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## The 'Grave' Incident

**Junaid Rashid**

He had a wavering temperament. He would fit himself in different roles under different circumstances. Sometimes after watching a cricket match, with a cricketing bat in his hand, he would go to his room. Hanging the ball in the middle of the roof of his room he would keep hitting it for hours together until he felt satisfied to have broken all the world records. On every such occasion, in his imaginative mind he scored more runs than any other batsman had ever done in cricketing history. Unlike the real life, his form never deserted him. Then came times, when he watched a movie or heard a song on the television or on the radio set and instantly assumed himself to be an actor or a singer with Oscars and other awards in his pocket. Life was as simple for him as making an omelette, where all you needed was a little beating and cooking. Put your imagination into work and you could become anyone and do any damn thing.

He was not an idiot as his behavior would suggest. He was good in studies and a budding artist too. It was just that he never took life seriously. He was growing up in a region where violence and bloodshed was as common a thing as ones breathing. Although many things were happening around him, yet he remained unaffected. He lived in his own fanciful world until he experienced a strange incident in his life.

One fine Friday afternoon, this boy went to the mosque to perform his prayers. As is the practice in the Muslim world the afternoon prayers on Friday are preceded by a long religious address. The preacher on this particular occasion had chosen the topic of "Life after death." He, like an able and well learned orator, described both the bliss and the hard ordeals that follow after death as per ones deeds. During the discourse, he particularly stressed on the need of visiting the graveyards and sending blessings to the dead which would relieve them of any hardships they were facing. Moreover, he told the gathering that if one visited a graveyard and sent blessings to the dead, then they would in return receive the blessings equal to the number of dead buried in that graveyard.

These words had a deep effect on this boy who as a result of his temperament decided in no time to take on this duty. From that day onwards he would often look for the graveyards with more number of dead buried in it. In his leisure time, more particularly, it became a habit for him to visit a nearby graveyard in his locality, he would pray for the dead and come back home.

One day the boy came back from school but he found the door to his house locked. His family had gone to the market, so he decided to follow his usual course to pay a visit to the nearby graveyard. He went there as usual, but that day the eeriness that surrounds a place as mysterious as a graveyard was felt much more by him. Whether it was the late afternoon time or something abstruse which his mind was unable to comprehend that added to the eeriness, he could not tell. The afternoon sky was cast with pale blue clouds and as they passed overhead he knew that some communication was being thrown across his careless way fortuitously. He stood at the side railing and began his prayer towards the Almighty to bless the dead.

Just when he was about to finish his prayer, he felt someone standing near behind. He looked back and saw an old man with a smile on his face. A man with beard, attired in clean, plain white clothes and a head-cap greeted the boy. Shaking hands with him, "As salaam Alaikum," greeted

the old man. “Wa Laikum Assalaam”, replied the boy. The boy was a little surprised to find the old man there, but then it came to his mind that he (the old man) too might be someone just like him securing blessings from the Almighty for dead as well as his own self.

Silence followed the scene. The boy began to lead back toward his home but then he heard the old man calling him from behind. The old man was pacing toward him and told him to stop awhile. The boy stopped immediately till the old man reached him. There was still the same ingratiating smile on his face and he began his conversation with the boy.

The old man told him that he knew him and that he has often seen him around. He said that they all felt very happy and soothed whenever he came to visit them. The boy became a bit confused as he was unable to understand the meaning of what the old man was telling him. According to the old man he had seen him many times but the boy had never ever seen him before. Moreover, the old man talked in the manner as besides himself there were many more around when the boy could find none.

The boy, unable to comprehend anything, suddenly seemed to be in haste. He requested the old man to allow him to leave as he had to go home and that it was already getting late. The old man replied that it was alright if he wanted to leave but told him that he will accompany him half way as he had something to share and tell him.

On the way, the old man began his tale, “It is now almost four years since I have been here. I actually hail from a village in the north but they killed me in a fake encounter, labeled me as a terrorist and got me buried here. Nobody in my family knows my whereabouts. All they know is that I once left home in the morning and never returned.” A cold shiver went down his spine and goose bumps began to appear on the boy’s entire body while he listened to the old man.

“I belonged to a poor family; I had three daughters to raise. When I was killed there was nobody to look after them. Since then, they are living a life of poverty and desolation. And what disturbs me more is the hope they nourish. They begin their each day thinking that one day I will come back and set things right for them.” Expressions of fear were clearly visible from the boy’s face thus he was told not to be afraid as no harm will be done to him. The old man asked him to do him a favor which would make him thankful to him.

“Why do you feel frightened, my boy, you possess a pure heart. In this selfish world where nobody cares even for the living, you come here and pray for the dead. What else could be dear to the Almighty than this deed of yours? Whenever I saw you coming here, I felt jubilant and sure that you will be the one to help”, the man went on with his talk.

Struck with fear, the boy somehow managed to pluck some courage and asked him what he could do for him. “You carry a message to my family. I will tell you their address, you convey to them that I am long dead and buried here in this graveyard. It hurts me to find them nurture false hope. I want them to know the truth and start their lives afresh. My soul will not find peace till I get this thing done”, he said with a downcast face.

The boy listened to the words of the old man with feelings of fret and fear. He wanted to pace his steps so that he could fast reach home and get rid of the old man. But the old man kept his company and throughout insisted him to help.

The boy, however, requested him to let him go this time and promised to come again and help him. At first the old man would not let him part but then after repeated assurances from the boy he let him go. Before the boy could turn around, the old man disappeared in no time just before his eyes. Feeling frightened the boy ran home fast and to his relief the family had come back from the market. Seeing him breathing hard and sweating profusely, his mother enquired about what had happened to him but the boy evaded to answer and went straight to his room.

As the day began to fade and the night spread its black wings Fear started to take a grip on the boy. During the dinner, he showed little appetite. All his thoughts were occupied by the graveyard and the old man. The place which till then had appeared just like any other suddenly began to assume a creepy reputation for him.

That night he slept with his parents. Fear has seized him, his heart would jump with every click on the door and every shadow would assume ghostly dimensions. As soon as the lights went off he pulled the feather quilt over his head. But, time and again he would slide it a little and look out of the corner of his eye; certain to find the old man standing there in the dark. With all these thoughts, sleep took him into embrace.

For the next few days the boy stayed at home and did not go outside. In fact, he abandoned the idea of visiting graveyards for he wanted to save any encounter with the old man and erase every detail of that incident from his mind. But, time and again, whenever he read news about an encounter or a disappearance in the newspaper it reminded him of his experience at the Graveyard.

A year or later he shared this experience with his Grandfather who admonished him for not helping the old man. For, his grandfather had heard about an incident from his friend where the man who helped a sprit was rewarded handsomely in return.