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Gains and Losses*

I SWEAR TO YOU I didn't see him; he came in front of the car very suddenly. He wasn't there and then he was ... like a jinn. I agree that I drive a bit fast, but not so fast that I can't see a full-grown, six-foot-tall human being. Besides the fact that on this deserted road nobody else could be seen for miles. I believe he was hiding behind the tree and deliberately jumped out in front of my car. Obviously he got hit and was flat on the road. I cursed out loud, perhaps at him, perhaps at myself, or call it a generic outburst of frustration. For a second, I considered leaving him. There was nobody for miles, just the whirling eddies of hot wind on a June afternoon. If he wants to commit suicide, why should I get in the way of his plans? Perhaps it was the innate goodness woven into the texture of every human's soul that overcame me at that moment. I got out of the car to check on him. As soon as I touched his wrist he jumped up and stood erect, as if nothing had happened. Jesus, looks as though this was his *modus operandi*! I was sure he was going to ask for money. What a dangerous way of making money, he could have gotten killed!

"Can't you see? Are you blind? It's mid-afternoon, not even dark that you wouldn't see the car?" I screamed at him. Have you heard the American saying: "A good offense is the best defense." So before he could even utter a word I was all over him. But the truth is that even Americans rely rather too much on this saying. They've now launched offensives for threats that don't exist yet. What can a poor man do? I think power is the best defense, but who gives a damn about what I think! Well, let's get back to the story at hand. In response to my tirade the man smiled; yes, he smiled. I really got confused. See, there's an expected, predictable reaction to most things. You tell me, was smiling an expected reaction here? Smiles can solve problems, but not when they're meant to deliberately upset you. And yes, I did lose it.

*"Sūd-o-Ziyān," from the author's collection *Dūsra Rukh* (Karachi: Scheherzade, 2011), pp. 118-32.

“You’re smiling? Are you crazy? Don’t you realize you could have died? If you really want to die try a train.”

“I’m not crazy, I’m a jinn.”

“You’re a what?”

“Jinn. A jinn. Are you hard of hearing?”

Must be a con artist. To avoid trouble, I turned to get back in the car and speed away from all this nonsense.

“Where are you going? I really am a jinn, my name is Sheharzad.” His tone was plaintive. “I had to test your character, which is why I jumped in front of your car. Had you left me unattended, nothing would have happened and I would have waited for the next driver. Now that you’ve passed the test, at least take your reward.” A middle-aged man, not very tall but not short, neither fat nor thin, dressed in shalwar and kurta, claiming to be a jinn!

“Why, of course, you’re every bit a jinn, and I’m Solomon.” I couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

“Okay, if you don’t believe me, look at this.” He lifted his shirt.

Could a jinn be so pathetic, so helpless and pleading? Not a chance. I was about to ignore him, but from the corner of my eyes I saw something that made me break into a sweat. Under his shirt, instead of a man’s body there was nothing.... As he lifted the front of his kurta, I could see the back of his kurta fluttering in the air, and nothing where his body should have been. Dear God, what sort of hypnosis is this? To be sure, I made a fist to punch his stomach. My fist just shot straight through from the front to the back. I study science and I’ve never believed in any such nonsense as jinns or extraterrestrials. But how could I explain this? I forgot to blink or even to breathe; the clank of my keys falling from my hand and hitting the ground brought me back to earth.

“Please breathe at least! I won’t harm you. I’ve been ordered to reward you for not leaving me on the road.” He bent down to pick up my keys and handed them to me.

“Who ordered that?”

“I don’t have orders to tell you.”

“I don’t need any reward,” I heard myself whisper, frightened out of my wits.

“Then we’ll give you a reward of our own choosing, whether you like it or not. So, you shall have two rewards. First, one of your wishes will come true. You can wish for anything that makes you happy and you shall have it. Ask for anything: money, fame, respect, health, women, family, education, power—just anything! The Giver has everything in his power to bestow. But remember, you can ask for just one thing. And what-

ever you ask for will stay with you forever, till your last breath; a wish fulfilled for the rest of your life.”

