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## Occult Museum<sup>\*</sup>

**H**AD IT ALL REALLY HAPPENED, I wouldn't have cared *why* it had. I have no control over what happens, anymore than I have control over dreams. But dreams are my personal property. If I see something in my dream and I can't understand any of it, it doesn't matter, but I ought to at least understand why I dreamt it.

However, this dream ... I understood everything about it, except why I dreamt it.

And what I didn't understand at all was that the person who was my oldest and dearest friend in the dream, and who disappeared even as I was looking at him, didn't exist in reality. I saw him for the first and, up until now, the last time, in my dream. In his wake he left a whole series of memories that went back to him and me—memories I no longer remember. I kept talking to him, calling him by his name the whole time, but after I woke up I didn't even remember his name. Perhaps that's why, for days afterwards, I was assailed by the thought that he should have had this dream, not me.

I had emerged from the railway station. There was a string of vehicles going by and I was waiting for it to stop so I could cross the road. The sun was out but there were patches of clouds in the sky that kept blocking the light. Some clouds also brought a bit of light rain, but it disappeared after a short time leaving dark splatters all over the road. I glanced up at the sky. Thick clouds were gathering on the northeastern horizon. My house was in that direction.

Before long it'll be raining hard, I thought, and I figured that if I set out right away I could reach home before the worst of the rain struck. The traffic had slowed down a bit. I didn't think it was worth waiting any longer

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<sup>\*</sup>“Akalṭ Miyūziyam” from the author's collection *Ṭā'ūs Čaman kī Mainā* (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, 1997), 199–212.

so I started walking fast when someone shouted at me loudly. I turned around and looked. The voice had come from the direction of an unattractive, reddish-ocher building that seemed to be some sort of new extension to the railway station. The building wasn't finished yet and there were iron rods sticking straight up on its roof. A portico had been constructed in a semi-circle over the tall, narrow door of the front entrance. He was standing under that portico wearing a raincoat and laughing. I rushed toward him. He came forward a few steps too. When I got near, I put out my hand toward him and he reached out and gave me a hug.

"Brute, finally I've caught you, and what timing," he said laughing. "What have you been doing? Is it the same work as before? And how are our dear ones? Which ones are still alive, and which ... no, first tell me, are you in this world or the other world?"

"If you're in the other world, consider me there too," I said, "but alive or dead, where are you found these days?"

"I've moved here now."

"And the others? Your family..."

"They're arriving soon. I've come to pick them up. The train is late."

He took off his raincoat, threw it over one arm and said, "So, now tell me everything."

"What do you want to hear?"

"You know, you're my oldest friend now," he said and brought up several old stories. We reminisced for quite a while about the mischievous activities of our childhood and the foolhardy things we did in our early adolescence. Sometimes we laughed, sometimes we felt regret when we reminded each other of the details.

"Okay, that's enough about the past," I finally said. "Move into the present. What are you doing now?"

"I'm a government officer, a government official," he said straightening his neck with false pride.

"What department?"

"Health."

"So why do you look sick?"

"Because medicines are my business, that's why."

"Stop joking."

"A defeated man is bound to look sick."

Now he'll unravel his yarn, I thought, and he said: "In government hospitals the business of buying medicines ..."

"I know," I said.

"So, we made a decision ... by 'we' I mean..."

"I know ...," I said again.

“Ah, I see, you’ve become somewhat prudent,” he said. He laughed for a while and then continued, “So we made the decision that medicines for those hospitals would be acquired through us. The basic purpose for choosing this new method ...”

“... which remained unrealized ...”

“Of course it was. Just keep listening. The basic purpose was to show that we’re aware of the flaws of the old practice so we’re changing it.”

“Okay, so then?”

“The hospitals were divided into zones. I was made responsible for the northern zone. I remained there a full year. In the end, after being defeated by one clerk, I ended up here.”

“A clerk?” I asked. “In your department?”

“You could call him a clerk. These people make lists of the medicines that come to our department and those that we supply to hospitals. That’s about all they do.”

“Are there several?”

