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## The Call of the Flesh\*

ASLAM WOKE UP QUITE LATE but didn't get out of bed. It wasn't pitch dark in the room the way it was outside where the entire world lay covered in a milky, obscuring fog. The screeching sound of an occasional crow or two or of wheels crawling along ponderously on the ice told him that it was morning.

He lay there quiet and still, afraid the unconscious woman sleeping next to him might wake up and flee. In the murky darkness he studied the delicate features of her marble-white body—a body that had so far remained a tightly guarded secret, and was likely to remain a secret forever. She was so close and yet so far, and the distance would perhaps never be crossed because this was their last night together.

He would be leaving this city in the evening. Perhaps time and space would erect formidable walls between them, the steely curtain of the seven seas and the interminably long years as thwarting as the remoteness of their two young bodies.

The same perplexity that had dogged him for months assailed Aslam's mind, the same misgivings his heart. The first time they met he had found that the rhythms of his soul accorded so perfectly with this woman's that his fancy-free imagination began to see them together in dance halls. Their feelings were the same, their minds complements of each other. Not their bodies though. Like fish swimming together in the same pool, each body writhed with longing for the other in isolation, never able to know the other.

Often the two bodies pined for union, called out to each other. Their hearts throbbed wildly until their breath became hot and strained, their veins began quaking, their blood sizzled, and their hands grew restless. Each hugged the other passionately but wistfully. They snatched and plucked at each other, but abruptly drew apart. Some secret oozed out of the woman's body like cold water and overcame the call of the flesh.

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\* "Jism kī Pukār," *Savērā* No. 2 (n.d.), 97–103.

They'd spent countless nights in this agony. Yet their torment didn't diminish their mutual love and desire for intimacy. When his exhausted body gave up its futile attempts, he would lie quietly feeling the gentle rise and fall of her lovely bosom, unable to comprehend the nature of this strange love.

It was not that the woman's racial subconscious hesitated to make love with an anomalous body. Aslam could still feel the burning sensation of the passionate kiss she had planted on his neck during their first night in bed and he remembered how tightly she had wrapped herself around him. Nor was it that her sexual desire had waned already. She was a healthy young woman, saturated with the effervescence of youth.

What was it then—he'd often asked her—this third, unknown element of their life? But no sooner had he asked the question than Amelia's smiling face turned gloomy and she evaded the issue, or made up some convoluted Platonic arguments to convince him that his love was still too coarse because it was grounded in carnal desire.

This annoyed him. He wasn't quite that naïve about Eve's daughters after all! Hadn't he given liberally of his youth in the side streets of Europe? Did he not know that under the tumultuous fire of heavy artillery and the earsplitting noise of bombers zooming overhead the only audible sound was the quiet duet of two bodies? Could he even count the women whose smiles and tears had sullied his soul to the point that it had now become such a sieve it couldn't hold back even the largest chunks of stone?

Amelia's incomprehensible aura had often driven him to the brink of exhaustion. He would snap at her in irritation and angrily dash off to some dance hall or bar to calm his nerves and soothe his ire with the pretend love of other women and the phony stupor of booze. When he returned to his room late at night, he always found Amelia in his bed without a trace of reproach in her eyes, only a silent, heart-wrenching plea that made him feel terribly ashamed of himself and angry at his own self-centeredness.

His befuddlement grew worse: he had stained himself with the street filth just to get even with this woman, like a cranky child who rolls on the dirty floor just to spite his mother. But his perverseness had no effect on Amelia, not in the least. The mystery of her look remained as thick and forbidding as ever.

These thoughts went through his head as he lay there motionless in the faint glow of the approaching morning. His self-seeking body again asked: what good was this love anyway?

The darkness was fading away slowly as the light of the morning sun

tore through the layers of clouds and fog. He quietly got out of bed, put on his robe and went and stood by the window.

This was his last day in Europe. On the off chance he ever returned here, would he still be the same Aslam? And would it still be the same Europe? These towering houses, the haunts of his life's myriad pleasures and boisterous fun, would all of it have disappeared without a trace? He was overcome with emotion. In spite of his usual indifference, he broke into tears. He had done his best to hate Europe, cursed it several times a day for its inhumanity and money-grubbing. Its women had given him pleasure, but they had failed to earn his respect. He could not remember a day throughout his stay that his soul had not been violently jolted as by an earthquake. He knew well that a sea of lava was simmering under this glittering surface and might erupt any day. All the turmoil, the nerve-racking agitation, the hoopla and hullabaloo that raged here was beyond his comprehension. No one but no one had ever given him a satisfactory answer about all this rushing and running, this pushing and shoving. What was it meant to achieve? Running fast might help forget the restlessness, but could it calm it?

