

A House of His Own

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Their friendship had sprung up in a coffee shop at Zero Cross in the Old Town. They would sit there sipping coffee and then walk to the Chinar Park and stay together for hours in the twilight, puffing away at cigarettes and sharing little secrets of life.

'Bhai, this word 'salary' has become an abuse. Can't even manage the school fee of my daughters', said Najab, a government teacher, to his friend.

Hussain, who worked in a private company, gave a chuckle before responding, 'Then leave your job, buddy. Your department accommodates even poor brains and dull people. Thank God for what you get.'

Najab didn't mind the put down as he knew the drawbacks of the system he was a part of.

The two friends would turn up for their rendezvous almost every week and deliberate over a lot of things, more especially the hardships of living in a town.

Najab was more interested in investing in his children's education. He believed that education at least makes a human being out of an animal. Hussain lived in a rented house in the heart of the city. He would let slip the whole of his time contemplating the dream prospect of having a house of his own. He would literally die to own the house he presently lived in on rent. With this house were associated some everlasting memories of his beloved wife and children.

Soon after he completed his graduation, Hussain's elder son bade farewell to further education and started giving tuition to local kids. His daughter passed BA and soon joined her brother, and both of them began supporting their father in making his dream a reality.

Time passed by. Hussain began saving money to buy the house of his longing.

He applied for a loan, borrowed a great deal from wherever he could, but he still needed Rs two lac to give his dreams a practical shape. Some advance money had already been paid to the owner and Hussain was given the time of three months for the close out. As often happens in these cases, you lose the advance money if you fail to catch up. And then the deadline drew near. Now, he sold the jewellery of his wife, even received advance pay from his company, but he still lacked an amount of Rs 75,000.

In this uneasiness, Hussain visited Najab on a particular day.

'Bhai! You know how much I desire to buy that house.... The worry is I still need Rs 75,000. I know you won't refuse. I'll pay you back as soon as I can.'

Najab could hardly resist the force of his friend's words. He instantly came out with the required amount and handed it over to his friend. 'It's been needlework collecting this amount. I saved it for Fatima's marriage. Take it and return when things get better for you.'

The house was bought. Sweets were distributed and Quran Khwani was performed to celebrate the occasion.

Time began to move on so quickly for Hussain and his family. A portion of the house on the ground floor was changed into a readymade-garments' shop. The well off days had already begun to usher in. Hussain

saw the lenders quickly off and he paid all his debts, but he forgot to return the money he owed to Najab. Najab would not have reminded his friend had it not been for the sake of Fatima's marriage.

'I'm ashamed to mention it. Don't think that I have come to ask for the money I lent you. Your niece has got hitched. I'll consider it a favour if you can arrange something.'

'I'm going through a difficult phase of my life. I've nothing in hand', Hussain replied.

Najab began to lose the colour of his eyes. He became pale and gloomy.

'Do something yaar. If not 75, let it be 50 or 40. There is no compulsion from the other side, but the guests are not to be sent back empty-handed.'

'They are not demanding any dowry. Why is he bent upon spending extravagantly?' thought Hussain.

'Don't worry. Allah will send some unseen help.'

Such unexpected negation shocked Najab. He left, but left with a heavy heart.

As Najab was walking away, Hussain was all the time praising his 'ability' to deceive his friend.

The other morning, when Hussain had just reached office, his phone rang, 'Hello, hello.... Papa! Mummy is not feeling well! She has just collapsed.... We need you badly!'

Hussain's son rushed his mother to hospital where patients outnumbered doctors by several degrees. The doctors reckoned that she fainted due to high blood pressure which refused to come down. They feared it might result in a permanent brain damage or some similar serious ailment. The children were weeping hysterically.

Najab who had by chance seen Hussain's wife being rushed away to the hospital reached soon after.

'We might have to operate the patient tomorrow. Do arrange Rs 75,000', said a doctor.

The figure hit Hussain like a bullet. It was not just a coincidence. It meant much more.

Hussain hurried to his home and brought out the required amount from his locker.

Luckily, the next morning medical tests revealed that it was not so serious a matter. Hussain's wife was discharged from hospital the next day and she was advised to take rest for a week. But, a change had occurred in the conscience of Hussain.

He went to Najab's house and sought his forgiveness. 'This is your money, brother. I lied to you that I have no money. You brought in an unseen ambassador to open my eyes.'

Najab had, in fact, conquered his soul.