



VINTAGE

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A CASE OF EXPLODING  
MANGOES  
MOHAMMED HANIF

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## About the Book

There is an ancient saying that when lovers fall out, a plane goes down. This is the story of one such plane. Why did a Hercules C130, the world's sturdiest plane, carrying Pakistan's military dictator General Zia ul Haq, go down on 17 August, 1988? Was it because of:

1. Mechanical failure
2. Human error
3. The CIA's impatience
4. A blind woman's curse
5. Generals not happy with their pension plans
6. The mango season

Or could it be your narrator, Ali Shigri?

Teasing, provocative, and very, very funny, Mohammed Hanif's debut novel takes one of the subcontinent's enduring mysteries and out of it spins a tale as rich and colourful as a beggar's dream.

## About the Author

Mohammed Hanif was born in Okara, Pakistan. He graduated from the Pakistan Air Force Academy as Pilot Officer, but subsequently left to pursue a career in journalism. A graduate of the UEA's creative writing programme, he is currently the BBC's Urdu special correspondent in Karachi.

For Fatima, Razia, Nimra & Channan

MOHAMMED HANIF

A Case of  
Exploding  
Mangoes

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## PROLOGUE

YOU MIGHT HAVE SEEN me on TV after the crash. The clip is short and everything in it is sun-bleached and slightly faded. It was pulled after the first two bulletins because it seemed to be having an adverse impact on the morale of the country's armed forces. You can't see it in the clip but we are walking towards Pak One, which is parked behind the cameraman's back, in the middle of the runway. The aeroplane is still connected to an auxiliary fuel pump, and surrounded by a group of alert commandos in camouflaged uniforms. With its dull grey fuselage barely off the ground, the plane looks like a beached whale contemplating how to drag itself back to the sea, its snout drooping with the enormity of the task ahead.

The runway is in the middle of Bahawalpur Desert, six hundred miles away from the Arabian Sea. There is nothing between the sun's white fury and the endless expanse of shimmering sand except a dozen men in khaki uniforms walking towards the plane.

For a brief moment you can see General Zia's face in the clip, the last recorded memory of a much photographed man. The middle parting in his hair glints under the sun, his unnaturally white teeth flash, his moustache does its customary little dance for the camera, but as the camera pulls out you can tell that he is not smiling. If you watch closely you can probably tell that he is in some discomfort. He is walking the walk of a constipated man.

The man walking on his right is the US Ambassador to Pakistan, Arnold Raphel, whose shiny bald head and carefully groomed moustache give him the air of a respectable homosexual businessman from small-town



America. He can be seen flicking an invisible speck of sand from the lapel of his navy-blue blazer. His smart casual look hides a superior diplomatic mind; he is a composer of sharp, incisive memos and has the ability to remain polite in the most hostile exchanges. On General Zia's left, his former spymaster and the head of Inter Services Intelligence General Akhtar seems weighed down by half a dozen medals on his chest and drags his feet as if he is the only man in the group who knows that they shouldn't be boarding this plane. His lips are pinched and, even when the sun has boiled everything into submission and drained all colour out of the surroundings, you can see that his normally pale skin has turned a wet yellow. His obituary in the next day's newspapers would describe him as the Silent Soldier and one of the ten men standing between the Free World and the Red Army.

As they approach the red carpet that leads to the Pak One stairway you can see me step forward. You can tell immediately that I am the only one in the frame smiling, but when I salute and start walking towards the aeroplane, my smile vanishes. I know I am saluting a bunch of dead men. But if you are in uniform, you salute. That's all there is to it.

Later, forensic experts from Lockheed will put the pieces of crashed plane together and simulate scenarios, trying to unlock the mystery of how a superfit C130 came tumbling down from the skies only four minutes after take-off. Astrologists will pull out files with their predictions for August 1988, and blame Jupiter for the crash that killed Pakistan's top army brass as well as the US Ambassador. Leftist intellectuals will toast the end of a cruel dictatorship and evoke historic dialectics in such matters.

