

The Road of Separation : A Short Story

by Habib Mohana*

Dhok Saidan, the farming village had forty households. The village was famed in the area for inorganic mangoes and wheat. Over the last few days the village was abuzz with the news that the government was planning to build a motorway through the village. The work on the motorway was in progress some miles to the east of the village and the road had gobbled up several villages, farms and orchards that happened to be in its path.

One night after dinner the villagers held a meeting in the mosque in which they decided to go and meet the Deputy Commissioner of Chakwal and ask him to spare their village from the jaws of the motorway.

Next morning a dozen men gathered around the Datsun mini truck that was supposed to take them to the city. They had donned their best clothes, had tied tall fluffy turbans and worn their best peep-toed shoes. They had hardly boarded the truck when they saw a small dust devil that appeared on the village dirt road. After some time a new Toyota car emerged from the cloud of dust. The car pulled over under the gnarly sprawling banyan tree. It belched out four well-dressed men who had bulging files in their hands. They were officials from the land requisition department. One among them made an announcement from a megaphone and asked the villagers to assemble under the ancient banyan tree.

The men, boys, children and even some old women gathered under the tree. The group leader informed the villagers that the motorway was going to pass right through the middle of their village, 'Government will pay each one of you hefty sums for your houses and farms and orchards. Government will also allot you houses in the newly-built colony on the other side of the motorway. The new village is only one and a half miles away from this village. We have named the new village New Dhok Saidan.'

The villagers were stunned by this news. They begged the officials to spare their village but the officials said that it was the order of the president and it could not be helped.

The villagers kept hoping that the government might change its mind but one misty morning when smoke was rising from the breakfast fires the graders, dumpers, bulldozers, crawler excavators and road rollers rolled into Dhok Saidan. The villagers in a last-ditch effort staged a protest but the officials gave a call to the police and in no time a caravan of blue vehicles rumbled into the village. The grumpy police inspector gave two hours to the protesters to vacate the village. The villagers gave in.

The villagers piled their belongings on the tractor trollies or donkey carts, weeping women rounded up their children, and the cursing men rounded up their buffaloes and cows and goats. The villagers and their animals were driven towards New Dhok Saidan the government had constructed for the evacuees on the other side of the would-be motorway. The residents had hardly moved out of the village when the mechanical shovels went into action pulling down the houses, primary school, buffalo sheds and the mango trees.

The village mosque, graveyard and banyan tree did not interfere in the plan and they were spared. More than half the orchards and wheat fields of the village were requisitioned by the government.

The villagers had been resettled in New Dhok Saidan. They did not feel at home in their new cookie-cutter houses. They felt suffocated in the two-room quarters and all longed to go back to their old village. Apart from the agriculture the villagers knew no other business and in the new settlement they entered new professions.

Seventy year old Chacha Ramzan had lived in the new cemented village for three days when he asked Falka his son to take him back to the old village. Chacha Ramzan was born and bred in old Dhok Saidan and his entire life he had known no other place than his village. He had married when he was sixteen and had sired three daughters and one son. Now the tall brown dignified man lived with Falka's family. From the very beginning he was averse to the idea of leaving his ancestral home.

'I haven't had a wink of sound sleep since we came to this place. I can't sleep until I say a brief prayer over my mother's grave and light a mud lamp at it.'

'They have razed the village to the ground. Where would you stay?'

'I will stay in the mosque.'

'Who will cook your bread?'

'I can cook myself a thick loaf of bread.'

Falka turned a deaf ear to the old man's jabberwocky but one late afternoon the old man put a bottle of mustard oil and match box in his pocket, picked up his crooked stick and stole away from his house. Weaving his way through the crawling road machines and mounds of building material Ramzan plodded to the old graveyard. He said a prayer over his mother's grave and lit the mud lamp that sat in the niche in the gravestone.

It was his mother who had raised Ramzan and his sister. He was hardly ten when one dark winter night his father eloped with an unmarried girl whose house shared a dwarf wall with their house. They had a small farm and a few heads of cows and goats. In the morning their farm was occupied by the wronged family and their cows and goats were also dragged away from their house by the injured party. Ramzan, his sister and mother were left with only a roof over their heads and a few household things. They had to start again from scratch. His mother worked as a farm hand in the village farms while Ramzan minded his little sister.

Falka and his son had combed New Dhok Saidan but the old man was not there. Then they strode to the old graveyard and found the greying man sitting at the foot of his mother's grave, whispering prayers.

‘Let us go back home, father.’

‘But who would take care of the dead?’

‘No one can harm them. They are beyond harm.’

