

The Long Way Round

by

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She locked the door behind her and headed to the gate, it was cloudy and the moon was hanging like the tablet she'd forgotten to take in the night sky. She recited the quls and blew them over herself and them. She could make out three shapes today, shadowy forms which were now following her down the garden path. She had hoped they wouldn't be around this evening, that she'd be able to have tonight without them clinging to her like a wet towel. But there they were, a knot of crowed ghouls she'd never been able to exorcise.

She walked around the car he had pulled up outside the gate and got in the passenger seat, he was on the phone and didn't look at her but just being around him it was like the static in her junk radio of a brain tuned into song. The tenderness she felt for him blurred the gloom she felt at their presence. Though it was strange the way both of them had started, he had asked her to be more than friends because there weren't enough reasons not to. And he'd left her for lack of reason to stay and then come back again for lack of reason to stay away. And she'd let him. She knew he felt forced to come to her as he was. She had that ability with men, an ability which didn't say impress me it just said tell me who you are, and they did but she knew it made them like her a little bit less.

Still, what was between them was not unspectacular. They had rooted together in some incorruptible way and when he would eventually leave her for

good, she hadn't felt loss or a lack of him, but that a part of herself had been severed.

He was still on the phone and bored, she looked back and saw the wraiths huddled cheek-to-jowl in the backseat. They looked almost comical this way, as if they were waiting to go on a school trip. Sometimes they managed to tag along with her like this, lurking without striking, but she'd been ambushed too many times by them to relax. She remembered how it had been when they were at their worst, the years they had knitted her with worry, when her days and nights were curfewed by their presence. Remembering, she reached out to the one nearest her and put her index and middle fingers into his eyeballs and twisted them. He batted her hand away reassembling himself while the others looked at her dolefully as if this was all her fault.

And she'd thought it was for a long time. They had first appeared many years ago and she'd responded to their presence the only way she knew how, by pleading with God for them to go away. They would surround the jaanemaaz while she prayed, looking at her with idle contempt, while she begged that they'd be gone by the time she'd finished her namaz, furious when they were still there, making deals with Him to negotiate their withdrawal, and finally, resigned asking if He had wanted her to suffer so, could they at least yield to her sometimes, when she most

needed them to, would they cease fire, going through all the stages of grief in one prayer.

It was only later, way later, too long later, a lifetime wasted, that she learnt finally what they were. She'd known that what she had others didn't and what others had she didn't. She'd see friends enter the cave of depression but it was a place she'd never known the coordinates to. That the world was better with her in it was something she'd never questioned. But she also knew that the shadows that trailed her didn't appear to most people. That to suffer from memories was normal but suffering in this way wasn't.

She learnt that what she had, these unwanted, intrusive thoughts, were a sort of mental incontinence by fiends of the mind. She'd read about the impish thoughts that had afflicted other people who had this, from throwing babies off a cliff to hurling obscenities in a place of worship. And this had long been her fear, that some kind-hearted person would helpfully ask, what sort of thoughts do you have? And she never wanted to answer that. She'd remember the spirits around her growing up, bordering her as she prayed, burning the tasbeeh in her hand, the page of the Qur'an her finger rested on. And all the more fervently she prayed, all the more fervently they burned.

She read that these were not to be prayed away and were not to be escaped from, a life sentence in a diagnosis. She needed to do the following: acknowledge the blackguards presence, imagine they exist as just flotsam and jetsam in the current of life, succumb to their eternal presence and just go on. And it hadn't worked at all until it did. while they hadn't gone, the fighting had become less blitzkrieg and more sporadic guerilla warfare. More often now she could go days without being under siege, she could finally feel like she wasn't a pawn on somebody else's chessboard. But there were still days when they managed to ensnare her, when she felt like she was sword fighting at the edge of an abyss, and she was all the weaker for knowing how bad it was at the bottom, how the fates howled for her there.

She looked back at the coterie behind her and socked one of them in the jaw.

She glanced at him and wondered what he'd make of this flotsam of boy scouts one of which was currently doing contortions ripening himself for revenge. She'd told him bits of it, the only person she'd told, and referred to it as her 'neuroses'. Do you remember my neuroses? she'd say, and he'd look at her kindly and seriously and say yes, and she'd regret having brought it up at all. She couldn't tell him everything of course and it wasn't out of fear that he'd leave her or reject

her. It was out of the inability to explain why she always sounded like an exhausted, hunted animal. Why she was always at war with herself.

He was off the phone now and said ‘chale?’ and they drove off in search of kahva. They talked as they usually did about everything, partnering their thoughts, gnawing each other to the rind. This is how it had always been between them, they surrendered to each other again and again, and with time his words had furnished rooms in her mind, of what it could be like to be with someone this way, to let him live in those rooms, and know the ins and outs of her. Even later when he’d emptied those rooms, he still trespassed through, sitting for a while, opening the book he’d left on the table, warming himself by the fire.

