

LOVE ACROSS THE SALT DESERT

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The Rann of Kutch is a vast, lonely desert, almost impossible to cross. Yet, some people do cross it for reasons of their own. Najab Hussain also crossed the vast desert for a very special reason. What was it?

1. THE DROUGHT in Kutch had lasted for three successive years. Even when clouds were sighted they passed by, ignoring the stricken country. The monsoons had, so to speak, forgotten to land. The Rann lay like a paralysed monster, its back covered with scab and scar-tissue and dried blister-skin. The earth had cracked and it looked as if chunks of it had been baked in a kiln and then embedded in the soil-crust. The cattle became thin and emaciated. The oxen died. The camel alone survived comfortably, feeding on the *bawal*, camelthorn. Then one day the clouds rolled in like wineskins and the lightning crackled and the wineskins burst. Though two years have passed since the drought ended, everyone remembers that it first rained on the day when Fatimah entered the village. This is how she came.

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What would he not do for her, the daughter of the spice-seller; she who smelt of cloves and cinnamon, whose laughter had the timbre of ankle-bells, whose eyebrows were like black wisps of the night and whose hair was the night itself? For her he would cross the salt desert!

He had stayed the day at Kala Doongar, a black hill capped with basalt, the highest in Kutch. He had set his camel, Allahrakha, free to crop on the *bawal* trees. At dusk he paid homage to the footprints of the Panchmai Pir on the hilltop. He left some food there and started beating on his *thali*, according to the custom here. In a few minutes jackals materialised and gobbled up the food. This was auspicious. If they had not turned up he would have cancelled the journey. A lamp was lighted in the Pir's honour every night on the hilltop and the flame could be seen on all the way from Khavda. Over a hundred years earlier the Panchmai Pir had trudged these salt wastes serving the people accompanied, as legend had it, by a jackal. Reclusive by habit he used to retire to thorn jungles, where apart from his vulpine companions none else dared to disturb his nocturnal trysts. The custom of feeding the jackals had lingered since then.

Najab bowed before the flame and set out. He left behind the camelthorn shrubs and the area once famous for its savannahs of stunted grass, but now sere and brown as the desert. He had left behind all human habitation,

Kuran being the last village. For the next three days he would not be seeing any *bhungas*, those one-room mud-houses, circular at the base, but tapering into conical thatch-roofs at the top. Now only the sand-scapes stretched out before him, mile upon mile. Water splashed in the *chagals*. With the name of the Pir on his lips Najab Hussain set forth.

Najab's diffidence was notorious among his friends. He was known to have blushed at the mere mention of a girl. A strangely introverted lad with dreamy eyes, no one had ever associated him with any act of bravado. His father, Aftab, would say, "All that my ancestors and I have acquired during a hundred years, this lad will squander away, not because he is a spendthrift but because he will be too shy to charge money for what he sells!"

He had crossed the Rann on four occasions earlier, though he had turned twenty only a month ago. But each time he had either accompanied his father or that wily old smuggler, Zaman, the veteran of a hundred illegal trips to Sind. Each time they had taken *tendu* leaf worth about five hundred, and sold it across the border for twelve hundred. But between the pay-off to officials and to the intermediaries who arranged the sale of the *biri* leaf, to the man who took the camel out to graze and to the friend or relative who harboured them, there was precious little left. It was just enough to buy some used terylene garments or cloves and then it was time to make the long trek across the desert. It was during one of these trips that they had stayed with Kaley Shah, the clove-seller. "He is a distant relative of your mother," his father told Najab. Kaley Shah was tall, and well-fleshed and his thick-jowled face had a purple tinge about it as if somewhere along the way it had got stuck with a discoloured patch. He always wore a *tahmat* of black and white checks. Within a day Najab discovered that the fellow was an absolute rogue who drove such a cussed bargain that for the first time in his hearing his father started mouthing obscenities.

But his daughter Fatimah was a *hoor* with eyes so bright that they would have lit up the darkness of the underworld. She was taken by this quiet, pleasant young man so ready with his smiles. But she could hardly elicit a word out of him. Fatimah had been under pressure to get engaged to someone in the village known for his slurred speech and grotesque stammer. "Just my luck to run into mutes," she thought. But then, as she caught him staring at her, she laughed back. And in the evening when Fatimah repeated the performance and her face flooded with excitement as if she dared him to take the next step, he had flung his arms around her in a reckless, dizzy moment. Yes, he would come again, he told her, and saw her start with disbelief for he seemed to have answered her inarticulated question: Would he come again? This time he would come alone with no father to cramp his style. And as he left he looked behind to find her gaze following him, her

eyes like a pair of storm lanterns in the dark.