“You said two rewards ... what is the other?” Suddenly my voice had gained a controlled excitement. An infinite door of opportunities had been opened. Candles of desires ignited in my mind. I rubbed my hands in anticipation.

“The second reward ... is a little tricky,” the jinn said haltingly. “The second reward is actually a sorrow. You can choose any sorrow. It will stay with you for the rest of your life. Because of your chosen sorrow, other sorrows will become rare. You will not be totally free of them but mostly you will live with one sorrow.”

“Chose a sorrow ... what kind of reward is this?” the castle of my dreams began to crumble before it was even finished. My expectations dashed with a big bang. I hoped the jinn heard the bang.

“Think about it. It isn’t every day that a person gets to *choose* his sorrows. It’s true that most of them are earned, but the Giver never asks you which sorrow you’d rather have. Wouldn’t you say it’s a reward to choose your own sorrow?” The jinn was preaching to me now.

“Listen man, sorry, jinn, or whatever you are. I don’t need any sorrows. Please. Why don’t you leave me alone and go back to the heavens? The fairies are waiting for you.”

“But sorrows would still be inscribed in your fate, whether you like it or not. Who knows what gets written? What’s better, having unknown sorrows and wishes or writing your own fate? I would strongly advise you not to let this chance slip by. At least you can have the happiness and sorrow of your own choice.”

I was really in a fix, not sure what to do. What would you have done in my place?

“Listen, these are really complex issues. I need time. I might wish for something in a hurry that I may not really want or need. I need time to think.” I really wanted to get away from there.

“Fair enough. Would one week work for you?” I thought he was laughing at me, enjoying my dilemma.

“Yes, one week would do,” I said. Given the situation, had he allowed even one hour, I would have agreed. How could a person argue with a jinn—though there are certainly those who would try. Argue with a jinn! I wasn’t that kind of a person.

“Can I ask others for advice?”

“Sure, you’re free to consult others, but you alone will reap the reward, which will be sweeter if chosen wisely. Make a wrong decision and you’ll carry the cross. So, ask as many people as you want, but the final decision

will be yours.”

“Ask as many as ...” I was mimicking his words, getting in the car to get away as fast and as far as possible.

“Next week, same time, same place.” I could swear he was laughing at me, attempting to provoke me. I’m a peaceful man, particularly when I’m faced with someone stronger than I am. So, I chose peace and drove.

I was returning to work from a meeting when this accident took place. Now that I had turned my car back toward work, one question preoccupied my thoughts: what will my wish be, what will my wish be? Imagine the infinite possibilities. Suddenly I felt sorry for my limited imagination. Perhaps imagination is a learned behavior acquired according to a person’s capacity? I saw a towering Sheraton Hotel looming straight ahead; should I ask for it? It would be mine forever. Owner of a five-star hotel plus the fringe benefits, such as the unrestrained physical pleasures one might get as the owner of a five-star hotel. In my middle age I suddenly felt the sizzling sensation of youth course through my veins again. When I drove around the roundabout, I saw the State Bank building. My brain did another somersault. I suddenly felt very embarrassed by the bankruptcy of my earlier wish. Really, wishes are circumscribed by the limits of one’s imagination. Well, why not go for the State Bank—the whole of it? All the gold, the bonds—and all those other Sheratons that will come in its wake? I felt embarrassed about my previous thoughts about the Sheraton. I felt tiny bursts of electricity running through my body. Why only a state bank? I’ll ask him to make me the richest person in the world. Now my thoughts were rapidly climbing the stairs of wealth. I felt good about myself, proud of my smarts. The world’s richest man for the rest of my life! Suddenly I felt cramped in the car; my knees were too big for my small car now. At the traffic light a beggar knocked on the window. I would often hand him change but now I couldn’t do that. The gulf between us had just become too wide. I ignored him and drove along, leaving him in the dust of my newfound possibilities.

