

SITTING IN  
TWO BOATS

# SITTING IN TWO BOATS

*A memoir of faith and madness*

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# 1

## GOD THEOREM

In May 2001, I attend a three-week extensive workshop on superstrings, held in the Department of Physics, Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU), Islamabad. The very first speaker begins his talk with the Hamiltonian, which is the starting point of any quantum mechanical problem. I'm lost. How could there be no factor of mass in the equation? I clear my throat and raise my voice from the third row, "Excuse me, did you forget the mass in the kinetic energy term?"

He pauses, "For simplicity, all constants are set to unity." He turns back and within a blink of an eye, he fills the long board – that extends from one end of the wall to the other – with equations. To my disappointment, I put down the pen and say to myself: *this cannot be the theory of everything. Everything cannot be just equations. Can it achieve the world peace? Does it cure all diseases? Why there is death? A true theory of everything must be like a machine: question in, answer out.* Perhaps I'm thinking of a higher theory, whereas the goal of string theory, which is regarded the candidate theories of everything, is to combine quantum theory and general relativity.

At the tea break, students are chatting with the speakers, while I'm standing alone at a distance holding my cup like I don't belong here. I strongly feel that one day I'll discover the theory that really describes everything, not just the physical aspects of the universe. I come to physics with a goal. I know breakthrough will happen through physics.



My life dramatically changes in July 2003 when I get engaged. This is when I'm a Ph.D. student. I enter QAU in spring 1999 as an M.Phil. student. The engagement takes place on the fourteenth of the month. I'm in university at the time. My presence in the ceremony is not necessary. Our women go to my fiancée's house to give her the ring and pour sugar in her hairs. Pouring sugar into the girl's hairs is our tradition which means that she is now ours. It's evening and I'm in the hostel when mother tells me about the ceremony on phone. She says that my fiancée looked very beautiful in the engagement dress. I cannot wait to go home tomorrow and see the pictures. I do not sleep all the night and spend the night in the department. It is common for research students to work late at night in the departments. I'm working on a problem in quantum electrodynamics in three dimensions (QED3),

which involves 2-space and 1-time dimensions. QED3 by-passes the Higgs mechanism to study mass generation. I'm stuck in this integral, which can be solved if one of the quantities is a vector. This quantity is a scalar in theory. Scalars are quantities which have no directions such as temperature, and vectors have directions such as force. Calling a scalar a vector is like calling a buffalo a camel.

Next day in the afternoon, I get my backpack to leave for home. The bag, beside other things, contains my clothes. I do laundry at home. There is also a laundry shop in the hostel where I sometimes drop my clothes. I need to change for three rides: the first one from Islamabad to Peshawar, which is about a three-hour drive; the next one from Peshawar bus station to Karkhano Market; and the last one from Karkhano Market to Jamrud, Khyber Agency. A Jamrud bus also runs directly from the Peshawar bus station, but it stops everywhere and makes a half-hour trip one-hour long. I prefer a minibus to Karkhano Market and then a taxi to Jamrud.

Upon reaching Peshawar, I get on a minibus. As the vehicle passes through the Tehkal area, the traffic is jammed. I'm sitting by a window facing the sun. It is very hot, and the bus is advancing slowly. I cannot wait to get home to see the pictures. To keep myself busy, I grab a pen and paper from the backpack to write something

unusual. Usually I take notes about physics, but today I want to create something spontaneously. I rapidly write:

*As soon as the girl saw the window open, she jumped out it. Out there, she saw a woodcutter and snatched the piece of wood from him. With the piece of wood, the girl struck the boy on his head. The girl dropped the stick and ran, while the boy toppled and fell on the same piece of wood that she dropped. The dying boy, taking his last breath, said to the girl on the run, "O girl." He said nothing before that.*

I write the original story in Urdu in which the first word is *lardki*, girl, and the last word is also *lardki*, but the title is *lardka*, “The Boy”. This is the first story I ever wrote. Normally, I am immersed in equations, but today I did something new. I’m very excited as if I have solved a major problem in physics.

As I arrive at home, I show the story to my niece Benish who is in middle school. She says, “Hmm, very good.” I’m totally restless and want to show it to everyone.

In the evening, I call my fiancée. Hajra, another niece of mine, sets up the call. Hajra and my fiancée are childhood friends. The phone-call is set in a manner so that my brothers-in-law do not know, as they may not like my fiancée to talk to me. Hajra first calls Ayisha telling her to expect a call from me. Hajra and I are not in one place. She lives in our childhood house, while I live in

our new house. Both houses are in Jamrud. I make the call when Hajra gives the green signal.

“Is it Dr. Saar Gul’s house?” I say.

“Who is Dr. Saar Gul? Sorry, you’ve dialed a wrong number.”

“Oh no, no, it’s me Shahid. I want to talk to you.” I open with a joke. She gets confused. She doesn’t understand my jokes yet.

“Hi.”

“I saw the pictures. You looked very beautiful in the blue dress.” I’m referring to the engagement pictures.

“Thank you.”

“How is your study? Home Economics College must be a good college. I didn’t know much about your college when I was a student in Peshawar University. Peshawar University has a big campus, I didn’t explore it much.” I graduated from Peshawar University in 1998 with a master degree in physics.

“Our college is behind our hostel.”

“I know the boys’ and girls’ hostels are not far from each other, but I didn’t know about your college. May I ask you one last question. In which year are you?”

“Second year.” She means second year in F.Sc., a two-year 11- and 12-grade certificate.

“O.K. thank you for talking to me. I’ll call you another time.”

“Sure.”



Next day in the afternoon, I head back to Islamabad. First to Peshawar then to Islamabad. In Peshawar, I'm sitting alone on the seat. Other seats are also half-full. When the coach pulls away, the bright day looks to me as if it's moonlight and the coach is heading to a desert. I'm frightened. My hands between my legs. I'm thinking that I'm standing in front of our hostel gate and smoking. The me in the thought turns around looking to another person who is also me and who is also smoking. That me also looks behind. The whole scene multiplies like the mirrors in a barbershop in which the image reflects back and forth. I then see myself watching a movie alone in a theater. The person in the screen who's also me is watching TV. In the TV is another person who is also me, is sitting on a chair; legs crossed and watching TV. The TV and the person also multiply. Then I suddenly see that the world is changing. A revolution is coming. I think:

*It is the first day of the fall semester. Only five students are registered in Prof. Danish's class, because nobody ever got A grade in his course. The professor is in his office when somebody knocks on the door.*

*“The door is open.” The professor raises his voice from the inside.*

*A boy, breathing irregularly, enters as if escaped from a jail. His shirt is half-open, eyes red and fully open, hairs scattered, and holding a diary in both of his hands tightly close to his chest.*

*“Here is my theory.” Without even asking a permission, he sits on a chair next to the desk, and abruptly puts his diary on the desk before the professor. “I’ve unified arts and science, please, take a look.”*

*The professor, who is in the middle of writing an email, raises his eyebrows, thinking what to say.*

*“Your physics is about unfeeling particles and fields; my theory is, in fact, a love story of the universe. Please, take a look at it. It’s in front of you.” He continues talking without a pause, “The universe is...”*

*“Hold on. You hardly look 18. Where did you learn physics?” says the professor.*

*“Knowledge is not in books. It’s out there. I directly acquired it”*

*The professor does not follow the logic. “Well, it is not a good time for discussion. My class is about to start.” The professor has seen many crazy people like him who come to physics department claiming big things.*

*“If you do not take interest in my work, I’ll commit suicide. I’m serious.”*

“*Suicide?*”

“*Yes, I’ll leap off the library.*”

“*Why don’t you publish your work? Why suicide?*”

“*No journal publishes this kind of work. I put theorem and poem on the same footing. A math journal does not publish poetry, and the same is the case with the literary magazines they do not publish theorems.*”

*He gives examples. He writes on the chalkboard in the office:*

X:  $2+3$

Y: 4

X: ?

Z: 5

X: !

“*It is a story. Here X, Y and Z are characters, they talk in a mathematical language. X asks a question. Y answers it. X says it is wrong. Then Z gives the correct answer. X says, yes, it is correct.*” He then gives another example. He writes:

*I said to her to marry me. She neither said yes nor no.*

“*It might look to you like a love story; in fact, it is a form of logic in which there is no yes or no. My work is also like this.*”

“*I have no time. Sorry, take your diary and leave,*” the professor says. He sends the email, takes his notes and heads to class. “*Physics doesn’t work like that.*”

“*OK, OK.*” His tone changes, “*If you don’t want to know about my theory, I’m going to perform an act as I leave your office. I’m also an actor. You will enjoy the live show..*”

*“What kind of acting? That jumping from the library.” The professor becomes suspicious.*

*“No, it’s a secret. I cannot tell you now.”*

*The young boy leaves the office. He’s holding his diary in both of his hands. His arms are hanging vertically down and he’s knocking the diary against his knees while walking. The professor’s office is on the second floor. When he reaches the staircase, he tumbles and rolls down the stairs. He abruptly sits on his bottom upon reaching the ground.*

*A student rushes to help if he is hurt. The student gives him a hand to stand on his feet, but he shakes his head left to right, to say don’t touch me. He is mute. His lips are closed tightly as if glued, and is constantly looking at his diary, which is lying in the stairs, with a babyish look. Professor Danish, who was following him, asks the student to give him the diary.*

*It is 10 a.m., the busiest times of the day. Student are going in and out of the classes. The hallway is blocked. The young boy, whom nobody knows, takes his diary from the student. He is sitting squeezed and frightened in the middle of the hallway and looking at everyone as if they are the predators and he is a prey. He opens the diary and turns over all the pages so that everyone sees that it is empty. Professor Danish, who is also standing in the crowd, recalls the earlier encounter with him in his office, “Why would he show me the diary if it was empty.” The young boy, after turning over all the pages, returns to the*

*first page and begins writing. When he writes, he nods as if he is receiving commands from someone.*

*When he finishes writing, he closes the diary and put the pen on top of it. It is very quiet here, a place which is otherwise very loud. He is looking here and there through the legs of the crowd around him, to make a way to get out of there. In one direction, he finds an outlet and prepares to run. He leaves the diary there and runs toward the main library. Professor Danish also runs fast after him. In the library, he takes the stairs and reaches the fourth floor. It is a reference section. Professor Danish also gets there, but he cannot find the young boy. Professor Danish is panicked, checking every aisle. Behind one aisle, he notices a broken window. When he looks out the window, he sees the young boy lying dead on the ground. He leaves the dead body there and rushes back to the department and takes the diary, which is with the people, into his possession.*

*When Prof. Danish opens the diary, it begins with a theorem, which states that a complete theory of everything exists if and only if there is no god. His work contains verses and dialogues. He remarks that mathematics is poetry. To him, words choice, word count, line break, and the number of lines in a poem are important. From it, he obtains the values of unknowns, such as the charge of an electron.*

*Prof. Danish is impressed. He does not follow much of the poetic approach, but, at least, the fundamental constants of nature – the speed of light, the gravitational constant, the*

*Planck's constant, etc. – are obtained right. In standard physics, these constants can only be determined experimentally.*

*A new theory comes into being. It is called the Emotional Science. Most people think it is the end of the story, as the ultimate theory of everything is discovered. On one hand the theory is simple, but, on the other hand, it is hard. To understand it, one has to be a poet, a mathematician, a linguist, an artist, and much more. Who could have all these characteristics?*

*A new scientific era begins. All fields of knowledge are unified. Science fiction becomes the new standard. New conventions are introduced. Textbooks are revised. Theorems in mathematics are proved poetically.*

*Everything is fine but god. Why is god not allowed in his poetic model? The atheists are fine with the new model, but not the theists. The theists find god in a new form. They recall that the young boy, who scarified himself and whom nobody knew, was, in fact, guided by an angel. How could he write such an incredible theory in one setting? His diary was empty, and he was nodding when writing. He must have been commanded by someone, and, therefore, he must be a messenger of god. Professor Danish reminds the people that the said boy was not a prophet but an actor, referring to his encounter with the young boy; however, he has no evidence to support his claim.*

*Would God send a messenger whose very message is to deny Him? Perhaps God wants us to forget about him and focus on our own problems, people think.*

I call the whole scenario “God Theorem”, according to which, religion would always exist in some form.

## 2

# IMAGINED VS REAL DIALOGUES

**T**he thought experiment, which describes the God theorem makes me skeptical. In physics, we test our theories. Is there any way to test the dialogues that take place between the two characters, Professor Danish and the young boy? Since I have no name for the main character, I'll call him Thought Prophet or TP in short. How would the plot change if Professor Danish takes a look at the diary? He would discover that it is empty. He may say what a joke and may ask TP to leave, and then TP would do what he does in the hallway in the original plot. In either case, it proves that the physics professor is unhelpful and that the young boy is indeed a prophet anyway.

I'm just afraid of gods and prophets. Life is much simpler if there is no such thing. I'm in silence since the day I have got this idea of God theorem. Most of the times I'm carrying my diary. I have written several stories. My stories are not longer than two or three sentences. The goal is to write the shortest possible story – a story that can be told in one word or even one letter. I feel that a story is more powerful than an equation. A story expresses feelings while an equation doesn't.

One day I'm sitting with my roommate Hussain and another friend Kashif at Chemistry Huts, a tea shop. Chemistry Huts, which is near our department, is our favorite place where we hang out. Some days we would spend all day at the huts. When we are about to leave, other friends join us, and we order more tea. Normally when we gather, we tease Kashif to give us a treat for one or the other reason, but today I'm in silence carrying my diary like Thought Prophet, who also carries one.

“Shahid, I think you should see a doctor. I've been noticing you're behaving oddly.” Hussain says. “Look at yesterday, you confined yourself in the room. It was good I came to help you got out of that phase. I don't know how long you were sitting like that.”

“What happened yesterday?” Kashif, who is a day-scholar, interjects.

“I don't know but yesterday when I came to hostel, Shahid was sitting on the floor like a baby. He tucked his head in his knees. I thought he was weeping. I called him 'Shahid, Shahid,' but he was not responding,” Hussain explains.

“I was hearing you, but my mouth was shut; I was unable to talk. Perhaps my brain was not sending the signal to my body to react,” I say.

“Shahid, are you happy with your engagement, or your family forced you?” Kashif asks.

“Kahif!” Hussain eyes Kashif.

“Let’s go right now,” I say at once.

“Go where?” Hussain inquires.

“You were saying to go to a doctor.”

“Oh yes. We need to find a good psychologist or psychiatrist in Islamabad.”

“I know one doctor. Let’s go now.” I take the last sip of tea and throw the cigarette away.

My friends unwillingly get up and come with me. We head to the university main gate where we get in a taxi. I guide the driver where to go. Hussain is sitting on the front seat, while Kashif and I are in the back seat.

We reach Pakistan Academy of Letters (PAL), Islamabad. I had been to PAL once with a poet friend from Landi Kotal who was receiving an award. PAL also gives awards to writers.

My friends cluelessly looked at each other. “Which place is this? We were supposed to go to a doctor,” Hussain says.

“We’re in the right place.”

We go to the Chair’s office. The PAL Chairs are renowned writers. The current one is also a famous poet. “Can I please meet with the respected chairman? I’m Ph. D. student at Quaid-i-Azam University.” I request the PS Chair.

“Please, write your name on this.” The secretary gives me a paper. I write my name, which he takes inside his boss’s office. As he steps out, he asks me if I can meet with his boss, while my friends are asked to wait in the lounge.

I abruptly sit on a chair to the right of him as I enter and say, “I’m a patient and you are the doctor who can cure me. Here is my disease.” I put my diary before him. In the back of my mind is Thought Prophet. I do not use exactly the same words as he uses when he enters Professor Danish’s office.

Unlike Professor Danish, the Chair of PAL takes the diary from me and reads it. On the first page is the boy’s story and a poem below it.

“Did you write another piece?” He inquires turning over the pages.

There are a few other two-line stories and some of my quotations that I associate with the Thought Prophet.

“Yes.” I look here and there, pointing at different objects in the office. “See, this is a pen, that a book, a table, chairs. Apparently, they’re different objects, but if you chain them on a wire, they belong to the same chain. My work is also like that. I relate unrelated things. See—” I point at my diary which is with him, “—the title of the first story is *The Boy*, in which a girl kills a boy. The second piece is a poem in which a girl on the run promises

her lover that she will come back to reunite with him. The story and the poem when combined generate a third story. The title of this larger story is again *The Boy*. In the old story, an innocent boy is killed, while in the extended story another boy – the woodcutter, who's the protagonist – helps the girl to kill the antagonist.”

He leaves his seat and starts wandering behind his chair. I also leave the chair and sit on another one in front of him. I talk to him like I know him for many years. Mostly I'm talking. During this, he also prays – the noon prayer – in the office. After the prayer, his driver comes in. I realize it must be his time to off. I ask him, “Should I go?”

“As you like,” he replies.

“Should I come again another time?”

“As you like,” he repeats.

Well, if you leave it to me, I'll never come again, I think to myself.

I couldn't notice how long the meeting took place. When I come out, Hussain and Kashif tell me that they waited more than two hours. The meeting further worsens my condition. I think I've created a masterpiece because of the way the Chair of PAL reacted: wandering around in the room, putting his hand under his chin, going to say something but saying nothing. More than what I have shown him, the Thought Prophet bothers me,

as if he has really emerged. I thought about the prophet, which was just a spontaneous thought, and today I really practiced his dialogues. Who is he? He carries a diary and so do I. Is he me? Did I foresee the future – my own future? He commits suicide. Does this mean I'm also killing myself? These thoughts scare me.

Next morning another idea come to mind, to discuss the God theorem with a professor in my own department. This professor, who taught us Methods of Mathematical Physics, is secular. I think he will appreciate my ideas. I enter in the professor's office just like Thought Prophet and give him the diary. I claim that I have proved a theorem.

“What are the G, NG, B, and NB in your theorem? You didn't define them,” the professor says.

“Here G means God; NG is used for no-God; B for believer; and NB for non-believer.” I explain the terms.  
“Sir, may I explain it on the board?”

“Sure.” He lights a cigarette.

Instead of explaining the God theorem, I write on the board what Thought Prophet does in Prof. Danish's office:

X:  $2+3$

Y: 4

X: ?

Z: 5

X: !

He leans on the chair, crosses his legs and takes a puff,  
“What is this?”

“The unification of arts and science is possible. This is a dialogue written mathematically.”

“Shahid, I don’t get how this is related to your theorem. Leave your notes here, I’ll take a look.”

“It’s okay Sir. You may not understand it. From my writing, it is not so obvious. I’ll write it neatly and show it to you another time.” I get my diary and leave. In fact, I didn’t want to leave the diary with him.



I encountered two experts. First, I met with the chairman of PAL and then with my own professor; however, I didn’t talk about Thought Prophet. I know it is a blasphemous idea. How can I discuss it with someone other than my close friends Mushtaq and Irfan in my village. So, I head to Jamrud.

# 3

## FORMER AND NEW SECULAR FRIENDS

In the village, *hujra* is a house used by men. Typically, it has a large room, a veranda, and mosque. Most *hujras* also possess *djinns*; they are spotted at night. Awais Khan's *hujra* is no exception. The *djinn* in his *hujra* is named Gul Khan, who wears a *waaskat* – sleeveless jacket – a hat and has white thick mustaches. But tonight is different. Gul Khan is not spotted. Lights are on. Two *charsi*s – hashish smokers – are filling cigarettes in the veranda. Awais and his friends are in the room. I'm also sitting inside in one of the cots and listening to him with curiosity. One person asks him, "We heard that Kabul sends students to Russia. Why did you return and didn't go to Russia?"

He sighs, "Unfortunately, I couldn't go." He inhales the cigarette, "Under President Gorbachev's *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* program, the funds for Afghanistan were cut. They were not sending students to Russia anymore. I was in the last batch. Students before us were sent." He exhales rings of smoke "Thanks for this." Referring to the *chars*' cigarette in his fingers, "Food was scarce. In the battlefield, this full cigarette was the only source that kept us warm in the cold weather and gave us energy. We were not only students in Khushal Khan Khattak lycée but

fighters too. We fought with terrorists – Mujahideen – in the frontline.”

Awais returns from Kabul in December 1989. This is when I’m in the first year in college doing F.Sc. The Kabul graduates have no good reputation in our village. They use blasphemous language, drink alcohol and are called *sra kafir*, red infidels. Yet the return of Awais increases my curiosity in meeting with him, because once I also wished to go Kabul; but my brothers didn’t allow me to study in a Communist regime. Awais was also not allowed. He left for Afghanistan without his parents’ permission. Afghanistan was the nearest country to go to. It is about 25-mile in the west from Jamrud.

Awais teaches us Marxism. Initially we are three friends. Beside Awais and I, our third friend name is Hamza, who is also our neighbor. Awais has brought two notebooks which are very dear to him. They contain notes on philosophy. He says he has taken these notes during the meetings called study circles in which comrades learn philosophy. While coming from Kabul, he hid these notebooks safe in his luggage. He says if Mujahideen saw it, they would kill him. Afghan troops could not control the roads. Mujahideen fighters attacked the roads in their search for pro-Soviet people.