Ever since his return Khavda, Najab had been straining to get away. What was there about the Rann that he did not know? He could cross the Rann in the daylight, leave alone starlight, a thing none of his elders had dared to do! And one morning Aftab was woken up by a shout from Zaman. What does that old rogue want, he muttered, rubbing his sleepy eyes. Zaman asked about Najab's whereabouts.

2. "The boy has been sulking of late but he should be around. Anyway, what business is it of yours?" The old man did not hide his irritation.

"Who are you trying to fool, Aftab Mian?" asked the smuggler. "Don't you know that Allahrakha is also missing?"

In these border villages the pattern of life was such that if a man was absent long with his camel, it was taken for granted that he had made a foray across the desert into Pakistan. Aftab went into the mud enclosure where his camel was kept and found it empty. His heart sank. He ran into the house to see if the bundles of *tendu* leaf he had bought by him had been taken by the boy. "Oh, the fool! That son of a fool!" exclaimed Aftab, almost shaking with fury. "He has forgotten to take the leaf with him!"

"Who are you trying to fool with all this drama?" called out Zaman who was still standing at the door. "This son of yours is not as innocent as the world believes. He is a pig and the son of a pig."

There was no limit to his chagrin. Zaman was a 'chief', the man who kept the Rangers across happy. Any one crossing the Rann without his support was running the gauntlet with the law. And here this fledgling had blundered in without as much as a word to him, or a salaam, or a hundred rupee note!

"May Allah bring him safely out of this!" said the old rogue piously. He means just the opposite, thought Aftab. Nothing would please him more than to see Najab turned into carrion with vultures hovering around.

"Don't worry, Zaman, Allah will see him through!" he said testily and banged the door in the smuggler's face.

As Zaman walked off, Aftab went in to break the news of their son's escapade to his wife. She would faint, he thought. He found her crouching with her back against the mud wall. She did not even blink in surprise, once. She just sat there cowering as if he had just slapped her and was about to do so again. Allah! She knew it! She knew it all the time! She was waist-deep in this conspiracy along with her son and never breathed a word about it. His eye fell on her bare arm.

"Where is the gold bangle my father gave you, woman."

"You need not worry. Najab will return with cloves."

The long-striding Allahrakha kept a brisk pace. A strong south wind drove the tang of the Kori creek back into Najab's nostrils. He followed the

stars, the Milky Way flaked with mica, the Great Bear shambling towards the north. Before dawn he had reached his destination, for a sandy elevation palisaded with the bones of dead animals told him he had arrived at Sarbela, over twenty miles from Kala Doongar. He was already beyond the international boundary. Here he rested. During daylight, movement was impossible. The Indus Rangers would be looking from their bamboo watch-towers. And in the heat everything became a *mirage*. A depression in the sand looked like a splash of water, a freak, stunted cactus gave the appearance of a grove, and a camel looked like a huge prehistoric animal on the move. Any movement was sure to be noticed through binoculars.

When the sun came up Najab took his first drink of water from his *chagal*. At noon he had his first meal – dry, stale bread with onion. By now thoughts about Fatimah took a vice-like grip over him. An entire night lay between them, he thought. And the distance was less than ten miles. The thought of it made him writhe even as the sun started beating its anvil on the desert. A whiff of the tangy south wind caught his nostrils again. But this time it brought with it a thin, dappled veil of cloud, patches of which lay overlapping like fish scales. Within an hour this corrugated cloud had covered a substantial portion of the sky, looking for all the world like a stretch of wind-rippled sand. Yes, this was the time! He got up and shook the sand from his turban. Even as he harnessed his camel he thought that Allahrakha was looking at him quizzically as if asking what the hell he was up to. At one level of consciousness he knew that this was madness. He knew of overworked camels dying of fatigue, of the patrolling parties of the B.S.F. and the Indus Rangers and the mirage-chequered, trackless wastes of the desert. But he succumbed to a rush of blood and the face of Fatimah beckoned him like a mirage.

Najab crossed the International Boundary Pillar Number 1066. He knew the track he had to take, bisecting the two posts of the Indus Rangers at Jagatrai and Vingoora. But he strayed ever so slightly, and from their watch-tower they saw through their binoculars this sleek camel, wrapped and distorted by the heat-shimmer into a lumbering leviathan. An Indian slipping into their territory with *tendu* leaf right under their noses, and that too without paying any hush money! They were not going to stand for it. Najab was in a trance now, events flashing past him like figures on a screen. The mile-long chase, the firing from behind, the spent bullets flopping in the sand and then the rising wind which churned the dust into his eyes and then rose between the hunter and the hunted. When the dust settled half an hour later he was alone in the Rann.

