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Fable of a Severed Head*

5:40— VERAR LOCAL EXPRESS

Shifting his heavy, red canvas bag from his left shoulder to his right, he looked up at the Churchgate Station monitor and scurried toward Platform 3. People were practically running to the platform to board the 5:40 local. Women office workers were scrambling into the ladies' compartment, pushing and shoving, being pushed and shoved in the wild crush, barely managing to keep their stride under the weight of their dangling purses and shoulder bags, as if this was the last train. Dog-tired from the day's grueling work, he only wanted to plop down by some window and let the fatigue of the day, indeed of his whole life, slowly ooze out of his bones.

He spotted an empty seat almost as soon as he stepped into a first-class compartment. Before he could get to it, a young man who was lost in the music flowing from his MP3 player through the headphones patted on his ears, practically lunged forward and grabbed it. He looked at the young man in disgust. "All right, buddy, but you won't get to sit there long!" All the seats were taken now. With a quick, upward movement he thrust his shoulder bag onto the overhead rack, walked into the aisle, and stood holding the handle swaying just above his head. The train jerked softly and started to move. As it picked up speed, so did his heartbeat—thump ... thump ... thump ... thump ... Charni Road ... Grant Road ... thump ... thump ... thump ... thump ... Mumbai Central ... Mahalakshmi ... Dadar ... thump ... thump ... thump ... thump ... The local was speeding along, people were getting off, climbing aboard, spilling into the compartment, a veritable coop packed with chickens. Yet they went on playing cards and chattering away. These were the regulars who sat in the same compartment of the same local train day after day and played cards or made small talk to kill the monotony of a few hours' commute. Bandra Station had already passed. The constant jostling and shoving of the crowd had pushed him into the narrow gap between two seats, close to

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the rack where his own red bag sat among an assortment of carry-ons. All of a sudden his cell phone started to ring. Putting it up to his ear, he shouted something above the din, glanced at his watch, and hung up. He looked around the compartment and his eyes alighted on a flabby man sitting by the window looking outside, his jowls busily at work on a glob of chewing spices stuffed inside his mouth. Thump ... thump ... thump ... thump ... Santa Cruz was passing, the next station was Andheri. He quickly looked at his watch and just as he was dialing his phone an enormous explosion went off in his head ...

For a split second he saw the crowd of riders, whether seated or standing, swirl in front of him a few times like photo frames. In less time than it took for his entire body to vault upward with incredible force and fall back down, it disintegrated into big and small chunks of flesh and his severed head hit the ceiling like a ball squirting jets of blood everywhere before dropping onto the iron floor where it bounced once, rolled over to the frame of a seat, bumped into its leg, shook slightly, and settled. His stomach had ballooned for an instant and then exploded, followed by a long drawn out whistle, akin to the steam let out by a pressure cooker ... *shooooon*.

In the thousandth part of a second, his eyes relayed this scene to his brain.

The sturdy ceiling made of iron sheets had been torn up miserably, as if some mammoth fist had come down on it with massive force; ceiling fans, twisted out of shape, dangled precariously by their cables; where before there was a window, now there was a gaping hole as large as a door; a blood-spattered shoe lay nearby; a wallet, its mouth gaping wide, revealed a few bank notes and a photograph of a little girl in ponytails with drops of dried blood on her forehead and lips. Farther away lay an open fist slightly curled around a broken pouch of chewing spices. Blood from the ears of the young man listening to his MP3 had streaked all the way down to his jaws, his glazed eyes locked into vacant space, and nothing left below his stomach except a web of blood-drenched intestines. Screams of horror, shock, and terror were circling like a haunting echo. Feet clad in flip-flops, sandals, and heavy boots, were treading over blotches of clotted blood, stepping over torn bodies. Countless hands were hurriedly collecting shattered bodies, cut-up limbs and dead bodies on stretchers, and pieces of human flesh in sheets. The pair of frozen eyes saw this horrific devastation and a cold but exhilarating smile of immense satisfaction splashed across the lifeless lips for the thousandth part of an instant, an involuntary smile that appears after one has performed an impossible task.

The stench of rotting human flesh and gore pervaded the impenetrable darkness like some suffocating gas. Time itself seemed frozen inside this blood-chilling darkness—a darkness as terrifying as the gloom in the hollow of a grave. How long? He tried to calculate the time. Perhaps he had been waiting in the murky shadows of his grave for hundreds, indeed thousands of years for Judgment Day ...

