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## The Accident

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In the gathering greys of a chilly evening, Rehan, a director in the forest office, was speeding home in his amethyst sedan. Before Government College his car ploughed into a boy on a bicycle. The jolt he received told him how much force his car must have transferred into the poor soul. Through the windscreen he saw the boy fly through the air.

Rehan was double-minded. He wanted to stop and help the boy. But no one had seen. The road was almost deserted. Rehan gunned the engine and made his getaway. He branched off the main road, his palms sweating. It seemed to him that the buildings around him were spinning. The car was overheating, it turtled in a cloud of exhaust and came to a dead halt. Rehan had no idea what to do. He restarted and moved off at a snail's pace. Later he pulled over again and thought about returning to the spot to help the victim.

"Someone must have picked him up by now and taken him to the hospital," he assured himself. "They can spot the dent on the bumper of my car. I must hurry home and hide the car. Thank God my wife and kids are at her father's house."

He managed to drive himself home. His factotum brought him dinner, but his mind was stuck on the image of the boy flying through the pale misty air.

"The boy might still be lying unattended, dying a slow, painful death in dark shadow of the trees on the edge of the road. He looked to be my son Imran's age. I should go to the place and have a quick look whether or not he has been taken to the hospital."

He told his factotum that he was going to see friends. He hailed a taxi and asked the driver to take him to Government College. Before the college he asked the driver to slow down and he had a good look around for the boy and his bicycle but they were not there.

He dared not ask passersby about the accident. Instead he had the driver take him to the district hospital. At the emergency he saw an old man and a young woman being treated for minor injuries. Fearfully, he peeped into the adjacent room. On a soiled stretcher he saw a dead figure wrapped in a bloodied white sheet. The sight of blood made him reel. He slumped into a chair. Twelve long minutes passed before he found himself asking a paramedic about the bloodied body.

“A boy of fourteen or fifteen, he was hit by a speeding car some time back. We have been waiting for the relatives to take away the cadaver. Do you have any clue about his identity?” the paramedic asked.

“No, no...I asked just out of curiosity. I was here to get my blood pressure checked.” Hurriedly Rehan made for the exit.

He wandered the roads not knowing what to do or where to go. He found himself near a police station. “I must tell them about the accident. I killed him. He died due to my recklessness.” He stood a couple of steps from the gate, pondering. Then a sudden fear gripped him that the police might mistake him for a terrorist, so he moved to the thatched café facing the police station. He ordered a cup of tea but could not drink it. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket, lit it but forgot to smoke. He became aware of it when the glowing tip reached his fingers.

“The parents will be asking their neighbours the whereabouts of their son,” he was repeating to himself. He sat lost in his thoughts when the waiter came to collect the bill. The waiter gave him a suspicious look.

Rehan went home and crawled into bed. For hours he lay wide awake. The sound of the bang of the car hitting the boy resounded in his head. The image of the airborne boy was clawing at his heart. He remembered that the boy’s bicycle and books went flying too.

Rehan felt suffocated in the bedroom. He plodded up the staircase to the flat roof. For a long time he moped about the roof, smoking cigarette after cigarette.

He returned to his room and climbed into bed but sleep continued to elude him. “By now, I think, the bereaved parents would have shifted the corpse to their house,” he told himself.

Towards dawn he drifted off to sleep. He had hardly slept an hour when he was wakened by a funeral announcement blaring from the loudspeakers of a nearby mosque. His eyes were puffy and his skull was cracking from pain. He strained every nerve to catch the words of the announcement but could not understand anything about the identity of the deceased.

“It must be him. The announcer is announcing the death of the boy I killed last night. I am a murderer. I have sent him to an early grave. Had he and me not happened to be at the same place at the same time, he might be alive today. He would be taking his breakfast now.”

The factotum brought breakfast but in the shiny steel tray Rehan saw the huddled image of the boy lying at the side of the road. He broke one morsel off a slice of toast but the rings of his esophagus seemed to be stuck, he had to spit out the half-chewed morsel.

The servant sailed in to clear away the breakfast things. “Sir your car has a big dent on the bumper.”

“Yes...no, I hit a...a brick fell on my car from a passing truck. No big deal, don’t worry about it.”

He wanted to take the day off, but then said to himself that this might make his colleagues at work suspect him of killing the boy, so he got dressed for the office after all. Before leaving he ordered his factotum to take the car to the repairman to get everything smoothed out.

He flagged down a taxi. On the way to his office the taxi passed the city’s only cemetery. Rehan saw a grave being dug, he asked the taxi driver to stop. He went to the gravedigger and questioned him about the intended occupant of the grave. “He was a school boy. He was killed by a car. I think the driver had a drop too much,” the gravedigger answered.

Rehan’s sleepless gaze lingered on the rectangular pit. He felt as if the flying boy would land in the pit and tell him angrily, “Since you have killed me now also bury me with your own hands, you heartless moron!”

He was startled from his dream as the taxi driver began honking impatiently.

As the taxi tooted towards the office, Rehan glanced at the posters and billboards on buildings along the way. He felt as if they all carried one message: “The forest officer killed a school boy.”

He stopped to buy two local newspapers from a newspaper boy. “Someone must have picked up on the news. They might have the registration number of my automobile,” he was thinking. He clawed through and scanned the papers but there was no mention of the road accident that happened the previous night.