But this afternoon, history is taking a long siesta, as it usually does between the end of one war and the beginning of another. More than a hundred thousand Soviet soldiers are preparing to retreat from Afghanistan after being

reduced to eating toast smeared with military-issue boot polish, and these men we see in the TV clip are the undisputed victors. They are preparing for peace and, being the cautious men they are, they have come to Bahawalpur to shop for tanks while waiting for the end of the cold war. They have done their day's work and are taking the plane back home. With their stomachs full, they are running out of small talk; there is the impatience of polite people who do not want to offend each other. It's only later that people would say, *Look at that clip, look at their tired, reluctant walk, anybody can tell that they were being shepherded to that plane by the invisible hand of death.*

The generals' families will get full compensation and receive flag-draped coffins with strict instructions not to open them. The pilots' families will be picked up and thrown into cells with blood-splattered ceilings for a few days and then let go. The US Ambassador's body will be taken back to Arlington Cemetery and his tombstone would be adorned with a half-elegant cliché. There will be no autopsies, the leads will run dry, investigations will be blocked, there will be cover-ups to cover cover-ups. Third World dictators are always blowing up in strange circumstances but if the brightest star in the US diplomatic service (and that's what was said about Arnold Raphel at the funeral service in Arlington Cemetery) goes down with eight Pakistani generals, somebody would be expected to kick ass. *Vanity Fair* will commission an investigative piece, the *New York Times* will write two editorials, sons of the deceased will file petitions to the court and then settle for lucrative cabinet posts. It would be said that this was the biggest cover-up in aviation history since the last biggest cover-up.

The only witness to that televised walk, the only one to have walked that walk, would be completely ignored.

Because if you missed that clip, you probably missed me. Like history itself. I was the one who got away.

What they found in the wreckage of the plane were not bodies, not serene-faced martyrs, as the army claimed, not the slightly damaged, disfigured men not photogenic enough to be shown to the TV cameras or to their families. *Remains*. They found *remains*. Bits of flesh splattered on the broken aeroplane parts, charred bones sticking to mangled metal, severed limbs and faces melted into blobs of pink meat. Nobody can ever say that the coffin that was buried in Arlington Cemetery didn't carry bits of General Zia's remains and what lies buried in Shah Faisal mosque in Islamabad are not some of the remains of the State Department's brightest star. The only thing that can be said with certainty is that my remains weren't in either of those coffins.

Yes, sir, I was the one who got away.

The name Shigri didn't figure in the terms of reference, the investigators from the FBI ignored me and I never had to sit under a naked bulb and explain the circumstances that led to me being present at the scene of the incident. I didn't even figure in the stories concocted to cover up the truth. Even the conspiracy theories which saw an unidentified flying object colliding with the presidential plane, or deranged eyewitnesses who saw a surface-to-air missile being fired from a lone donkey's back didn't bother to spin any yarns about the boy in uniform with one hand on the scabbard of his sword, stepping forward, saluting, then smiling and walking away. I was the only one who boarded that plane and survived.

Even got a lift back home.

If you did see the clip you might have wondered what this boy with mountain features is doing in the desert, why he is surrounded by four-star generals, why he is smiling. It's because I have had my punishment. As Obaid would have said, there is poetry in committing a crime after you have served your sentence. I do not have much interest in poetry but punishment before a crime does have a certain

sing-song quality to it. The guilty commit the crime, the innocent are punished. That's the world we live in.

My punishment had started exactly two months and seventeen days before the crash when I woke up at reveille and without opening my eyes reached out to pull back Obaid's blanket, a habit picked up from four years of sharing the same room with him. It was the only way to wake him up. My hand caressed an empty bed. I rubbed my eyes. The bed was freshly made, a starched white sheet tucked over a grey wool blanket, like a Hindu widow in mourning. Obaid was gone and the buggers would obviously suspect me.

You can blame our men in uniform for anything, but you can never blame them for being imaginative.