A shaft of milky white light suddenly lit up the intense darkness with a rumble, evoking the inevitable feeling that the impending hour of retribution had finally arrived. He saw a band of khaki-clad men standing in front of him, hands stuffed into white gloves and handkerchiefs tied tightly around their mouths. One man, somewhat more advanced in years, wearing a cap and uniform and a pair of rimless eyeglasses, appeared to be their chief.

“Mighty strange, wouldn’t you say Inspector Chauhan, more than three weeks and no one’s come to claim it!” the chief said, touching him. His fingers had the steely grip of a vise. He was staring at the lifeless head that had swelled and now looked somewhat larger than ordinary heads because of the chemical process used to preserve it at four degrees Celsius for three straight weeks. His body was blown to pieces in such a way that not a single limb had been left intact. As soon as the head was dislodged from the body, all the blood had drained out and it had turned as pale as turmeric. His immobile eyes were open, the irises totally white. His jaw was shattered and turned sideways. The lifeless face, with its puffy nose slightly bent to one side, with its thick lips and broad forehead, had a deep scar in the corner of its upper lip from some old injury.

“How many dead bodies, would you say?” asked the chief in rimless glasses.

“Besides this severed head, there’s just one other unclaimed body. The rest have already been picked up by the relatives,” Inspector Chauhan replied.

“I see ... The Government has announced compensation of half a million rupees for the victims’ survivors,” the chief said, his eyes riveted on the head. “Someone or other should have claimed it.”

“Sir, one woman is looking for her disabled husband. She shows up every morning with her child.”

“Did you show her the skull?”

“Yes, I did, but she said her husband was dark. The head must be from someone with a lighter complexion. I even showed her the other unclaimed body, but that one is charred beyond recognition.”

“Until someone identifies this head, we’ll have to keep it well preserved.”

“Sir, I’ve noticed something very peculiar,” the inspector hesitated.

“Go on, what is it?” the chief stared at him from behind his rimless glasses.

“Sir, look closely,” he pointed at the pale face of the severed head examining it carefully. “It seems ... as if he was ... smiling in his last moments.”

The chief first gave his subordinate a suspicious look: what in the world made him think the head was smiling! And then he examined the lifeless object with his own eyes. The lips were open a touch, revealing two lines of firmly pressed teeth over which the dried blood had taken on a darkish hue. He thought the lips were a bit stretched out, which Inspector Chauhan probably mistook for smile.

“What rubbish!” the chief exclaimed jerking his head. “Who ever smiles in their last moments! This is absolutely the first time I’ve heard such nonsense!”

He came from a village in Kanpur. His parents had died when he was just a child, the youngest of five. His eldest brother was some twelve or fifteen years his senior and had retired only a year ago after serving as an accountant in a sugar mill. He was the one who had looked after the whole family. Not for this reason alone, but partly because he was aware of his responsibility and had married quite late, the family too regarded him as their father. He had no children of his own; he treated his siblings as his children. The sister-in-law too was extremely kind and loving. The boy turned out to be quite intelligent from very early on, which led his eldest brother to get him enrolled in the Indian Institute of Technology at Kanpur. He did extremely well and stood first among the entire graduating class in Computer Science and Engineering, and he didn’t have much difficulty landing a job with a multinational company in Mumbai. His dazzling achievement made his brother immensely happy and whenever they talked on the phone he always advised him to be honest and hardworking, attributes that had won him the confidence of the management of the sugar mill. When his sister-in-law talked with him, she urged him to steer clear of the seductions of the city, the glitz and glamour, and never failed to ask him if he had found a suitable girl yet.

After he was settled in his job he felt that it was now his duty to live up to the expectations of his brother who, putting aside his own needs, had raised him and provided him with an absolutely first-rate education. Taking his brother’s advice to heart he was working with honesty and diligence—working, that is, until the day a fair, dreamy-eyed man with a long, light brownish beard that quite became him, unexpectedly appeared

in his life and utterly changed its very meaning. A kamiz that reached far below the knees and a shalwar that hesitated well above the ankles on his tallish frame gave him a sharp, keen look. This man raised so many questions about life's purpose and the value of death that he felt as shaken as the earth, indeed an entire population, following a seismic tremor. He had met him in some gathering of friends. On the very first encounter, it was obvious to him that a person simply could not look deeply into his large eyes for longer than a second. A conspicuous quality of his disposition was that he could say the crudest and bitterest thing with incredible softness. No matter how heated a discussion might be, he was never heard raising his voice or showing any sign of irritation or anger.