Awais teaches us that, basically, there are two schools of thoughts in philosophy. One thinks that consciousness

is primary and matter is secondary. This school of thought is called idealist. The second school of thought, which is called materialist, thinks that consciousness emerges from matter. In simple words, if you favor the former, then you are a believer, and in the latter case, you are a disbeliever.

We meet up on an empty lot in front of our houses. Children play here. In one side of this area is a creek. The sound of the flood can be heard from our homes when it rains. When we were little, we could not wait to play in the muddy water. Children are lucky to have a ground like this in the middle of the village. Villagers do not spare open lands unless it is disputed. This lot is also disputed. Our family is a strong candidate for it. It is as old as I was born or maybe older than that. This is a part of our property, given to us as a fine by other villagers who stole valuables from us. Another place where we meet up is called Kas. It is another disputed area in front of Teddi bazaar, walking distance from our street. There are several soccer and cricket grounds where boys play. The picturesque mountains of Khyber Pass, in the west, can be seen from here. It's an ideal place for walking or running. You can make a meeting place anywhere. People will not bother you. We also remove stones from one spot, making a round sitting place on the ground. We are now several friends and call each other 'friend'.

Initially we read the Awais notes to each other in our study circles. Later we find a more concise book on Marxist philosophy by V. Afanasyev, a Russian author. In Peshawar, there are certain book stores that sell progressive literature. Like Awais notes, the very first topic in Afanasyev's book is "The Fundamental Question of Philosophy", which emphasizes whether matter or consciousness is primary. This book becomes the basis of our study circles. It discusses interesting questions. What is matter? What are space and time? Cause and effect.... It is physics. I have never learned these topics although I'm taking physics in college. Physics is my favorite subject. Philosophy further increases my interest in it. I like the Afanasyev's book so much that I read it every night. It mainly has two parts: the first part is dialectical materialism and the second part is socio-economic theory of communism. I never make it to the second part. I take deep interest in the first part which is philosophy. Later, I find more books. Urdu is rich in progressive literature. Most of these books are reprinted several times which means they have a big market in Pakistan. One book is *Insaan Bara Kaisey Bana* – The Evolution of Mankind – by Allen Senegal, published in Moscow. When I'm reading this book, I shake like I'm committing a sin. Another book is *Mazi ke Mazar* – The Shrines of Past – by Sabte Hasan. Study without Hasan is incomplete. He is a

progressive writer and has written several books. When I read *Mazi ke Mazar*, it gives me a feeling as if religions have emerged from one another – a kind of a parent- and daughter-religion.



The long days of summer are ideal for reading. We have a shop in Jamrud bazaar. Beside Tedi bazaar where I live, Jamrud bazaar is the main bazaar. At noon, the heat waves make the bazaar almost empty. Most stores are closed. Our store remains open. We four brothers run the store. My shift starts at noon. The roof-fan is blowing very hot. The chair on which I sit is also warm to touch as if it has a high fever. The chair is so uncomfortable that it has swelled my legs joints. Sometimes I put my hands under my legs. When there are no customers, I read books. One day I was looking down reading a book, a cow ate sugar from the basket. A customer pointed it out to me. The baskets of loose sugar and tea are displayed in the front; other merchandise is behind. Our store is famous for Kenya tea. Afridis – our tribe – are very picky in about tea, especially green tea. It is said to tell how good one's home cooking is if they know how to cook green tea. Everything should be added to water in perfect timing. First, heat up water. When it starts to boil, add

green tea and sugar to taste, then cardamom. Leave it on low heat for a while and then serve. Another variation is to add sugar, green tea, and cardamom to an empty but hot pot and then pour hot water on it, and leave it on low heat for a while. The color must remain yellow. If it turns red it is a bad tea.

I still pray, although the Afanasyev's book changes my mind. All my family members pray five times a day. I'm no exception. But it's not possible to sit in two boats. Little push is needed. I've climbed the wall, and need to leap to the other side. I'm in a state of transition. One night, I'm in bed. I see a deep space when I close my eyes. I don't find anything in the space but a dark, void, and Godless universe. Next day, I go to college while still fasting habitually – it is the month of Ramadan. I'm not courageous to break the fast. After college, later in the day before dusk, Awais come over. It's only him and me in the *hujra*. I say to him, "I did it."

"So?" He inquires, "Are you fasting?

"Yes."

"Fasting for what?"

I go straight to the pitcher in the veranda and drink a full glass of water. Later, as usual, I'm sitting with my brothers around the table for *iftar* – meal eaten after sunset. How can I tell them that I do not belong here? I

feel guilty. When everyone is doing one thing and you are doing another thing, you feel like you are wrong.

After committing the first sin, I plan for a second one. Two days later another thought comes to mind – to drink alcohol. Though drinking was not new in our house, Manan – my oldest brother who died in 1988 of kidney failure – was a drinker. He comes late at night. He was yelling, swearing and breaking pots. Since his time, I hated alcohol, but today I need just a sip. I know comrades drink. For this, I do not want to blame anyone. I want to do it myself. Solely my decision, so that tomorrow I do not say that so and so made me a drinker. I go to a liquor store in Teddi bazaar to buy a bottle. Liquor – and other drugs – are openly sold in tribal areas. The owner does not ask me as to whether I buy it for myself or someone has sent me. He's nice and sells the bottle to me. When Manan was alive, he would send me to this store to fetch him a bottle. Though I was underage, neither my brother nor the storekeeper minded it.

I come back to *hujra*. There is no one in there. They left for *Taraweeh* prayer, a night prayer performed during Ramadan. I also bring some snacks. I saw Manan was drinking it with some snacks and soda. I don't know which thing to put in the mouth first, to sip or make my mouth salty. Anyhow, I do something and drink it.

My friendship with Awais does not last. He becomes jealous of me as, gradually, I led the group. We are now about ten friends. Awais, Hamza, and I are clear. The other friends are in the process of being cleared. Clear friends are those who made the transition leaving the religion. One day Hamza and I are sitting in Kas, and he gives me a long speech, I don't get it. I ask him to tell me clearly what's the problem. Did I do anything wrong? He says nothing but asks me to leave the group saying it is the group's decision. I'm shocked. Where did my sacrifices go? Most of our group meetings were held in our hujra, because there was more privacy in our place. I do not say anything and leave quietly.



Marxism impacts me both positively and negatively. On the positive side, it enlightens me. On the negative side I fall behind in the college. I have failed the F.Sc. exam, because of not focusing on my study, instead reading progressive literature. It is the winter of 1992 and my last chance to pass the exam. If I failed this time, I would lose the chance for education in science. Putting blame on Marxism alone would not be correct. There were other factors, which also contributed to my failure. One reason is the sudden change in the medium of

instruction. Up to high school, education is in Urdu; in college it changes to English. The second reason is the wrong choice of the college.

In August 1989, I pass the SSC exam – a two-year 9-and 10-grade certificate – in low grade. I apply to several colleges, but only a mediocre college in Pabbi accepts my application. Pabbi is a town outside Peshawar. I have to take two busses. First, from Jamrud to Peshawar, then from Peshawar to Pabbi. Altogether it is a one-and-a-half-hour drive by bus. The tiresome part is the Jam bus. Jamrud is called Jam in short. The Jam bus stops everywhere. It does not go until it finds a passenger. If you say *za kana* – please go – to the driver, he bursts at you saying get off and get a taxi.

The college is inside the fields at the bank of a stream. It is said that prior to college, this place was a slaughterhouse. Most local students come on bicycles. They also bring a saw to reap the crops for animals on the way back. Students organizations, which are political wings of various mainstream political parties, are also very active. Every other day is a strike and classes are canceled.

In Jamrud, I do not tell anybody that I go to college. If I do, people ask annoying questions. Which college do I go to? If I say Pabbi College, they make fun of me. Pabbi College! That far! Why not Islamia College, or Edwardes

College, or Govt. College Peshawar? One day, I'm coming from college. I'm in the white college uniform. A high school classmate sees me in Teddi bazaar and runs after me to check my books as to which college I go to, but I run faster.

Since in college the medium of instruction is English, I have a hard time with study. I cannot forget one topic in physics on which I spent weeks to understand. This topic is called 'resonance' – the vibration of, say, a string with natural frequency. It is explained with the help of an example that soldiers are asked as not to march in unison over a bridge. It may cause the bridge to collapse. I'm lost. How could a march cause a collapse? To understand the topic, I search the Urdu meaning of resonance. The word is *baazgasht*, which I have never heard. The Urdu translation makes it even harder.

When I'm doing nothing, I play with physics equations. One day, I combine two Newton equations of motion and obtain a third one. The new equation is not in the textbook. I'm very excited. On dinner time, I discuss it with Laiq Khan. He cannot believe that his brother has discovered a new formula. He says it should be called Shahid's formula. Even for a single second, it doesn't come to my mind that I should first discuss it with my own teacher in college; instead, I ask my brother if he knows anyone in Peshawar University. Luckily, he knows

a professor in Islamia College. That professor arranges my meeting with the Chairman of the Department of Physics, Peshawar University. By then I have obtained several other equations. We meet in the conference room. My brother is also sitting. He has taken off from work today. This may change our future. The Chairman takes a look at my equations and says that there is nothing new in it. When he explains one thing, I raise another question. It takes more than an hour, but I'm not satisfied. Finally, he gets angry, saying we're done. We come from there. After that, I derive more equations, but over time the craziness fades away.

When the first-year exam comes, I fail several papers including physics. Many students switch from F.Sc. to FA. Science is hard. FA, which is a certificate in arts, is easy. Next year more bad luck happens to me. New textbooks are introduced, but we – the failed students – are told that our exam will be based on the old coursework. Unfortunately, on the exam day, the Board only sends papers based on the new curriculum to our college. I fail again. I do not give up. I study the new course and finally pass the F.Sc. in a supplementary exam.

In fall 1993, I enroll in a two-year B.Sc. majoring in physics and mathematics. The class size is small as compare to the F.Sc. class. I learn from my classmates that without private tutoring one cannot pass the exam

with high marks. This thought never came to me in F.Sc. I had no one to guide me. I depended on the classwork. We didn't even finish half of the course. No one uses class notes, because there are better notes available in the market prepared by well-known professors. Tutoring is the second source of income for lecturers. Popular lecturers are very busy. They hold tutoring sessions from early morning until late evening. They only take a break from tutoring during the day to go to college for work. The sessions are held in groups, one hour in length. The tutor takes notes on special thin paper under which are several carbon copies, which are then distributed among the tutees. Or one master copy is produced. Then students make photocopies in a nearby photocopier shop.

My math tutor is a senior lecturer in our college and my physics tutor is a senior lecturer in Islamia College Peshawar. The math session is at 7 a.m. at the professor's place across from our college. This means that I get up very early to take a bus from Jamrud to Peshawar and then from there to Pabbi. The physics session is at 3 p.m. in Hayatabad. Hayatabad is a residential area near Jamrud. Our math teacher has very weak eyesight. We say that he has memorized all the mathematics. He remembers every single problem in the book. His house is by the main road. After our session, we walk him to the college. He tells us that in his time he revised the course

more than fifty times before the exam. He gives the same advice to us. Practice and practice. Math is learned through practice.

The B.Sc. exam is held in August in two parts for which we are freed almost three months before the exam. Following my math professor's advice, I revise the course several times. I never studied like this in F.Sc. Scratch papers are all over my study table and pens without the caps. The cap moves in front of my gaze, which bothers me. I remove it. The fan is also off when I'm studying. Though it makes the room unbreathable, it blows away the papers on the table.

I don't really have friends who disturb me, but only sometimes one of my customers named Yaseen visits me. He tells me inspiring stories of Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, from where he did the master. One of the reasons I'm studying hard is to get admission in Quaid-i-Azam University, which is the top No. 1 university in Pakistan. I like Yaseen's company; however, he does not realize that he is also wasting my precious time. He comes in the midmorning and leaves in the evening. One day he comes with another person whom I don't know. Yaseen introduces his friend, "This is Mushtaq." I'm thinking what to say. All of a sudden it comes to my mind to show them my article that was published in *Science Magazine*, an Urdu magazine. I discuss in the article that

there is no room for the supernatural in science. Science cannot be derived from religion; they are different things. I wrote the article as a criticism to an article published in the same magazine that related science and Quran.

Mushtaq likes the article and asks if I can lend it to him. The next day he comes again but without Yaseen. I'm surprised how could he visit me unannounced. I saw him just yesterday for the first time. I'm not that fast in friendship.

“You write well. Very philosophical article.” He praises my article.

“Thanks.” I say.

“I know all lefties in Jamrud. How could I not know you?”

“I was part of a small group. Our politics started in hujra and ended in the hujra, ha ha. We didn't take it to the next level.” “Are you also a lefty?” I ask back.

“I'm a nationalist, I support ANP.”

Awami National Party (ANP) is a Pashtoon secular party. It was founded in 1986 by Khan Abdul Wali Khan, son of Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan, aka Bacha Khan. Bacha Khan is also known as the Frontier Gandhi. My forefathers were also in Bacha Khan's *Khudai Khadmagar*, God's Servants, moment originated in 1929. The moment was active in the Northwest Frontier Province of India to nonviolently oppose the British. Bach

Khan died on January 20, 1988, at the age of 98. Though he lived long, he spent one-third of his life in prison. According to his will, he was buried in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.

“Politics is not my thing. I like pure politics. I saw that purity in Marxist philosophy, but now I see it in physics. Physics gives me more pleasure.” I say.

“I have an idea. We can establish an organization. To promote education. People will also benefit from your knowledge. Just a food for thought,” Mushtaq suggests.

“Let’s get this exam out of the way. Then we can think about it.”

When the result is declared, I stand first in the college. Officially the result is declared in February 1996, but I request an advanced transcript to be directly sent to Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) where the admission deadline is in January. I apply to physics and mathematics disciplines. I receive an acceptance letter from the mathematics department which I decline. My priority is physics. When the result is officially declared, I applied for M.Sc. physics in Peshawar University where I am easily admitted. After M.Sc, I again apply to QAU for M.Phil. program to which I am admitted.

Meanwhile, I keep meeting with Mushtaq and his secular friend Irfan. We spend many nights together, sometimes at our place or at Irfan’s place. Our discussion

on philosophy would continue until morning. I lose my old friends, Awais and his company. Thankfully I find Mushtaq and Irfan as my new friends.

## 4

# IMAM MEHDI

Normally when I come from Islamabad, I met with Mushtaq and Irfan on the next day in high school Jamrud, where they are teachers. This is the same school I went to. Whenever I come to this school, it reminds those old days when I was a student. I was on the PT team, a drill in which students exercise in unison. I was on this team since 5<sup>th</sup> grade. To look beautiful, we also tied colorful handkerchiefs to our fingers. My position was in one of the outer columns and in the second row. Our instructor was very strict. He hit us with a stick when we made errors. I didn't like it much. The instructor told us that he would spare us as we advanced to 9<sup>th</sup> grade. In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, I was not spared. I protested but the instructor hit me very badly, saying that my height was short, and so I was still suitable for the drill.

There are several playing grounds on the premises of the school. The classrooms make an E-shape. In front of the classes are four beautiful lawns. In the east are the lower grades and higher grades are in the west.

Today when I enter the building, Irfan and other teachers are sitting under the shade of a tree on one of the lawns.

“Assalamu-alaikum.” I say.

“Please, come here. Sit here,” one of the teachers says.

“Thanks.” I sit next to Irfan, light a cigarette, and put my wristwatch on the table.

“I like your style. As soon you sit, you keep your watch next to you. I observe that you never forget it when leaving.” Irfan giggles.

“Yes, it is in my subconscious I never forget it. Where’s Mushtaq?” I look around.

“There he is. Speaking of the devil and he is here,” Irfan says.

“Hey Shahid.” Mushtaq gives me hug. “Sorry, I was mailing my assignment to Alama Iqbal Open University.”

“I’m glad many teachers are benefiting from the distance learning of Alama Iqbal Open University.” I notice other teachers are also working on their assignments.

“I’m doing B.Ed,” one teacher says.

“I’m working on master’s in history,” another says.

“I’m hot. Let’s sit in the staffroom under a fan.” Mushtaq wipes sweat from his forehead.

“It’s nice breeze here. Maybe, you’ve walked in the sun,” I say.

“Let’s go to the staff room.” Irfan nudges me.

The staff room is big, but only few chairs are here because the staff likes to sit on the veranda or on the lawn.

“Congratulation Shahid on your engagement.” Irfan puts *naswar* – snuff – in his mouth.

“Thank you.”

“Congrats Shahid.” Mushtaq also wishes me.

“Does she go to college?” Irfan asks.

“Yes, she is a second-year student in Home Economics College, Peshawar,” I say.

“You are lucky, your life partner is educated,” Mushtaq says.

“In fact, I was here for something else. Can we meet tonight? Maybe at our place. I have a new theory,” I say.

“Did you again challenge Einstein’s theory?” Irfan jokes.

“It’s not a daytime discussion. We need a night-long discussion with drinks,” I say.

“We’re curious to learn about your new theory. I think we’re free tonight. We can come,” Mushtaq says.

“Perfect. I’m going to go to Karkhano Market to bring lamb to barbecue. Let’s enjoy. I’m excited,” I say.



We have a big *hujra*. My brother, Abdur Rahim Afridi, is a political figure. He has held several political gatherings and musical concerts in the *hujra*. Hundreds of people have attended these gatherings. Attached to the *hujra* is an aluminum factory in which utensils are manufactured, which are then supplied to various cities – Peshawar, Swat, Karak,...

On one side of our *hujra*, in a small room, *tara*, local liquor, is distilled. We make *tara* on a small scale, just for our own consumption. The main ingredients are grapes, brown molasses of from sugar cane, or other fruits. On the commercial level, *tara* is sold in transparent plastic bags – unbottled. The factories are in Ghundi Jamrud. It gives you a quick kick, quicker than vodka.

It's evening. Rauf, our servant, has just distilled Jamrud water. We also call it Jamrud water. I ask Rauf to reserve two bottles for us.

“Uncle, your friends are in the office” Israr comes over. Israr is the nephew of my sister-in-law. Not only my own nephews, but all youngsters call me uncle. Many people get offended when you them uncle. It means you are too old to be called an uncle. But, for respect, my youngsters call me the English word ‘uncle’, which means I’m educated. The actual words in Pashto are *kaka* – uncle on the paternal side – and *Mama* – uncle on the maternal side. There are two other interesting words *troper* – cousin on the maternal side – and *tarboor* – cousin on paternal side. We Afridis call each other *troper*. It means we are friends. *Tarboor* is not used in a good way. *Don’t be a tarboor*. It means don’t be an enemy. A *tarboor* shares land with you, but a *troper* doesn’t.



Next to the main room is an office used for the factory. “Assalamu-alaikum.” I greet Irfan and Mushtaq. Abdur is on phone.

“Let’s go to the other room,” I say.

The main guestroom is big. There are no chairs or beds in it. It’s fully carpeted. Mats are placed on the floor along the walls. A *thookdaan* – a spitting container for *naswar* – and an ashtray are put in front of each mat.

I leave Irfan and Mushtaq in the room and set the grill to barbecue in the courtyard.

“Shahid leave it to me. You don’t know how to make tikka. You’ll burn it, haha.” Irfan joins me.

“Really, Thank you. Please, you take care of it. Let me go home to make salad,” I say.

“Slow down Shahid. Your gait is very fast.” Irfan shouts after me.

On the back of the *hujra* is our house. Inside the boundary wall of the main property are three houses and a barren garden, which was once very green. Abdur Rahim; my other brother Gul Rahim, and my nephew, Hafiz Ur Rehman, and I live here. Hafiz’s father has passed away. My other brother, Laiq Khan, and the family of Manan, who passed away too, live in our childhood home in Teddi Bazaar. Teddi bazaar is about a half-an-hour walk from here. Mother lives in Teddi Bazar and

sometimes she stays with us here. My father has also passed away.

Abdur's house is made of concrete, not like our childhood house which is made of mud. There is one living room. Three sofas are placed in a U shape, a TV in front of them. A dish antenna is installed on the rooftop. Next to living room is a kitchen, then Abdur's room, then is the room of his children. Next to the children room is my room. My room is in the east, facing the kitchen. By my room is a basement. Outside the rooms is a big veranda and a front yard below the veranda.



“Shahid, you’re here. Mushtaq and Irfan were asking for you.” Abdur comes home.

I’m sitting in the living room.

“What are you watching? Are you crying? Anyone says something to you?” Abdur worries.

“I’m watching this show of an old man. I didn’t watch it from the beginning. I don’t know name of the show. It is an Indian channel. See this old man; he is kicked out of the house by his sons. He doesn’t say anything but quietly lives in the garage.” I wipe off my tears.

“But what made you so emotional?” Abdur laughs.

“The older one gets, the wiser one becomes.” I shake my finger. “Elderly people see everything, but they do not complain. God opens the treasure of knowledge on them the older they get, but they don’t show off.”

“Are you referring to Mother? She’s very dear to me, but, you know, she loves Manan’s children more, and fights always with Sajida.”