**FORM PD 4059**

Record of Absentees without Leave or Disappearances without Justifiable Causes

**Appendix 1**

Statement by Junior Under Officer Ali Shigri, Pak No. 898245

**Subject:** Investigation into the circumstances in which Cadet Obaid-ul-llah went AWOL

**Location where statement was recorded:** Cell No. 2, Main Guardroom, Cadets' Mess, PAF Academy

I, JUNIOR UNDER OFFICER Ali Shigri, son of the late Colonel Quli Shigri, do hereby solemnly affirm and declare that, at the reveille on the morning of 31 May 1988, I was the duty officer. I arrived at 0630 hours sharp to inspect Fury Squadron. As I was inspecting the second row, I realised that the sash on my sword belt was loose. I tried to tighten it. The sash came off in my hand. I ran towards my barracks to get a replacement and shouted at Cadet Atiq to take charge. I ordered the squadron to mark time. I could not find my spare sash in my own cupboard; I noticed that Cadet Obaid's cupboard was open. His sash was lying where it is supposed to be, on the first shelf, right-hand corner, behind his golden-braided peaked cap. Because I was in a hurry I didn't notice anything unlawful in the cupboard. I did, however, notice that the poem on the inside of the door of his cupboard was missing. I do not have much interest in poetry but since Obaid was my dorm mate I knew that every month he liked to post a new poem in his cupboard but always removed it before the weekly cupboard inspection. Since the Academy's Standard Operating Procedures do not touch upon the subject of posting poetry in dorm cupboards I had not reported this matter earlier. I arrived back at 0643 to find that the entire squadron was in Indian position. I immediately told them to stand up and come to attention and reminded Cadet Atiq that the Indian position was unlawful as a punishment and as an acting squadron commander he should have known the rules. Later, I recommended Cadet Atiq for a red strip, copy of which can be provided as an appendix to this appendix.

I didn't have the time for a roll call at this point as we had only seventeen minutes left before it was time to report to the parade ground. Instead of marching Fury Squadron to the mess hall, I ordered them to move on the double. Although I was wearing my sword for that day's silent drill practice and was not supposed to move on the double, I ran with the last file, holding the scabbard six inches from my body. Second Officer in Command saw us from his Yamaha and slowed down when passing us. I ordered the squadron to salute but 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC did not return my salute and made a joke about my sword and two legs. The joke cannot be reproduced in this statement but I mention this fact because some doubts were raised in the interrogation about whether I accompanied the squadron at all.

I gave Fury Squadron four minutes for breakfast and I myself waited on the steps leading to the dining hall. During this time I stood at ease and in my head went through the commands for the day's drill. This is an exercise that Drill Instructor on Secondment, Lieutenant Bannon, has taught me. Although there are no verbal commands in the silent drill, the commander's inner voice must remain at strength 5. It should obviously not be audible to the person standing next to him. I was still practising my silent cadence when the squadron began to assemble outside the dining hall. I carried out a quick inspection of the squadron and caught one first-termer with a slice of French toast in his uniform shirt pocket. I stuffed the toast into his mouth and ordered him to start front-rolling and keep pace with the squadron as I marched them to the parade square.

I handed over command to the Sergeant of the Day, who marched the boys to the armoury to get their rifles. It was only after the Quran recitation and the national anthem were over, and the Silent Drill Squad was dividing into two formations, that the Sergeant of the Day came to ask me why Cadet Obaid had not reported for duty. He was supposed to be the file leader for that day's drill rehearsal. I was surprised because I had thought all along that he was in the squadron that I had just handed over to the Sergeant.

'Is he on sick parade?' he asked me.

'No, Sergeant,' I said. 'Or if he is I don't know about it.'

'And who is supposed to know?'

I shrugged my shoulders, and before the Sergeant could say anything Lieutenant Bannon announced that silent zone was in effect. I must put it on record that most of our Academy drill sergeants do not appreciate the efforts of Lieutenant Bannon in trying to establish our own Silent Drill Squad. They resent his

drill techniques. They do not understand that there is nothing that impresses civilians more than a silent drill display, and we have much to learn from Lieutenant Bannon's experience as the Chief Drill Instructor at Fort Bragg.

After the drill I went to the sickbay to check if Cadet Obaid had reported sick. I didn't find him there. As I was coming out of the sickbay I saw the first-termer from my squadron sitting in the waiting area with bits of vomited toast on his uniform shirt's front. He stood up to salute me, I told him to keep sitting and stop disgracing himself further.

As the Character Building Lecture had already started, instead of going to the classroom, I returned to my dorm. I asked our washerman Uncle Starchy to fix my belt, and I rested for a while on my bed. I also searched Obaid's bed, his side table and his cupboard to find any clues as to where he might be. I did not notice anything untoward in these areas. Cadet Obaid has been winning the Inter Squadron Cupboard Competition since his first term at the Academy and everything was arranged according to the dorm cupboard manual.