"A life bereft of the will to achieve something sublime and a death without the desire to accomplish something noble is only the destiny of animals. And such animals are found among humans too. If a person wants to truly live as a human, the first condition is to consider your people a single family and never hesitate to lay down your life, or even take life, for their protection and to obtain justice."

"And did you? I mean, did you ever have to face such an ordeal?" asked someone.

He first stared at the man who had asked the question and then stretched out his right leg and pulled the bottom of his shalwar all the way up to his knee. Below his knee there was a stump fitted with a steel-and-fiberglass prosthesis. Almost everyone was taken aback because his gait never betrayed the fact that half of his leg was missing. He lit a cigarette and the room was filled with the pungent smell of an imported Rothman. "Every moment that follows another, I consider a new life; in other words, I can perceive death in every breath I take. Always ready to embrace it. Remember, only cowards are afraid of dying."

Amazed, all he could do was gawk at this man with such a beautiful face and such indomitable courage.

"What makes life so precious to you—really?" he asked, looking at everyone in turn with a sweet smile. Then, after a pause, he proceeded to answer the question himself. "Material satisfaction, sexual pleasure, blood relations—isn't that it? Is any one man able to achieve all this at once? And assuming he does, exactly how long do they last? Five, twenty-five, fifty years! But no more, do they? Worldly relationships are a deception. Relatives profess their love for you as long as you live, but forget you soon after you die. No one lives or dies for another. But just imagine a life that never ends, where time doesn't even exist, so plentifully supplied with goods and sexual prowess that youth's effervescence might never leave the body and one instant of pleasure might stretch over many centuries.

So tell me now, which one is important: this ephemeral life or that other one that never ends?" He was laying it all out, causing the eyes of his audience to shine with a brightness brought on by a concept of a life that transcended life itself.

"Isn't enduring inequity the same as giving more power to the tyrant? Isn't it the worst kind of cowardice? Are we not told that we must live like a ghazi (warrior) and die like a shaheed, a martyr?" He had said that haltingly, probing each face one by one. "To defend the oppressed with force means the death of the oppressor. It isn't some kind of vengeance, it's simply the execution of justice." He was talking softly but pointedly, though his face was blazing like red-hot copper.

The man's every word was teeming with numerous spearheads that invaded every single cell of his brain. For the first time he was overwhelmed by the feeling that like countless other men he too was yoked to a life that had no purpose, its center occupied merely by his own family when, in fact, everyone among his people scattered throughout the world was a part of his family. Every time he looked at a newspaper or switched on a news channel, a slew of crying, inconsolable children, grieving women, and wounded, bleeding, frightened men stood before him. While surfing the net one evening, images of mutilated bodies and traumatized souls from all corners of the earth suddenly spilled out from the screen, formed a circle around him and stared at him silently. They looked at him helplessly, their despondent eyes brimming with questions, which made him panic and close his eyes. Their muted sobs, their painful groans made every hair on his body quiver.

He consulted his family doctor who listened and explained that those images had no reality. They were merely a reflection of his own imagination. It was called hallucination. The doctor advised him not to dwell too much on melancholy events and depressing incidents and wrote a prescription for some tranquilizers. As long as he kept using the medication, he didn't suffer from hallucinations, but if he neglected to pop a pill one day, those same shattered, bleeding images again poured out of the screen and stared at him, as if demanding: "What have you done for us?" And then they would start to sob softly. Soon their anguished sighs shook the entire room like someone overwhelmed by a sense of guilt.

A thin, sallow-complexioned woman stood in the Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) room on the first floor of the Police Commission's hundred-year-old, black-stoned building, trying to appease the whimpering child in her lap. She looked pretty haggard, as if she hadn't oiled and combed her hair

for days, although both the bindi in the middle of her forehead and the sindoor dust in the part of hair seemed quite fresh. In the past three hours the police constable had asked her to leave countless times: the boss was out on inspection and would probably be returning late. She just heard him out, but asked no questions and didn't budge. A while later, as Inspector Chauhan, wearing dark glasses, crossed the corridor swiftly and went over to his desk, he was slightly jolted to see the woman, hesitated briefly, and then went inside his cubicle. A swarthy, middle-aged man, his jaw constantly moving from the effort of chewing his paan and betel nut, followed him in.

The woman looked expectantly at the door swinging behind them.

"What's it like outside? Any news, Kala Babu?" asked the inspector, lighting a cigarette and offering the packet to the swarthy man.

"Eerily quiet ... all over," Kala Babu also lit a cigarette.