He reached his office. On the glass-topped table he saw a leave application from Sonu the janitor. Rehan allowed the application without bothering to read it. Then his eyes spotted the word “died.” He picked up the application and read it carefully. “My son died in a road accident, I will not be able to attend work for one week...”

Rehan called his clerk to his office. “Where did the accident happen?” he wanted to know.

“In front of the Government College, sir. He was only fifteen, a talented and respectful boy. He was called Fida. He was Sonu’s only son.”

In the afternoon, Rehan went to Sonu’s house to offer condolence. He was shown into a dingy musty room where he sat on the threadbare plastic mat with the bereaved father. From the adjoining room Sonu’s wife’s sobs could be heard. She sat on a saggy soiled sofa. Her female relatives were trying to console her. Sonu’s younger daughter brought tea for the guest. To Rehan it smelt of blood but for the sake of his host he took some sips. His stomach heaved. He tried to focus away from death and blood but the scene whirled in his mind. Rehan felt as if the boy would fly into the room, perch on the chair and tell his father that his boss had killed him. Then his eyes wandered to the whitewashed wall where clothes hung on pegs. Among them was a school uniform while under it sat a pair of boots. “It must be his uniform and boots. Only yesterday he was wearing them.”

He pushed a bill of five thousand rupees in the bereaved father’s hand and said goodbye.

Rehan bought flowers and candles and went to the cemetery. He laid the flowers on the freshly built grave of Fida. He lit the candles and placed them around the small earthen hump. He lifted his cupped hands heavenwards and whispered a brief prayer. His face twisted with pain, he begged God and the dead boy for forgiveness. He found himself crying. His hands scooped the freshly-dug earth from the grave, he squeezed the earth in his fists, sobbing quietly. A man nearby who was sticking a smouldering joss stick into a mud grave approached him and placed a reassuring hand over his shoulder. He offered Rehan water from a bottle. “Was a close relation?” he asked, and Rehan nodded his head.

A week later, Sonu reported for duty. Whenever he came across Sonu, Rehan would see the boy flying through the pale misty air. So he avoided Sonu. Even if he saw his back, or heard his voice or saw his name in the attendance register, the accident scene would revive in his heart. Every day Rehan told himself that he should tell his janitor the truth about his son’s death but he could not find the courage.

But this phase did not extend beyond maybe five months. Gradually Rehan stopped thinking about the boy, and Sonu’s face did not trigger anything in his mind.

Fifteen years passed and it was Sonu’s last day at work. His colleagues gave him a farewell party. Everyone said kind words to the retiree. Sonu sat hunched in his chair nibbling at a biscuit

as he listened to their short generous speeches. His malnourished body filled only half the space of the chair. Rehan contemplated the janitor's dark, shrunken face, dim muddy eyes and balding head, his frayed clothes and distressed shoes. "At this age, Sonu's sapped limbs can't compete with the monster of life," Rehan thought. "His son would be doing some job now, had my car not run into him. His son would be shouldering the household's burden. How the width of centimeters can ruin people's life! How a nanosecond's duration can do damage beyond repair."

One evening a year later, Sonu paid his old boss a visit. He was shown into the drawing room where Rehan sat in an overstuffed sofa. The factotum brought tea.

"What are you doing these days?" The host lit himself a Triple-Five cigaret at the gas heater that stood near his sofa.

"No job. With the retirement gratuity I bought a three-wheeled motor rickshaw. Two months into the business, and one morning my three-wheeler ploughed into the back of a mini truck. I received minor injuries. I sold the rickshaw at half price and with that money I opened a kiosk in the market and sold pakoras but they would not sell, maybe I could not fry them crispy enough. I brought the unsold pakoras to my house and we ate them for breakfast, lunch and dinner till all my family had diarrhea." He laughed a weak laugh, "Now I am out of work. Sir, do me a favour, keep me, please, as a servant at your house."

"Well, I would love to but we are moving to Canada where my son is living."

In fact, the date when this move would happen was uncertain, but Rehan remembered the accident and did not like the idea of having to see Sonu every day in the meantime. "Still, let me offer you some assistance," he concluded, handing Sonu a 5,000-rupee note, just as he had done years ago.

As they were exchanging goodbyes at the gate, Rehan wanted to tell his guest the truth about his son's death but words failed him. The cold moist streets lay deserted. The streetlights glowed wanly, struggling against the thick bank of fog that was advancing from the east. Sonu wandered off into the fog like a stray cat. Rehan kept gazing after him. Suddenly he saw the boy flying through the pale misty air.

Sonu had been swallowed by the fog. For some time, indecisive, Rehan stood rooted to the place. "We may not get another chance of meeting. I should tell him the truth," he resolved, and he scurried after Sonu. He opened his mouth to call to him but words would not come out. He

found himself bathed in cold sweat. He had no idea which street Sonu had taken. He could see only a few arm-lengths ahead through the fog. His voice returned. He called, “Sonu, Sonu, please stop.” But he did not meet a soul. Gasping, he pressed on till he was lost in the maze of the fog-filled streets. He had the feeling that he was walking over the edge of a cliff. He stopped. He heard a motor, it sounded like a truck. He couldn’t tell which direction it was coming from, he didn’t know which way to move. It passed him from behind, closely, clattering in his ear, almost brushing his elbow, and then it was gone. It might easily have struck him. A few centimeters would have made all the difference.