I attended all the rest of the classes that day. I was marked present in those classes. In Regional Studies we were taught about Tajikistan and the resurgence of Islam. In Islamic Studies we were ordered to do self-study because our teacher Maulana Hidayatullah was angry with us because when he entered the class some cadets were singing a dirty variation on a folk wedding song.

It was during the afternoon drill rehearsal that I got my summons from the 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC's office. I was asked to report on the double and I reported there in uniform.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC asked me why I had not marked Cadet Obaid absent in the morning inspection when he wasn't there.

I told him that I had not taken the roll call.

He asked me if I knew where he was.

I said I didn't know.

He asked me where I had disappeared to between the sickbay and the Character Building Lecture.

I told him the truth.

He asked me to report to the guardroom.

When I arrived at the guardroom, the guardroom duty cadet told me to wait in the cell.

When I asked him whether I was under detention he laughed and made a joke about the cell mattress having too many holes. The joke cannot be reproduced in this statement.

Half an hour later 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC arrived and informed me that I was under close arrest and he wanted to ask me some questions about

the disappearance of Cadet Obaid. He told me that if I didn't tell him the truth he'd hand me over to Inter Services Intelligence and they would hang me by my testicles.

I assured him of my full cooperation. 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC questioned me for one hour and forty minutes about Obaid's activities, my friendship with him and whether I had noticed anything strange in his behaviour in what he described as 'the days leading up to his disappearance'.

I told him all I knew. He went out of the cell at the end of the question-answer session and came back five minutes later with some sheets of paper and a pen and asked me to write everything that had happened in the morning and describe in detail where and when I had last seen Cadet Obaid.

Before leaving the cell he asked me if I had any questions. I asked him whether I'd be able to attend the silent drill rehearsal as we were preparing for the President's annual inspection. I requested 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC to inform Lieutenant Bannon that I could continue to work on my silent cadence in the cell. 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC made a joke about two marines and a bar of soap in a Fort Bragg bathroom. I didn't think I was supposed to laugh and I didn't.

I hereby declare that I saw Cadet Obaid last when he was lying in his bed reading a book of poetry in English the night before his disappearance. The book had a red cover and what looked like a lengthened shadow of a man. I don't remember the name of the book. After lights out I heard him sing an old Indian song in a low voice. I asked him to shut up. The last thing I remember before going to sleep is that he was still humming the same song.

I did not see him in the morning and I have described my day's activities accurately in this statement in the presence of the undersigned.

In closing I would like to state that in the days leading up to Cadet Obaid absenting himself without any plausible cause, I did not notice anything unusual about his conduct. Only three days before going AWOL he had received his fourth green strip for taking active part in After Dinner Literary Activities (ADLA). He had made plans to take me out at the weekend for ice cream and to watch *Where Eagles Dare*. If he had any plans about absenting himself without any justifiable cause he never shared them with me or anyone else as far as I know.

I also wish to humbly request that my close arrest is uncalled for and if I cannot be allowed to return to my dorm I should be allowed to keep the command of my Silent Drill Squad because tomorrow's battles are won in today's practice.



**Statement signed and witnessed by:**  
Squadron Leader Karimullah,  
2<sup>nd</sup> OIC, PAF Academy

Life is in Allah's hands but ...

## ONE

THERE IS SOMETHING about these bloody squadron leaders that makes them think that if they lock you up in a cell, put their stinking mouth to your ear and shout something about your mother they can find all the answers. They are generally a sad lot, these leaders without any squadrons to lead. It's their own lack of leadership qualities that stops them mid-career, nowhere for them to go except from one training institute to another, permanent seconds in command to one commander or the other. You can tell them from their belts, loose and low, straining under the weight of their paunches. Or from their berets, so carefully positioned to hide that shiny bald patch. Schemes for part-time MBAs and a new life are trying hard to keep pace with missed promotions and pension plans.