"Anyway, keep your eyes and ears open. It's been three weeks. We're under terrible pressure from the higher-ups," said the inspector and rang the bell to ask the constable minding the door to send the woman in.

She entered, balancing the still-crying child on her waist.

"Have they found your husband?" the inspector asked.

"That's what I've come to find out from *bujur*," the woman importuned.

"Well, look, there's just this one burnt body left. You've already seen it. You say your husband was crippled and very dark. And you think that unclaimed head isn't your husband's either?" Then, putting just the right amount of emphasis on each word, he said, "I kind of feel that your husband ... I mean in the blast ..."

"No, please don't say that, sir," the woman cried and shook her head refusing to believe.

"Did you have your breakfast?" the inspector asked.

She just stared at his face in silence. "Will you have some tea and biscuits?" he asked.

"No, sir, I don't want anything. My husband ..." and she burst into tears.

The inspector took off his dark glasses and put them on the table, opened a file and started reading. Kala Babu was looking at the woman intently. "Don't cry, don't cry," he said and subjected her to an inquiry of his own. Her husband hawked cheap Chinese stuff at the Andheri station. He hadn't returned home since the blast. His old, deaf mother keeps remembering him and crying. It becomes impossible to reason with her or even ask her to stop crying because she can't hear.

"You have a ration card?" asked Kala Babu, staring into the woman's eyes that had by now turned red from crying.

“Yes, Brother,” the woman said quickly.

“The Government has allocated altogether half a million in compensation, right? If no trace is found of your husband, you can also get ... ”

“No, Brother, no. I only want my husband.” The woman broke into a crying fit. Seeing his mother’s state, the child also began bawling loudly.

The inspector briefly lifted his eyes from the file, gave her a look and then returned to reading. The Babu used every trick he knew to prepare the woman to accept the reality, but all she could do was keep sobbing.

“Come back two days from now,” the inspector said, without raising his eyes from the file.

The woman tarried a little with tears in her eyes and then said “Namaste” and practically dragged herself out of the room. Kala Babu leaned toward the inspector and said softly, “Sir, I’ll be back in a minute,” and, following the woman, he too left the room. The woman was walking in the long corridor taking small steps. Her child was still crying. Perhaps he was hungry ... Kala Babu walked quickly and caught up with her. With a look of immense compassion he yanked out a hundred-rupee note from his pocket and held it out to her. When she refused to take it he tried to reason with her gently that it was meant for her to buy milk for the child. He stuffed the note in the child’s fist. The woman burst into tears.

“Look, Bai, it’s been a month, right? And not a trace of your husband, right? He might have perished in the blast, right? You have an infant and you need to take care of him, right? Weeping and crying isn’t going to do much good, right?” He was talking like some nursery school teacher, stressing every word. “The incident is still fresh, the Government’s still in a generous mood, right? This is the time to grab whatever you can. If time passes, the Government will forget its promise. And then you’ll knock about till your chappals wear out but you won’t get a penny, understand? Let us know in two days, right? I’ll speak to the boss and smooth things over for you, right?” Kala Babu’s litany of “right” was busy at work bridging the gulf between her mind and her heart. Her eyes were fixed in a daze on the face of this swarthy man who seemed like an angel in that moment. The child was gripping the note tightly.

“Believe me, I don’t want anything from you,” Kala Babu blurted out impatiently, unable to withstand her vacant gaze. “Of course there will be some expenses in getting the matter settled, but I’ll pay that out of my own pocket. Just remember me when you receive your compensation, right?” He gently stroked the cheek of the child whose tiny hand was still clutching the note. He smiled broadly at the dazed woman, which revealed his filthy brown teeth. The woman just stood there, as if her feet were nailed to the ground, lost in troublesome thoughts of the future. Pushing

her into the vortex of a myriad questions and misgivings, Kala Babu walked with giant steps back toward the inspector's cubicle.

It was an unruly mob screaming slogans at the top of their lungs, holding saffron-colored banners that were hundreds of years old, their foreheads smeared with saffron and red powder that was even more ancient. They were gathering around a dust-colored, moss-covered, high-domed building like some rebellious tidal wave that surrounds a rock and slowly submerges it. The feral energy of madness had breached the ring of khaki uniforms without resistance. All at once frothing saffron waves swelled up ominously from the area surrounding the ancient building that stood like a formidable rock and caused it to crumble like a fragile, gritty sand dune, leaving no trace of either history or topographic feature, nor even the high-handedness of the law. There was only the wild uncontrollable mob that had smashed all the rules and regulations of law and nature, leaving in its wake a cloud of dust that was rising like their slogans ...