Every Thursday afternoon the old graveyard would come alive with the villagers. The men, women, girls and boys would descend upon the cemetery. Ramzan also joined them. They recited prayers, lit mud lamps at the graves of their loved ones and stuck smouldering joss sticks in mud graves that were covered in small limestone rocks. They slung wheat grains and lentil over the humpy graves for the birds and the ants. The grave-visitors distributed halva, or roasted grams, or sweetened rice pops among the congregants.

After one year when the motorway had been completed, the authorities erected a two-yard high barbed wire mesh fence on each side of the road. The villagers now could not visit the old graveyard on Thursday afternoons. The government had built an overhead bridge for the convenience of the villagers but it was fifteen miles away in the east. It meant that if they wanted to go to the old graveyard they had to cover thirty miles—fifteen miles on each side. One and half mile distance had elongated into thirty miles distance.

Now the villagers could not pay their weekly visits to the old graveyard but still they took their dead to the old graveyard in a mini truck though the government had earmarked a plot of land for the graveyard close to New Dhok Saidan.

After two months one innovative villager secretly cut holes in the iron wire mesh fence on both side of the road wide enough to let pass a man through. Now again the villagers could easily reach the old graveyard in a short time, though they had to negotiate the speeding vehicles on the motorway. For Ramzan it was manna from heaven. Often he would take his young grandson who helped him negotiate the zooming traffic and thus the old man would reach the grave of his

mother. The yawning holes in the iron fences went undetected for some time but then one day the motorway authorities caught a group of villagers passing through the holes. The trespassers were arrested, whisked to the police station and the holes in the fence were repaired straightway.

Four months had hardly passed when again the villagers made holes in the fences in order to reach the old cemetery easily. But now the holes camouflaged with branches of thorny acacias could not be spotted by the motorway authorities. Every Thursday afternoon the villagers would cross the motorway in drove and go to the old graveyard to light lamps at the graves of their dear departed. Ramzan accompanied them on their visits but he wanted to visit the graveyard daily which was not possible for the villagers.

Every third day Chacha Ramzan would ask his young grandson to take him to the old graveyard but one day his grandson was not available. While his daughter-in-law was busy with her chores Chacha sneaked out of the house and headed towards the graveyard alone. He passed through the hole in the iron fence. The road flowed with heavy traffic but the uncanny pull of the loved ones helped him manoeuvre through the speeding motors and somehow he reached the other side unharmed. Upon reaching the cemetery, he excitedly poured mustard oil into the mud lamp that sat on the grave of his mother and lit it and heaved a sigh of relief. He picked the little rocks from the grave and kissed them with tearful eyes, pleased at the reunion. He ecstatically said a brief prayer for the sake of his mother's soul and sat down at the foot of the grave, gazing into the grey air, lost.

He saw his mother picking heads from the swaying pearl millet stalks. She had gone ahead in the tall millet and now she was invisible. Then all of a sudden she tumbled out of the millet crop. She was chased by the owner of the millet field. He tried to haul her back into the field but she resisted fiercely. Screaming Ramzan scrambled to her rescue, the farmer gave him a kick in the stomach and he dragged his mother to the middle of the millet field. Ramzan sprinted to the village and called the villagers to help his mother. When he returned with the reinforcement his mother was plodding out of the field her hair dishevelled and her head shawl dragging in her feet. The men searched for the owner of the land but he was nowhere to be seen. Then he remembered how his mother one day had left reaping the wheat and had come running to him to protect him from a feisty ram that was intent upon snatching a chapatti from him.

When his nostalgic train of thoughts broke, he kissed the headstone of his mother's grave. He loved the peace and serenity of the graveyard. Then through his mind flashed the day he tied the knot with the girl of his dreams, that day the entire village was dancing: men, women, boys and girls.

Ramzan went to the deserted mosque and offered his prayer. He had sweetened rice puffs in his pocket. He munched them and washed them down with water from the clay pitcher. Soon the dark fell and he lay down on a prayer mat. He had just nodded off to sleep when the search party

led by his son reached the mosque. Falka was angry with him, ‘one day either you will be run over by a motor or will be gobbled by a wolf.’

They took him back to the village.

After this incident his family kept a close eye on him and they would not let him go out of the house alone.

Three weeks later, his son had gone to Rawalpindi for some work. For Chacha it was a godsend. He sneaked out of the house, crossed the motorway somehow and was in the old graveyard. He lit the mud lamp of his mother’s grave. Running a satisfied gaze over the graves, he took a leisurely stroll through the graves. He knew many of the occupants of the graves. He would stop at a grave, talk to the occupant for some time and then move on.

The sun had sunk behind the craggy Pothohar hills. When Falka returned home he asked his wife about his father and she said, ‘I think he would be in the mosque.’ Falka went to the mosque but his father was not there then he raced towards the old graveyards.