Look at the arrangement of fruit salad on my tormentor's chest above the left pocket of his uniform shirt and you can read his whole biography. A faded paratrooper's badge is the only thing that he had to leave his barracks to earn. The medals in the first row just came and pinned themselves to his chest. He got them because he was there. The 40th Independence Day medal. The Squadron Anniversary medal. Today-I-did-not-jerk-off medal. Then the second row, fruits of his own hard labour and leadership. One for organising a squash tournament, another for the great battle that was tree-plantation week. The leader with his mouth to my ear and my mother on his mind has had a freebie to Mecca and is wearing a haj medal too.

As Obaid used to say, 'God's glory. God's glory. For every monkey there is a houri.'

2<sup>nd</sup> OIC is wasting more of his already wasted life trying to break me down with his bad breath and his incessant shouting. Doesn't he know that I actually invented some of the bullshit that he is pouring into my ear? Hasn't he heard about the Shigri treatment? Doesn't he know that I used to get invited to other squadrons in the middle of the night to make the new arrivals cry with my three-minute routine about their mothers? Does he really think that fuck-your-fucking mother, even when delivered at strength 5, still has any meaning when you are weeks away from the President's annual inspection and becoming a commissioned officer?

The theory used to be damn simple: any good soldier learns to shut out the noise and de-link such expressions from their apparent meaning. I mean, when they say that thing about your mother, they have absolutely no intention – and I am certain no desire either – to do what they say they want to do with your mother. They say it because it comes out rapid-fire and sounds cool and requires absolutely no imagination. The last syllable of 'mother' reverberates in your head for a while as it is delivered with their lips glued to your ear. And that is just about that. They have not even *seen* your poor mother.

Anybody who breaks down at the sheer volume of this should stay in his little village and tend his father's goats or should study biology and become a doctor and then they can have all the bloody peace and quiet they want. Because as a soldier, noise is the first thing you learn to defend yourself against, and as an officer noise is the first weapon of attack you learn to use.

Unless you are in the Silent Drill Squad.

Look at the parade square during the morning drill and see who commands it. Who rules? There are more than one thousand of us, picked from a population of one hundred and thirty million, put through psychological and physical tests so strenuous that only one in a hundred applicants

makes it, and when this cream of our nation, as we are constantly reminded we are, arrives here, who leads them? The one with the loudest voice, the one with the clearest throat, the one whose chest can expand to produce a command that stuns the morning crows and makes the most stubborn of cadets raise their knees to waist level and bring the world to a standstill as their heels land on the concrete.

Or at least that is what I believed before Lieutenant Bannon arrived with his theories about inner cadence, silent commands, and subsonic drill techniques. 'A drill with commands is just that - a drill,' Bannon is fond of saying. 'A drill without commands is an art. When you deliver a command at the top of your voice, only the boys in your squadron listen. But when your inner cadence whispers, the gods take notice.'

Not that Bannon believes in any god.

I wonder whether he'll visit me here. I wonder whether they will let him into this cell.

2<sup>nd</sup> OIC is exhausted from his business with my mother and I can see an appeal to my better sense on its way. I clench my stomach muscles against the impending 'cream of the nation' speech. I don't want to throw up. The cell is small and I have no idea how long I am going to be here.

'You are the cream of our nation,' he says shaking his head. 'You have been the pride of our Academy. I have just recommended you for the sword of honour. You are going to receive it from the President of Pakistan. You have two choices: graduate with honour in four weeks or go out front-rolling to the sound of drums. Tomorrow. Clap. Clap. Tony Singh style.' He brings his hands together twice, like those Indian film extras in a qawwali chorus.

They did that to Tony Singh. Drummed the poor bugger out. I never figured out what the hell Tony Singh was doing in the air force of the Islamic Republic anyway. Before meeting Tony Singh (or Sir Tony as we had to call him since

he was six courses senior to us), the only Tony I knew was our neighbour's dog and the only Singh I had seen was in my history textbook, a one-eyed maharaja who ruled Punjab a couple of centuries ago. I thought the Partition took care of all the Tonys and the Singhs, but apparently some didn't get the message.

Tony Singh didn't get the message even when they found a transistor radio in his dorm and charged him with spying. *Top of the Pops* was Sir Tony's defence. They reduced the charge to un-officer-like behaviour and drummed him out anyway.