The sun's red was dissolving into the saffron of deepening darkness like a wet cloth soaked in blood. Tridents, swords, spears and machetes blazed in the darkness and blood-splattered bodies fell to the ground amid muted screams and cries. As they ran for protection, children were pierced with the points of spears and swords and women's clothes were torn from their bodies. Hungry dogs mauled and gnawed at the naked bodies in the streets and alleyways. There was neither a place of refuge nor a protector anywhere in sight.

The DVD playing on the television ended, but each of its scenes kept playing in his mind like a horrific nightmare. The room was filled with a funereal silence. Whether this was due to some unpleasant incident or because of questions that had inevitably impinged on his consciousness after watching the film he couldn't decide. No one had argued that day. The cigarette pressed between the lips of the long-bearded man was glowing like suppressed anger. Scratching their flushed faces with his piercing eyes, the man had communicated his message directly to their brains: "If a person wants to truly live as a human, the first condition is to consider your people a single family and never hesitate to lay down your life, or even take life, for their protection and to obtain justice."

He stayed up late that night, and only fell asleep after a lot of tossing and turning. In his sleep he had the sensation of his body touching someone. He felt around in the darkness until his hand touched something wet and clammy. Feeling alarmed, he got up and quickly turned on the lamp on the side table. He was astonished to see that the sheet covering him

was sticking up in a strange shape. He extended his hand gingerly toward it and turned it over with one quick, precise movement. A scream escaped from his lips. A man soaked in blood was lying on his side. Both fists were pressed against his knees and he was moaning. With shaking hands, he grabbed the stranger's shoulder and turned him over. His heart dropped. He couldn't believe his eyes: it was he himself lying in bed, horribly wounded and mauled. He himself exactly, same face, same height! His body was covered with deep cuts and bruises, as if it had been stabbed with some extremely sharp-edged weapon. He was sobbing and hissing: "Save me! Please save me! ... They're going to kill me! ..."

Seeing himself in this state he began to shudder with fear. He felt the ceiling fan stopping, the ceiling itself beginning to cave in, the walls crumbling, the ground quaking ...

In the morning he found himself lying on the floor with a nasty headache and a burning sensation in his eyes. Suddenly he remembered everything that had transpired during the night and stood up quickly, staring at the bed, his eyes bulging with astonishment and a nameless fear. The sheet was crumpled but there was no sign of the wounded man who had been lying on the bed moaning from pain. And the sheet was spotless.

The long-bearded man listened intently to the description of his condition and then said with a peaceful smile, "This is neither mental anxiety nor are you possessed by some evil spirit. All those grieving people you saw were your conscience. The wounded one lying on your bed was your soul."

"What do they want from me? After all, what can I do for them?" he asked in a trembling voice.

The long-bearded man said with an affectionate smile, "A lot. You can sacrifice your life for a noble purpose and thereby attain cosmic happiness in an unfulfilled life. This happiness begins as soon as a person is placed in his grave, which turns into a flower garden for martyrs." He felt very light and full of self-confidence after he shook hands with the man and came out onto the street. He felt a spring in his step, and all those buses and cars zipping by seemed like so many automatic toys in an expo, the passersby like the lifeless creatures in computer graphics, and the skyscrapers like a pile of empty cigarette packs. Apparently he was prepared for that noble and grand purpose which promises a cosmic happiness in an unfulfilled life after death ...

In the ATS office, the inspector with two sub-inspectors at his side was looking intently at the face of the elderly man in an old-fashioned shirt and

trousers with a closely cropped beard who time and again compared a picture of the severed head with the photo he had brought along. His hands were shaking from an unknown fear and anxiety and his eyes were probing.

Yesterday, too, the man had come to the ATS office, but as he approached the staircase he noticed that some people who stood facing a bulletin board on the wall across from them were deeply absorbed in looking at a particular notice. A frail old woman in a Kolhapuri sari stood near the board resting her hand on the shoulder of a six- or seven-year-old girl. She would repeatedly interrupt asking one of the readers in Marathi for something, but nobody paid attention to her. Her utter despondency caused the elderly man with the closely cropped beard to stop. Suddenly the eyes of the old woman fell upon him and she hobbled over to him. What she said to him in her Marathi-mixed-Hindi was that she was searching for the name of her son Ganpat Tikkaram Gaikwar on the list. Shaking his head the man proceeded with her over to the bulletin board. A strange fear gripped him when he realized that the list contained the names of the dead and wounded from the train bomb blast. He took his glasses from his pocket and began reading the list:

1. SHIVRAM SHANTARAM MOOREY, 40 YEARS
2. RAM BACHCHAN YADO, 53 YEARS
3. KHATOON B. ANSARI, 67 YEARS
4. DILEEP ILHAS JOSHA, 45 YEARS
5. RITA DESOZA, 18 YEARS
6. MUHAMMAD ALI HAIDAR ALI PATHAN, 36 YEARS
7. VASANT JADHUPOVAR, 28 YEARS
8. TABASSUM AYYUB SHAIKH 27 YEARS
9. BABY SHABANA MUHAMMAD USMAN, 8 YEARS ...