The second reward, to choose a sorrow, was lost somewhere in the dark, subterranean alleys of my subconscious. I hadn’t given it a moment’s thought. Isn’t happiness more important than sorrow? I was still juggling with my first reward when a silly thought broke in to spoil the moment: What if he makes me the richest person in the world but I have a stroke, or get polio, or I’m blinded? Oh my God, perhaps I should ask for health. Yes, stay healthy for the rest of my life and then die suddenly. But, what good is health without riches? Is it possible for him to grant me both health and wealth? See, the issue got complicated again. You’re laughing at me? Okay, tell me what you would have asked for if you were in my place?

See? You're speechless too. Anyway, I was totally confused. One moment it was health, then wealth, then changing to fame. Fame—a long line of beautiful girls begging “autograph, autograph please!” I ignore them with a slight tilt of the head, a smile at the corner of my mouth, and move on. Fame ... but Hitler, Mussolini or Genghis Khan? There are many famous murderers and criminals. What might determine fame, who knows? Juggling with my wishes, I reached the office, but I couldn't really concentrate. I kept searching for what could give me lasting happiness.

“What's wrong? You look preoccupied,” my coworker asked me.

“No, there's nothing wrong.” I wasn't going to share a single paisa from the lottery. I didn't reveal what had just happened. Then I thought of something and asked him, “If somebody promised you they would grant your wish, what would you ask for?”

“What sort of a question is this? Who's granting the wish?” he brought his mouth close to my ear and whispered, suspiciously.

“Nobody, I was reading a short story that got me thinking.”

“I would ask for a baby. I've been married for fourteen years, still fruitless,” he sighed.

“Not wealth? You can always adopt a child...”

“Yes, but if I don't have a child then what good is my wealth? Who will I pass it on to? And then an adopted child isn't going to be in my bloodline.” He was convinced about his need.

This became my preoccupation for the next several days. Friends, neighbors, coworkers, I started asking everyone the same question. If you could have one wish granted, what would you ask for? Somebody with cancer asked for health; one friend wanted his thirty-nine-year-old daughter to get married; some asked for children, some for wealth. Conflicting views really made me confused. Humans don't agree about what will make them happy. Happiness isn't a butterfly that you can catch and put in your pocket. What makes you happy depends on your needs and situations. What gives you happiness now may not suffice in the future. I lost six days contemplating all these thoughts. My sleep was gone; I was constantly tossing and turning. All I could think was “What am I going to ask for, and even if I come up with something, what will I choose for my sorrow? How can I pick one sorrow over another and live with it for the rest of my life?” I couldn't come up with an answer. Then suddenly, through my insomnia, a thought flashed across my mind: I'm going to ask him for more time. What am I going to say? I didn't know. I did some mental calculation about possible excuses and turned over to get some sleep.

I was absolutely sure that I wouldn't find him at the designated spot on my return. I stopped the car at a turn before the spot in question to

make sure he hadn't rounded up a whole mob to greet a fool. People love stupidity; it makes them feel better to see someone more stupid than themselves. When I couldn't see anyone, I felt encouraged and moved the car forward slowly. When I got near that tree, the jinn suddenly materialized from nowhere. I couldn't make sense of my own emotions. On the face of it, I didn't want him to show up and wished that the whole thing would just go away; and yet somewhere in my subconscious, I did want him to show up. Few people avoid fruit they haven't toiled for. As I got near, he jumped on the hood. The one who gives automatically assumes the higher ground, in other words, he climbs onto the hood of your car. I was left with no choice but to get out of the car. We were both gawking at each other, waiting for the other one to start. If you start you often lose the initiative.

"So you picked your two wishes?" He blinked first.

"Maybe, maybe not," I answered diplomatically.

"What kind of answer is that? Tell me the wish that will give you lasting happiness. Tell me quickly so I can grant it," the jinn demanded.

"I definitely have some ideas, but your question needs some clarification." I was still noncommittal.

"What is that supposed to mean? I was pretty straight forward and I spoke in plain language." The jinn sounded unhappy.

"Well, the part about sorrow, it's very confusing. What is sorrow? What if it doesn't give me any grief? What if I experience no sorrow over anything? I remain content with my fate? If I have no money, I sleep hungry, but experience no sorrow—then what?" I challenged him.