And then again, precisely what aspect of this life was so precious to him that the thought of leaving it behind had brought tears to his eyes? Crying his heart out like someone bursting into tears at leaving the gravesite of a dear departed one?

Was he crying because Europe didn't remind him of his enslavement and servitude? Because nobody had hurt his dignity, his self-esteem? Or because the thought of returning amounted to wallowing in unmitigated backwardness and ignorance once again? In a bog of backwardness, ignorance and superstition, where the more you tried to extricate yourself, the more deeply it sucked you in?

He couldn't decide which of these reasons was true and which was false. But perhaps—he thought—he was apprehensive about his separation from this woman, this woman who had brought him to the extremes of both happiness and gloom. Suddenly the realization struck him that no, absolutely no other woman had caused him such excruciating pain. Grief, restlessness, trouble, anxiety—yes, but never such genuine pain, such trenchant pain that it takes over a man's faculties of heart and mind like a block of ice and trickles down drop by drop freezing every incipient urge for action in him. Only this woman, asleep in my bed, has given me such pain. And try as I might I can never get rid of it.

So Aslam was returning to his home country hoping, but just, that there he might be delivered from this unrelenting torment. For months he had been caught up in a tug-of-war between the empty, unavailing em-

brace of this woman in the middle of a Europe quaking at the edge of a volcano and his own homeland where if anything existed at all beyond spiritual and mental servitude it was the impulse to do battle with these ancient retrogressive forces.

A sickly sunlight began to spread outside. He heard a rustling sound coming from the bed and then someone's melancholy voice said, "Dear, come over to me."

Aslam walked over to the bed and plopped down on the edge feeling Amelia's stare on every part of his body.

She got out of bed and slipped into her robe. Tying the belt, she said, "You get ready too. The train leaves at four, doesn't it? Let me have one last stroll with you."

The two washed up, changed clothes, and walked out into the street holding hands.

"Let's go to the park ... but no, there would only be bare trees there now ... let's just stroll along ... we don't need to go anywhere in particular...."

Every step of the way each of them remembered the past but remained silent. All the events were floating in their memories. Here, under this tree, they had stood waiting for the rain to subside. Aslam had taken out matches to light his cigarette but they slipped from his hand and landed in the mud. He stuck the unlighted cigarette between his lips and started looking around. The girl standing next to him took out a book of matches from her bag and said, "Here!" That was their first meeting.

And—voilà!—the flower-woman is still there at the corner, her eyes gleaming with mischief as before. Several months went by. As they were passing by her, the woman had thrust a bunch of white flowers towards them saying, "Blossoms of love!" The two laughed. He bought the bunch and stuck it into Amelia's hair. She blushed and said, "Today is the day lovers give these flowers to their girlfriends, you know?"

"Then, what's the harm?"

"But we've been through that stage; we're friends."

In front of their favorite café, Peter the waiter stood twirling his hoary white moustaches. The minute he saw them his face lit up. He greets them and without asking starts cleaning a table for them, steps inside the café and shouts, "Tea for Monsieur Hamindar." The same ritual is enacted every day, and as on every day, both break into a smile.

Even as they drink their tea, neither utters a word—either because they've said and heard all that needed to be said and heard during the intervening year, or because they lacked the right words to say what they longed to.

Strange, isn't it, that from this day forward the clouds above their heads will have different hues! The breeze swaying past them a different lilt! Even now Aslam couldn't resist thinking that they had never experienced true union, and he couldn't honestly claim that he knew the only woman who had made him feel the true agony of love.

She neither wants him to stay here permanently (actually, it was at her constant urging that he was prompted to go back home) nor does she want to go with him—her rationale being that, like trees, humans become accustomed to their particular soil and wither away if uprooted.

The silence torments them. They can hear the call of their bodies. Starting as a soft whisper and rising gradually to a crescendo, it eventually becomes a painful scream. They begin talking it away with inane banter, so limited in scope: the depressing weather, the pointless comings and goings of the passersby, the atrocious taste of the tea—so afraid to broach any other subject. Strange that the thing they're so afraid of is their own bodies.

And time is flying by, or perhaps not time but we ourselves, like moths diving into the flame of time to become nothing.