He went on reading with slowly clouding eyes. Then, No. 112 appeared: "Ganpat Tikkaram Gaikwar, 42 years." The instant he read out the name the old woman collapsed on the floor wailing loudly. She was striking her face with her hands and the girl in tow tried her best to calm her. The man was overcome by the woman's inconsolable lamentation and a nameless misgiving seized his heart. He left the place and returned to the inn where he was staying. Today, when he explained to Inspector Chauhan why he couldn't come yesterday, the latter said, "We see such lamentation every day, but what can we do? We can't turn back the way you did. We steel our hearts and perform our duty."

The ATS investigating team had already examined the two pictures closely. They had the photo of a cheerful, smiling young man that had probably been taken for some identity card. Then there was this other picture of a swollen, severed head with terribly mutilated features.

"Yes, Darogha Sahib," said the man, "although the picture does not

exactly look like my brother, the features do resemble his ... somewhat. The face has become so distorted it is difficult to recognize.” Then in a trembling voice he added, “I pray it isn’t my brother.”

“And so do we. The fact is our team suspects that he was the same terrorist who planted the bomb in the train. But of course, it’s just a suspicion. We’ll have to investigate the matter thoroughly.”

A chill ran through the man’s body and beads of perspiration oozed out on his forehead ... Chhoto? A terrorist? It just can’t be, he thought. The question of whether he would give in to vice or go astray doesn’t even arise given his upbringing. Besides, Chhoto wasn’t argumentative or irascible. He couldn’t be talked into doing anything perverse. A child who’d never killed a bird with a slingshot, how could he ever become a terrorist! They’re police officers, after all. It’s their job to suspect. It’s not for no reason that people say, given the opportunity, they’re not above suspecting their own fathers ...

“When did you last see your brother?” a sub-inspector’s query jolted him out of his thoughts.

“We haven’t had a chance to see Chhoto in the past twelve months, but we did talk with him on the phone. We talked with him ten or twelve minutes before the bomb went off. We’d found a beautiful girl for him and I called him to discuss it.”

“What did he say?”

“Just that he was too preoccupied with a slew of important matters to even think about marriage.” As he said that, his eyes became moist. “Darogha Sahib, may I look at the head?” He wanted to look at the unclaimed head in order to reassure himself that he wasn’t wrong in placing his trust in his younger brother.

“Of course!” said the inspector and got up after instructing a sub-inspector to have the suspicious man who was in custody brought to the morgue of the J.J. Hospital in the other jeep. The elderly man walked out of the cubicle behind the inspector. Wiping away the tears he had so far managed to hold back in the inspector’s presence, he proceeded toward the wooden staircase. As he was going down, steadying his trembling legs on the steps with difficulty, he couldn’t believe what he was seeing: On the wall near the staircase some people were looking closely at a notice on the bulletin board. The old woman in the Kolhapuri sari whom he had seen yesterday was there again with her hand resting on the same girl’s shoulder. She was making entreaties about something in Marathi to all and sundry but no one seemed to bother with her. He felt that she would soon see him and ask him to find out whether her son Ganpat Tikkaram Gaikwar’s name appeared on the list ... In great consternation he turned

his face away and quickly left the building. He wanted to leave the place at once. He couldn't avoid feeling that the old woman was hobbling toward him as fast as she could holding on to her granddaughter's shoulder for support.

His cell phone started to ring and kept ringing for quite a while, but he had no mind to take the call. As he sat in the rear seat of the jeep with the members of the ATS team, he was deeply immersed in thoughts of his youngest brother. Chhoto's innocent face dangled before him like a framed photograph. In a way, all of the siblings were deprived of parental love and were affected by its absence, but being the youngest, Chhoto seemed to have been affected the most. Perhaps that's why he never got into any mischief like most kids. For the first time he deeply regretted that he had been unable to buy nice clothes and toys for his younger brothers and sisters, especially Chhoto who was the youngest—because he made so little money. He felt it even more strongly because now, earning a good salary, Chhoto was overly concerned with the needs of the whole household. On every festival he never failed to send clothes, toys, and shoes to his two married sisters and their children ... The cell phone started to ring again. He was jolted from his thoughts. Quickly pulling the phone out of his pant pocket, he brought it to his ear. His wife was speaking on the other end.