The old man was having a great time in the gloomy graveyard. Halfheartedly he turned his steps towards his house. He passed through the first hole in the fence. The motorway was lit up by hurtling vehicles. He waited for the traffic to end. The bright lights had almost blinded him. Then there came a letup in the traffic and he toddled across one side of the road and now he was trying to climb over the metal beam crash barrier that divided the road in the middle. He was fumbling with the crash barrier. His son had just passed through the hole in the fence on the other side of the road. Falka shouted to him, ‘Baba, don’t cross the road.’ but Baba did not hear him due to the traffic din. The old man landed on the fast lane. A car was bowling down towards him. Ramzan stood close to the barrier and when the car had passed he snailed ahead. He was about to cross the third lane when a delivery van ploughed into him. He was slung into the air like a tennis ball hit with great force. The driver pushed his foot on the gas pedal and made his getaway. Chacha cannoned into the barbed wire mesh fence, his body spread-eagle and face turned to the road, he looked like a huge bird caught in a net. Falka with the help of the petrol police took him down from his perch. They laid him down on the flank of the road. One cop felt his heart and then the wrist but he could feel no movement. They called an ambulance. If they could get him to hospital in time, his chances of recovery would brighten.

The authorities repaired the holes in the fences and they warned the villagers that they will be sent to jail if they ever again created holes in the fences.

Nine months later Ramzan had fully recovered from his injuries and he was again hale and hearty.

The old man had not visited his mother's grave for a long time. His son allowed him to accompany the villagers who were going to the old graveyard in the bus. After having accomplished the rituals the villagers boarded the bus to return home but Ramzan threw a wobbly, 'I don't want to go back to New Dhok Saidan. I don't belong there. I will stay here, in old Dhok Saidan.'

The villagers forcibly pushed him into the bus, 'Old Dhok Saidan doesn't exist anymore,'

'But my mother's grave exists, the mosque exists, the banyan tree exists,' Ramzan bawled.

All the way the old man sat boohooing and slapping his head and the women tried to console him while the kids sniggered.

Upon reaching home he insisted upon shifting to the old graveyard but his son would not listen to him. Next day the old man began a hunger strike. The village elders went to see him and advised him, 'you are no longer fit to live alone in that place.'

But Ramzan was adamant.

Two days later Falka brought him to the old graveyard. He spent one night with his father and left in the morning. The old man made the mosque his home.

Every Thursday afternoon the villagers paid a visit to the old graveyard in a bus. For Ramzan they brought fruits, sweets, milk, butter oil and other necessities. His son, on each visit, would bring him provisions and a change of fresh clothes.

On Thursday the old man also waited for the pilgrims' arrival anxiously. He would stand up and greet the approaching procession by waving to them. He would hug the men, caress the head of the women and girl and run his skeletal fingers through the hair of the boys.

Chacha Ramzan had spent more than eight months in the graveyard alone, the harsh wind and weather had told on his visage and skin. His beard was overgrown and messy, his clothes were soiled and greasy and he looked like a beggar. He had erected a hut from tree branches and hay near his mother's grave and he spent the day in the hut. To keep himself busy during the day, he fixed the droopy torn green flags that stood flapping over the graves, put the small displaced limestone rocks back on the graves, trimmed the wild bushes, cut down the tough wild grasses and repaired the graves that were damaged by the rain.

In the afternoon he would sit at the foot of his mother's grave and pray-count on the sandal wood rosary. Sometimes he talked to his mother and sometimes staring into the distance listened to the

hiss of the distance while the memories of the bygone days raced through his mind. At dusk, he retreated to the mosque, ate the leftover bread he had baked in the morning. Sometimes a shepherd would pass by the graveyard with a flock of goats and he would give him some milk.

It was a golden Thursday afternoon, the villagers had reached the graveyard but they were not greeted by Ramzan. His hut was empty, his son went into the mosque but he was not there either. Now all the villagers joined in the search. They saw around the trees that grew at the edge of the graveyard, calling but there was no sign of the old man. The villagers spread out around the graveyard shouting in panic. A few minutes into the search and a woman saw Ramzan's right sandal, then one man came upon his crooked stick next they found his turban sheet and then they found him—his lower body had been eaten away but his head and upper body was unscathed.

They brought the corpse back to New Dhok Saidan. The relatives washed and shrouded the dead body.

The villagers had brought a mini truck to shift the dead body to the old graveyard but Falka said that his father will be buried in New Dhok Saidan in the plot of land that had been designated for the graveyard.

'What are you saying? Your father loved the old graveyard. His soul will not rest in peace until he is buried at the side of his mother,' the village chief argued.

'You are right but this thing can't go on forever. Someone's loved one, someone's father or mother has to be buried here, in the new graveyard. It is time we made a start. In the beginning we did not like this place but now we call it home. My father will ...'

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