I’m the youngest of my brothers and sisters. I don’t say anything, but it really hurts my feelings when I hear bad words about Mother from my brothers. Mother has always fought for me with my brothers. She would take money from my brothers and give it to me, and I would buy books with that.



It’s 10 p.m. Perfect time for discussion. I take a pen and a clipboard and go to *hujra*.

Sadiq, our watchman, is on the veranda, making a cigarette of *chars*. Mushtaq is also sitting with him.

I go straight to room.

“Irfan, can I turn off the air-condition? The room is very cold. Or I may have a high fever,” I say.

“Let me feel your forehead. It’s cold. What’s the problem? You’re shivering,” Irfan notes.

“Never mind. Let’s start the discussion. The tonight topic is....”

“Shahid, why are you talking so rapidly? What’s wrong?” Irfan observes.

“What?” I pour whiskey in glass and swallow it. “Who brought the whisky?”

The hot spirits pass through my throat and then through my esophagus and then enters my stomach. It radiates all through my body. I take a deep breath, and recline on a pillow by the wall, putting my hands under my head.

“Abdur Rahim gifted us the whisky. He put away the *tara*,” Irfan says.

“Sorry, I was smoking with Sadiq.” Mushtaq enters.

“Shahid is very excited. The tonight topic, I think, is very special,” Irfan says.

I sit up, flip the Gold Leaf packet – my favorite brand – and light a cigarette.

“Are we ready?” I adjust my eyewear.

We sit in the corner away from the air-conditioning. I’m still cold.

“What’s the topic?” Mushtaq leans back.

“It’s about the Theory of Everything. Rather it is more about who will discover such an exceptional theory.”

“Who?” Mushtaq raises his eyebrows.

“We’ll talk about the who part later. Let me first explain what a true ToE – the theory of everything – is. String theory and quantum gravity explore only the physical aspects of the nature. They cannot be a ToE. A true ToE works like a machine. Question in and answer out. No question will remain unanswered. No mystery will remain. No death. Life forever. A true ToE is the key to paradise.” I sip from my glass and take a puff.

“No death. Is it possible?” Irfan is surprised.

“In future, death will be used like anesthesia to treat patients during surgery,” I remark.

“Now the who part.” Mushtaq can’t wait.

“Did you hear Einstein’s quote, ‘God does not play dice.’ God may not play dice, but he does play hide and seek. He appears and disappears – comes and goes,” I say.

“I smell something from your mouth. Tell us clearly, do you believe in God? Do not talk in code words.” Mushtaq says.

“Let’s go to that corner. Take your drinks.” I point to another corner in the room.

In the other corner, I continue. “No, I don’t believe in God. Let’s go back to the old corner.”

In the old corner, I say, “I’m a rider on two boats. I’m an atheist in one boat and a theist in the other one,” I say.

“Thanks for the clarification. Can you now explain the who part?” Mushtaq reminds me.

“Here is how it goes. Let me first tell you a joke about two philosophers. One philosopher is a theist and the other is an atheist. They are debating all night in favor of their ideologies, but they cannot convince each other. The hot discussion continues until next morning. Their arguments are so strong that by morning the theist becomes an atheist and the atheist turns into a theist. They convince each other but lose their own faiths.”

Laughter.

“Something like this is happening here. I’m thinking how to make it simple. An atheist prophet will emerge. A prophet who denies God. A bad man, but not a fake prophet. In the past, God wanted to be praised and worshipped. For this, He sends prophets, who were people of good manners. People followed them. Now, God wants to be defied and not to be worshipped. For this, He sends a person, who preaches that God does not exist.” I bend down to take notes.

“What’s his name? Is that you?” Mushtaq quizzes.

“Monologue. Mr. Monologue,” I say at once.

“Mr. Monologue, hmm. This is his name?” Irfan says.

“An atheist prophet. A bad man, but not a fake prophet. Can you break it up in parts? I don’t get it?” Mushtaq demands.

“Mr. Monologue is a super-genius person. Give him any problem, he’d solve it instantly. He also cures patients and raises the dead.”

“Is he Jesus?” Irfan guesses.

“But what makes him bad? So far he looks like a good man,” Mushtaq notes.

“He does bad things so that he is not worshipped. He kills people. Rapes women in public. Walks naked. And at times, he flies.”

“Wait a minute.” Irfan stops me. “Your theory resembles the Imam Mehdi theory in Islam. Imam Mehdi will come before the Day of Judgment. He will be assisted by Jesus Christ to kill Dajaal.”

“Irfan, Shahid’s Mr. Monologue character is more than that. It is in fact an amalgamation of Einstein, Jesus, Imam Mehdi and Dajjal. It’s interesting,” Mushtaq concludes.

“It’s four in the morning. I think we should go to sleep. We may talk about this another time,” I say.

The discussion with Mushtaq and Irfan fully charges me and more interesting ideas come to mind.

# 5

## 2 IS ODD

**I**t is late August 2003. I take my backpack and head to Islamabad. On the way to Islamabad I'm thinking of Mr. Monologue. I'm not thinking about him like a character in a story but as a real person who would emerge sooner or later. I get scared when I see him in me. Like I know my own future.

When the coach reaches to Karachi Company – the main bus station in Islamabad, I take another local hiace for Aabpara Market where a shuttle bus runs to the university. In Aabpara, I wait for the university bus, but it has not yet arrived, and so I pass the time in the market. As I walk, my pace gets faster and faster zigzagging between people as if I'm in the movie "Matrix." The people look static to me, while I move through them like a bullet. I walk from end to end in the market and then return. As I cross the one-way road to get on the bus, I halt in the middle of the road and poke at a speedy Land Cruiser coming toward to me. The Land Cruiser – which is very close to me – stops. Its lights fall directly into my eyes. It's evening. I know the Mr. Monologue in me has made me powerful. Nothing can hurt me. I jump from the

road to the side and cross the other one-way road without observing the on-coming traffic and get on the bus. The blue university bus has arrived. In the bus, I sit on one seat squeezing myself, but I'm very scared. The darkness of the night horrifies me. Another student also sits next to me. I know this student. He's also from physics. I turn my face away from him and look out of the window.

In university, I go straight to my office to hang a picture – which my fiancée has embroidered – above my desk. To acknowledge the gift, I write in my diary: *There is a house in it. My fiancée sent this picture from the village. My mother lives in the village.* I lock the office and head to the hostel. I take the usual route, the sidewalk that goes by the mathematics department. I'm again walking like I'm in the movie "Matrix." I have fixed my gaze straight and not looking down. Steps also come in my way. I skip them if they do not exist. I have maintained my balance. I do not fall. As I reach the hostel, I suddenly stop considering myself trapped in the shadow of the hostel gate. The shadow makes a pattern on the ground. I'm standing in a step forward position with my hands on my hips. I'm looking down at the pattern of the shadow and thinking how to escape from it. Suddenly I jump and get out of the shadow trap. I overhear someone behind me laughing. I head to Hostel-2. There are four boys' hostels on the premises. Hostel-2 is for the Ph.D. and M.Phil. students.

The other three hostels are for the Masters' students. The girls' hostel is behind the boys' hostels. As I reach the plaza between the hostels, I change my direction and instead get into Hostel-1. I totally randomize – zigzagging – my path. I'm checking how long I will take to get to my room in Hostel-2. At the entrance of hostel-1, I see a cat. I run after him. The cat runs upstairs in fear. I also run upstairs. I'm not looking down to watch my steps. I halt the cat upstairs in the hallway. I look into his eyes telling him that I can run faster than him. I do not look around to see if people are observing me.

I leave the cat there and head back to my hostel. Instead of going to my room, I go to another plaza behind the hostel. A laundry shop is also here, which is closed now. The autumn leaves are lying on the ground. No students are here. I'm wearing jeans, shut tucked in, my hands on my hips, bag on my back. The goal is to zigzag through everywhere while not stepping on the leaves. I'm marching and sometime jumping high as if I'm flying. The earth under me is running backward. At one point, I run over a fence behind the benches. I'm convinced that the iron fence cannot hurt me. Mr. Monologue is protecting me.

“Shahid, you are here. What are you doing here? Let's go to room.” Hussain finds me.

“What time is it?” I say sitting on the bench with him as if nothing has happened.

“Did you eat dinner?” He puts his arm on my shoulders. “Let’s go to huts. The cafeteria might be closed. Get up. Let’s go.”

“OK, let me put my backpack in the room. Please, wait in the plaza; I’m coming.” I say. Joining Hussain fully normalizes me. I totally forget what I was doing a little earlier. I quickly go to my room and then go to huts.

Beside the chemistry and social huts on the campus, there are other huts by the university main gate. These huts are not on the university premises. They look like real huts built out of mud and have no electricity, but are very popular. Majeed huts is the oldest one, which has been in business since 1973. The spicy food of Majeed huts is so popular that ex-Quaidains also come here with family for lunch.

When we get to huts, Majeed huts is closed. It’s late, however, another huts is open. Hussain calls the waiter to bring the menu.

“We only have potato bhurji. Sorry, this is the only dish left,” Hikmat, the waiter, says.

“Ugh.” My least favorite dish. Half-cooked potatoes mixed with eggs. “Please, bring tea.” I don’t feel any hunger.

“Hikmat, one cup for me too.” Another friend Nawab also joins us.

“Hi, Nawab,” I say.

“Every donkey has a head, but not every head is that of a donkey. Your all-time joke, doctor.” Nawab says to me. Even if you are a Ph.D. student, people would call you a doctor.

“The donkey theorem,” I chuckle.

“Nawab, you don’t remember that one.” Hussain laughs. “One day he was drunk.” He is referring to me, “He fell on the steps in the hostel. He was swearing saying who made these steps in the middle of everywhere.”

“This is one thing I don’t like about Quaid-i-Azam University: steps are everywhere,” I say.

After the tea, Hussain heads to physics department while Nawab and I go to the hostel. In the hostel, we say goodnight to each other heading to our rooms. I’m so tired that I instantly crash on the bed. Later in the night, I suddenly get up. I would hardly have slept an hour, but I feel very fresh. I feel like something is occurring at me – a revelation. I get the clipboard and pen and step out. I wander in the plaza. I’m in night-dress wearing a *shalwar* – loose trouser, sweatshirt and flip-flops. I feel tightness in my thighs. I lift up one foot and stretch my leg, and then the other one, but it doesn’t help. I then drift and

exit the hostel. I stand outside and keep stretching my arms and legs. The tightness in body is not getting any better. Beside tightness, I'm hearing the voices of crickets. Some voices are high like coming from nearby and some are very low as if coming from far far away. I follow the voices and motion along the driveway. The voices get louder and louder as I leave the hostel area. I pace toward the main huts. This area is dark. On one side is the campus and on other side are woods. Upon reaching the huts, I sit on a chair. The huts are closed while the chairs are there in the open. Beside me, there are a few dogs sitting on the ground. After relaxing, I get back to the hostel and spend the remaining night in the TV room. The TV room is also empty. Lights are off. I lean on the chair and sleep.

I get up in the predawn hours. Suddenly it occurs to me that I should take a shower. I put the clipboard, which I have carried since last night, in the room, and get a shampoo and towel. Luckily the bathroom is not busy. There are a handful of bathrooms in the hostel, which are very busy in the morning. One has to wait a long time. I adjust the water and stand under the shower. The water is falling on me. Suddenly, I turn the knob of hot water to fully hot. The touch of hot water mystifies me. I'm trying to understand what hotness is. I then shut the hot water and turn the knob of cold water. Then I rapidly turn the

knobs from fully cold to fully hot. The bathroom becomes steamy. I'm confused by the feeling of hotness and coldness.

“Who's there? Please, hurry up.” Someone knocks on the door.

“I'm coming.” I dry myself, put on *shalwar* and the sweatshirt.

I put on *qameez* in the room. I then step out of our hostel and walk in Hostel-1. This is the same hostel where I taught a cat that I could run faster than her last night. The hostel is evacuated for white-wash. The doors of all the rooms are wide open, and the electricity is cut. I enter one room on the second floor. I stand in the center of the room and look at one of the walls. When I focus, I see a portrait on the wall. Since it is predawn, the picture has yet to become fully visible. The picture is within reach of my height. If I go closer, I can verify what is on the wall, but I don't do it; instead, I concentrate from where I am to see what is in the painting. I see a naked man. I keep looking at it. More men also emerge in the painting. They all are naked. I smile to myself, “I can see in the dark.” I leave the room and march down the hallway, looking through every room. I'm sliding my feet in flip-flops. I get out of the indoor hallway to the outer one. I can see the ground. Suddenly I jump and quickly turn around in the air and then land on my feet like a cat. I jumped in

the hallway, but not out of the floor. I'm thinking if I leap out of the floor, I'll not be hurt. When I keep looking at the courtyard, the height disappears. I start believing that height is just an illusion: the eyes can only see a two-dimensional image. The world is two-dimensional. I step back to prepare to jump, but as I run, I stop at the boundary wall and do not leap. Though I believe that I'm powerful, I'm not yet convinced that I reached to the level of Mr. Monologue. I then leave the hostel and head to the huts for breakfast. The light in the sky has increased. I'm marching fast sliding my feet. At the hostel gate, I suddenly stop. I don't know why I stop. I'm figuring it out. When I roll my eyes, I see a spider's thread, which is almost touching my nose. It gives me a surety that I'm gaining the power of Mr. Monologue. I can detect small things.

I go to the same place where I had dinner last night. Hikmat comes to take the order. When he's taking the order, I only see the lower part of his body, because I'm looking down.

“Sit down,” I shout at him.

“Yes.” He squats down in front of me in fear.

“Now I see your face. Egg sandwich.”

“OK. Can I go now?”

“Yes.”

During this, I see a cat who is looking at me. I leave my seat and crawl after him. The cat runs away. I then stand up. Because of the tightness in my body, I stretch my arms and start dancing. First, I extend my right arm moving it horizontally counterclockwise. It activates my left arm, which also starts to stretch. Likewise my neck and legs also begin to move. I start stepping forward and end up in the middle of a road. This road separates the campus and huts and goes around the university, called the periphery. I lie down in the middle of the road and squeeze my body. Now I'm thinking that I'm a snake. A car also passes near me. Since I'm in its way, it drives away from me. I then stand up by myself as if nothing has happened and head to the hostel. During this, I do not look around to see if people are observing me. I'm very happy. I can do what I want to do. I'm a freeman.



“Where were you last night? You were not on your mat,” Hussain, who has just got up, says.

“I slept in the TV room.”

“What happened to your shirt? It has on mud on it. Did you fall?”

“At huts. I can't explain it.”

“Shahid, you need to go home. It wouldn’t be safe to go by yourself. I’ll call your brother to take you home. Stay in the hostel. I forbid you. Do not leave the hostel,” Hussain says. He has been to our place several times. He knows my brothers and nephews.

“Do you have our home phone number?”

“Yes, I do.”

“But what would you tell him? I’ve just come from home yesterday.”

“Don’t you worry. I’ll talk to Abdur Lala. I’m going to the department. You stay in the hostel until I return.”

Hussain leaves, while I take his words literally: “I forbid you. Do not leave the hostel.” I take it as if God has forbidden me. I further restrict myself, to stay in the room. I have some water in the bottle. I say to myself that this is all the water available to me for the rest of the day. I then dress up formally as if I have an interview, but then I lie on down my mat. There are no beds in the room. Two mats are put on the floor on a rug. One closet, a mirror, chair and desk. My mat is on the desk side. The light is off. I’m lying straight with glasses on. Between my eyes and glasses, I put a small towel. Suddenly I sit up and scratch the brand name from the cigarette packet, which is under my pillow. *Products should have no brand names.* I lie down again and remain lying until Hussain comes back.

“Shahid, are you awake?” He says.

“Yes,” I slowly say.

“Get up. And why are you wearing glasses while sleeping?” He laughs.

“I cannot use two senses while talking to you. I can either see you or hear you,” I say in a ghostly way.

“Hehehe! C’mom. Get up.” He cannot stop laughing.

I suddenly sit up and lean on the wall, while he’s standing in the doorway. He enters and sits on the chair.

“I called Abdur Lala. He said that he was sending Hafiz. Hafiz will take you home. I’m going back to the department. If you want to have cup of tea, you can come with me to go to café.”

“No thanks. I’m fine.”

I again lie down as Hussain leaves. It is very quiet in the wing. Perhaps it’s the daytime and most of the students are in the departments.

Later in the day, someone slowly knocks on the door. I say yes removing the towel from my eyes. It is Nawab who brings me lunch from the hostel mess. He keeps the plate and *rooti* on the rug near me, and he sits on the chair. I put the towel back on my eyes saying I’m not hungry. He remains seated for a while and then leaves when he receives no response from me. He leaves quietly.

God is great. God is great. The *muazzin* calls people for the noon prayer. The university mosque is just outside

the boys' hostels. Later, the *muezzin* again calls for the afternoon prayer. Over time, the speed of my thoughts has slowed down. I get up and start realizing that my own stories and theories give me the stress. My problems will be solved if I destroy them. I put away the chicken plate and *rooti* from the rug and keep them on the desk. From the desk, I pick up my diary and rip off the first few pages, which contain the boy's story and the other two or three liners. I also remove the pages from the clipboard, which contains the God theorem. I put all the papers on the concrete floor and burn them. While the stories are burning, I stand up and bend my head above the fire. The heat is directly falling on my face. I'm at once relieved taking a deep breath. The flame slowly settles down, and the papers turn into ash. The ceiling fan is already off since morning. There is no disturbance in the room. I sit next to the black ash and beat it with my fingers. Meanwhile, a drop of sweat falls from my forehead directly onto the black ash. It turns the ash into ink. I open my diary, which is lying next to me, and write: '2 is odd', with my finger. I smile. The diary, which was just emptied, is again filling with words. I like brevity. This short sentence – 2 is odd – amuses me. It contains number and letters. It reminds me of Mr. Monologue who combines dialogue and theorem. Now I'm learning how could that be possible. I close the diary and press it. The

sentence ‘2 is odd’, which is still wet, must have printed an image on the opposite page. I don’t open it again to see how the image looks, however, I imagine it. If the number 2 is odd on one page, then it is even on the other page. The number 2 bothered me since my fourth year in college when I learned that 2 is the only number which is an even number and which is also a prime number. All other prime numbers are odd. Prime numbers are those which are only divisible by themselves and one, while even numbers are multiples of 2. Prime numbers are very curious numbers. They follow no pattern. Since college, I assumed that the mysteries of primes may only be due to the number 2 being an even number. Today I conjectured that 2 is odd. Problem solved! The number 2 may not be odd by definition, but it is odd because it is alien in the family of primes.

I stand up and sit on the chair. The chair and the desk are not next to each other but by the opposite walls. Since my hands are blackened by the ash, I put them on armchairs. The rays of sunlight are falling through the window. Meanwhile, a drop of sweat falls in my eye. In that droplet, I see a man behind the windows filming me. I also recognize the cameraman who happens to be one of my professors who taught us Group Theory. I give a thumbs up to the professor and smile – I’M FAMOUS. I know the media has also reached out to the campus. They

are interviewing my friends to know about me. I stand up proudly and go back to the blackened floor. I sit, bend down my head and adhere my ear to the floor. I'm trying to hear Australia on the other side of the globe. I don't hear anything but tiny clicks in my ear.

Suddenly the door opens. Four people – Hussain, Nawab, Hafiz and Daulat – enter. Nawab takes me to the washroom and helps me to wash my hands and face. After that, we all go to Physics Department where Hafiz has parked his Suzuki Carry. The sun is about to set. At the parking lot, Hussain and Nawab see us off. On the way, Hafiz says sorry for being late. He says that he and his friend Daulat were in Peshawar city when Abdur called him.

## 6

# FROM HEAVEN

We get home in the night. Sadiq opens the gate. Abdur is standing on the veranda holding a radio. He listens to news. As Sadiq closes the gate after we enter, he runs back and turns on a light. I understand this cannot be just a light. He must have turned on all the cameras. When I look at my brother, he also looks tired. I get the whole idea why Hafiz took so long in coming to Islamabad: a technical team was installing cameras everywhere in our house. A huge press conference must have also been held at our place. The media wants to know about my life. *I'm on all TV channels.*

I say salam to Abdur and then go straight home. In the house, lights are on, but I don't see anyone. *Hmm, it's not that late in the night if everyone is sleeping.* I was expecting they would proudly greet me. Anyway, I go to my room and then to the bathroom in the room. The floor is half-wet. I lie down on the floor, extend my arms and legs, and become motionless. I feel like I'm dying. Meanwhile, someone calls my name, but I do not respond. Finally, they – my sister-in-law and my niece – find me in the bathroom. I didn't lock the bathroom door. I cooperate with them and get up by myself. My sister-in-law asks me for dinner, however, I demand a cup of coffee. I'm the

only one in our family who drinks coffee regularly. The rest are tea drinkers.

All night, I go in and out to *hujra* to smoke. There is no problem, I can smoke anywhere, but I'm very happy and cannot remain in one place. I might have slept a little in the night. When I get up in the morning, I notice the bolts in my room and the bathroom are removed.