“I heard it on the TV—the head might belong to some terrorist.”

There was a tremor of impatience and fear in her voice and she was having tremendous difficulty keeping herself under control.

“But the picture looks very different. Anyway, it will become clear after I've looked at the severed head that it's not our Chhoto's.” He said that in a deliberately loud voice and then hung up. He was amazed how easily and confidently he had lied. He didn't want to hurt his wife by telling her that although the picture of the unclaimed head didn't exactly resemble his brother's, the slightly curved nose and the scar above the upper lip were exactly like Chhoto's.

The J.J. Hospital morgue was about as old as the facility itself. With the man with the close-cropped beard in tow, the inspector of the ATS and his team entered the dreary morgue followed by two hospital sweepers who were pushing a gurney. The stench was so oppressive that just about everyone had put their handkerchiefs over their noses and mouths. Passing through a large hall where a few corpses lay stark naked on stone slabs, they stepped into the heavy, close atmosphere of the refrigerated room. Here, dead bodies were kept on sliding shelves at near-freezing tempera-

ture. At a sign from the inspector one of the sweepers pulled out a shelf ... The man with the close-cropped beard saw that it was the same head as in the picture, its frozen eyes fixed on him. His heart thumped loudly in his chest. He could recognize his brother behind seven screens, among a million people. In front of him was the head of his well-intentioned, dutiful youngest brother, the very sight of which rattled him to his very bones, the head of a man who had wasted his own life while taking the lives of innocent people.

“And here I am, left to wallow in the filth of an ephemeral world!” the thought occurred to him. “Death is eternal sleep, they say. Amazing that one should say that without experiencing it! The fact is sleep vanishes with death, leaving protracted waiting in its wake ... for one’s salvation!”

The scene melted and became clear before the frozen eyes of the head. If it had a heart it would have fluttered wildly. His eldest brother was standing right in front of him, his face as lifeless as a piece of charcoal from which all the glow and heat had departed. He looked at him intently and saw him move his quaking hand toward him, then pull it back quickly. He was shaking his head ... out of immense pain ... anger ... regret ... denial ...

“Look at it carefully.” It was the same voice he’d heard several times.

“No, Darogha Sahib, it’s not my brother.” The words caught in his throat.

“Are you absolutely sure?” asked the inspector.

“Ye ... ye ... yes!” Bhai Sahib said with finality.

The head saw Bhai Sahib swivel quickly on his heels and make for the door. His neck bent down, his shoulders slouched, like an ox weighed down under the crushing weight of a yoke.

Once again the head found itself in nauseating darkness. Never in his life had he imagined for an instant that Bhai Sahib, who loved him like a father, would refuse to recognize him this way. A sentence echoed in the darkness: “Worldly relationships are a deception. Relatives profess their love for you as long as you live, but forget you soon after you die. No one lives or dies for another.”

The feeling that he had really been living under the deception of relationships until now overwhelmed him. Thank God he had now not only extricated himself from the slush of this deception but was also witnessing its demise. If only he had freed himself from it sooner and devoted his life to the pursuit of his noble purpose. If only ...

Was it only a few minutes or a few hours or a few years after Bhai Sahib

left when there was again light in the darkness? This time quite a few people emerged from the dirty walls and came to stand before the head. The head's eyes first fell on the bunch of uniformed men, headed by the police officer who wore dark glasses. Then, somewhere in the midst of this throng he spotted the outline of someone in handcuffs clad in white from head to toe. What the dead eyes saw after they had adjusted to this sudden flux of light was truly very surprising: his ideal, the Perfect Man was standing before him. His long beard was matted now. His face reflected apprehension and dread, his dreamy eyes the fatigue of many sleepless nights.

"Look at it and tell us whether you recognize him," the inspector said in a commanding voice.

Why wouldn't he recognize me?—the head thought. He doesn't fear death like the worldly. He's a true ghazi, ready to sacrifice his life and take life any moment for the sake of his people. My relationship with him is not a blood relationship that material considerations or greed might rupture, as Bhai Sahib has done. Our relationship is based on unshakable belief, a solid ideal and a lofty purpose.

