Well, I’m not. Even death can’t scare me.”

We burst out laughing.

“I swear I’m not a coward. I’m not afraid of dying. I’m ready to die anytime.” He quickly stuck his wide-brimmed hat on his head, stood up and said, “I won’t come back until I’ve retrieved it, the very same fish I shot with my gun, the fish that it was my right to have, and I’ll prove to you that it was neither a piece of wood nor a baby alligator. It was a fish. A real fish.”

He positioned himself at the edge of the bridge facing the water below. He balanced himself and leaned forward a little in the posture of someone about to jump. One, two, three ... he still hadn’t jumped. Perhaps he’d changed his mind. He’s always been like that. I inched my foot forward and gave him a gentle nudge from behind, and down he went. Below him the watery monster was panting and bellowing. Rahman and I continued sitting quietly where we were. Because he had gone headlong into the water, his hat must have fallen off as soon as he went over the steel structure. His glasses too, if they had still been on his bulging eyes ... perhaps his walrus moustache would get wet and stick to his lips first, then his glasses would fog up—so badly that he would never be able to wipe them dry again simply because his handkerchief would also have become wet; then again, perhaps that would happen later because his handkerchief would be in his pants pocket. But what difference would that make? He would never be able to take the handkerchief out quickly enough to wipe his glasses. Ha, ha! I’m really quite strange! It’s very likely that he turned around as he fell and the whole order was reversed—the shoes first, then the handkerchief, then the moustache, and finally the eyeglasses. In that case, the handkerchief would have become entirely useless.

It’s also possible that he fell on his right side and that the outer edge of his right pants leg got wet first, then the right side of his shirt, his right moustache, and lastly, the right lens of his glasses. Or he could have fallen on his left side. Or maybe he fell flat on his stomach and ruined all his gear at one go! Or he might have fallen on his back and be floating on the waves like a wooden board, going across to the other side gazing at the starlit sky, wetting only the sides of his eyeglasses and the points of his moustache.

Anyway, it doesn’t matter which way he fell; he should have at least given us that *soon* sparrow. He took it with him, stuffed in his pants pocket, for no reason at all. What could he have possibly gained by that?

At least we could've taken something along home. Now this idiot Rahman, he doesn't even know how to drive. Dog tired as I am from a whole day's work, I'll have to drive instead of him, for a good hundred miles. He'll just loll around in the next seat, snoozing, maybe even snoring away. And when we go to return the car, Jafar's wife will be after our hides asking us where we left him. Who'll make her understand that he went after a fish? And oh, did he take the car keys with him?

"Rahman, Rahman, are the car keys with you?"

"No."

"Then he took them with him. Oh, what misery! How're we ever going to get home?"

Suddenly I thought of something, "Rahman, did you hear any splash?"

"Nope."

"I didn't either. Where can he have gotten stuck along the way? Shouldn't we have heard a splash by now?"

"Maybe he fell on something hard," Rahman said.

"In that case we should've heard a thump. But what hard thing? There's only water below."

"He's probably sitting somewhere stuck to a pillar, or holding onto one of the legs of this centipede. Light some matches and take a look."

One after another, I lit several matchsticks and peered below and on either side of the bridge. The light wouldn't go beyond a few yards, and the sense of darkness became even more acute after the match went out. "Forget about the matches," Rahman said. "Try calling out to him. If he's under there somewhere, he'll respond."

Puffing up my lungs I called out to him as loudly as I could, "Chaudhry Muhammad Abdul Muqem Khan Jafar, High Court and Supreme Court Advocate!"

There was no response. Walking a few yards up ahead on the steel structure and then back, I called again. There was still no response. I asked Rahman, "Should I also call out his father's name?"

"No, no. Don't do that. He'll be offended."

Our Jafar, he's quite a strange man. One of his quirks is withholding the choicest part of a thing so long that when he finally releases it, there's no desire for it left in the heart. If he had wanted to, he could've performed today's spectacular feat much earlier. But no, he didn't do it until he'd thoroughly bored everyone. The upshot: we couldn't feel even a shred of excitement. Shouldn't he do what he has to do in a timely fashion?

Rahman was sitting quietly, which made me quiet too, so we sat for a long time peering into the spreading darkness in front of us.

“Hey, Rahman? Wouldn’t you say half the night’s already gone?”

“Hunh.”

“We only came here for a one-day picnic. That was yesterday. The next day has already begun. That’s not right. Let’s end the picnic.”

“Fine. But was this a picnic or a fishing trip?”

“All right, it wasn’t a picnic, it was a fishing trip.”

“You call this a fishing trip? Firing a shot blindly into the middle of the river after walking around holding fishing rods in our hands?”

“Only Jafar can tell us that now—he’s the one who arranged the whole thing. Too bad he’s among the fish at the moment. They must be rolling around his chest, poking into his nostrils, playing with his moustache. And if we happened to be near him, he would be holding them proudly in his lap and looking at us through his half-closed eyes, trying to suppress a smile through his walrus moustache.”

“It’s possible some fish thought he was a worm and devoured him.”

“Well, at least some fish got to eat a worm today.”

“Pity that that worm wasn’t on our hooks.”

Suddenly the deafening roar of the bellowing water-monster flowed straight into our ears—a deafening roar which, surprisingly, we hadn’t heard for quite a while now, even though we sat right next to it. □

—*Translated by Faruq Hassan and
Muhammad Umar Memon*