The next few hours passed in a daze. He was mortally scared that Allahrakha may die of fatigue. To ease him of his burden he now started

walking beside him. Within an hour the salt had scraped the callus from his feet and scarred them with agonising cracks. Under a hot tin sky, the Rann was blazing now, throwing up white needles which hurt the eyes. And as the Rann palpitated, it haunted him with its mirages, pools of shadow, scooped half-moons of water. Hours of wandering as if in a trance, attempting to lick the receding edges of the mirage. Then light thinning away, and an hour or two later, dusk, and a thin plume of smoke rising from a dung-fire. Allah be praised! He was now within range.

He waited for the night to descend and then struck out hobbling on his toes, for his desert odyssey had cost him his heels. Within an hour he was at the clove-seller's door.

Fatimah rose from her bed like a panic-stricken doe as he called out her name softly through the window bars. It took some anxious moments for it to sink in that it was Najab. Her lustrous eyes lit up the dark of the room as she opened the door.

3. Two hours before dawn, Kaley Shah was woken up by the beat constable banging on the door. "A smuggler has come across the Rann, Kaley Shah. You wouldn't know anything about him, would you?"

"*Kasam tumhari*, not a sparrow has entered the house, or the village. Even the dogs have not been barking tonight." Then he added with a knowing wink, "Why should a smuggler come to me?"

But the law was not amused. "Kaley Shah," he said sardonically, "your belly is stuffed full with silver. It would outweigh even the dirt in your heart!"

The constable's words rattled like a sack of empty cans in his head and prevented him from sleeping.

"You have a guest," said Fatimah as she brought him his tumbler of hot, steaming milk next morning. "It is Najab. He stayed the night in the cattle shed." For a moment he was terrified. A smuggler in the house, the police prowling all around and he did not even know of it! His meeting with Najab had been brief. The wretched fellow had brought no *tendu* leaf.

"First you come unannounced, dragging the police behind you, and then I find you have come with nothing. Trading with you is going to be a dead loss, son, with the cops on your back and your hands empty."

Najab thought that Kaley Shah's waist-cloth, with its black and white checks looked like a chess board. He would have to make his moves carefully. He showed the gold bracelet. "I have come for cloves, *Chacha jan*. And I shall pay in gold."

The next two days Kaley Shah was busy buying cloves and arranging to get Allahrakha grazed a few miles away, by a cowherd. Otherwise the presence of a strange camel would have let loose a babble of tongues. Najab slept in the cattle-shed in the evening and slipped into Fatimah's room late

at night.

“They want me to marry Mahfuz Ali,” she told him. “He is related to us from my mother’s family. The way he stammers! You should hear him! Urchins start mimicking him the moment they set eyes on him. It is just a step removed from being hounded like a madman and pelted with stones.”

“Has it never occurred to you to take a ride on Allahrakha across the Rann?” She had kept silent and silence was assent. It was as simple as that. 4. The first lurch of the camel next evening and they were off. He had waited with his camel at the outskirts of the village and she had slipped out after her father had started snoring. The moment was too big for them and they did not speak. It was only in passing that she thought of the village she was leaving for good. As for quitting one and entering another, she never gave it a thought. Where did one have the time for Pakistan and Hindustan when one was eloping with one’s love and crossing the desert which divided, both physically and symbolically, the two countries? For her it meant just a shift in dialect, a smear of Kutchi added and a little of Sindhi sandpapered away.

And the camel lurched and bumped onwards and Najab drove him hard. By the time they reached Sarbela she was exhausted and fell asleep.

She woke up in the afternoon to find the sky overcast. It turned ominous in the evening with depth upon depth of dark-edged nimbus gathering at the summons of a storm-god. Another night they journeyed facing the wind which hurled the sand in their faces. As they neared Khavda, the thunder started rolling and reverberating across the skies.

Three times during the night Aftab opened the door, thinking his son had come. But it was only the wind knocking against the door. This time the banging was persistent. When he unlatched the door he found Allahrakha shying away from a streak of lightening. Huge, isolated drops of rain were falling, kicking up the dust. Aftab steeled himself. He would not allow any relief, any expression of joy to show on his face.

“Son, have you brought anything?” he asked, an edge of iron deliberately introduced in his voice.

“Yes,” replied Najab, as he ushered Fatimah in.

The rain stormed down and swept away three years of drought.