In the mid-morning, I'm alone in the room in the *hujra*. The factory noise can be heard. This aluminum factory, which Abur started in 1997, is inside the *hujra*. There are several machines. The noisiest and heaviest machine is the presser, which converts an aluminum block into a thin sheet. Two workers work on this machine. One person inserts the block, and the other removes the sheet from the other side. When the block is passing through the machine, it creates a huge noise. The sheets are then taken to a cutter, where they are cut in circular plates. After that, the plates are transferred to other rotating machines which transform them into pots. The last machine amuse me. It reminds me of topology: how a single circular plate is deformed into a pot without breaking. Topology is an amazing subject. The topology of a shape does not change by deforming it unless it is torn or punctured.

I'm sitting on the mat and thinking of Mr. Monologue. If he is super-genius, how would people communicate

with him? For him, even Albert Einstein is a common man. He makes everybody's head lower. No one can look into his eyes. This is something he doesn't like. While I'm thinking, Hafiz walks in.

"You are here. I was looking for you," he says.

"Hafiz, come over here. Let me tell you something."

He sits on the carpet in front of me and puts *naswar* in his mouth, while I light a cigarette. Just like my former friend, Awais, who changed my mind, I changed Hafiz and Aziz. Hafiz and Aziz are cousins. Both are married, though younger than me. More than nephews, they are my best friends.

"If one person is let alone, he can do whatever he wants to do. He can do good and bad things," I say. "You know why is he doing this? Because he has more freedom. Interfere him. Reduce his freedom. He may be nice. He'll listen to you." When I'm telling him this, I have Mr. Monologue in mind. He is given the name Monologue for a reason because he enjoys more free will. This is something he doesn't like. He wants to involve his nation in his decisions, to turn a monologue in to a dialogue. Though this limits his free will, he makes friends instead of blind believers. "Hafiz, Listen." I bend forward putting my elbow on my thigh.

"Yes." He drifts closer to me.

“I may do weird things. I may break things, beat someone or jump from the roof.” When I say things, I cannot distinguish between Mr. Monologue and myself. “What was I saying? Sorry, I forgot.”

“You were saying you may do bad things,” he reminds me.

“Yes, thank you. So...” I’m again lost. “Excuse me, I need to go to the bathroom.” I stand up and utter, “Yes, if I do that then stop me. I’ll listen to you.”

I motion to the bathroom, which is not attached to the room but behind it. I squat on toilet. Again, like the last night in the bathroom in my room, I become motionless. I feel like my body is squeezing until I would become a particle and fall in the toilet hole. I have already urinated but cannot stand up. When I take too long, I hear Abdur, who is sitting in the veranda, asking Hafiz to check on me. Hafiz shouts, calling my name and rapidly knocks on the door.

“Don’t break the door. I’m coming,” I respond quickly putting on *shalwar*.

Hafiz accompanies me home and takes me to his room instead of mine. His room is bigger. Initially, this room was the only room when this house was constructed in mid 1980’s. The whole property is about two acres, which is surrounded by a thick, tall mud wall. It is believed that a mud wall can stop a canon projectile. Even rich people

in the area have mud boundary walls. The construction inside may be concrete and well furnished. Hafiz's room is like a castle having holes for rifles on the top. Initially, Abdur Rahim and Gul Rahim moved here, and then Hafiz. Since I'm unmarried, I live with Abdur.

Hafiz leaves me in his room. He turns on the air conditioner and turns off the light. I lie in his bed. Due to fluctuation in the voltage, the air conditioner changes sounds. I breathe in and out as the air conditioner changes sound from low to high. In the same way, I expand and crouch my legs. I think like it is pre-planned to help me to do exercise. Not only do I expand and crouch my legs, but also I curl up and fold the blanket on me. Sometimes I roll and go under the bed. I observe every place in the room. Under the bed, I see the bed frame covered by a spider's web. As the air conditioner changes sound again, I roll up and go to the original position on the bed. I also feel a stabbing pain in my legs. When I feel it, I sit up and connect the pain spot and my brain by a straight line, and I claim that the pain radiates to the brain through the shortest path, not necessarily through the nerves. While in this process of sitting, lying and rolling in the bed, I shout once, "GET OUT OF MY LAND." I'm referring to Osama bin Laden who is thought to be hiding in the tribal areas.

While resting in Hafiz's room, I constantly think on Mr. Monologue. Now I'm learning more about him. One of his problems is how to communicate with people. He wants to bring a revolution that would change the world, but he does not want to do it alone. If he wished, he could turn the world into a paradise using his own supernatural power. He believes in teamwork. Fortunately, his nation also turns out to be smart. It is not wise to communicate with him directly. He may turn irrelevant and stay off the topic because he has many things to say. One way to communicate with him is to isolate him and puzzle him.

I know Hafiz brought me to his room to isolate me. Every time I sit up in bed, my gaze falls on a keyhole in the TV entertainment center in the room. I know a camera is installed in the keyhole. Between the entertainment center and the bed is a carpet for sitting. The television is alongside the bed. Behind the TV in the window is the air conditioner. At the time, the TV is on. The Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan is dancing to a song. I know he sees me and wants to learn dance moves from me. I get up and start dancing. Then suddenly I break the glass door of the entertainment center in anger. I shout, addressing Shah Rukh Khan, "*You think you can dance better than me?*" I need a break.

Meanwhile, Hafiz's wife, Aneela, who is my niece, rushes in and gives me a fabric to weave on my hand

which is bloody. My sister-in-law, Sajida, also comes in. I sit in the bed, cover my face with my hands and start weeping. When I'm crying, I see the baby Mr. Monologue in his mother's arms. He needs to be loved. He does not want to be isolated.

Sajida brings her baby son, Gaheez. I love babies. I take Gaheez from her. When I look into Gaheez's eyes, I notice like he's saying something to me. Sometimes he looks at me and sometimes at the ceiling. When I look up at the ceiling, I start imagining lines. These lines are very fast moving and nonintersecting, although they come very close, but never touch each other. In the center of these appears a light. The light speaks to me. It says, "Do you see these fast-moving lines? These are the lines of realities. There are as many realities as people. No two people have the same realities. You wanted to know the reality. See, one of the lines is yours. Here you are. You see what your reality is. You must be very proud, but you are not special. Before death, I inform every individual about his fate. Get ready. Your time is up. If you still want to live, I can grant you more life. The choice is yours. See, if you can enjoy it."

The image disappears.

Meanwhile, someone comes and tell me that my friend, Mushtaq, is in the *hujra*, and so I go to *hujra*. Mushtaq is sitting with Abdur on the veranda. I say *salam* to them

and then go to room. The room and veranda are not next to each other but there is courtyard between them. Mushtaq also comes right after me. We are sitting on the carpet but not talking. It is the same room where we – Mushtaq, Irfan, and I – have spent many nights discussing philosophy, but today we are sitting like someone has died.

“What is wisdom?” He begins the discussion.

“Wisdom...” The question that otherwise would be very difficult for me to answer, but today when I know it, my mouth is shut. I’m already enjoying extra life. Is it really enjoyment? I smile to myself. I’m looking down and drawing lines with my finger on the floor. I bend up my head and look out of the window. The green mulberry tree in the courtyard looks very lifeless today. Its leaves are motionless as if it is an artificial paper tree. I again imagine the light in the center of non-intersecting lines. It reminds me, “Told you. Is it enjoyable?” Of course, it is not. I leave Mushtaq there and head home. Inside the house, I don’t go to my room. Instead I go in the other direction to the garden. The garden, which is about a quarter acre, is mostly dry because of scarcity of water. I sit on the ground by the edge of the garden. It is noon on hot sunny day, but I don’t feel any hotness.

Meanwhile, Hafiz finds me there. He squats next to me and gives me some pills. He says that he tried to make an

appointment for me with a doctor, but because of the weekend, he couldn't make one, however, the doctor gave him a prescription on phone. He says that these pills will help me to rest. I understand what kind of rest he's talking about: rest in peace. I know these are death pills. He wants me to die peacefully. I take the tablets from him and put it in the mouth without even looking at them. I ask Hafiz to leave me alone. I go inside the garden and find a place to lie on. In the middle of trees, I lie in a prone position expanding my arms forward. There are also thorns on the ground, which inject into my body. They rather soothe me. I'm relieved from all the pain I had in my life. I submit to death. I have no fear now. I notice the soul is peacefully leaving my body. Then I feel that big ants are crawling on my body, but I cannot do anything to them because I'm dead.

“Shahid, Shahid, where are you?” Hafiz is shouting.

It surprises me. How could I hear him if I'm dead? This might be the afterlife. Another secret reveals itself to me: dead people can hear but they cannot respond. Hafiz shouts again saying to get up. Now he's standing by me. When he gets frustrated that I'm not responding, he lifts my arm and drops it. The arm falls back on the ground. Meanwhile, Sajida also arrives here. She's asking Hafiz to lift me. Eventually, Hafiz lifts me and puts me on his shoulder. Though he's younger than me, he is taller and

has a tough body. It is a long walk from there to my room. On the way, I realize he must be tired. I tell him in low voice, “I can walk.” He puts me down and I walk on my feet. “Walking dead,” I say to myself. The world has so changed. It would be in all newspapers tomorrow that a dead person was walking, but I’d not be able see it as I’d be buried.

I lie in my bed. My feet are facing south. Feet cannot face west or north. In the west is *Kaaba* in Mecca, while in the north is the old *Kabba* – *Baithul Muqadda* – which is in Jerusalem. My eyes are closed. If I open them, I’ll see the clock hanging on the front wall. I’m lying straight, my hands on my chest.

Meanwhile, my eldest brother, my mother and probably my sisters also rush in. Since my eyes are closed, I cannot tell who is here. Probably all my family members. They have just been informed about my death. They are not talking but I can tell one of them is reciting the Quran. The Quran is recited in the deceased’s room, to make his/her afterlife easier. They then leave me alone and close the door. I can hear women are weeping in the courtyard. The weeping sound fades away. Now I know it is night. Most people have left.

It is now the next day. My funeral is arranged. My body is put in the coffin and taken to the graveyard. The graveyard is in Teddi bazaar. My funeral is taken to the

graveyard by feet. I don't hear anything but ripples in space. After the funeral prayer, my body is buried. People disperse after the burial. Now I'm alone in the tomb. The ripples in space also disappear. Perfect darkness and silence. This heaven. But what will I do here? In the other world, I liked brevity and wrote short stories. My shortest story was:

*Afsaana loves Negaar. Neither am I Negaar nor are you Afsaana.*

This world, on the other hand, is infinite. To entertain myself, I need to expand my stories by adding more and more characters. In the other world, stories have ends, but here there are no ends.



Later in the night, I really wake up in my bed. When I open my eyes, I'm sleeping on my right side. I don't believe it. Am I alive or dead? I stretch my legs to see if they move. Then I turn straight and see the clock hanging on the wall. When I turn left, I see someone sleeping on the floor. I get up to go to the bathroom. The person on the floor, who turns out to be Aziz, also gets up and asks me if I need anything. I'm very confused. How did I make the transition to the previous world? I go to the bathroom and keep thinking. Perhaps I have made a transition to

another world where the same people welcome me who I left in the previous world. I'm dead in one world and alive in the other one.

# 7

## FIRST DAY IN PSYCHIATRIC CLINIC

When the weekend is over, on Monday, September 1, 2003, our driver drives the Carry Van in the courtyard. I'm secretly taken from the basement to the vehicle. Over the weekend, I was asked to stay in the basement. Perhaps the family wants to keep the latest development in secret. Today, the vehicle is also brought inside the house so that nobody can see us. Normally we use the *hujra* for transportation where the vehicles are parked. I'm asked to sit on the back seat. Aziz and Hafiz sit to the left and right of me. Abdur sits on the front seat with the driver. The van leaves the house, making sure no one saw us. The van passes through the street. On both sides of the street are fort-like, tall, mud walls of the houses. After taking the first right turn, the road head to Teddi bazaar. This road is unpaved. We instead take a left turn and head to Jamrud bazaar. This road is paved. After taking several left and right turns in the street, we enter an open area. This is Jamrud railway station. The train is called Khyber train safari, a tourist train. It runs only once a month from Peshawar to Landi Kotal. It is pushed and pulled by two steam engines. It passes through 34 tunnels and 92 bridges and reaches a height of 3,900 feet. There is an interesting train bridge past Landi Kotal, under which a vehicle passes twice; once it enters, then takes a semi-circular turn and leaves on the other side.

At the end of the station is Warsak Road. On the north is Warsak dam. Jamrud bazaar is in the other direction half a mile from here. We take a right toward Jamrud bazaar. Because of the encroachment by vegetable and

fruit carts, the road at the end is very narrow. We enter the main Jamrud bazaar. In the west is the monument *Bab-e-Khyber*, gateway to Khyber Pass. We head to Peshawar in the east passing through the bus stop, then the high school from where I graduated. We then reach Takhta Baig check-post. Visitors are checked here by the Khasadaar Force, semi-police. An escort is provided to tourists. After the barrier, one road leads to Peshawar and another to Bara in south-east. Khyber Agency, which is a tribal district, is comprised of three tehsils: Jamrud, Bara and Landi Kotal. There are seven tribal agencies and six frontier regions, collectively called FATA. Special laws apply to the FATA. These laws are called the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR). The FCR was introduced by the British in about 1850. The basic rights given to most Pakistani citizen are not found in the FCR. For example, if a person commits a crime, his entire tribe can be arrested and/or fined, and the tribe's houses may be demolished. The draconian laws of the FCR will later be abolished and FATA will be merged into the Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa province. The current name of the province is N.W.F.P., which will later become Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa.

We then pass through Wazir Dand area. Here is a small bazaar where weapons, liquors and drugs are openly sold. At the end of the bazaar is a checkpost. This separates

Peshawar and Khyber Agency. This check-post is controlled by the normal police of Peshawar. These policemen are not allowed in the tribal areas. On a signboard at the check-post, visitors are warned that crossing this point is prohibited. Across from the check-post is a big dump where heroin addicts smoke heroin. The railway track passes between the dump. Past the check-post is Karkhano Market where imported merchandise is sold.

I'm keenly looking out here and there like I'm new here. I'm very cooperative. When I look at Hafiz and Aziz they are smiling at me. I know there are proud of me. I know that because of me the family is in the spotlight.

In about 15 minutes, we pass through Peshawar University, which is a collection of several universities and colleges. To the right is Khyber Teaching Hospital, one of the biggest hospitals in the city. In about 10 minutes, we reach Shafique Psychiatric Clinic in Tehkal Bala. The Peshawar International Airport runway is nearby.

I longed for a meeting with a psychiatrist. I'm brought to the right place. But I know this not real; this is a stage set. Everyone here is an actor. Patients – men and women – are sitting on the benches in the hallway. I'm looking at them, making faces. Aziz drags me to one side. Patients names are called. Meanwhile, my name is also

called. I'm taken inside the doctor office. The doctor, in his 40's, is typing on the keyboard. I don't see the monitor. I think it is under the glass desk facing up. The doctor looks up at me and asks me what the problem is. I know he is an actor. I say nothing but, in anger, push away everything on the desk. The doctor's assistant, who is also present, grabs me. My family members get embarrassed. The assistant says it is normal for them.

I'm taken to another room. Here I see another actor. This person is wearing a mask. He asks me the same question as to what my problem is. I say no other words but what I said to the chairman of the Pakistan Academy of Letters, Islamabad – "I'm a patient and you are the doctor who can cure me." He says nothing but pokes a needle in my bicep.

In the other room, my family members provide my history to the doctor. *The patient's name is Shahid Nawaz. Age 28. Single. Student Ph.D. physics. 4 brothers, 3 sisters. One brother died 6 years ago. Some marriage stress. Was being forced to marry widow of the brother. He didn't. Eventually developed an enormous relationship with somebody. That didn't work out. Now has been engaged by family. Some stress at college. Many friends have left the country. Started psychotic behavior about a month ago. Very aggravated last 10 days. Short tempered. Beats family member today. Talking to himself. Laughing to himself. Talking about his field and*

*experiments, and draws maps of places. He says he is going to meet with President General Pervez Musharraf.*

*My family members have also brought what I was writing over the weekend. Love loves Love; Since I have no enemies, all friends are invited for marriage; Universities must remain open; Thinking pushes time; I cannot go with you, I'm sorry.* Behind each of these quotations was a scene. If one character's name is Love and the other's name is also Love, and they love each other, that would be: *Love loves Love.*

The doctor also notes musicality, that the patient has some dancing associations but more a manic appearance, for which the injection Largatil plus Valium/Diazepam is prescribed. It is to be given to me every day for a total of three days. The first one is given today in the clinic at 4:15 p.m. I will be brought here again tomorrow for a treatment called electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). The treatment triggers temporary seizure in the body. It is performed on empty stomach, because it must be given with general anesthesia. The doctor says it will be given every other day until I pain feel in my body.

## 8

# THE WIDOW

The morning of December 13, 1998 begins like other days. The sun has risen, and I'm still in bed. I can hear Afnan, Hafiz's father, is talking with Manawar Khattak in the other room. Manawar is like our family member; he lives with us in our *hujra*. We call him *Subedar saib*. He had been a Subedar, a Junior Commissioned Officer in Pakistan Armed Force, now retired. Though he is not a fugitive, his son and nephew are. He lost several family members in the hostility; his wife, two sons, and a brother. Their entire family is moved to Jamrud. Jamrud, being a tribal area, is a place where outlaws seek asylum. It is true that we Pakhtoon are hospitable. Nobody turns away one if he seeks asylum, but it is also true that that these fugitives, called *mukhrooraan*, provide additional manpower to a family. Manawar Khattak, basically from Nowshera, has been living with us since 1987. He knew my other brother Manan.

I then hear a squeaky sound of the dry bolt of the main gate. Usually, Afnan asks me to open the gate for him. I rush to open the gate, but he's already left in his brand new green Suzuki car.

“He was in hurry. He's going to a funeral in Swabi,” Khattak raising his voice from the room. This is our *hujra* in Teddi bazaar where there are two rooms.

About two hours later, I'm with a student whom I tutored in math and who is now a medical student at Ayub Medical College, Abbottabad. When I was in B.Sc. (1993-

95), I tutored a group of F.Sc. students. Those students are still in contact with me. While I'm talking with the student, Hafiz comes from home saying I have a phone call by Faizan, a friend of Afnan, when Hafiz says it's Faizan, I get suspicious. How could Faizan want to talk to me? If he has anything to say, he can say it to Hafiz. He's more friendly to him than to me. Anyway, I rush home. Hafiz also follows me. The phone set is in Afnan's room. When I attend the phone, Faizan on the other end says that Afnan Haji has passed away.

“What?” I sit on the edge of the bed. “Do we need to come?” I do not use names in conversation. Hafiz is standing behind me.

“No, his body is in the hospital. We’re bringing the body in half-an-hour,” he says.

I don’t ask the cause of death and hang up the phone. I stand up, putting one hand on my thigh and point the finger of the other hand at Hafiz, “Your. Father. Is. Dead.” I say.

“Now what?” He is paralyzed, didn’t know how to react. He is 20-year-old, newly married.

“Let’s go to hujra and set up the cots in the courtyard. Quick, you go first, I’m coming.”

Like other days, the women are doing chores, cleaning the big courtyard or washing dishes. Mother is sitting on a cot on the veranda. I know a thunderbolt will hit the

house shortly. Suddenly, I recall that Mother is a heart patient. She was recently discharged from the hospital. She had a minor heart attack. I feel she would not bear the loss. I give her Lexilium, an anxiety relief tablet. I used to use it during the exam days. Mother says, “What’s this?” I say, “This will relieve your headache you always complain about.” She takes it.

When the body is brought, it is unloaded in the street and taken inside the house. I do not weep when I see the body; instead, my throat gets very dry. When a loved one of mine dies, I don’t know why my brain thinks very fast, seeing optimistically a very bright future. I see that one day I will be very famous. Not only that, but also that one day I’ll receive a Nobel Prize. Perhaps I seek comfort in the big ideas.

In no time men and women rush in. Men are giving their condolence in the *hujra* while the women are sobbing in the house. There are many women who lost their loved ones. It reminds them their own loss. Mom is sitting at the edge of the cot near the head of the body, but she’s calm as the Lexilium has started to work.



Afnan had of a heart attack while driving. Luckily, his partner sitting in the passenger seat controlled the car

and avoided an accident. He was rushed to a hospital but did not make it. He left a son, a daughter, and the widow. His children are not from the widow but from the other sister of the widow who also died four years ago of cancer. The widow has no children and is young. In our culture, she must remain in the family and cannot be turned away to her parents.



Two weeks after of the demise of my brother, Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) announces admission. This would be my second time applying to QAU – then for M.Sc. and now for M.Phil. My interest in QAU further increased during M.Sc. at Peshawar University, where one of our professors, who taught us Particle Physics, was an ex-Quadian. Particle Physics, which studies subatomic particles at high energy, is my favorite subject. My professor told me that there is a strong group of Particle Physics at QAU.