A lone drummer – a corporal who, after carrying the biggest drum in the Academy band all his life, had begun to look like one – led the way; keeping a thud, thud, thud-a-dud marching beat. More than one thousand of us lined both sides of Eagles Avenue that leads from the guardroom to the main gate.

At ease, came the command.

Tony Singh emerged from the guardroom, having spent a couple of nights in this very cell. His head was shaved, but he still wore his uniform. He stood tall and refused to look down or sideways.

Clap, came the command.

We started slowly. 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC removed Sir Tony's belt and the ranks from his shoulder flaps and then he took a step forward and whispered something into Sir Tony's ear. Sir Tony went down on his knees, put both his hands on the ground and did a front roll without touching his shaved head on the ground.

The bugger was trying to be cocky even when his ass was raised to the skies.

His journey was painfully slow. The drumbeat became unbearable after a while. Some cadets clapped more enthusiastically than others.

I glanced sideways and saw Obaid trying hard to control his tears.

‘Sir, I swear to God I have no knowledge of Cadet Obaid’s whereabouts,’ I say, trying to tread the elusive line between grovelling and spitting in his face.

2<sup>nd</sup> OIC wants to get home. An evening of domestic cruelty and *Baywatch* beckons him. He waves my statement in front of me. ‘You have one night to think this through. Tomorrow it goes to the Commandant and the only thing he hates more than his men disappearing is their clever-dick collaborators. He is looking forward to the President’s visit. We are all looking forward to the visit. Don’t fuck it up.’

He turns to go. My upper body slumps. He puts one hand on the door handle and turns; my upper body comes back to attention. ‘I saw your father once, and he was a soldier’s bloody soldier. Look at yourself.’ A leery grin appears on his lips. ‘You mountain boys get lucky because you have no hair on your face.’

I salute him, using all my silent drill practice to contain the inner cadence, which is saying, ‘Fuck your mother too.’

I wonder for a moment what Obaid would do in this cell. The first thing that would have bothered him is the smell 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC has left behind. This burnt onions, home-made yogurt gone bad smell. The smell of suspicion, the smell of things not quite having gone according to plan. Because our Obaid, our Baby O, believes that there is nothing in the world that a splash of Poison on your wrist and an old melody can’t take care of.

He is innocent in a way that lonesome canaries are innocent, flitting from one branch to another, the tender flutter of their wings and a few millilitres of blood keeping them airborne against the gravity of this world that wants to pull everyone down to its rotting surface.

What chance would Obaid have with this 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC? Baby O, the whisperer of ancient couplets, the singer of golden oldies. How did he make it through the selection process? How did he manage to pass the Officer-Like Qualities Test? How did he lead his fellow candidates through the mock

jungle survival scenarios? How did he bluff his way through the psychological profiles?

All they needed to do was pull down his pants and see his silk briefs with the little embroidered hearts on the waistband.

Where are you, Baby O?

Lieutenant Bannon saw us for the first time at the annual variety show doing our Dove and Hawk dance. This was before the Commandant replaced these variety shows with Quran Study Circles and After Dinner Literary Activities. As third-termers we had to do all the shitty fancy-dress numbers and seniors got to lip-sync to George Michael songs. We were miming to a very macho, revolutionary poem. I, the imperialist Eagle, swooped down on Obaid's Third World Dove; he fought back, and for the finale sat on my chest drawing blood from my neck with his cardboard beak.

Bannon came to meet us backstage as we were shedding our ridiculous feathers. 'Hooah, you zoomies should be in Hollywood!' His handshake was exaggerated and firm. 'Good show. Good show.' He turned towards Obaid, who was cleaning the brown boot polish from his cheeks with a hankie. 'You're just a kid without that warpaint,' Bannon said. 'What's your name?'

In the background, Sir Tony's 'Careless Whisper' was so out of tune that the speakers screeched in protest.

Under his crimson beret, Bannon's face was beaten leather, his eyes shallow green pools that had not seen a drop of rain in years.

'Obaid. Obaid-ul-llah.'

'What does it mean?'

'Allah's servant,' said Obaid, sounding unsure, as if he should explain that he didn't choose this name for himself.

'What does your name mean, Lieutenant Bannon?' I came to Obaid's rescue.