"Okay, let's see. Say, if you have something, anything at all, and it's taken away from you—the feeling of loss that you experience is sorrow."

"So I have this car, but I didn't have it before. When I get it I'm supposed to experience happiness and when I lose it, I grieve over it?"

"Are you like a saint, or different from the rest of the crowd? If you lose something you *will* feel sorrow. The more invested you are in the loss, the more profound the sorrow. That's why people consider losing a child the greatest loss. What gives you sorrow defines you. Some lose everything and still take it in stride, while others grieve over even the smallest things." The jinn gave me a lecture.

"Great, see, now you've explained that sorrow is losing something you possessed. I think I understand it now. Give me one more week to think."

He looked at me suspiciously. "What did you think, that grief was a medal I would pin on your chest so you could show off to everyone and collect their sympathies? Grief is a very personal thing, even more personal than happiness. I think you're not being straight. I'll grant you a wish and

a grief of my choice.”

“No, no! Please no! Give me just one more week!” The thought of losing this opportunity rattled me.

“Okay, one more week, but there will be no more extensions,” the jinn warned me.

I stepped back to my car and before I could even turn the key in the ignition he had disappeared—or maybe evaporated describes it better. I was very pleased with my performance. I had gotten one more week to think and make the right choices. With one hand on the steering wheel and the other out the window, I was humming some favorite tune. What’s the name of that rich guy? Yes, Bill Gates, perhaps he feels the same way when he’s driving. Powerful, able to buy anything he wants. But Mr. Gates is way behind. He can only purchase things money can buy. I’m in a different class now. Next week, same time, same place, I can have whatever I want. The thought was so intoxicating that I didn’t notice the big truck that was close behind me. When the driver honked, I hit the brakes instead of the accelerator. My car froze in the middle of the road. The truck couldn’t break its momentum and dragged my car along with it for some distance. Next thing I remember, I was in a hospital.

Waking up in an emergency room is in itself a small catastrophe. It’s a chaotic scene. Doctors and nurses are running from the less severe to the more severe cases. I felt an IV drip hanging from a stand at my bedside. My right arm and head were bandaged. All sorts of wires were crisscrossing my chest; some felt as though they were glued there. I tried to ease myself into a better position but my right leg refused to budge. My heart sank.

“Bed eleven is conscious now,” I heard a nurse’s voice say. A physician and a nurse were at my side within a minute.

“Thank God you’re okay, it really was a bad one, but everything is fine.” The doctor was taking my pulse as he spoke.

“I can’t move my right leg, doctor.”

“Yes, that’s correct. We’re concerned about two things. One, you might lose your vision. That isn’t too likely though, but still there is a risk because of your concussion. Second, your leg wound, I’m afraid of gangrene. I’m waiting for an orthopedic surgeon to make sure we don’t need to amputate it.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. I suddenly thought of the jinn, if he were here I could have saved my leg. Is my stupid leg really the most important thing in life right now? The richest one-legged man or a poor man with both legs—take your pick. I was weighing my options. But I wouldn’t see him for a week. Happiness has its own timing; it doesn’t follow our schedule. Should I tell the doctor to wait for a week? The nurse helped

me out of this dilemma by giving me a shot of painkiller. When I woke up again, a slightly older doctor was examining my leg.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you. I needed to look at your leg.” He bent my leg at the knee and flexed it to the hip. “We don’t need to amputate it. There will be a small restorative surgery today, ten days of antibiotics and four to five days of bed rest. You’re really lucky. Was it a very old car? The ambulance crew said that it froze on the road?”

It felt as if the doctor was sitting inside my mind, reading all my secrets and laughing at me. Even before I could answer him, he’d gone to the next patient. Things happened exactly as he predicted. I was discharged after a minor surgery. Thank God I didn’t waste my wish on saving my leg; it was going to heal anyway. The next few days of rest gave me a lot of time to think. This accident made the choices easier.

On the fifth day I threw the crutches away. Day six I got approval to resume my life “as it was.” Day seven I was ready to drive to our agreed spot. The jinn was already waiting.

“How is your leg?” he asked after the greetings were over.