A day trip to Islamabad is possible. I make two trips: first to submit the application package and then for a test/interview. On the test day, I get up early to take a coach from Peshawar. Hafiz drops me at the coach station in his father's car. After his death, Hafiz has taken the charge of his father's business. I carry a calculator and all

the original documents. Original documents are checked during the interview. As the coach drives halfway, I have a strong urge to smoke. I've almost become a chain smoker since my time in Peshawar University. Usually, the coach stops at a roadside restaurant for lunch or prayer, but this is neither lunch or prayer time to stop. The coach is fully packed. The aisle between seats is also filled with extra folding seats. I know it is unethical to smoke, but then I think to myself that a small puff would not make a big difference. I light a cigarette taking a puff and then stub it out before the conductor bursts at me.



A subject-based test is held in each department; mine is in the physics department. After the test, the successful candidates are called for the interview. I also qualify for the interview. When my name is called, I enter in the Chairman's Office and sit on the candidate's seat. I pass my documents to the Chair who passes it to the other member. There are only two committee members.

The chairman asks me, "Why does an electron not fall inside the nucleus despite the fact that they attract each other?"

"According to quantum mechanics the electron has probability everywhere in the space, even inside the

nucleus, but Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principal prevents it."

He does not say anything.

"I see a gap in your education. Have you ever failed? The other member notices.

"Yes, in F.Sc."

"Which subject?"

"Physics." I proudly say.

She rolls her eyes. No further questions are asked.



A few days later Hussain calls me that I have got admission. Hussain Wali was my classmate in Pabbi College. After B.Sc., we both applied to QAU, he got admission in physics. I in mathematics. I didn't join QAU back then because my first priority was physics. I asked Hussain to call me if my name appeared in the list of passed candidates on the notice board in physics department.



The night before I leave for Islamabad, Laiq comes to my room saying he needs to talk to me. Laiq is now the

eldest brother after Manan. Laiq handles the family matters. He says, “I know you’re leaving tomorrow. But you know, there is a matter at home we have to resolve.” He refers to the widow.

I’m listening sitting next to him in the cot. My head is down in respect, arms folded on my laps. I was expecting he would congratulate me on my admission but no. I’m the first person in the family who is highly educated. I may have different desires, but he doesn’t consider it.

“She’s in iddat. When the iddat period is completed, she can marry,” he says. *Iddat* is a period in Islam in which a widow is restricted from marrying after her husband’s death. It is about 4 months and 10 days. “She must stay in the family and wed to an unmarried brother of her husband,” he stresses. Now, this is not Islam. In Islam, the widow is free to marry any man. It is our culture. Our culture and Islam go side by side. When Islam let your one foot go, the culture blocks the other one. “You still have time, think about it,” he concludes.

On my mind is Quaid-i-Azam University which is more important than marriage. I have never been part of the family matter. I have devoted my life to education. If people go one way, I go in the other direction. Hafiz’s mother used to joke with me, “Shahid, the mosque is this way.” I used to walk in the evening. The mosque was at one end of the street; I walked in the other direction. In

Peshawar University, I didn't even come for Eid holidays. Though the university was not far from Jamrud. I preferred to stay in the hostel. On the Eid day, the hostel was almost empty. Only foreigners stayed during the holidays. My problem was with the additional Eid prayer, which was performed after sunrise.



Quaid-i-Azam University is very beautiful. It looks like if it is built on a hill. Steps are everywhere. Some departments are a little higher than others. The bus stop is called *point*. The peak times are 1, 3, and 5 p.m. At these times, the day scholars leave. *Quadians* do not miss points whether leaving or not. They reach there for *pohndi* – checking out. No touching, but looking from a distance. An evening walk on the periphery and a stop on H-5, girls' hostel, are a must. Some boys are lucky they have girlfriends. Others enjoy *pohndi* only. There is also a beautiful stream behind the campus. Not to mention, a permanent visitor who comes to campus every morning. He holds a shopping bag containing notes. His name is Altaf Jervis aka Mr. Nothing. He Looks like Einstein – white moustache, long hair and wearing a white hat. He doesn't talk to people much. He advocates his Theory of

Nothing. Once he was picked up by the Pakistani ISI then released.

Most wear pant shirts. Only a fraction of students wears *shalwar qameez* – loose trouser and long shirt. I also want to look like other *Quaidians*. I used to wear *shalwar qameez* in Peshawar University. Peshawar University is Pakhtoon dominated. Very few people wear pants and shirts. Hussain helps me in shopping to buy pants and shirts from the Supermarket in Islamabad. Next day I wear brown trouser and a white striped dress shirt, but I cannot walk in it. I keep pulling up my pant all day. Perhaps the pant is a size longer on me. In the evening, when I come back to the hostel, I'm so tired. My legs are hurting. I never wore straight cloths.



In the first semester, I do not perform well. Though I pass all the papers, my GPA is low and so I'm on probation, given one chance. If I do not improve in the next semester, I'll be dropped. I blame the new semester system for this. In Peshawar University, there was annual system where only one final exam was given at the end of the year, for which students had plenty of time to prepare, but here there are frequent sessional exams, homework, and a terminal exam immediately after the

completion of the coursework. In Peshawar University, books are less important. Students use notes which are transferred from seniors to juniors for ages, but here the courses are in full control of the professor. They use latest books.

First marriage and now probation. From day one in QAU, I was in silence. My roommate had also noticed it. He once asked me what the problem was. When I told him, he said go ahead and marry her. He assured me that I'd be happy. He is also married. But my mind is not ready to marry my sister-in-law. I also realize if I do not marry her, who will marry her? She's young and has no children. Clearly, my brothers are married; they will not adjust to her. Though in Islam four wives are allowed, I'm the most suitable solution. Sometimes it is better to make a quick decision than to keep thinking. Before my family pushes me, I should decide whether to marry or not. Whichever I choose it should be solely my decision. Just like the first drink, I did not involve anyone. I went to the shop, bought a bottle and swallowed the bitter sip. Now it is time for another bitter sip.

At the end of the first semester, I get home for summer vacations. The *iddat* period is already over. Whether I like it or not, I decide to marry the widow. I convey my willingness to Laiq through his son-in-law, telling him clearly that my marriage should be arranged before the

end of this summer. My words would not remain the same after that. Laiq gets a wrong message from this. He thinks I'm eager for the free marriage deal. He asks me to wait that there is no rush. He also says that they need to check with Hafiz if he also agrees. Meanwhile, my mother started a new game. She literally pulls me by my arm to have breakfast in the widow's room. Eventually, I move to our other house in area called New Abbadi where my other two brothers live.



In September, I get back to Islamabad. The marriage does not take place. The administration in the physics department has changed. The new Chairman is a material physicist, who is against particle physics, the field I want to pursue. The particle physics group was once very strong in the department. I enter the department at a time when the group is in decline. The courses offered are only those leading to experimental physics. Beside the other three courses, I take one course on General Relativity in the Mathematics Department – the requirement is to take four courses per semester. I work hard in the second semester and improve my GPA. I start research work in particle physics in the third semester.

During this time, I get to go home on and off for pocket money. Hafiz has become very crazy fighting with everyone that he's under stress because of his stepmother who is also his aunt. He's asking my mother to pressure me to marry his aunt as soon as possible, because he's taking responsibility for her and wants to put the burden on my shoulders.

On one weekend when I'm about to leave for Islamabad, my brother-in-law Azmat discusses the matter with me. When everybody fails to convince me, Azmat thinks he may persuade me. We are in our *hujra* attached to our new house. We talk in a smaller room in the *hujra*. This room was once used for the office of the aluminum factory in the *hujra*. Azmat asks me the same questions that Laiq asked me months ago, that the widow must stay in the family and I'm the only solution. I'm crossed. I'm sitting on the edge of the chair, he in the cot. I say, "Let me tell you very clearly. If they push me, they will lose me. I'll abandon my family. I'm telling you seriously. Who says that there is no other option? Follow one thing. Islam or *Pakhtoonwali*. In Islam she's free; her parent can arrange her marriage elsewhere. She must be turned away to her parents."

"Who turns away their daughters-in-law? It has never happened."

"I can't help you here, sorry," I reply.

“Okay, I’m asking you this question for the last time. I’ll convey your message to your brothers. Nobody will bother you again in this matter. Tell me, will you marry her? Tell me in yes or no?”

“No.”

A few months later, the widow is married to a *teenager* son of Manan, and so the matter is settled.

# 9

## A LOVE AFFAIR

In December 2001, I'm invited to participate in a conference in Moscow. I longed to see Moscow. Back in those days when I learned Marxism, I heard from Awais that Moscow is a beautiful place. Though he himself never had been to Russia. The conference organizer says they will cover the accommodation and the school fee, but not the air ticket. I get so excited as I receive the email and step out of the office to smoke. I head to the Chemistry Huts, which is behind our department. At the entrance of the Physics Department, a group of girls crosses in front of me. One of the girl says "hi" to me. The girls are coming from the Electronics Department and entering the Physics one. The two departments are connected by a corridor. I look back. It is Haifa. I say hi back. I'm surprised why the most beautiful girl on the campus would say, "hi" to me. For a moment, I forget about Russia and proceed to the chemistry hut. I sit on a bench in the lawn facing the Earth Science Department. To the left of me is Chemistry, to the right is Physics. I light a cigarette and order tea, but Haifa is on my mind. Does this mean she is interested in me? She has many lovers. One of her lovers stalks her to her doorstep every day. Many have proposed to her, but she always declined. She's never been seen with boys; instead, she is found in the group of her girlfriends. I shake my head to change my mind. Perhaps she meant nothing. Maybe, she said hi because I never bother her.

Next day I apply for the visa. The Russian Embassy is not far from the university. There is a hub of embassies on the Diplomatic Enclave. The busiest one is the American Embassy. Originally, the university busses passed through the American Embassy. Later, the road

was closed to public. Now the university busses use another route. After issuance of the visa, I also book a ticket on Aeroflot. I also need to buy warmer clothes as the conference is in February. When everything is ready, I receive another email from the conference organizer saying that unfortunately, they cannot invite me. The funds for the conference are cut. They are not inviting international students anymore. They also reimburse me the visa fee I paid for.



Haifa graduates a month later. Normally, most students return for M.Phil., but she doesn't. However, she comes to campus every Friday to hang out with her girlfriends. She enters the campus via the Chemistry Huts. I can recognize her from her gait, moving one arm like me.

I'm not really doing any research. Coming to the department in the morning, playing chess online, going to chemistry huts in and out, and waiting anxiously for Fridays. When I hear a feminine voice outside my office, it creates a sense of lightening inside me. One day, one of her classmates gives me her MSN Messenger ID. I add the ID to my friends' list and check it every night if she's online. I chat from my lab. One night the name pops up.

I say, “Hi.” Instantly, “Hi” back from the other side. She asks, “Are you Shahid Afridi in our department?” My profile name is Shahid Afridi, which she sees on her screen. Initially, she does not believe it. After exchanging a few lines, she asks if she can meet with me tomorrow. I forbid her – people will make up stories. It is a short chat. I don’t count on it as many people make fake IDs with girls’ names.

In spring 2002, I arrange a talk on special relativity. This is an unofficial talk, just for few a students I know. As I start the class, Haifa also comes in. She learns about it someone although she’s not a student. The talk is in a classroom in the Physics Department. After the talk, I’m very disturbed thinking why would she attend my lecture. I get to the Majeed Huts and sit in a less visible place in the far end. I order tea, cross my legs and thinking. In a little while, I see Haifa and another girl coming toward me. The other girl’s name is Uzma. I know her. I taught her chess. They come and sit with me. I order tea for them, but I don’t know what to say. They praise my talk. As they leave, I decide to go home. I do this most of the time, to pick up my bag anytime and head home. My favorite hobby is thinking. In the bus, I have more time for this.

Two days later when I come back, my engagement news is spread throughout the campus. Haifa is followed

like paparazzi. People keep news about her instant by instant as to who she likes. One of her lovers comes to my office congratulating me on my engagement with her, which never happened.

After many thoughts, I finally decide to take the initiative to propose her. I send her the proposal via Uzma. I ask Uzma to ask Haifa if she is interested. I'll not bother her again. At the time, I'm in my office while Haifa is standing outside the physics seminar library. When Uzma comes back, she says that she was crossed saying how dare I propose her. She's crossed, I'm cross too. For me what is important is that she is not interested. This clears my mind – end of story.

A few months later, I attend a workshop in ICTP. The ICTP is a physics center in Trieste, Italy, founded in 1964 by Abdus Salam, Pakistani Nobel Laureate, to providing education and skills to scientists in developing countries. In my absence, Haifa comes to my office asking for me. My colleague Zareena tells me this when I return from Italy. Zareena says that Haifa was very angry and wanted to meet with me to confirm that on what grounds I proposed her. To this end, Zareena was not aware of my proposal, although we were good friends. Zareena also says that Haifa might want to meet with you just to increase her importance. Whatever she meant, I'm again disturbed.

Over time my feelings for Haifa settle down. Things change again when she returns for M.Phil. in spring 2003. I want to give an end to this. So I decide to talk to her directly, clearly and boldly. I again ask Uzma to convey my message to Haifa that I want to meet with her. A time is set up, and so we meet in the hallway behind the Physics Office. This wing is quiet. The main entrance is on the other side. When I go upstairs, she is already there. My office is downstairs. I move close to her and stand face to face with her. I want to settle the matter once and for all. I ask her, “Am I Shahid, or Shahid bhai? Say it, Shahid or Shahid bhai.” I mean to say Shahid or brother Shahid. Girls add *bhai* with a boy name when calling just for protection so that the boy does not get any wrong signal. She goes from one side of the hallway to the other but does not give me a conclusive answer. It must end today, but she’s not ending it and will hang me up for another two years, I say to myself. When I get no answer, I get closer to her and say, “I’m a frog and I like frogs.” From which I mean nothing. I use meaningless and irrelevant words when I’m very angry. I leave her there, go downstairs and head home to calm down.



In whatever way I change my mind, it does not help. I'm disturbed more than before. I confine myself to my office, only I go in and out when I run out of cigarettes or need to drink tea. I have many associations with this office. On the door is a portrait of Einstein in which he is standing and thinking. His desk is full of notes. My desk is not like his. I have notes pile up on the corners; the center is clear so that my arms have maximum freedom while writing. My drawers are never empty of alcohol. I buy alcohol in a Christian colony behind an old MNA – member of National Assembly – hostel. My office is also known to my friends as being a safe place for eating during the month of Ramadan.

When I become totally helpless, I decide to write her a letter. I write the letter at night in the office in solitude. I write the letter in Urdu. First, I draft the letter then transform it to another paper. In the original letter, I draw a slanted line at the corner before beginning the first word, by which I mean anything before this line is not mine. No names, the sender or the recipient, are used – hers or mine. I write:

*“I’m writing you this letter to clearly tell you that I like you. You were wondering as to what signals you gave me. I’m telling you clearly that my love is not based on signals. Staring or smiling from a distance does not prove anything. I’m telling you in simple words that I love you. But today I want to give an*

*end to this one-sided love, because one-sided love makes one crazy. I'm also writing this letter to inform you that my family wants to arrange my engagement. I'm asking you to please tell me if you are interested. I cannot wait indefinitely. My offer will expire after this date. I'll not bother you again."*

I draw another slanted line at the corner after the last word, by which I mean anything after this line is not mine. The back of the letter is empty. I fold the letter and put it in the drawer. The letter is intended to be delivered tomorrow. Whether I get a chance or not, the letter will expire after tomorrow anyway. I write it for my own satisfaction. The purpose is to avoid a situation when one day she comes to me and says, "I liked you, you should have waited for me." More than a proposal, it is a retreat to free myself from this affair.

It's the next day – Friday, April 4, 2003. In the morning, I come to the department and go straight to chemistry huts where I also take breakfast. There are two lawns in the Chemistry Huts. If students do not find a place on the benches, they also sit on the ground in groups. Rush hours are 10 to 11 a.m. Normally I have someone to sit with, but today I have no friends. My eyes are on the walkway between the two buildings of Chemistry Department. I know she will enter this way. When she doesn't come, I realize that she may not be coming to school today.



Later in the afternoon, when the department becomes almost empty for the Friday prayer, I decide to go home. A good Muslim will not skip a Friday prayer. It replaces the noon prayer for the day and is prayed in congregation. The prayer is preceded by a sermon by the Imam. The university mosque is by the boys' hostels. I've never seen women praying in the mosque, although Islam does not prevent them from doing so. In disappointment, I get my backpack and say to myself it is over. As I exit the department, I see her sitting with Uzma on a bench in a lawn. In the front of Physics are two lawns separated by a sidewalk. They're sitting in the farther one. I turn back to go get the letter. I remove the letter from the drawer and put it in a quantum mechanics book. I go past them and stop at the edge of steps. I don't know why I feel like she wants to talk to me. I ask Uzma if she can come. I give her the book and tell her that there is a letter for Haifa if she can give it to her. She takes the book from me, while I proceed to the Majeed Huts in the other direction.

I sit under a thin shade of a small tree and order tea from Guddo. Sitting behind me is my advisor and his company taking lunch. A while later, Sheraz, a physics student, comes to me saying hastily that Haifa is looking for me. As I stand up, I see Haifa is also striding towards

me. She is in a yellow dress holding the book in her hand with the arm folded to her stomach, her hair on her face. Between us is the road. As she crosses the road, she throws the book on my face. She says, “What you think of yourself?”

I also say something back but do not remember my words. I may again have said something irrelevant. People also flock to the scene. My advisor picks up the book from the ground and then holds me. The earth under me is like fire. I wish to vanish. I try to control myself and walk with my advisor and his company to the department.

In the department, we go straight to my office. Meanwhile, the Friday prayer is also finished. The department is full again. Standing outside the seminar library is Haifa and her classmates.

“What did you do to her?” My advisor asks me. Two other professors are also standing.

“I gave her a letter.”

One of the other professors opens the book, which he takes from my advisor and reads the letter. He says there is nothing in it that might have offended her. My advisor says writing the letter was wrong in the first place. I should not have given her anything in the written form. Meanwhile, Haifa can also be heard talking loudly in our wing. I say to my professors that it is the end of my life.

I'm going home to finish my life. During this, I change my statements several times. Sometimes I say I'm finishing my life then say no, no I just want to go home to change my mind. In reality, my decision is final. I'm ending my life, but I don't want them to call my family to inform them about my intention. Apparently, I normalize myself. My advisor says he will drop me at the bus station.

Before leaving, I look at the university for the one last time. The steps, huts, friends, everything come in mind. Many times at night, I fell on the steps. One night while coming from the department, I started to fly all of a sudden. I didn't anticipate there were steps down the way. Another night, my friend Iqbal and I brought a bottle of gin to drink it in my office. We were so thirsty for alcohol for many days that we could not wait to open it. In this business, the bottle slipped from my hands and the room got flooded with alcohol. I heard of canals of milk and alcohol in heaven but saw a puddle of spirit in my office.

My advisor leaves me at Karachi Company. He also advises me not to return until I fully settle.

I wait for the Peshawar coach, but it's running late. The shortage of busses is common on Friday. It is good to go to Pindi bus station, which is bigger than the Islamabad one. Islamabad and Pindi are twin cities. I wait a little bit

more, then suddenly I recall that I'm going to commit suicide. Why wait? Why not get a taxi? Why save money. I have a few thousand rupees in my pocket with which I can buy a pistol on the way at Wazir Dand weaponry market, Jamrud. I have heard that a suicide plan may change if you delay it. The more you think, the lesser are the chances you will do it. I need to shut my mind, get a taxi, buy a gun, and then shoot myself in the bathroom in my room.

There is also a shortage of taxis today. Luckily, I find one. The driver in 50's, black dyed beard and mustache, is standing outside his black Alto Suzuki. I talk to him for Peshawar. He says okay. Many local taxis do not go long distances. This man says, "I'm also from Peshawar and was looking for someone going to Peshawar. Other taxis will charge you double for two-ways because they come back empty." I don't care if you charge me double or triple, I say to myself and get on the back seat. "I work in a company in Islamabad and drive the taxi for extra money. On Friday, I go to Peshawar to spend time with my family. On Monday morning, I come back," he says. This driver is very talkative. I just need a quiet time with my mind shut. "You may like music." He plays a cassette of old sad Bollywood songs. When I pay attention, it is about failure in love. I learn that failure is not uncommon. People do not finish their life. Then I say to myself no, no

nothing can change my mind – I. Am. Finishing. My. Life. This. Is. It.

In an hour and a half or so we reach the Attack Bridge, the Border of the Punjab and N.W.F.P. provinces. We are heading west. The river under the bridge is very deep, where the Indus river from the north-east and the Kabul river from the west combine. The Kabul river is muddy whereas Indus is blue. In fact, the Kabul river falls into the bigger and longer Indus river and running south. After crossing the bridging, we stop at a roadside tea shop. We sit on the veranda and order tea. The driver is very nice. He's talking to me, but my response is one syllable. My mind is elsewhere. After tea, we continue to Peshawar. In this hour and a half, I observe softening in my plan. Now I think, why spend money on buying a gun? I spend all my money on alcohol. Every other week I go home asking my brothers for pocket money. What will they be thinking of me? So I decide not to buy the gun but steal it from my Hafiz. I know his pistol will be in his room. Hafiz has recently moved from Teddi bazaar to our house in New Abbadi. In another hour or so we reach Peshawar. The driver drops me in Karkhano Market. Nonlocal taxis do not travel in tribal areas because of the fear of kidnapping or car-snatching. At the checkpoint, I take another local taxi and head home.