‘It’s just a name,’ he said. ‘Nobody calls me Lieutenant. It’s Loot Bannon for you stage mamas.’ He clicked his heels together and turned back to Obaid. We both came to attention. He directed his over-the-top, two-fingered salute at Obaid and said the words which in that moment seemed like just another case of weird US military-speak but would later become the stuff of dining-hall gossip.

‘See you at the square, Baby O.’

I felt jealous, not because of the intimacy it implied, but because I wished I had come up with this nickname for Obaid.

I make a mental note of the things they could find in the dorm to throw at me:

1. One-quarter of a quarter-bottle of Murree rum
2. A group photo of first-termers in their underwear (white and December-wet underwear actually).
3. A video of *Love on a Horse*.
4. Bannon’s dog-tags, still listed as missing on the guardroom’s Lost and Found noticeboard.

If my Shigri blood wasn’t so completely void of any literary malaise, I would have listed poetry as Exhibit 5, but who the fuck really thinks about poetry when locked up in a cell unless you are a communist or a poet?

There is a letter-box slit in the door of the cell, as if people are going to send me letters. *Dear Ali Shigri, I hope you are in the best of health and enjoying your time in ...*

I am on my knees, my eyes level with the letter-box slit. I know Obaid would have lifted the flap on the slit and would have sat here looking at the parade of khaki-clad butts, and amused himself by guessing which one belonged to whom. Our Baby O could do a detailed personality analysis just by looking at where and how tightly people wore their belts.

I don't want to lift the flap and find someone looking at me looking at them. The word is probably already out. That butcher Shigri is where he deserves to be, throw away the key.

The flap lifts itself, and the first-termer shitface announces my dinner. 'Buzz off,' I say, regretting it immediately. Empty stomach means bad dreams.

In my dream, there is a Hercules C130, covered with bright flowers like you see on those hippie cars. The plane's propellers are pure white and move in slow motion, spouting jets of jasmine flowers. Baby O stands on the tip of the right wing just behind the propeller, wearing a black silk robe and his ceremonial peaked cap. I stand on the tip of the left wing in full uniform. Baby O is shouting something above the din of the aircraft. I can't really make out any words but his gestures tell me that he is asking me to come to him. As I take the first step towards Baby O, the C130 tilts and goes into a thirty-degree left turn, and suddenly we are sliding along the wings, heading for oblivion. I wake up with one of those screams that echoes through your body but gets stuck in your throat.

In the morning they throw poetry at me. Rilke, for those interested in poetry.

The Officer in Command of our Academy, or the Commandant as he likes to call himself, is a man of sophisticated tastes. Well-groomed hair, uniform privately tailored, Staff and Command College medals polished to perfection. Shoulder flaps full. OK, the crescent and crossed swords of a two-star general haven't arrived, but this guy is having a good time waiting for all of that.

Some crumpled sheets of paper stuffed in the obligatory gash in my mattress are what they find. *Clues*, they think.

I don't read poetry and used to refuse to even pretend to read the strange poetry books that Obaid kept giving me. I always made the excuse that I can only appreciate poetry in

Urdu, so he went ahead and translated this German guy's poems into Urdu for my birthday, wrote them in rhyming Urdu since I had also taken a stand against poetry that didn't rhyme. He translated five poems in his beautiful calligrapher's handwriting, all little curves and elegant dashes, and pasted them on the inside of my cupboard.

In the clean-up operation that I carried out the morning of his disappearance, I stuffed them into the mattress, hoping that 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC would not go that far in his search for the truth.

I have thought of most things and have ready answers, but this one genuinely baffles me. What are they going to charge me with? Rendering foreign poetry into the national language? Abuse of official stationery?

I decide to be straight about it.

The Commandant finds it funny.

'Nice poem,' he says straightening the crumpled paper. 'Instead of the morning drill, we should start daily poetry recitals.'

He turns to 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC. 'Where did you find it?'

'In his mattress, sir,' 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC says, feeling pleased with himself, having gone way beyond the call of his bloody duty.

Rilke is crumpled again and the Commandant fixes 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC with a look that only officers with inherited general-genes are capable of.

'I thought we took care of that problem?'

Serves you right, asshole, my inner cadence booms.