“How did you know?” I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“You call me a jinn but still question my reach. That is precisely the problem with you guys, you believe in Him but doubt His reach.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let go of the small talk or you’ll really get confused.”

“Yes, I’ve reached a decision; I believe it will secure my future forever.”

“Great! Please surprise me, what have you chosen that leaves all other wishes behind?” He clapped like a kid.

“Really, you want me to tell you?” I was teasing him, perhaps getting even with him at a subconscious level.

“My first wish is to see a new dream every night.”

The jinn’s eyes bulged in disbelief. “Did you have a head injury along with your mangled leg?” He couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“That is my wish, now please grant it.”

“Did you get any second opinions?” The jinn was reluctant.

“I’ve thought about it thoroughly. If I can dream something new every night, happiness will follow automatically. Health, wealth, fame ... they all follow dreams, don’t they? Dreaming is the key to success; give me dreams, new fresh dreams every day.”

“I don’t understand at all,” he pleaded, annoyed with himself.

“You haven’t ever dreamed?” I was surprised.

“Jinns don’t sleep. I don’t know what a dream is, although I have heard about them from my elders.”

“Okay. Don’t waste any more time! Please grant my wish.”

“They say I’m made of fire; I would rather be made of mud and water and be able to dream. Are dreams really very good?”

“Very good, very exhilarating.” I wasn’t about to forgive him. “As for being made of fire or mud, there must be a reason why angels were asked to bow to Adam.” I was on a roll.

“Who bowed to whom?” He wasn’t happy with his lack of information.

“Let it go. The dark chapters of our history are either closed or spun. You’re really silly, it looks as though you don’t know what spin is? If you were the winner, you would’ve written the history your way. Looks as if your forefathers kept you in the dark. Stop wasting time and grant my wish!”

“Consider it done,” the jinn clapped his hands three times, mumbled some mantras, hugged me and wrapped his arms around me.

“What is the next wish? I mean the sorrow that you will live with for the rest of your life?”

“Sorrow means something that I had and then lost, correct?” I wanted to make sure one last time.

“Correct. Now you stop wasting time.”

“Okay, so my second wish is that you take away my feelings, make me thick skinned.”

“Take away your feelings?”

“Yes, take away my feelings, give me this grief forever—that I have no feelings.” I was enjoying the moment, delivering my words like a dialogue in a sentimental movie, one hand on my chest. I even stooped forward.

The jinn was looking at me very closely, trying to understand.

“Take away your feelings ... what will that do?”

“That’s not for you to question. The loss of feelings will kill me!” I was so proud of my acting.

“I always think I understand humans, but they never cease to surprise me.” He looked defeated. “At least explain to me why you insist on losing your feelings.”

“My friend, if there are no feelings, the gains and losses in life won’t affect me! You can say I’m losing my feelings in order to gain a thick hide.”

“I give up!” He threw his hands up in frustration and held me tightly; he repeated some mantras and then released me. I felt very light and free of worry.

“Go now,” the jinn said, “I’ve fulfilled both of your wishes. I swear by God, Who created both of us, I’ve never heard such ridiculous wishes before, and I don’t ever want to hear them again.” The jinn clapped his hands and disappeared. Only a puff of smoke was left dancing in front of my eyes.

I was feeling very happy; I drove away, very happy and proud of my

shrewdness. The car had hardly gone a mile when I felt myself engulfed by darkness. Thank God the road was empty. I slowly pulled over to the side; I couldn't see anything. Somebody saw me in that state and called an ambulance. Within fifteen minutes I was back in the same emergency room.

"Oh it's you again," the doctor recognized me right away.

"This is exactly what I was afraid of," he said after listening to my story. "I was hoping this wouldn't happen to you. Remember I told you that sometimes head injuries can cause blindness later? The nurse held my hand in sympathy. What a settlement. Nature had put me in my place without wasting a minute; human helplessness knows no boundaries.

"Doctor, can blind men dream?" I asked in desperation.

Despite her professional seriousness and the gravity of the situation, the room resounded with the nurse's uncontrollable laughter. □

—*Translated by the author*