Amelia's listless body kept moving as usual, but each instant brought the memory of past days back to torment her. The next morning, sitting in front of the mirror, she found herself waiting for the pair of familiar hands to sneak up from behind and cover her eyes. Sipping tea, she waited to hear the complaint that it was too weak, and the music flowing out of the radio sounded pretty humdrum without being panned by the man who was gone. The bright blue sky began to gnaw at her. Now who would tell her wondrous stories about the blue skies, boundless stretches of land, and impenetrably dense forests of a faraway country?

She felt as though some inscrutable chemical change was taking place in every pore, every joint and every muscle of her body. Her otherwise quick, penetrating mind refused to think anything. Her eyelids began to droop for no reason at all. Her limbs felt so weak, as if they had returned from some great, bone-crushing expedition, as if she had been walking continuously during the past year carrying an improbably heavy weight—a weight which couldn't be gotten rid of but instead shattered into smithereens and permeated her being, becoming her burden.

What kind of love was it, she wondered, that canker-like had burrowed us hollow? Could it be that their mutual attraction was the same old flaming lament that shot out from their bodies, sometimes breaking into a song and sometimes a dirge? But in the beginning didn't they think

the mainstay of their love was a compassion for mankind that breaks the bonds of ego and embraces the whole of suffering, tortured humanity?

Her ears began to reverberate with Aslam's passionate speeches. Her despondent heart surged with exhilaration as she remembered his fiery writings. How at first sparks flew from his eyes the moment he spotted some jobless man or beggar. He had difficulty swallowing his food the minute their melancholy faces floated past in his mind. Spain or China, India or Java, his compassionate heart felt their pain equally. Amelia remembered the day he was marching in the Spanish Democrats demonstration holding their standard and the police arrested him and put him in jail. How she had cried her eyes out for him and how he had scolded her saying, "Your tears embarrass me!" Considerations of race, nationality, color, or religion had never so much as touched him from a distance. Like a child, all this was totally incomprehensible to him.

Not only was Amelia unfamiliar with a man's love, she didn't even know what a man's personality was until then. For the first time in her life she had met a man who possessed something of the limitless expansiveness of the sky. And when she came and stood right under his shade, she was swept away by a feeling of awe, delight and wonder, like someone from the foggy northern climes who finds himself exposed to the scorching sun of warm countries. Before long her female instinct told her that this man was thirsty for a woman's love, and this thirst had driven him to many waterholes. To camouflage this thirst he had woven an astonishing, magical web of thoughts and ideas. Hiding behind the mask of human compassion, this thirst was casting stealthy glances every which way in search of someone to quench it. As soon as he found Amelia, Aslam had thrown away the torch, torn the mask from his face, and tried to grab hold of her body.

The quest started slowly and then intensified. Amelia's just-awakened mind was dazed, but she didn't let her body succumb. She never allowed herself to forget that this man's feelings were a trust that she was keeping. Whenever her body even tried to respond independently of her will, she resolutely suppressed its call.

What she loved in this man was his untamed, crazy nature, something resembling the explosive wildness of a whirlwind, but she wasn't prepared to strike a bargain with this craziness.

Now, asleep or awake, indeed all the time, she's left wondering: was she right in resisting him? After all, in the end her reluctance to give herself to him left both of their lives unfulfilled. Perhaps they would both spend the rest of their days lumbering along under the gloomy weight of their past.

What if it had been different, if she had only heeded the call of her lover's anguished body, what then?—Amelia wondered, crushing the delicate petals of the pear blossoms in her palm. Only one of two things could have happened: he would have tired of me soon enough, just as he had tired of other women, or he would have become like a piece of iron stuck to the magnet of my body. In either case, it would have killed the fire of his thought and his zest for action, and we would each have blamed the other for it. Our love wouldn't have breathed in the present and in the future; it would have been dead and buried in the past.

She asked herself numerous times how things would be now: What would Aslam be doing today? Likely wandering in the desolate wastelands of his soul like someone who has lost his way, or giving some Kallu farmer or Natthu laborer (ridiculous-sounding names he would mention) the glad tidings of a new world!

And what about me? She asked. What am I? Without a digit next to it what value does a zero have? A woman without a man, a body without another body, a soul without its mate?

Heaviness and gloom settled over her heart. She desperately wished time would just erase the past twelve months from the continuum, like an orthographic error, and return to the drizzly day when she had lit Aslam's cigarette under the tree. If that could ever happen, she wouldn't let his steadfast feet stagger, or his convictions cloud over.

But time ... it only knows how to fly by, or perhaps it is we who fly by, not time....□

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*