“Yes,” he replied, “but one of them ...,” he paused and gnashed his teeth.

“The same one who defeated you?”

“In one day he makes twelve times the salary I earn in a whole month.”

“In just one day?” I asked. “Your salary for a whole year?”

“Yes sir!”

“A clerk?”

“Yes sir! And you know what I’m like. I said, ‘Ustad, I won’t allow this.’ I tried to stop the practice, but it was no use. Finally I tried to transfer him.”

“And he had it stopped?”

“I put my foot down,” he said shaking his head in confirmation. “I shook up the whole department, top to bottom.”

“And the outcome?”

“Outcome? When I exerted my utmost to have him transferred, he ... got me transferred instead.”

“The clerk?”

“Yes sir!” he replied looking defeated. “Although I was promoted when I was sent here.”

“Through the influence of that same clerk?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised!” he exclaimed gnashing his teeth again. This isn’t a figure of speech, he really was gnashing his teeth. By this I mean he was grinding his upper and lower teeth together. I could hear a slight grinding sound.

“A clerk can have so much influence?”

“Conferred by the higher ups, by us. Don’t you know about this busi-

ness? Everyone receives their portion, their share and gifts, and a woman ...”

“Even women are used?”

“Where aren’t they used?”

“I mean, even in your department?”

“Even in my department. Where nothing else works, a woman comes in handy. Handy ... or rather, she’s used.”

“Not on you though, eh?”

“Everyone knows my disposition,” he said appearing defeated again.

To get his mind off thinking like this I asked, “The train—it’s rather late isn’t it?”

Raising his wrist, he looked at his watch and said. “There’s still quite a bit of time left ... our trains, ah ...” He stopped and started gnashing his teeth again.

“And that one, I mean your ... the one you always kept hidden from me.” I also asked this to keep his mind off of other things. “How is she?”

He closed his eyes a little, as if trying to recall something, and then he said, “Oh, she ... she got married even before me.”

“And how many days did you grieve over her marriage?”

“Not even one day.”

I looked at him and he said, “I was the one who refused, so grieving was completely out of place.”

“So your grief conforms to your principles too?” I asked.

“You people who have no principles can’t understand this sort of thing,” he said with some bitterness. “Then during that very same period, the business of my own marriage became complicated. You know the story. Also for this same reason ... although when the news of her death suddenly arrived ...”

“She died too?” I asked. “When?”

“Just a few days after the wedding,” he replied. “Her clothes caught fire.”

A terrible death, I thought, imagining burning to death, then to prevent myself from thinking about it, I asked, “You said you were sent here with a promotion ...”

“Yes, a new department has been established here to safeguard the samples and formulas of all the medicines produced in the entire country.”

“Even the samples?” I asked with amazement. “There will be too many.”

“It’s a huge department, brother.”

“And where is it?”

“It’s under construction at the moment.”

“But where is it located?”

“Right where you’re standing,” he said and smiled somewhat proudly.

I looked at the tall, narrow door of the building. It was half open. The area inside was rather dark because outside the sky was now covered with clouds.

“This ... this is your department?” I asked. “But how much room will it have?”

“It should be big enough for our needs, he replied. “Although I haven’t looked inside yet. I just arrived yesterday. I also haven’t taken charge yet.” Then he fell silent and began thinking about something.

The rain had now started to come down. I watched big fat drops falling lazily outside the portico and then I looked at my friend. Once again he raised his wrist and looked at his watch.

“There is still some time before the train arrives,” he said after a while. “Come on, let’s take a look at the work here until then.”

He grabbed my hand and we went through the door one behind the other.

In front of us there was a rather long, narrow passageway lit dimly by a single bulb that hung in the middle of its high ceiling. Right next to the door was a table with thick legs. My friend put his raincoat on the table and looked around. On the opposite end of the passageway, a bright light was coming from somewhere on the left, its yellowness suggesting that it might be sunshine, but it was very quiet there. On the right side, however, from behind a row of rather small doors, I could hear pounding and hammering and the sound of large objects being moved around. We bent down and went through one door. Here the light was even dimmer than in the passageway, but this much was clear: there was a random series of rooms with low ceilings and all of them had interconnecting doors. It was quite stuffy and close inside and there was no ventilation source visible anywhere.

