

‘The Deserter’**Short Story****Habib Mohana**

Six-footer Ditto was a renowned kabaddi player. He had avid fans in every village in the district of Dera Ismael Khan, and some of his fans had named their sons and nephews after him. He was a brown-complexioned man of twenty-three, with dark curly hair and a long bushy moustache. He played kabaddi in the village fairs, to which he was always accompanied by a group of friends. At the edge of the ground his friends would stand in tight circle around him while he removed his clothes and tied a loincloth around his hips and groin. Like any other wrestler, he entered the ground half dancing and half jogging to the beat of the drums, his lithe athletic body glistening in the sun. If he won, his friends would hoist him onto their shoulders, showering one rupee notes over him. The drummers would scramble to collect the money. Several men had offered their daughters hands to him in marriage, but he politely refused, arguing that he was married to kabaddi.

He was born into a prosperous farming family of Daraban – a village located five miles east of the Suleiman Range and famed for date palm groves. Since he was a source of fame and honour for the family, his brothers kept him away from the toil and sweat of farm work. Every month his brothers slaughtered a billy goat for him. He ate some mutton fresh, while the remainder was first lightly grilled over embers and then hung on the clothesline for his subsequent use. In summers he drank sherbet made from almonds and poppy seeds and in winters he ate halva made with wheat flour, butter oil and cow-feet jelly to enhance his physical strength. His afternoons passed doing vigorous exercises and rubbing mustard oil into his toned body to make him strong and healthy.

Every year on the first Friday of April, people from the villages of Damaan Plains converged on the shrine of the saint Kaloo Qalandar at the village of Shah Alam to celebrate the annual fair, which coincided with his birthday. Some of the villagers reached the venue on horses and camels while some took vehicles, and they pitched their tents in the fairground around the shrine. The shopkeepers sold toys, sweets, sherbets, and agricultural tools in tents and reed sheds. The villagers spent two nights in the fairground dancing, singing, and playing, or watching games of strength.

In the late morning the kabaddi players were doing warm-ups in the fairground to the music played by the drummers and pipers while a gigantic crowd of spectators restlessly waited for their favourite players to go into action. There were four tiers of spectators: in the front tier, people sat in a massive circle on the bare ground; behind them, people perched on charpoys; the third layer consisted of standing spectators, while in the outermost tier were the ones who sat atop busses, trucks, and tractor-drawn trollies. More than twenty parties of

drummers and pipers hailing from different villages were walking and playing their instruments, creating the chaotically lively background music for the action.

The rules of Damaani kabaddi are primitive and simple: a raider sprints to reach the finish line while two defenders chase to intercept him. The rivals shove one another using hands and shoulders. Slapping is not allowed. The teams are divided on the basis of the two main tribes of the area, and final victory depends on team effort as well as individual performance.

It was Ditto's turn to carry out the raid. He dashed towards the finish line while two players from the rival team leapt at him to deter him from reaching it. Ditto levelled the first defender to the ground by pushing him with his shoulder, however the second one clutched at his loincloth in desperation. It came off, rendering the raider stark naked. About one lakh* eyes stared at him. A grunt of grief and anguish emerged from his friends' and fans' mouths, while his rivals and the majority of the spectators erupted into jeering and whistling and clapping their hands. All players wore bikini-like underwear under their loincloths and he too used to wear it but that day, as the bad luck would have it, he had left it at home.

He had a blackout, and on coming round he found himself sitting cross-legged on the ground. The drummers had stopped banging their drums, his ears buzzed with the rush of blood and he wished the earth would swallow him up. He felt as if the sky had cracks, the ground spewed smoke, and the busses and trucks were on fire. He felt like he was a circus beast on the loose and that the spectators would charge at him and beat him to a pulp.

With their shoulder sheets open and waving like unfurled flags, his friends rushed to Ditto and enfolded him in the sheets. One of his friends had brought him his clothes, and he scrambled into them, his eyes directed to the ground to avoid catching their gaze. Wrapping arms around him his friends ushered him out of the ground, which still faintly echoed with clapping and whistling. They brought him to the tent, and said reassuring words to him but it was of no avail as he had taken the thing to heart. Without eating his dinner, he curled up on the charpoy, wrapped a quilt around his face and cried into it. All night long he lay wide awake with the images of the morning's incident playing and replaying through his mind. 'Life will never be the same again for me,' he thought. 'I won't be able to live among these people who witnessed me standing without a stitch on.'

Next morning, his friends took him to Daraban but he dared not face the women of his family so he stayed in the guesthouse of one of his friends. He mulled over several options to stay away from his village so that the people would not poke fun at him for having seen him buck naked.

After extended consultation with his friends and brothers he decided to enlist in the army as a soldier. As the educational requirement for this job was fifth grade certificate, he fortunately had the requisite qualification.