They all approached and bent over him, so close indeed that the head felt the long beard of the man literally poking into its eyes. For a moment he felt as though the other man was about to kiss his forehead. If only I could tell this man who has given me the true understanding of life—the head thought—that thanks to you I've accomplished the lofty purpose of my life.

The man straightened up, wiped the sweat off his brow, and then shook his head with a smile, "No," he said, "I don't know who he is."

There was a slight tremor in his voice.

Perhaps he didn't recognize me. How could he? After all, my face is so distorted ... Had he recognized me he would surely have declared proudly: Yes, he's the young man who preferred martyrdom over a life of ignominy, who regarded his people as his own family and sacrificed himself for a great cause ... That man's words were still reverberating in his mind: "Live like a warrior and die like a martyr."

"Don't lie! You do know him, don't you?" Inspector Chauhan's tone was quite severe. "Wasn't this suicide bomber a member of your organization?"

Looking with contempt at his lifeless eyes, the man said, "No. He was not one of us. We consider it a great sin to take the life of innocent people and the taking of one's own life is absolutely forbidden in our religion!"

Something exploded loudly in his head. His brain shattered and whistles started to blow in his ears as darkness fell before his eyes like a thick, black curtain. Everything was instantly shut out from his eyes.

In the dimly lit morgue all of them were standing by the rack of the freezer with handkerchiefs over their noses. As always, inspector Chauhan had on his dark glasses. Today, more than any other day, Kala Babu's jaw was working impatiently and doubly hard crushing the betel nut and paan stuffed into his mouth. The attendant and a clerk of the morgue stood holding a file and some forms. Behind them stood a terrified woman in a dirty sari with its hem drawn over her mouth. A chill brought on by some nameless fear was slowly spreading through her body. Perhaps she hadn't combed or oiled her hair for quite a few days, but the bindi mark in the middle of her forehead appeared quite fresh. However, today there was no sindoor dust in the part ... The sound of a child crying nonstop outside could be heard in the room. The sweeper pulled the shelf out of the freezer with full force: the same unclaimed head was staring at them with its lifeless eyes. Kala Babu took out a small packet from his pocket, gave it to the woman in the sari and made a sign. The woman took a pinch of perfumed red dust and smeared it on the brow of the head with trembling hands. Joining her hands, she bowed to it reverentially, and then, God knows moved by what emotion, she burst into tears.

Kala Babu pulled out a length of virgin white cloth pressed between his underarm and thrust it toward the sweeper who extended his gloved hands, picked up the head, put it inside a polyethylene bag and wrapped it carefully in the cloth. The sweeper set this ball of white cloth on the gurney with the same reverence that one places a dead body before its survivors and then started to wheel the gurney toward the door. As soon as the woman emerged from the freezer room she took the crying child from the constable's lap and hugged it. Kala Babu took out several fifty- and hundred-rupee bills from his pocket and tipped the lower-rank workers of the hospital and morgue. After coming out of the building they walked toward a waiting taxi Kala Babu had engaged ahead of time. The woman and Kala Babu took the rear seat. The woman was holding the white-wrapped head in her lap as though it was not some dead object but a live bomb.

"Don't delay the last rites." Despite its impenetrable polyethylene shroud and thick white-cloth wrap, the head heard the inspector instructing someone. "Kala Babu, beware, it will begin to decompose very quickly now."

"What a stench, sahib. I can hardly bear it. We'll go straight to the Dadra electric crematorium."

"Crematorium!" he protested with the full power of his lungs, but after the blast he had also lost his ability to speak. In his voiceless scream there was a protest that was unable to create the slightest vibration in the

sensitive wireless waves floating in the air.

Before the taxi started the woman looked at Inspector Chauhan and joined her hands in a gesture of deep gratitude. Sitting next to her, Kala Babu was smiling broadly, puffing away on a cigarette pressed between his filthy brown teeth. Suddenly the inspector remembered something. He quickly ordered the taxi-driver to halt and said to the woman, "Just pull the wrap and let me have a look at the face."

The woman covered her mouth and nose with the hem of her sari, unwrapped the white cloth, picked up the head in its polyethylene bag and showed it to the inspector. The inspector removed his dark glasses, covered his mouth and nose with his handkerchief, and stuck his head in the window. He took a long hard look at the stinking, disfigured head, and started. He couldn't believe what he saw ...

The eyes of the severed head, which was melting away like hot wax, were shut tightly and its lips were pressed together so hard it seemed as if it was caught in a deathly struggle to arrest some unbearable anguish between its jaws. □

—Translated by Mubammad Umar Memon