The Commandant has his finger on the pulse of the nation, always adjusting his sails to the winds blowing from the Army House. Expressions like *Almighty Allah* and *Always keep your horses ready because the Russian infidels are coming* have been cropping up in his Orders of the Day lately, but he has not given up on his very secular mission of getting rid of foam mattresses with holes.

'You know why we were a better breed of officers? Not because of Sandhurst-trained instructors. No. Because we

slept on thin cotton mattresses, under coarse woollen blankets that felt like a donkey's ass.'

I look beyond his head and survey the presidential inspection photos on the wall, the big shiny trophies caged in a glass cupboard, and try to find Daddy.

Yes, that nine-inch bronze man with pistol is mine. Best Short Range Shooting Shigri Memorial Trophy, named after Colonel Quli Shigri, won by Under Officer Ali Shigri.

I don't want to think right now about Colonel Shigri or the ceiling fan or the bed sheet that connected them. Thinking about Dad and the ceiling fan and the bed sheet always makes me either very angry or very sad. Not the right place for either of these emotions.

'And now look at them,' the Commandant turns towards me. My arms lock themselves to my sides, my neck subtly shifts itself into a position so that I can keep staring at the bronze man.

'Spare me,' I think, 'I didn't invent the bloody technology that makes foam mattresses.'

'And these pansies ...' Nice new word, I tell myself. This is how he maintains his authority. By coming up with new expressions that you don't really understand but know what they mean for you.

'These pansies sleep on nine-inch thick mattresses under silky bloody duvets and every one of them thinks that he is a Mughal bloody princess on her honeymoon.' He hands over the crumpled Rilke to 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC, a sign that the interrogation can proceed.

'Is this yours?' 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC asks, waving the poems in my face. I try to remember something from the poems but get stuck on a half-remembered line about a tree growing out of an ear, which is weird enough in English but sounds completely crazy in rhyming Urdu. I wonder what the bugger was writing in German.

'No, but I know the handwriting,' I say.

‘We know the handwriting too,’ he says triumphantly. ‘What is it doing in your mattress?’

I wish they had found the bottle of rum or the video. Some things are self-explanatory.

I stick with the truth.

‘It was a birthday present from Cadet Obaid,’ I say. 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC hands the poems back to the Commandant, as if he has just rested his case whatever the case is.

‘I have seen all kinds of buggers in this business,’ the Commandant starts slowly. ‘But one pansy giving poetry to another pansy, then the other pansy stuffing it in the hole in his mattress is a perversion beyond me.’

I want to tell him how quickly a new word can lose its charm with overuse, but he is not finished yet.

‘He thinks he is too smart an ass for us.’ He addresses 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC who is clearly enjoying himself. ‘Get ISI to have a word with him.’

I know he is still not finished.

‘And listen, boy, you might be a clever dick and you might read all the pansy poetry in the whole world but there is one thing you can’t beat. Experience. How is this for poetry? When I started wearing this uniform ...’

I have a last look at the bronze man with the pistol. Colonel Shigri’s bulging eyes stare at me. Not the right place, I tell myself.

The Commandant senses my momentary absent-mindedness and repeats himself. ‘When I started wearing this uniform, you were still in liquid form.’

2<sup>nd</sup> OIC marches me out of the Commandant’s office. On my way back I try to avoid the salutes offered by cadets marching past me. I try to pretend I am having a leisurely stroll with 2<sup>nd</sup> OIC, which will end in my dorm rather than the cell.

All I can think about is the ISI.

It has to be an empty threat. They cannot call in the Inter bloody Services bloody Intelligence just because a

cadet has gone AWOL. ISI deals with national security and spies. And who the fuck needs spies these days anyway? The US of A has got satellites with cameras so powerful they can count the exact number of hairs on your bum. Bannon showed us a picture of this satellite and claimed that he had seen bum pictures taken from space but couldn't show them to us because they were classified.

ISI also does drugs but we have never done drugs. OK, we smoked hash once, but in the mountains I come from, hashish is like a spice in the kitchen, for headaches and stuff. Obaid got some from our washerman Uncle Starchy and we smoked one moonlit night in the middle of the parade square. Obaid had a singing fit and I practically had to gag him before bringing him back to our dorm.

I need to get an SOS to Bannon.

Shit on a shingle. Shit on a shingle.