After training he was posted in the desert of Bahawalpur near the Indian border, and after two years his company was transferred to Rawalpindi. His third year was in progress and he had not returned to his village even for one day. Whenever his colleagues went home for the vacations, his heart flew to his village but the unsavoury incident that occurred three years ago prevented him from visiting his home and seeing his loved ones. He spent the annual long vacations in the long gloomy army barracks listening to his radio or wandering around the cantonment roads, sulking and fretting as he saw no end to his suffering. Several times his brothers visited him and begged him to return to his home village but he would not listen. He did not feel at home with army life, although it provided him a shell under which he could hide his shame.

Once his father and elder brother visited him at the Rawalpindi cantonment to persuade him to go home with them. 'People don't remember things for such a long time. They've other headaches,' his father said.

'People of the area miss you at their fairs and festivals,' his elder brother claimed.

'I can't go with you. I don't have the grit to face people,' Ditto replied.

'You're wrong! For how long will you keep avoiding the people of your village and area? One day you have to return to your people,' his father said.

He had served in the army for over four years when one evening he absconded from the Rawalpindi cantonment. To avoid arrest by the army men, the deserter did not return home. After wandering in different cities for about two months, one night he secretly arrived home. He revealed to his family that he had quit his job, and they hid him in a room, but within a fortnight his secret was out.

One noon while he was having lunch with his friends in the palm-tree grove at the edge of the gurgling stream that meandered through the village, three soldiers in plain clothes sneaked upon him to arrest him and take him back to his regiment. With a half-chewed morsel in his mouth and without bothering with his shoes, he tore away. The soldiers chased after him in hot pursuit. The gruelling race continued for some time but he, being an experienced kabaddi player who also knew the village streets like the back of his hand, soon lost his pursuers. After this incident, the army men came to Daraban several times in plain clothes to apprehend the deserter, but each time he escaped them.

About eight months had passed since his desertion, and now he sometimes walked the village streets in the daytime, and sometimes he assisted his brothers in the farm work.

April brought a pleasant change to the weather, and the villagers gathered in the village of Shah Alam for the annual fair. It was the last day of the fair, and the kabaddi match was in full swing. Ditto sat with his friends on the charpoy watching the kabaddi match, his face half swathed in the turban sheet to hide himself from the public, as he had not forgotten the unpleasant incident that had taken place in the same place. His friends had been urging him to play kabaddi since early morning, but he would not listen. Some kabaddi players approached him and requested him to play, but he did not accede to their request. Next, the chief of his tribe in white clothes and a tall turban approached him and without heeding his protestations dragged him to the place where the action was. Half-heartedly, he stripped off his clothes and tied the loincloth around his waist and groin. Clutching Ditto's wrist the chief held his arm aloft for the audience to see that he was back. The entire audience rose to their feet, clapping their hands with delight. The musicians played even more vigorously.

Ditto accepted the challenge of the two veteran players. He made a dash for the finish line and the defenders chased him to nail him down. He was midway when he noticed that four men were chasing him: two in loincloths and two in full clothes. The men in loincloths stopped when they saw Ditto had won, but the two in full clothes kept perusing him. First he thought that they were his friends who were racing after him to give him money as a reward and hoist him to their shoulders. But when he had a closer look at them, their unfamiliar faces and army hair cut suddenly pressed an alarm button in his head. He increased his speed to lose his pursuers, but they were bent upon catching him.

The drummers had stopped beating their drums. All the spectators stood up, and buzzing emanated from them like thousands of bee colonies on the move. Some of the spectators thought that the pursuers were his enemies who had found an opportunity to settle some old scores, so they encouraged him to run faster. His worried eyes searched for a cleft to pass through in the four-tiered human bulwark, but there was none. For a while he raced in a zigzag pattern to evade arrest, but then he began to run towards the northeast where his friends were. He had only just drawn closer when a fissure appeared in the human bulwark, and he wove his way through the spectators. In the meantime two more army men had also joined the chase. Ditto was on the brink of surrendering when he found himself near a bus. He frantically clambered the ladder of the bus and reached its roof, which was crawling with kabaddi fans.

The army men surrounded the bus and the spectators jostled for the best place to view the live drama. The tribal elders strode towards the bus to investigate the affair. The tall, grumpy hawaladar told the crowd that they were only acting upon orders, and warned people not to interfere in their business. Next, he yelled at the deserter to get off the bus.

About 50,000 people stood packed around the bus, which had become the focus of all eyes and ears. The elders requested the pursuers to allow the deserter to put on clothes and

shoes, after which he would go with them of his own accord. His friends threw him his clothes and shoes while the impatiently curious multitude pressed closer to see and hear better. After donning the clothes and shoes, Ditto wrapped the turban around his head in a way that nearly hid his face. Standing close to the bus, his friends and fans instructed him to jump into their arms. He followed their instructions and thus made it to terra firma. Yelling with excitement and waving their hands and caps, the people urged him to run, which he was already planning to do. He ducked and pushed ahead through the cooperative and sympathetic throng. Flailing their arms and shouting furiously, the army men tried hard to catch him, but it was tantamount to finding a needle in a haystack. In the ensuing tumult the army men were put off the scent and the deserter dissolved into the sea of people.