“You’ll suffocate in here,” I said, “you’ll have to make some arrangement to get air.”

“Yes of course, something will be done. For now ... well, come on, let’s take a quick look around the place.”

We went around quickly. Most of the rooms had long wooden crates lying about haphazardly. Some of these were being moved from one place to another, some were being opened using small hammers, and so on. I couldn’t see the faces of the workers clearly because the light was weak and they were absorbed in their work with their heads bent down. In some rooms a single table and chair were visible. Each table had an iron mesh tray sitting on it and the man sitting on the chair would pick up something from the tray, bend over the papers stacked in front of him to write something, drop the thing onto the ground next to his chair, and then pick up something new from the tray.

We passed right by several tables but none of the men lifted their heads to look at us.

“Your staff seems very conscientious,” I said whispering as we were passing one table.

“I haven’t taken charge yet,” my friend replied, also whispering, and then he stopped to pick up something from a tray.

Even then the man sitting there paid no attention to him; on the contrary, he bent over his stack of papers even more.

“Just look at this.” After closely examining the thing he had picked up from the tray, my friend handed it to me. In the dim light I couldn’t see it well. It was some sort of capsule made from a thin membrane. I felt disgusted by it. Putting it back in the tray, I said to my friend, “Come on, let’s go.”

We walked quickly, going from one room to another and from there into a third. In several rooms there were tall, narrow tables up against the walls and on every table there was something or other, which I couldn’t make out clearly because of the dim light—and my friend also didn’t seem to have any interest in this stuff. He took my hand, lowered his head, and kept moving forward silently. If I stopped near some table, he tugged my hand lightly to nudge me forward. Even so, I saw a few things.

On one table I spotted the desiccated feet of birds, on another, piles of rusty nails, and on a third, mounds of broken teeth from predatory and other animals. On one table there were cuttings and withered leaves from wild plants. Right beside them were some knives and hatchets made of some hard wood—even their blades were made from the same wood. There were also many stoves of various kinds on top of which were tiny piles of dull, nasty-colored powders and seeds of various shapes in small earthenware dishes. On several tables I also saw clear glass containers lined up in a row, but they were so close together that I couldn’t guess their individual forms and shapes.

The stuffiness had become unbearable. I said to my friend, “Let’s get out of here now.”

After walking for some time I said to him, “This place of yours—I just can’t figure it out.”

He didn’t answer, held on to my hand and continued moving until we again came out into the passageway. The door on the left side was quite near and I had a clear view of the road outside. I had just put my foot out in that direction when my friend’s grip on my hand tightened and he led me toward the right side of the passageway where the light that seemed like sunlight was visible.

Reaching the end, we stopped. We had a wall in front. On the left side

of it was a smallish courtyard filled with some discarded objects. A long chain hung from a hook on its high ceiling and a bright lantern tied to its lower end was giving off yellow light. We both went up close to look at it. It came all the way down to the tip of our heads.

“Why has it been hung so low?” I asked myself and looked at my friend.

He remained silent. Then he squeezed my hand and motioned toward the opposite side of the courtyard. Another passageway was visible there which went straight for some distance and then turned off in a different direction.

“Okay,” I said, “let’s go look at that too.”

We went into that secondary passageway. For a few steps the light from the lantern helped us, but when we came to the turn it looked completely dark in front of us.

“Perhaps there’s no way forward,” I said to him. “Come on, let’s turn back.”

We went back. Now the lantern was visible again. We were walking quickly toward the courtyard when my friend’s hand, drenched in sweat, slipped out of mine. I went under the lantern and was turning toward him when a shadow came between us.

A woman was standing in front of my friend with her hands stretched out in the manner of beggars and her shadow was touching his feet. Her back was toward me. From the shape of her body, she seemed young and vibrant, but her dress was worn-out and appeared as if it had been immersed in some light oil, or perhaps it was only that type of cloth. I vaguely remembered that in my boyhood there had been a cloth of this kind that women liked.