As I reach home, I go straight to Hafiz's room, but it's locked. The lock is very tiny. If I try, I can break it with something. It grows bigger to my eyes and looks impossible to break it. I say to myself I'll figure it out; let me first go to my room and write the suicide note. In the room, the letter confuses me, I cannot comprehend what to write. Should I write a long letter to summarize all my life or a short letter? In this business, I lie in bed and sleep. I get up a moment later. For a moment, I forget about the plan. I then recall that I was going to do something. Suddenly, I call my sister-in-law, Abdur's wife. I just tell her everything: the today incident in the university and my suicide plan. I tell her that I was going to give everyone a surprise, but the story is spoiled. There remains no thrill in the suicide anymore. I'm not doing it. I must face the world.

A few days later I call Hussain. I ask him if people know about the incident. He gives me a feeling like nothing has happened. He says to come back. I go back next day although my advisor asked me to stay longer.

Three weeks later, on April 29, there is shooting in front of the administration building. It turns out that a student named Ali Rizwan Kasuri shoots another student named Amina Gillani, and then shoots himself. The girl dies on the spot, while the boy is in a coma and dies later in the hospital. The police investigation suggests that it

was a love affair. The girl had recently been engaged to some other boy by her parents. When the incident happened, many people thought it was me.

## 10

# RECOVERY

**O**n the eighth day of treatment, I feel a severe shoulder pain, and so the ECT is discontinued. I remember those eight days like a dream. I remember only early evenings and mornings. In the evening when I woke up and looked up at the fan and other things in the room, they looked golden to me. I thought I turned them into gold. Then my brother-in-law Azmat would come and give me an injection. Azmat was once a nurse in a doctor clinic. When I get up in the morning, I wrote quotations or equations on piece of a paper and threw it on the rooftop or here and there. In one quote, I wrote that a single electron contains information about the entire universe. The reason I was throwing here and there was I knew someone would pick it up. In the back of my mind my mind was Mr. Monologue. Since his nation isolates and puzzles him, he solves the puzzles and throws it away. There is a special TV channel, which broadcasts Mr. Monologue all day 24 hours. Whatever he does, people interpret it. He solves problems in a cryptic way. His solution is a puzzle per se. Thinking of Mr. Monologue, on one note I drew random lines very rapidly and threw it. I shouted, "Figure it out what it meant." One of my nephews was always present with me.

I didn't know what my family thought of me. One morning, all my sisters-in-law, sisters, and my mother came to my room. My sister Pashmeena said we knew you could cure sick people. I said, yes I could. I blew *dam*, blessing, on everyone in the room. Then Mother told me that she had joint pain. I said to her to show me her legs. I tightly hold her leg in my both hands and stretched it to

pull out all the pain. She shouted. I shouted too, asking everyone to leave my room.

One evening, there was party in our *hujra*. I was not allowed to go to *hujra*. I knew President Pervez Musharraf must be present. They would be figuring out how to safely escort me to the United States. One day I was told that one of my high school friends was killed by his enemies. I said to myself that it was easy. I rolled a paper making a tube. I looked in the tube. I just needed a photo of the dead person and I could bring him to life. Another time, I turned off the lights in the room and covered my eyes with a cloth. I knew I could see sun. After a prolonged observation, I saw a shining dot that slowly moved as I rolled my eyes.



The pain is so severe that there is no way to relieve it. It makes me forget about all my crazy thoughts. To relieve the pain, I lie on floor keeping. Two pillows under my head. When two pillows do not help, I put another a thicker one under my feet, and then another one under my neck until I'm totally lying on pillows. My nephew Naveed is observing me. I'm in the living room. Then I go lie on the coach. I wiggle some parts of my body all the time. Sometimes I wiggle my toes, then feet, then fingers,

then step out and go to *hujra* where I sit on the edge of a cot and then come back home quickly. This parade continues all day. I cannot stay in one place for long. When I come back home, Mother – who is sitting all day on the veranda – feels sorrow for me for being restless. I sit down on a chair in the veranda and smoke when I get very tired. My gaze automatically follows the ash falling on the ground and on my shoes.



Two months later, on November 4, my illness is diagnosed. In today's follow-up, I am no longer thinking that I'm dealing with an actor but a real psychiatric. Like other days, my brother is also present. Today the doctor does not ask my brother but directly asks me to describe my problem. Since he is a psychiatrist, he knows that today I'm able to talk. I describe my problem in one sentence: what I think right now I think of the very opposite at the very next moment *ad infinitum*. When I say *ad infinitum* I have physics in mind. We commonly use this word in physics. The doctor does not ask me for further explanation but gets it. He diagnoses that it is bipolar disorder. I've never heard of it. I only know that schizophrenia is a mental illness. The psychiatrist gives me an example that the renowned painter Van Gogh was

also bipolar. The choice of colors in his painting reflected his emotional state. I'm confused here. A renowned painter was bipolar. Does this mean that bipolar is an illness or a talent?

"I cannot help to cure it, but I'm prescribing you this tablet called Lithium Carbonate. It will lower the cycle," he says.

When he says, 'lower the cycle', he brings his index finger and thumb closer. I say, "I get it. You're controlling the amplitude."

"Exactly."

"I learn sinusoidal motion in physics: oscillating spring, motion of a pendulum."

My brother also laughs, "I do not understand what you two are talking about, but it is good the illness is diagnosed. Diagnosis is half a cure."



Of course, I'm concerned that I have mental illness but also relieved that I'm me Shahid not Mr. Monologue. To confirm it, I go to the rooftop and everywhere in the house where I dropped the notes. They are exactly there. I threw one magazine behind cabinet in my room. The cabinet is heavy. Somehow I manage to slide it. The magazine is lying right there. Nobody has picked up

anything. I'm still walking like Mr. Monologue, keeping my feet in a V-shape and sliding it, eyes wide open. My sister-in-law notes it and so I also drop this habit.

My illness is diagnosed in the month of Ramadan. It is a fun month. Everyone wants to have *iftar* with family. Delicious foods are cooked. Beside the normal meal, *iftar* has its own menu: samosa, pakora, kabab, data, sherbet and more. After *iftar* one is so full that she/he cannot walk. Bazaars become lively in the afternoon. Abdur passes time in Peshawar Saddar bazaar. He goes with his buddy Gohar and also asks me to go with them. They sit in the front seat, I hop in the *dyna*, minitruck. We put two chairs in the back. Though I'm not fasting, I'm enjoying it very much. My family knows about me, but never have said anything. Only my deceased brother Afnan was very strict. He was *tablighi*. Like Jehovah witness, *tablighis* are Allah witnesses, they go door to door preaching Islam.

After Ramadan, Eid gives me further pleasure. Since the *tara* factories are closed during Ramadan, drinkers cannot wait for Eid. Abdur and his company drink every night. I also join them.

Everyone is surprised at my quick recovery. Perhaps this is because I quickly realized my problems. Abdur also understood my problem. Everywhere he goes, he takes me with himself. This helps me to recover from my problems. I'm really very thankful to all my family

members. At all times, someone was present with me. One day, I slammed Hafiz very harshly. He said nothing. Another day, I held up my eldest brother, Laiq, and swirled him. He said nothing, but ran away from my room.

Sometimes my father-in-law, who is a principal at High School No.2, Jamrud, calls me, and I spend the day with him. My in-laws do not know about my illness yet. I would be very happy if they came and asked about my illness, but my family didn't inform them.

In December, I return to university. When I return, Hussain, my roommate, has gone to the United States for a Ph.D. Most of my friends have gone abroad. Usually students obtain M.Phil. from here and apply for a Ph.D. abroad. I was never motivated. Doing the coursework again, the comprehensive exam again, TOEFL, GRE. I'm an independent learner. Neither do I like courses nor exams. One contributor to my illness was also the comprehensive exam, which was this last September. It stresses me out. Since I was at home, I missed it. The next one is next year.

I do not stay longer in the university. I cannot adjust so quickly. I miss my home where I have more fun. Now the state of happiness is gone. I remain depressed most of the time. In bipolar disorder, also called manic-depressive illness, there are moods swing. It is a brain

disorder that causes unusual shift in energy, energy, activity level, and the ability to carry out day-to-day activity. In a manic episode, a patient feels high, has lots of energy, increased activities, has racing thoughts, trouble sleeping, starts big projects, spends too much money. Depressive mood is the opposite. One is very sad. Little to no energy, sleep too little or too much, self-loathing, suicidal thoughts.

I have been through most of these phases. In one moment, I would be laughing and then suddenly crying like a baby, or dancing and then becoming sad when a song ends. I have fear of an end. Why is there an end? I see ends in the depressed mood. I see people like walking dead. One day they will die, and they are still happy. Why don't people feel it? It is a truth. There is no cure to it. When I'm reading a book, I see many scientists in the book who are dead now. Why would they spend all their life in proving theorems if they already knew they would die one day? They should have saved themselves from dying.

Still depression works for me. At least, I don't do stupid things. I don't think about Mr. Monologue. When I go to my psychiatrist, I ask him to depress me. He laughs. He admits that I'm his unique patient. I don't tell him long stories but, what the amplitude and the period of moods are. He advises me to watch my sleep, thoughts and their

speed, and carefully watch my braking system. He also warns me about not taking on too many projects. Do not miss forest for trees.

# 11

## WEDDING

October and March are ideal months for a wedding. Not so hot not so cold. Most people wait for these months. My marriage is set in March – March 6, 2004. It is a two-in-one marriage. On a very short notice, my eldest brother decided to have his son's marriage too. I'm a little upset with it. Weddings of uncle and nephew. The reason is obvious. My brother wants to save money, especially on the wedding dinner.

Our wedding ceremonies are for three days. One the first day is the Henna ceremony in which the groom's family distributes henna to the invited families. The second day ceremony starts in the afternoon. The groom's family brings the dresses, jewelry, shoes, and other cosmetics for the bride and are shown off. Sweets are also served. This ceremony is called *jora*. In the night the groom's family again comes to the bride's house and puts henna on the bride's hands. The last day is called *janj*. On this day the bride is brought to the groom's house. On the same day lunch/dinner is also arranged by the groom's family. Some families arrange lunch on the next day as everyone is very tired on the last day of

marriage. At the groom's house, there is also a musical show on the eve of the third day of marriage.

On March 5, a big musical concert takes place at my wedding. The stage is set behind the *hujra* inside the giant house. The famous Pashto singer Haroon Bacha is on stage. My friends from university have also come. I'm dropping one cigarette and lighting another. Drinks are served in the *hujra*. Everyone is drunk and dancing. My friends are conducting the cultural *attan* dance. I never learn *attan* despite being a *Quadian*. In QAU, Pakhtoon students do *attan* like a ritual. Dancing in a circle in a group; step to the left, step to the right and move forward. It starts slowly and becomes faster as the music becomes faster.

On March 6, in afternoon, the bride is brought. At the time I'm with my friends in the *hujra*. Most of us are hung over from last night. I'm unaware that the biggest event has taken place. I can only meet my wife later tonight, what is called *sohaag raat* – couple's first night together.

Inside the house, the bride is sitting in her room like a guest and very confused; she only knows Hajra who's with her. Everyone else is new for her. Hajra, Hafiz's sister, and my wife were classmates in high school. My wife is actually Hajra's pick. My sister-in-law showed me pictures of many girls, but I liked Ayisha. She was educated. Her parents were also educated. Hajra told me

that Ayisha liked open-minded people like me. She said that Ayisha did not like a typical man who restricted his wife inside the house and asked her to wear a veil. Ayisha was the first girl in Jamrud who went to college and stayed in hostel. When we sent the proposal, her father somehow learned that I'm a disbeliever. You do not need to proclaim; your company tells who you are. To confirm it, Ayisha's father called Hafiz to ask if it was true. I was crossed when I learned that. I told Hafiz to tell them the truth about who I was. Hafiz said they would handle it; I should not worry. I didn't know what changed the mind of my father-in-law. When the proposal was sent for the second time, he accepted it.

Mother is coming in and out looking at the bride with pride. Other guests are also coming to see the bride. *Nikkah*, the marriage contract, is held in the evening. *Mulana*, cleric, first sends his representatives to the bride. He personally stays in the *hujra*. Only relatives can go inside the house. When the representatives enter the house, tomatoes and eggs are thrown on them. This tradition became obsolete very recently but still exists in some forms. When the representatives enter the house, they caution everyone not to do anything funny. They go straight into the bride's room. Someone whispers to the bride the name of her father-in-nikkah. Father-in-nikkah is like a lawyer who represents the wedding

couple. The representatives ask just one question three times, "Who is your father-in- nikkah?" When she tells the name, which she usually says on the third time, it means she is willing to marry. The representatives then reports to the *mulana*. Now it is the groom's turn. First the amount of *mahar* is decided: the amount to be paid to the bride. In our area, it is just a nominal amount with which she cannot even buy a dozen of eggs. *Mulana* then discovers the bride's and her father names from the representatives. Finally, he asks the groom if he accepts so-and-so the daughter of so-and-so.

Later my friends and Hafiz take me to a salon in Town, Peshawar. My friends also accompany us. Three friends – Ali, Waheed, and Ehsan – from QAU and one friend, Luqman, from Peshawar University are staying with me tonight. Luqman is a lecturer in Pabbi College, the same college I went to. Back in Peshawar University, Luqman was our expert in love affairs. He gave us useful tips how to impress a girl. He is married to his classmate.

The hairdresser also does my facial. He removes all hairs from face. I never had a smooth face like this before. At the end, he also uses gel on my hair. It makes my hairs to sit. My hair is straight otherwise. Even if one hair is left uneven it can be spotted. One of the haircutters in Teddi bazaar calls my hairs brush-like hair. Normally I don't use gel. I like it straight. We come back at about 10

p.m. When we come back, I also make a wedding night resolution, to quit smoking. Before going to home, I smoke the last one. Luqman then gives me some tips how to talk to my wife. He also says that my wife would offer me a glass of milk and dates. I also change my clothes in the bathroom behind the guestroom. I carefully put on my half-white dress as the floor is wet. When I look at myself in the mirror, I look like a villain in that gel. I cannot take another shower to undo it and leave it like that.

When I enter my room, I don't see the glass of milk and dates. Maybe it is Luqman's tradition in Pabbi. I suspiciously remove the veil from the bride face. Sometime other girls in the house may fool with you replacing the bride with someone else. I see a beautiful face, big eyes. I don't know how to begin.

I ask her, "Hi."

"Hi."

"What do you know about me?"

She says at once, "You don't pray, don't fast and you are a disbeliever."

My mouth gets dry and I lean on the pillow, "Well, time will tell who I am. What is important is I'm not forcing you to change. When it's your prayer time, you have every right to pray." I put the ring on her and give her the gift.

I then recall, “Are you sitting like this all day in your heavy wedding dress? Did you eat anything?”

“No, Hajra was me all day. I have eaten dinner.” She laughs.

“You must be very tired. Please, change your dress and sleep.”

I turn off the light. I leave her and go to *hujra*, when I realize that she has slept.

“You came so quickly and left our Bhabi alone,” Luqman inquires.

“Please, make me a drink and give me a cigarette.”

“You just made a resolution to quit smoking,” one friend says. Everyone laughs.

“Yes, that was the last cigarette before wedding. This is the first cigarette after marriage.” I cough.

“And this is your cough before smoking,” Ehsan reminds me. “Your statement that there are two types cough, before and after smoking.”

“Yes, the cough before smoking reminds you to smoke. The cough after smoking means you have smoked.”



*Valima*, lunch, is next day. The same place which was set for the concert last night is now set for lunch. Zia and I are sitting in chairs. Guests first meet with us. Zia is

taller than I. He is dressed in white wearing a black *waaskat*. I never wore a *waaskat*. I'm dressed in a light blue *shalwar qameez*. I have also gained some weight, which is cause by the medication I'm taking. My psychiatrist told me I should do exercise. Guests are also taking pictures with us. I'm missing most of the time. I frequently have the urge to smoke. I go behind the tent set for lunch leaving Zia alone.



Two days later, I see my psychiatrist and meet with a writer. First, I meet with the writer in his office in Peshawar city. This write, whose name is Adil Yousafzai, is an editor of a Pashto magazine. He also writes dramas for television. His office is in the basement of a building. A computer composer is working on the computer. Mr. Yousafzai is sitting next to the composer.

“Can I come in?” I say.

“Yes,” Mr. Yousafzai welcomingly says. He is leaning in a relaxed position in the chair.

“I’m from Jamrud. I want to meet with you.”

“Jamrud? I know many people in Jamrud.”

“I’m the brother of Abdur Rahim Afridi.”

“Abdur Rahim Afridi. The one whose brother had a marriage recently.”

“Yes, that was me.”

“Sorry. I was also invited but couldn’t come. Let’s sit outside.” He stands up.

We sit in the hallway. Here are four chairs.

“What can I do for you?” he says.

“I want to discuss with you a story I recently thought of. I didn’t write it but can explain it.”

I tell him how Mr. Monologue enters Prof. Danish’s office and then when tumbles down in the stairs and writes in his diary crazily. When I explain the diary part, I sit on the floor and explain it with full action. Then I go on telling him when I thought that I was dead.

“You have not only written one drama but two. You are also a character.” He laughs. “By the way, I like the scene when you played dead. If you don’t mind, can I borrow this scene? One of my dramas is running on TV these days. One of the characters has a seizure. This scene suits him.”

“I have nothing to say.” I say. “Would you publish my story in your magazine?”

“If you like I can publish in my magazine. I would rather suggest that you write your story in Urdu or English. To reach a larger audience. Readership is smaller in Pashto.”



After that I go to my appointment. I'm very excited. I also discuss the Monologue character with my psychiatrist; however, I do not call him Monologue in conversion but call him Utopian. I don't tell my doctor the whole story the way I did to the writer. I only summarize the main character. When my psychiatrist gives me the prescription, in the right margin or on the back of prescription slip, he writes his remarks about today encounter. I cannot wait to read it. Those notes are very helpful. I have very recently obtained my medical record from my brother, and started coming to my appointments by myself. Abdur would never let me come alone. He would send someone with me. most of the time when I insisted that I needed my medical records. When I saw that I also received the ECT treatment, I shook. I heard that it was given to really mad people. Abdur said that it was the main reason why he was not giving me the records. Later, I also asked from Aziz and Hafiz about what happened. Aziz said, "Yes, it is true. You have received electroshocks therapy. The clinic didn't have proper arrangements. When you were having the seizure, Hafiz and I held you tightly. With every shock, spit would come out of your mouth corners. Then Hafiz and I would pick you up to bring you downstairs. There was no stretcher in the clinic. One day someone from Jamrud saw us while we were taking you to the vehicle. He inquired

what happened to you. We quickly closed the doors and left. We did not want anyone to know about you. Especially so the news should not reach your in-laws."

About the today the doctor notes: *Although the patient is doing well, but probably drifting towards mania. The patient went on to describe his manic theory – his drama of the character "Utopian". A magnanimous, fantastic, admirable character.*

The doctor also changes my medication. He asks me to stop Lithium and puts me on Lamictal.

Of course, Utopian is a fantastic character, but he has a major problem. How did he become that genius? What is his educational background? When he enters Prof. Danish's office, it is not shown where he comes from. If he lives in Utopia, then how could he jump from Utopia and influence the real world. His goal is to prove that the supernatural does not exist. His own existence shows that he is a supernatural.

## 12

# AGAIN PH.D., AGAIN COURSEWORK, AGAIN COMPREHENSIVE EXAM

In the summer of 2006, my ex-roommate Hussain Wali, returns from the United States. It is said that *Quaidian* once *Quaidian* forever. *Quaidians* have so many associations with the university that when they come from abroad, they definitely visit the university, to have lunch at Majeed huts and meet with friends. Hussain motivates me to apply to his university. He is a Ph.D. student at the University at Albany, State University of New York. He says that one of his professors work in the field of Information Physics in his department, and so I must apply. Since I have published two papers, this will increase my chances to get admission. My papers are also on entropy. Entropy is what is studied in information physics.

My first paper is published in *Concept of Physics*, an open dialogue journal that publishes eccentric papers. The journal even publishes papers rejected by the reviewer(s). In the paper, I model a universe that consists in the form of clusters, such as the cluster of galaxies which are then the clusters of stars and the stars are the cluster of subatomic particles. An anonymous reviewer does not recommend the paper for publication, but the editor finds

it interesting because I make a connection between the Laws of Thermodynamics with the notion of space-time. The second paper – which is the extension of the first paper – is immediately published in *Entropy*, a reputable journal.

My work is not accepted by a string theorist, Dr. Fahim Hussain. He says that it is wrong. My advisor also comes under pressure and asks me to pick a mainstream research topic.

I gather material for the application package to apply for Spring 2007. Since I have not done TOEFL, I provide two letters – one from Peshawar University and one from QAU – stating that the medium of instruction is English. I also need three letters of recommendation. I arrange two letters, but one professor refuses to give me a letter. He, who is a MIT graduate, says since I got a C grade in his course, he cannot give me a letter. I say to him that I have two publications also. He says that publications mean nothing to him. Anyway, I arrange one letter from a professor in Peshawar University and send the application package.