‘Have you written today?’ he asked. She hadn’t. She spent most of her days at her clerical desk job reading other people’s words in the hopes that it would help her find her own. But she hadn’t written for over a year and she was losing the desire for the release that came from pouring herself onto a page of prose. And even when she’d write, she’d do so picturing him as the judge, though his criticism of her work always rested on what he’d thought she should write. ‘It’s not authentic, it’s not you’ he’d always say as she crumbled beneath his swift ruling.

They had shared a love of books and while she’d love the books he read, they’d have heated arguments about the books she read. ‘Nothing ever happens in

these books!' he'd complain, but she never cared what happened, mostly she forgot everything that happened anyway, only remembering whether a book had left her glad for the quarantine of being alone with its words or desperate to be done with them. Most of literature though rests on the misunderstanding that he no longer loves her and that she no longer loves him, whereas living through it, when you weren't privy to your own story, was far more gently painful than she'd realised it could be.

She remembered telling him once that most girls pick flowers with the rhyme 'he loves me, he loves me not', but the French version goes 'he loves me a little, a lot, passionately, madly, not at all', and how she'd thought it fascinating how a culture's attitude to love could be encapsulated in a children's game, that it's an understanding that love isn't a binary which exists or doesn't, that it can grow or come in different forms. Despite how much they'd pilfered each other, she couldn't say what she wanted to which was that maybe it'll grow for you, maybe you'll love me too one day.

She was brought back to herself by the ghoul she'd just whacked chewing on her elbow which she yanked away, they had reached the kahva place by then, a dhaaba they liked for its friendly but awful service. The staff were so used to them that they made it a point to serve everyone else first and had made a joke out of not giving them their order until they'd asked for it at least three times. Her phone

buzzed. It was her mother calling. She ignored the call. While her mother was the constant voice in her head, she hadn't wanted to hear her actual voice right then.

She'd grown up in worlds of women, always women. All of them secondary to her mother. When her friends would talk about their mothers she'd always feel like their stories were like weak tea compared to her mother's brew. Her mother was someone born with a constant yearning for that 'something higher' and she was bolshevik in sculpturing the world to her will, like the universe was a balloon she could make into any animal she wanted. She was both the piper and the tune, peerless and irreducible in her individuality. Every thought she'd had seemed anchored by an unmoorable belief in her unique specialness. And moving through the world with this belief, a simple liking of oneself, had been so disarming that people remained continually affected by it, wanting closeness to that feeling and to her. Yet forcing her children into these balloon animals had brought out a mercilessness in the moulder and a wariness in the moulded. The chicken doesn't always want to be a fox.

Her mother had taught her though that God was to be loved. She was brazen in her faith, and would often announce 'I'm not talking to Him' as if talking about a close friend she'd quarrelled with. Her mother had also taught her the importance of praying until you let go, until you achieve suqoon and your fist of a heart unclenches, whether the prayer had been accepted or not didn't then matter,

He had heard you which was all that mattered. She had tried to achieve this suqoon when the phantoms had started visiting her but she wasn't able to. Eventually she had stopped trying. She did wonder though how it'd be if her mother was haunted like this, she imagined they'd flee from her like bats swarming out of a cave.

They had finished their kahva and the ghouls were nodding off behind them, she wiped the drool off the chins of the nearest one with her sleeve and moved his face so his neck wasn't so crooked. He paid for their tea and turned to her and said 'please talk to me', she knew what he meant by this request to talk to him when all they'd done was talk to each other for hours, it was a desire to explore the shallows of each other after they'd traversed the depths. To talk almost like they'd just met, like you'd talk to a stranger. She talked to him about the country, about the mess it was in, worse than anything they'd seen before, how she'd evaluate the state of the economy by how much the price of kahva goes up with every visit. The menu used to have stickers over the old prices with the new ones but it'd gotten to the point that the stickers were empty, not worth the ink to write the price on. How all of their friends were either leaving the country or trying to. How you should love your country because it's yours, even when it could offer you nothing. That a life abroad was condemned to be an unengaged one. Working to make another nation great when that nation's greatness was inevitable is a hollow purpose, nobody wants to play a role in an inevitability. But Pakistan

seemed to be working hard to get its people to leave, and telling people they shouldn't go isn't the same as making them stay.

She said this and thought that it applied to their story too. After he left her, she was stricken by the sadness of being severed from him. And because cosmic injustice follows cosmic injustice, they hadn't left her alone in that grief, encircling her sobbing in bed, taking turns to swipe at her, weakened as she was by her sorrow. And even as she was tumbling into the abyss, they had been unsparing in their cruelty. she'd wonder whether he'd ever held her in his heart the way he had that day sitting in the car under the trees sipping kahva. And while she wondered, they'd whisper. cavalierly and softly at first but building in crescendo until she couldn't hear above the din, that actually he hadn't loved her at all.

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