“What are you doing here?” I chided the woman, “go outside and beg.”

But she stood there in front of my friend stretching out her hands the exact same way and my friend looked at her without saying a word. She seemed oblivious to me. After waiting a while I rebuked the woman again. Now she turned toward me and in the bright yellow light of the lantern I saw her from the front.

Her body was very shapely. Her features weren’t bad either, but the color of her skin looked as if she was one of those people who worked around fire. She continued staring at me for some time, but in a way that suggested I wasn’t real, as though I wasn’t a body but only a voice. She looked somewhat sad and frightened, but perhaps it was just the way her face was shaped because there was neither sadness nor fear in her eyes—although it was possible that by looking at those eyes for a bit I might have felt a sadness giving rise to some fear. Fixing my eyes on the bend in the secondary passageway, I chided the woman again: “Didn’t you hear? Go

outside. What are you doing here?" And I looked at her again.

Without giving any reply, she turned toward my friend, who just stood motionless looking at her—and perhaps I was already completely forgotten.

I should do something, I thought. I advanced toward her but then just skirted by her and came up next to my friend. Taking his hand, I pulled him toward me. With my other hand I signaled the woman to go, but she didn't budge. The lantern was behind her and the yellow light was filtering through her dress. Her features weren't visible, but from where we were standing it seemed as if gauze had been thrown over some naked female statue. And in this statue there was some vague allure—in fact, even its shadow had an allure saturated with evil. I felt myself being slowly drawn to this allure and realized that I must flee from it. I let go of my friend's hand and went underneath the lantern again. There, standing like a spectator, I saw the woman move quietly toward my friend. When she got close, she thrust her body slightly forward rather brazenly, bumping against his body and nudging him forward little by little into the secondary passageway. Turning her neck, she looked at me one more time, exactly as if she was determining the direction of some sound. Then she turned her face away. I saw the yellow reflection of the light from the lantern on her back and watched them both enter the dark bend of the passageway and disappear from my sight.

For a while I stood where I was without moving, then, dejected, I went forward. When I reached the turn, I looked at the narrow darkness stretching far into the distance and then came back into the first passageway. Through the half-open door, the road could now be seen again up ahead. When I reached the door my eyes fell on the raincoat lying on the table. I picked it up, threw it over my arm and went out the door onto the portico. I left the portico behind too and came onto the road.

The sun was shining brightly now. The grayish road, washed by the heavy rain, had become black and a light vapor was rising from it. There was some commotion in the area as happens after the arrival of any passenger train. I was waiting for the traffic to let up so I could cross the street when, from a distance, someone called out to me. I turned to look. The wife and young daughters of my friend were standing on the sidewalk in front of the station. Their luggage was sitting nearby. The fatigue of the long journey was visible on all their faces, nevertheless they all laughed and talked to me for quite a while. The wife told me that my friend had been transferred here and he had set off one day ahead of them.

"He told me he would meet us right here," she said somewhat anxiously. "We've been standing here for some time. God knows where he's been held up."



I kept standing there in front of her quietly without giving any answer. I didn't understand all the things the daughters were asking me about the recreational areas of the city. At about this point I had a very slight feeling that I was dreaming, but I had no idea at what point the dream had started.

It was getting late now and my friend's wife seemed almost on the verge of tears. She was looking at me again and again with questioning eyes. "You haven't seen him?" she asked.

Even then I remained silent. Her eyes were fixed on my arm. Suddenly it occurred to me that my friend's raincoat was thrown over my arm. She moved her eyes away from the coat and looked at me again. "Really, you haven't seen him?" she asked, nearly crying.

The daughters also came up near me waiting for my reply, and for some time I continued thinking about what I should tell them. Then I thought about what I *shouldn't* tell them, and the vapor rising from the wet road thickened.

I should wake up now, I told myself finally, and opened my eyes. □

—*Translated by Jane Shum and Mubammad Umar Memon*