On December 29, 2006, Hussain calls to tell me that I was admitted. He says that the department secretary has

sent me an email to accept the offer immediately otherwise the offer will go to someone else. At the time, I'm sitting with Abdur and his buddy Gohar in the *hujra*. I run home to give the good news to Ayisha. She is reciting Quran in the dim light of lantern. Loadshedding is very common in tribal areas. In winter, the power is off for more than 36 hours in 48 hours. She hugs me, and says she was praying for us.

Next day I check my email in a net-café in Peshawar as there is no Internet in Jamrud. The email is dated three days earlier. Because of the Eid-ul-Adha holidays, I didn't check my mails. This time Eid has overlapped with New Year. I accept the offer. The sender has also asked me to provide my current mailing address to send me the I-20 form and the TA-award letter. In Jamrud, mailman does not distribute mails in streets but only in Jamrud bazaar. One needs care of (c/o) of say, "a shop in the bazaar." For this important package I provide the Islamabad address.



I receive the package one week later, on January 6, the I-20 form – the most important document. I have heard many in QAU proudly saying they receive the I-20. This means the US visa is sure. I have very little time now. The

Office of International Student Services (OISS) has also emailed me that the orientation and the mandatory meeting with international students are on January 17.

Next day, after taking lunch at huts, I head to Peshawar. Although the US embassy is in Islamabad, I need to submit the passport in a courier service in Peshawar. As I travel halfway, I receive a call by Hamood, Aziz's younger brother. He at once says that Hafiz is dead. "What." I say. I do not ask details. Passengers are sitting around. Many thoughts come to mind. It cannot be natural. He used to go to a gangster's place. Maybe, he or his men have killed him.

As I get off the coaster in Peshawar bus terminal, I go straight to the restroom to change my jeans. It would not be appropriate to go home in that outfit. I have a pair of *shalwar-qameez* in the bag; I have brought it for the laundry. When I get it out off the backpack, it is wrinkled being squeezed in the bag. It is difficult to change here. The toilet is very small, the floor is wet and there is no hook to hang the bag.

I take a taxi from there as public transport would delay me. On reaching Karkhano Market, I get a local taxi for Jamrud and go to Teddi bazaar; I know everyone would be there. As I get there, I see people gathered in the graveyard. It is a big cemetery. Once it was small, now

spread over the area taking the place of the bus station next to it.

The deceased has just been placed in the tomb. I've missed the funeral. I do not demand if there is any way to see his face. My father-in-law takes the bag from me, and I sit on one side. Everyone is taking part in the burial process. It is virtuous to take the shovel from one another. After that *mullah* addresses the sermon.

I only weep when all disperse, and we get home. I sit on a stool in mother's room and sob. Manan died, then Hafiz's mother, then my father, then Hafiz's father; I didn't cry, but now I do, when I lost my best friend. "Why is so quiet here? Why is there no noise? No one is mourning. I don't see anyone is weeping. Because he had no one."

Pashmina, my sister, says, "No, no, people just dispersed. He had a very big funeral. People came from all over the province."

I then go Aziz's room, where Hafiz's widow is sitting with other women. She is in silence. I hug her and give her support. I can imagine how devastated she is. I don't know how our family would include her. Hafiz has no brothers. He only has a sister.

Besides the widow, Hafiz left two daughters and a one-year-old son. He was a heavy drinker and used drugs. This morning a worker found him dead on his bed. His

new apartment was under construction in our house in New Abbadi.



While people are still coming for condolences, I make a quick a trip to the Saddar bazaar to submit my passport in SpeedEx, which handles visa application. The person there asks me for supporting documents. I show him the I-20 form and the TA-award letter. He gives me the visa application, which consists of two or three forms.



I fill out the forms when get home. I don't understand how to write the street, city and state in different boxes. The address says the university is on 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, New York. I am assuming it is at the border of Washington, D.C. and New York. I fill out the forms anyway.



The visa interview is in the embassy in Islamabad. You cannot go directly to the US embassy, after 9/11; this road is closed to the public. The embassy's shuttle bus runs from Convention Center nearby. You have to be there very early to reach on time because there are long lines of people. My interview runs smoothly. The consular officer keeps my passport. She says it will be returned to me in the SpeedEx office in Peshawar. It is said if they keep your passport, it means you will get the visa.

Next week SpeedEx returns me the passport with a five years multiple visa stamped on it.



The spring semester has already started. I must get there as soon as possible. I cannot do anything with the Ph.D. at QAU but to quit it. I make a quick trip to Islamabad to fetch my personals items.

The flight is on February 6, 2007. My anxiety increases as the date approaches. Generally, I do not have fear of flight, though I do have fear of airports. It started in 2002, when I had been to ICTP, Italy. That was my first ever flight. I had to change several connected flights: from Islamabad to Karachi, then Dubai, then Milan and then Trieste. I had never seen an airport or its process from the inside, though I had seen off many friends from

Islamabad. A long line of passengers would enter on the departing gate, and another line leave through the arrival one. From the inside it looked to me like a black box. Back then I asked Hussain who had been to ICTP. He guided me that first I would pass through a security screening, then to proceed to check-in, then through the immigration process, then boarding. Everything went all right, but when I was in the waiting room for boarding, the flight was delayed for about half an hour. The airport was hit by dusty whirling winds. As I reached Karachi, first I smoked a cigarette outside, then entered through another gate. After the security screening, I noticed a long line of people. I also stood in the line. As I reached to the beginning of the line, the officer noticed that I didn't have the boarding pass and so asked me to get it from the check-in area. I ran back but by the check-in was closed. I was in the middle of nowhere. Luckily, I had a friend named Tufail Shah in Karachi. I called him. He gave me his address and so I stayed with him for the night. Next day I flew back to Islamabad. There was no other way but to talk to my agent to reschedule my ticket. I arrived in Trieste with two days delay.



I have very a short time – less than a week. I also need to buy warm clothing. Hussain has told me that the weather is very cold in Albany. I do my shopping in one day from Saddar bazaar and City Tower.

It's good that my flight is from Peshawar. I can stay at home for the night. If I had a flight from Islamabad, I would have to leave one day prior. Next morning, our driver drops me at the airport. Ayisha also comes with us. Mother sees me off at the gate. She kisses me on the neck saying it might be her last time to see me. I'm also on the verge of crying. When leaving, someone also splashes water behind us. It means drive safe.



In the plane, I take a deep breath and say to myself that one chapter of my life is completed. I'm not nervous as I was when going to ICTP. This flight is going to Dubai, from where I'll catch another connected flight to JFK.

Next morning, I arrive at JFK. After passing through the security clearance, I get out of the airport to smoke. I only have cigarettes. The lighter was taken from me at the airport in Peshawar. I look here and there to borrow a lighter from someone. I see a bus driver, who is also smoking. I borrow a matchbox from him. As I light the cigarette and take two puffs, I get frozen. I'm only

wearing a light red hoodie. Hussain told me to wear a warm jacket, but I couldn't imagine why. All my belonging is in my luggage, which I'll get in Albany. My next flight is to Albany. The cigarette falls from my frozen mouth. I light another cigarette and keep puffing.

The flight to Albany is different. There is no refreshment other than some peanuts. I laugh to myself when in the end the airhost carries a trash bag. What have we eaten to give you anything back.



My apartment is by Washington Avenue, which leads to the university. Now I understand – what I thought while filling out the visa application in Peshawar – that the university is not at the border of Washington, D.C. and New York, but Washington is a street name. I had several misconceptions. I thought that in America skyscrapers are everywhere. Tall buildings are only in the downtown areas. I also did made another mistake in the visa application. I wrote New York as the city, which is actually Albany. My surprises do not end. Albany is not just here but there are 28 cities named Albany in the United States. I learn that one student, while coming here, ended up in Albany, Georgia. Several other cities' names are also repeated. I had not seen this type of

pattern in Pakistan. There is one, and only one, Peshawar and one Lahore. I know one other place named Lahore, but that is called Chota Lahore – little Lahore – which is a village in Swabi. Not only this but streets are also named after cities. In our Albany – which is the capital of New York State – there is also Albany Street. In fact, this street is in Schenectady, another city near Albany.



Houses are mostly wooden. Apartment inside are airtight. If you cook anything, especially spicy food, the smell traps and sticks to your clothes. Your friend can tell what you have cooked lately. In Jamrud, I heard from my elders that foreigners stink. It is the opposite here. Our clothes stink more. People are health conscious. I see people jogging in the freezing temperatures. Hussain, who is now my roommate again, says that they want to stay away from the doctor because most people do not have insurance. I also get inspired and start jogging in the evening on Western Avenue, earbuds in my ears – listening to FM radio. Two days later, my ears start to explode from continuous music.

Classes have already started. I'm two weeks late. On my second day, our professor of Statistical Physics gives a quiz. He asks me if I wish I can take the test another time

as I missed the classes; however, I take the quiz. To his surprise, I pass the test with an A grade. For me the material was not new. I have already learned Statistical Mechanics in Pakistan. If you know the *partition function*, you have solved the problem halfway because most thermodynamic variables, such as energy, entropy, pressure, involve the *derivatives* of this function.



On the morning of April 16, 2007, a twenty-three-year-old Seung-Hui Cho kills 32 people in two separate incidents at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University campus in Blacksburg, Virginia. First, he kills two students in a dorm room and then another 30 people in four classrooms. He also takes his own life. He carried a 9mm handgun and a .22-caliber gun. Cho, who was majoring in English, was a South Korean-born American Citizen and had a history of anxiety disorder. This is the deadliest massacre in the US history at the time.

It concerns me. I also have a history of mental illness and know gun use. Not just me, everyone in tribal areas knows how to use a gun. Since childhood, we were trained how to deal with guns. We cleaned our weapons yearly. The easiest one was the 8mm rifle. It had one or two parts to remove. The important part was to clean the barrel

with a long rope. Sometimes we would need two people; one was holding the gun, the other one was pulling out the rope. Kalashnikovs have several parts, but the formula was simple, to put it together in the reverse order. Whatever part was removed first, it had to go back in the last. Our elders told us never aim a gun at someone even if it was empty. Satan could load it. One day, my sister-in-law – Hafiz’s mother – was cleaning a Kalashnikov. She was sitting in front of me in another cot on the veranda. She had already removed the magazine and just in case pressed on the trigger and a fired. I narrowly escaped being shot. The bullet penetrated a pillar nearby.

More recently I developed some suicidal thoughts. At night, as I close my eyes to go to sleep, long knives penetrate in my body. The deeper they go, the better I sleep. So, on May 3, I see a psychiatrist in the Health Center on campus. He notices that my mood is stable and prescribes the same medicine – Tegretol and Seroquel – I was taking previously. My Pakistani psychiatrist changed my medicine several times. First, he put me on Lithium, then Lamictal, then Tegretol and Seroquel. Though I’m taking the same medicine, the US version is more effective. I feel fresher when I get up in the morning.



At the end of the spring semester, I obtain Ayisha's I-20 form and send it to her. At the same time, I also study for the comprehensive exam which is in August. Ayisha gets the visa in June and arrives in July. Now we are living in a one-bed room apartment.

One month later, I also pass the comprehensive exam.

# 13

## RECURRING EPISODES

In fall 2008, a professor in our department gives a talk on *Question Theory* in a Friday colloquium. Question theory is useful in artificial intelligence, for machines to ask relevant questions. Questions are essential to request information. In 1978, Richard T. Cox defined a question as the system of assertions that answer it. The professor says something new that question and negation are identical. He explains it with an example that 'Is it raining?' or 'Is it not raining?' asks the same thing. In both cases the answer is 'It is raining,' or 'It is not raining.'

This professor has modeled his question theory on *order theory*. I notice that the theory can be generalized if it is based on topology, in which case a question and its negation would no longer be identical. Since the semester is in progress, I wait for the winter break to develop my model. One hardly has time for research when taking courses and has TA-ship duties.

As the winter break arrives, I start working on my idea. I require that questions must appear in the form of an objective type. Like a questionnaire. This questionnaire must form a topology. Topology is a collection of the subsets of a set that consists of the set itself, empty set, and the union and intersection of the members in the

collection. My model shows that a question and its negation are non-identical.

The night I solve the problem, I become so excited that I cannot wait for the next day to discuss it with my advisor. I know he will appreciate it. Next day, I realize that he may not be in office for the holidays. All of sudden it comes to mind to call him. I have his home phone number. So, I call him. The call is directed to his answering machine. As I start to record my message, someone answers the call.

“Hey Shahid, what’s the problem,” my professor on the other end says.

“I want to discuss with you my new findings. I have derived a master equation from which I can derive Einstein Field Equations and much more,” I say in excitement. In physics, if you can derive existing theories from your theory, it means your theory is more general.

“Sure, let’s meet tomorrow. I’ll be in the office.”

“It would be nice if you could come to my place. I’m just so excited. It would be very nice of you if you could come our place,” I unhesitatingly demand like we are friends.

He is also nice and says, “No problem. I’ll probably be there about 2:30 or 3. Please, text me your address.”



Since he's coming, I start editing my paper in urgency. I type my paper in LaTex, a typeset best for documents involving mathematical equations. In the middle of the paper, I also write dialogues that may have nothing to do with the draft. I write, "*He proposed to her. Her answer was NOT-YES, NOT-NO. He was insane, talking to himself and speaking much too loudly, 'NOT-NOT-NOT-NO,' and then said a little slowly, 'and yet NOT-YES.'*" I do not call it a dialogue but a monologue. A monologue is what Mr. Monologue – the character I created in 2003 – says. I have a separate diary in which I note monologues. One may call it a quotation, but I call it a monologue. In the diary, I also define a monologue. A monologue is one's own created language that she or he can better understand. Her thoughts could be mixed. She may know several languages in which she expresses her feelings. If she runs out of words, she draws images, even dances. It is a jargon that is produced spontaneously. It may be a jargon for a reader; it is a collection of separable realities for the creator.



Next day in the afternoon, my phone rings.  
"Shahid, I think I'm outside your house," my advisor says.

“Please, do not park in the street. You may park it in our driveway. I’m coming downstairs.” We have two parking spaces in our driveway: one for us and one for our downstairs neighbor. Since I do not have a car, my friends park there when they visit me.

Upstairs he says, “I can imagine how tough it is to be a graduate student.” He looks up. Our apartment reminds him of his own days as a graduate student.

Our apartment may be small, but I like its living room. The living room is like a pentagon. Windows are one each side. A Montessori school – which is from across the street – can be seen from the window. Inside in one corner is a study table. We use the same table for dinner. In the other corner is television. A twin-size mattress is placed where there is supposed to be a couch. We have no couch. Ayisha or I sleep in the living room. Since I snore, we do not sleep together. Initially I slept outside, but my wife didn’t feel good about it like she kicked me out of the room, and so we switched.

“Hi,” Ayisha says to my advisor shaking hand with him.

“I know Muslim women do not shake hand with men,” my professor says to her.

“Well, we are not that kind of Muslims,” she says.

“Please, come here.” I offer for him to sit. In excitement, I motion to show him my monologues diary

first. I show him the newest one, which I noted three days ago on January 11, 2009. It says, ‘*This work is done in six days and the seventh day is for rest.*’ I call it a joke, referring to the creation of the universe by God. In fact, I finished this paper in six days and on the seventh day I did nothing. The next one below it – same date – is ‘*You are my problem and I’m your problem.*’

“Why not get to the paper,” he says. I think my monologues confused him.

“Yes please.” I give him the paper.

He leans on the chair and reads it. He says, “I don’t understand it. Why don’t you explain it.”

“Sorry professor. I didn’t formally write the paper. It only includes the calculation. Let me explain what I’ve actually done. My work concerns question theory. I have shown that a question and the negation question are not equivalent.”

“How so?”

“Please, have this,” Ayisha interjects. “I’ve made pakora. I don’t know if you like it. I made it less spicy.” She’s also pregnant. We’re expecting our first baby after five years of marriage.

“I like Pakistani food. It’s good. Thank you.” The professor takes a bite from the pakora.

I continue, “Let me explain my claim with an example. Take one situation. A person enters a building. He is wet.

Another person in the building – who is not aware that it is raining – asks in surprise, “Is it raining?” In another situation, one person enters a building. This person is dry. Another person – who knew that it was pouring a little earlier – unbelievably asks, “Is it not raining?” People ask questions according to their desires.”

“It means you’re quantifying desires. Your idea looks bigger than a Ph.D. project. If you want to work with me, you have to choose a topic I can supervise.”

“It’s OK. I’ll work on whatever project you give me. And thank you for coming. Also, I’m very embarrassed that I bothered you. Perhaps it is the result of my illness, that I didn’t tell you about.” “In 2003, I was diagnosed with ...” I tell him about my illness. When I speak of my sickness, I do not say five years ago or ten years, but I say that it happened in 2003. I remember it by the year. August 2003 exactly.

“Do you see a doctor?”

“Yes, I go to the Health Center.”

“Thank you for telling me.”

“I have a good understanding of my problem. It is not as severe as it was back in 2003. Perhaps my idea has excited me. I’ve not slept enough for the last several days.”

“Take a break from the paper. There is no rush. You have time for research. And keep me posted if there is any problem.”

“Sure. I will.”



Two days later, I have a nervous breakdown. I write a long email to my advisor. I write:

*... I'm not the only person in the world who did this work. I've an opinion that in the past there were some brilliant people who came up with much more beautiful results than mine. I'm convinced that they might have first destroyed their findings and then killed themselves, for they knew their work might lead to wars.*

*If you do not reply to me positively, I would prefer to first destroy my findings, damage my computer and then kill myself.*

*I'm stable when I'm writing this email.*

*So please do something. My wife and my friends love me a lot. Please, try to avoid anything bad happening.*

*Today (Friday), I'll see my doctor at the Health Center at 10 a.m. and then I'll come home.*

I say that I'm stable; actually, I'm not. A full-blown mania retuned last night. I was in the room. Ayisha was sleeping on the floor in the living room. After about three

weeks of insomnia, I fell asleep. I was in bed. This queen-size bed can only be placed along one of the walls. If it is set along the opposite wall, it would block the door; and it can also be not put across, as it would not fit. Ayisha likes periodic change in the house. The bed – which is only a mattress on a box without a frame – can only be slid along to make room for a dresser. In the current position, the dresser is along the wall that has the door.

I was lying flat in the bed looking at the door. Two pillows under my neck and the door partially open. Ayisha checked on me. Ayisha only knew about my illness after our marriage. On the second day when I came from my psychiatrist in Peshawar, I first told her about my love affair in Quaid-i-Azam University and then about the illness. Her only question was that why her family was not informed.

The light was on and my eyes were also open. If I closed anything, my eyes or the light, I see images. While awake, I started snoring. Literally, my eyes were wide open but sleeping. The snoring stopped shortly, and I woke up. It was a brief but very deep sleep. I was so fresh like I slept for the whole night. I was scared. While my eyes were still open, I saw an image of Irfan, my secular friend in Jamrud. He was wearing a brown *qameez* and white *shalwar* and was standing sideways in the air on my feet side. He then turned around and showed his middle

finger to me. I rapidly blinked my eyes and the image disappeared. Then I saw the Prophets Muhammad, Jesus and Moses: Muhammad sitting, Jesus standing, and Moses lying. They were not separated by distance but by time. It was a time travel. They were quietly laughing at me. When I paid attention, it was one and only one person. This one person – who was lying – sat and then stood. He uttered, “Do you think you are the only person. Many other like you also existed. They flew and took fire. Not only them but the whole universe took fire. Do not commit suicide. Do not destroy the world. Do you think dear Lord created the cosmos? Never. Lord is dead. Dead but he hears. You also experienced it. You forgot 2003. You believed that you were dead. You were hearing everything. The universe is made from the ashes of dear Lord. You would inquire how he died. He loved to be loved. Appreciation made him stronger. One day he became so powerful that He flew and burned. Appreciation killed Him. You see the ashes now?”

One would call it a manic attack; it was actually a spiritual attack.

In the early morning, I called Ayisha to pull my hair. She didn't; instead, she brought ice and put it on my forehead. I asked her to put away all my calculations and also the computer. By now I have a thick folder of calculations and monologues – missed forest for trees.



In the evening, my advisor sends Hussain – who already knew my problem back from QAU – to check on me. He tells me that I should not say that I'll commit suicide. It is a serious matter.

Next day my advisor changes my TA-ship duties. We talk on phone. He is in the department. I make the call telling him that it would not be safe to teach labs. I may misbehave with professors or students; I have 2003 in mind. I do not want repeat anything. He changes my TA-ship responsibilities and instead takes me as a TA assistant for himself. This is something I can do from home, to grade the tests.

## 14

# THE STOP SIGN

Once started in 2009, the manic episodes occur almost every year, either in winter or summer. One would blame the weather for it, but I know my triggers. It returns whenever I solve a problem. Usually in breaks – summer or winter. When it happens, it happens in the early night. I get an idea which makes me excited, and so I do not fall asleep. Then working all night on the idea while going in and out to smoke and listening to music on YouTube. The music slows me down. Otherwise I'll go out to smoke more frequently.

When I smoke in the street, a stop sign – which is on the school side across the street – bothers me. On a red octagon-shaped sign STOP is written in caps. Like it is shouting at me, “STOP, STOP SMOKING” Ayisha is also allergic from my smoking. She says that the smoking smell has adhered to my clothes. In time when I need her most, she cannot come closer to me. She became much more distant when our son was born.

I see meanings in everything. First in the stop sign, then in my son's name. We have named him Ryan. The closest Muslim name is Rayan, which is a gate in heaven. Like he's my passport to heaven.

The smoking almost separated us. In the small house we don't really see each other. When I'm in the living room, Ayisha goes to the bedroom. When I'm in the bedroom, she stays in the living room.

One night in March 2009, the spiritualism was at peak. Ryan was not born yet. He was born in July. I realized I must take action. Something I didn't do for years. So, I went to one side of the living room, where the closet was, and I prostrated. My mouth was shut. I didn't say anything but went straight down and placed my face downward on the floor. I was relieved at once. What I denied, I just did it. Suddenly I recalled where was Ayisha. I went straight to the bedroom. The door was closed. When I opened it, she was lying in bed. Her hairs were laying widely open on the pillow and she was crying. Her eyes were red. I asked her, "Why are you weeping?" She sniffled, "I don't know." I left her there and noted in my diary in the living room: *Depression is a field like a gravitation field. It exists everywhere in the house. All are affected by my depression.* Since that night was the strongest, the field was also very powerful which made her cry.

Ayisha has many expectation of me. Every time when I'm elevated, I make big claim that my discovery is so important that I'll get a job in NASA. NASA needs people like me. Or I'll go to Princeton or MIT. She believes me.

The mania doesn't go unless I realize errors in my calculation. As soon I detect mistakes in my papers, I become like a flat tire. All the tremendous energy just blows out of my body. My mouth is burning because of chain smoking and I have an earache from continuously listening to music. In mania, I'm nauseous and feel hunger when mania goes away. I ask Ayisha to make chicken curry for me. She makes delicious food. I ask her to make it too spicy. I cannot wait to eat it with *rooti*. I become sleepy and sleep like a baby at the night. Next morning I get up very fresh. But being fresh is not a good thing. It means I'm again energetic.

These papers on which I work during illness are not related to my Ph.D. projects but more to number theory. One of my statements is that complexity is not in the system, it is in the numbers that describe it. I believe that there exists other numbers, which when discovered will overcome all complexities.



One day in September 2010, we Pakistani students gather in a restaurant in downtown for a lunch. There are several Pakistani students in Physics. We all have families get together, especially on Eid. Today we are the only boys are in the restaurant. In fact, this party is in honor

of a guest who came from New York City. The party is arranged on a short notice. I'm in office when Assad comes to my office. I'm working on a paper. This paper is related to my Ph.D. project. I know I'm not good shape but he insists and so I go with him.

We are six people at the table. They are discussing Pakistani politics. I am not taking part in the discussion but thinking to myself. I say to myself I can do it. I want to cry, to weep on purpose. Yes, on purpose. It needs guts to embarrass yourself in front people. Nobody can do it, but I can. My heart is softening until I start to weep. The guest says, "Did I say anything that hurt your feeling?" Rafiullah tells him, "No, no, his mother recently passed away." My mother died last month. I was not informed. Aziz told me ten days later. I had Ph.D. oral exam that day when Aziz called me. I remember Mother words when I was leaving Pakistan. She kissed my neck and said this might be her last time to see me. I have never gone back to my home country since I came here.

I'm at once relaxed. I did it. When the party is over, we come outside. I look up to the southern sky, which is visible from the street. There is light behind the clouds. I know He has forgiven me.

When I come home, I happily tell Ayisha that I have recovered from my illness. It is gone. I was never like this before. I'll also quit smoking sooner. She believes me.

# 15

## HOLLYWOOD OR HEAVEN

In May 2014, I find a job on a Jobsite. The position is a Research Scientist at Quantum Gravity Research, California. In the job description, it says that they are looking for an outside-the-box thinker to join their team. They study consciousness at quantize space-time level, a scale called *Planck's scale*. I didn't know that people also study consciousness from the physics point of view. More than the job details, the *outside-the-box thinker* interests me. Like I'm the one they are looking for. At the time, I'm in the department giving the final exam. I'm teaching Wave, an advanced undergraduate course.

When I get home, I also tells Ayisha. She is also anxious for us. I have applied to many places but no luck. Ayisha also helps me in my job search. Everyday she sends me several emails of teaching positions in colleges. She knows I'm not motivated to apply to jobs. Today I'm very excited, as this look like a dream job. She is also happy. It is afternoon. I'm thinking how to write the email, but I cannot comprehend it. Later at night, I'm sleepy but I also want to apply to for the job before the next morning. I write:

*This email is in regard to the Research Scientist position that is currently available at Quantum Gravity Research. As my enclosed resume will show, my research interests span over several aspects of theoretical physics. Currently, I'm a Ph.D. candidate. I will be defending over this summer. During Ph.D., I used Entropic Inference to address some conceptual difficulties that arise in the interpretation of Quantum Mechanics.*

*However, here I would like to briefly introduce myself in way that might not be so obvious from my resume. Rather than to start with my strength, I would like to address my weakness. Despite that fact that I'll be a Ph.D. soon, I do not apply for jobs so much, as I do not find the right place. I assume that I may not be the best fit. I may end up doing odd jobs, while at the same time I'll independently continue working on some fundamental problems in theoretical physics that bother me most of the times. Whenever I write an independent paper, I post it on Arxiv. Sometimes even the Arxiv refuses to publish my papers.*

*Long story short, I don't like doing research in a conventional way. I explore the possibilities that might be forbidden by the standard physics and mathematics. I always think outside-the-box, and that is the main reason why I'm applying for this job.*



Ayisha always asks me to show her my email before sending it, especially when I'm manic. Today she was sleeping when I sent the email. Two days later in the afternoon, I receive a phone call from Quantum Gravity Research (QGR) that I'm selected for the interview. The interview is set up for June 17.

I know they selected me, for the outside-the-box thinker. Now I have to show them the outside-the-box-ness. The best thing to show them would be my monologues. So, I write a paper. The title of the paper is, "My Monologues". The abstract is: "*My monologues are ways of talking to myself. Here are few of them. They are written without context.*" Each monologue is numbered. The first monologue is: "*The universe is created and destroyed by humans.*" The second one is a poem: "*Idea was created first/ Then language/ Then geometry/ Then math/ And then so on/ Who created the Who, who created idea and then everything? / Think about it!*" In total, there are 61 monologues in the paper. Before leaving, I show the paper to my psychiatrist. He says I better not take this with me. I take it anyway.

Ayisha is also happy. Our future may change. She and Ryan are also going with me. I requested them to come with me. I get confused at the airports.



One day prior to the interview, we arrive at LAX airport, Los Angeles. Sherzad – who was my classmate in Peshawar University – picks up us from the airport. We stay with him. He also takes us to the interview place the next day. The place is in Topanga. When we are driving though the beautiful mountainous valley of Topanga, it reminds me of the dry mountains of our Khyber Pass. Ayisha is also dreaming; it would be so wonderful to get a job here. There are beautiful houses on the top of the hills.

The interview takes place in the conference room. Ayisha, my friend and Ryan wait for me outside Three people are on the panel. The director is in shorts and is very friendly. Since they work on consciousness, I drag them into my own theory of consciousness. The universe only has consciousness if created by humans. I begin with the thought experiment when Mr. Monologue enters in Danish's office and all that. The director asks the same question that I thought many years ago: How he could jump from utopia in to the real world? For which I have no answer. The other questions are about my Ph.D. and how would I apply my expertise to solve problems in quasicrystalline structure of space-time. Their main idea is that spacetime is quasicrystalline at Plack's scale

When the interview ends, I cannot wait to smoke a cigarette. Ayisha was enjoying the place, taking pictures.

She looks beautiful in the red dress. After the interview, we go to Malibu beach. It reminds me of my favorite TV show, *Two and a Half Men*, which is set in a Malibu beach house.

When we are leaving the Malibu area, we see the Hollywood sign on a mountain from one highway. It makes me psychotic. Mr. Monologue revolutionizes the world and dies at the end and then re-emerges another time. Every time he vanishes because of his supernatural power. He uses it. He burns and the whole cosmos takes fire. The world again evolves. He appears at the end and ends it. Lastly he finds a solution to save the universe from collapsing.

He turns the world into Hollywood. Rules are bent in Hollywood. The opposite of Hollywood is CERN where the laws remain in effect. Hollywood is heaven and CERN is hell. Life exists in heaven and death in hell. The sinners in hells are stars of heaven. They illuminate the paradise. Mr. Monologue is an entertainer in Hollywood. He is in his late 80s, wearing a three-piece suit and carrying two pistols. His last joke is always to open fire on himself starting from head to toes. He is then taken on a stretcher with a broken mouth.



I follow up one week after the interview. The response is:

*Hi, Shahid, we will be going with another candidate. We are sorry for the delay in responding and thank you for your follow up.*

*We all liked you very much and I notice that you “think spherically” and are not be rigid in your mind, which is key to this work.*

*I would like to suggest that you check in with us religiously every 90 days. We may have opportunities for you in the future.*

# 16

## THE UNIVERSITY INCIDENT

I defend my Ph.D. dissertation on August 18, 2014. With the defense, I'm at once relieved from the stress I had during my entire period of Ph.D. work. I would either be manic or very depressed. Many times I would hide from my advisor so that he didn't ask me what I was doing. In one manic episode, I asked my professor if it would be better for me to go back to Pakistan. Back there my illness was under control. He said perhaps it might be, because of the different amount of sunlight I received. Perhaps in America I received more light.

A few days later, the mania returns. It takes a week or two to settle, so I go to the department to ask my professor to give me a few days off from work. The fall semester is starting soon. I'm also teaching. In the department, I also give a copy of my paper on my monologues to my professor. I have made 13 copies and the plan is to distribute it in the university. My professor says, "Part 1. More parts are also coming." I say, "Yes." After I finish my business in the department, I head to the Writers Institute on campus to see if they could

publish my article, but the editor is not present. A staff member tells me that she may be in the office tomorrow.

I head home. I take my black backpack; it has thirteen copies of my paper in it. I wait for the bus at Collins Circle, a driveway, which goes around a big lawn. The visitors' parking lots are nearby. The city bus – CDTA – stops here. I take bus No. 12 which runs between downtown and Crossgate Mall.

I get off the bus at Brevator Street and cross Washington Avenue. Bus No. 12 runs on Washington Avenue. I continue on Brevator Street. One block away, I cross Lincoln Avenue. Here Brevator Street reaches a dead end. At the end, I enter Frank Waterson Park. This park is close to our house. We come here in the evening. There is a small hill in the middle of the park. On one side of the hill are baseball and softball grounds. On the other side are a community garden, a playground, sprinkler, two tennis courts and a dog park.

It is a sunny day. When I reach the hill, I feel I would not be able to go home safely. Instead of going to home, I climb the hill halfway and sit under the shade of a tree. Suddenly, I dig the ground with my fingers. Now I'm thinking that I'm rabbit. I dig the ground very rapidly with my both hands and make a hole. I stand up, take my backpack and motion on the hill to go home.

Before I enter my house, I light a cigarette. I inhale the smoke very deeply. I do not exhale it. I don't know as to where the smoke goes. It disappears. Today the cigarette does not give me any kick. I take another puff. This time I insert the cigarette in my nostril and sniff it. No kick in anyway. I then put the burning cigarette in my mouth and chew it. I chew it until it turns into juice. I drink the bitter juice. Then my gaze falls on the stop sign on the other side of the street. It whispers, "You did it." I burp as if I have drunk soda.

I step in the house. Ryan is living the room playing. Ayisha is in the bedroom. The door is open. I don't say anything and quietly proceed to the bathroom to wash my hands, which have mud on them. The mud has also gone underneath my nails. They look black.

When I wash my hands, I come to the bedroom. I say to Ayisha, "I did it. I quit smoking."

She looks up at me, "Really."

"Take this remaining packet. I don't need it. One thing in my way of quitting smoking was mania. In mania, I need it most. But today, when manic, I am quitting it."

She believes me and takes the packet from me.

Next day on August 26, my plan is to go to Writers Institute, but I'm not stable. Ayisha also forbids me to go to the university. I also agree. I'm sitting in bed in the room working on the second part of my monologues. On

one wall is a photo of Ryan. He's wearing a blue hoodie. "Little Fl... 14 Academy" is written on the hoodie. Some words are hidden behind the guitar he is holding. 14 is written in big fonts in the center. It makes me psychotic. What is happening in '14? Is the world changing? Another Mr. Monologue revolution is happening. The 2003, symptoms are returned. My eyes are wide open. I keep the laptop on one side and stand. I extend my arms. As I rotate my arms clockwise, it activates my neck into motion. I cannot maintain my balance and fall.

In the early afternoon, the manic fever gets lower. With the consent of my wife, I take my backpack and head to the university. I wait for the bus at Bravetor Street. I linger a few second but cannot wait. I start to walk on Washington Avenue. The university is about a 30 minutes on walk from here. There is no sidewalk here. I'm walking on the shoulder of the road on the same side as the flow of traffic. I have never walked on the opposite side. As I keep going, my gait gets faster and faster. I'm in flip-flops. I feel like I'm flying. I realize I should not have left the house. Now nothing can be done. I convince myself that I should be fine and keep walking. At the traffic signal by university, I cross the road carefully looking both ways. I enter the university main parking lots for students. Then I pass near the Earth Science & Mathematics Department building. There I jump over a

stone-bench attempting to fly like Mr. Monologue. I continue pacing. On my left is the Performing Arts Center and on the right is the Fountain and a tower in the Fountain. At the end, I turn right in the direction of the Physics Department. I do not enter Physics; instead, I go past to go to Writer Institute which is in the Science Library building.

Outside the Library, I sit on the stairs. I come to realize that I'm not feeling well. I change my mind and don't go to the Writers Institute. Now it is a big problem how to go home safely. I may misbehave with someone on the bus or sleep on Washington Avenue on exiting the bus at Bravetor Street. I see 2003. I did this at Quaid-i-Azam University.

The racing thoughts settle in a few minutes. I go downstairs and get to the Campus Center. I need a drink. In the cafeteria, I stay in line. There is only one person before me, but I cannot wait. Something happens to my mind. I flip over a table and throw a punch at a girl who is passing behind me. The girl blocks the punch. A university auxiliary services employee injects himself and throws a punch on left side of my head. I fall and then stand up. I'm barefooted. The flip-flops slip from my feet during the fight. I have extended my arms forward like one surrenders before police. My arms are shaking. Someone in the crowd asks me if I need help. There is also

a physics student in the crowd who recognizes me. I don't say anything but only that I'm going to jail. *Mr. Monologue is going to prison. He wants to listen to prisoners' problems.*

The police officers arrive on the spot. I say nothing but loudly say, "I'm God. Here is my finding." I take off my backpack and give it to the officer. They take me outside the campus center and ask if I need to go home, but I insist they cuff me. During this, the speed of thoughts slows down. I say no, no I'm not God. When they get me in the car, my professor arrives. The officer says that my professor wants to talk to me. I say to my advisor from inside the car that I don't want to talk to him. He never listened to me.

In the police station, first they take my mug shot and then interview me inside. I tell them all about my illness and what I do when ill. They are very nice. They listen to my stories. For the first time I have a chance to share my stories with someone. After doing paperwork, I'm transported in an ambulance to the Albany Medical Center for evaluation.

In the ambulance, the officer says that my phone is ringing. He hands me my phone. It is Ayisha. I'm so embarrassed. What to say to her? I do not answer the call. The police team leaves me in the emergency room saying that their job is done.

In the ER, I'm in a bed in the hallway. Rooms are full. Blood is collected for tests. One person is watching. I'm leaning in bed and am very quiet. I'm thinking about my life. How to fix myself. I have a wife and son. I need to feed them. They depend on me.

Later in the night, while I'm still lying the hallway, I ask the person, who is watching me, if there would be anything to eat. He checks the fridge and brings a plate of meatballs. It is very hot. He says he heats it up in the microwave. It burns my tongue, but I cannot wait. It's so tasty. I empty the plate.



Later, Ayisha finds me in the hospital. She sits on the edge of my bed. I cannot make eye contact with her.

“Are you upset with me? I’m very sorry,” I say.

“No, why would I be upset.” She hugs me. “You are bleeding.”

“Yes, in the university....” I tell her what happened. “How did you find me?”

“I waited for you; but when you didn’t return until 6, I became anxious. I called Mrs. Wali. She told her husband to check on you in the university. I told her to check on you first in the tutoring center where you used to teach.”

“The Academic Support Center.”

Yes.”

“Then.”

“Someone there told Hussain to call the university police.? Hussain then went to the police station. There he discovers where you are.”

“Yes, the cops brought me here. I don’t know whether I’m still under arrest.

“No, you’re free,” she says.

“You mean I can go home when discharged from here?”

“I guess.”

“How did you come here? Where is Ryan?” I ask.

“Ryan is outside with Mr. and Mrs. Wali. They are in the lounge.”

“Don’t worry about me. Go home. If you want to call me, don’t call on my cell phone. Call on the hospital number. They have taken my personal items from me.”

“OK, see you tomorrow.”

“Say thank you to Hussain,” I say.



Later, my blood report comes. After which I’m shifted to a crisis intervention center near Albany Med. In the center, the nurse shows me my room. I collapse on the bed. A little later, I’m asked to come to another room

where I'm interviewed. Most questions are about suicidal tendencies or if I have harmed anyone or myself.

Next night, I'm shifted back to Albany Med, and admitted to the psychiatric ward. In the morning, the doctors again evaluate my case.

This ward is very different. Patients are not found in their beds. They are wandering in the halls or sitting in the TV room. Most patients are given nicotine gum. I do not ask for gum. Many times in the past, I made unsuccessful attempts to quit smoking using nicotine gum. It didn't help.

Patients are encouraged to participate in activities provided to them. A social worker tells me if I do not take part and remain isolated, they will keep me for a longer time. I like coloring and bingo.

Every night Ayisha, and Mr. and Mrs. Wali visit me.

I'm discharged on September 2. I'm asked to follow-up with my doctor. They have already made my appointment with my psychiatrist for September 4. At the gate, they give me personals. My phone battery is low. I have loads of email notifications. I check the one by my professor. He says he is anxious about me and wants to know how I'm doing if I need any help. I reply to him right away, and then I get home.



Two days later, when I walk out of Health Center, I receive a call. The person at the end says that she is the Director of Student CARE Services. CARE is service for students facing challenges to their success at the university. These challenges could be mental health concerns, family matters, health issues, or financial problems. The director says that she wants to see me. She also inquires if I see a psychiatrist.

Next day I meet her. She also gives me the police report which states that no charges were pressed against me. The report does show that an arrest was made. The director says that since a fight took place on campus and police were involved, the university president got involved. He wants to evaluate my case at the university level as to whether I'm able to teach. I'm teaching four discussion classes associated with a calculus-based physics course. She also asks to sign a release form to speak with my psychiatrist. Also, she wants to meet with my wife. The director says that she represents the victim.

Next day, Ayisha and I meet with her again. The director is impressed with my good behavior. She says that I'm all set, however, someone will observe my class.

My professor is also in the loop. He asks another graduate student to observe my class. No issues are found.

# EPILOGUE

## MOOD-DEPENDENT

### BELIEF

I graduate on December 20, 2014. I do not attend the graduation ceremony. My professor also insists but I refuse. I'm too old for this day. This is something, which should have happened many years ago. I began my graduation process in 2002 in Pakistan and now it is 2014.

I continue working at UAlbany as an adjunct lecturer for the next semester. But now I'm very changed. I'm no longer a student doing anything crazy. Meanwhile, I apply for jobs, mainly to colleges. At the end of the spring semester, I find a job in a high school in the Albany area. This is an Islamic high school. I'm a Math and Science teacher.

Two years later, in June 2017, I quit the job. I'm overwhelmed by the extra job assignments by the new Principal. This creates a big problem at home. How could I quit the job? To run the house, both partners need to work. Ayisha is an associate in a retail store. She cannot run the house alone.

In October, I find a part-time tutoring job in the Albany area. It is manageable. No need to prepare lesson plans or meeting with the parents. The job is to prepare high school students for ACT or SAT tests. Colleges require scores of these tests.

The mood swings do happen, but not with as much intensity. It has made my belief bipolar too. I call it mood-dependent belief. At one time, I'm an atheist. At another time, I'm a theist. I'm atheist when stable. Since I'm stable for most of the time, therefore on average I'm an atheist.

Now when I go to sleep, I don't see long knives penetrating in my body, but a rocket that rises and rises until it is set into orbit. I change sides and sleep.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The events and dialogues are based on author's memories of them. Some names and the identifying information have been changed. Certain names or events have been combined into one. The book cover image has been designed in Desmos Graphing Calculator.