

THE DJINN THAT FELL FROM THE WALNUT TREE

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I

Up in the north, deep in the mountains, a two days trek on foot or a day's on a mule back (and of late an 8 hours drive) from the town of K, you will reach a mountain pass that overlooks a brief valley. Not very long ago if you happened to stand at this pass and had time enough to look intently towards the vale below, you could vaguely discover houses spread in an arbitrary sprawl as if somebody had spilt a pinchful of rice hurriedly. At that time the virgin naiveté of the vale was yet to be exorcised by the intricacies and paraphernalia of macadamisation and concretisation. Standing there one could have said that sometime, after the deluge of Noah, a few men along with their wives and children had happened to pass by this vale. Tired- they had decided to stay here for a day or two, and afterwards had forgotten about the rest of world and the rest of world had forgotten about them. In this state of mutual forgetfulness, the vale had eventually become an anachronistic aberration. A place where you occasionally came across things that have been declared non-existent by the more knowledgeable amongst us. Things, which nature shows to its child but dares not to disclose them to its master.

Back then, there was a house in this vale by which stood a giant old walnut tree. In this house there lived a carpenter with his wife. Living in a place where a new house was built once in a generation or sometimes even two and where things like repairing a roof or a window or a door, was expected to be done out of courtesy rather than out of professional service, the carpenter's work fetched him just enough to suffice his needs.

But he wanted more.

So one day he decided to visit the town of K to sell some wooden artefacts and look for some work for which he is paid to his satisfaction. He sold the carved artefacts but could not find much work. Dismayed he returned to the vale and said to his wife;

“Say what if we cut the old walnut tree. We could make some money.”

The wife looked up in terror and with a grimace sitting on her brow replied, “If you think so!”

The carpenter saw the grimace and reasoned, “The walnuts do not fetch much but the wood- I tell you, I can carve a few things out of it. There is much demand for such items in the town.”

“I understand. But it is just that the walnut tree has been there forever, it seems like a part of our home.”

With guilty irritation quivering in his eyes the carpenter said in a cold gruff voice, “But we need the money!”

Early next morning the carpenter along with three of his neighbours came with axes and ropes and by afternoon all that was left of the walnut tree was a helpless naked stump- a gravestone for the fallen tree. Now, it happened that on this walnut tree there lived the patron Djinn of the Carpenter’s family. The patronage of a Djinn, you must understand, is a very miserly affair. It is not like that the djinn will pour a pot full of gold through your chimney or make your hen lay diamonds or weep pearls or leave a treasure chest at your door. Nothing fancy like that, it is rather a very unpretentious job. The Djinn will just see to it that your needs are met. Small insignificant things like ensuring water flows in your stream, fruit grows on your tree, rice ripens on time and other drab things. And sometimes when feeling quite extravagant

he may drop an apple or a walnut on you. The patronage of Djinn is hardly something that anybody takes notice of. It is like air- you breathe it and forget about it.

Over the years the Carpenter's needs had more or less been the same. They hardly warranted a Djinn's active interest. As a result the carpenter never suspected he had a patron and the Djinn in turn grew quite indolent. Indolent enough to sleep through the hacking of the walnut tree. Only when the tree came crashing down did the Djinn wake up. His predicament was immediate.

He was homeless now!

Sitting there on the leftovers of the fallen tree while the carpenter and his men sawed off its branches and the trunk, the Djinn with a very heavy heart thought about this whole affair. It was not often that a Djinn became homeless and never in an as unceremonious way as he did. "If I don't find a home I will have to haunt the graveyard forever." says the Djinn to himself. "No. No, that won't do. I am not going to be the one who disgraces my ancestry. Besides, who will look after the carpenter's family then?"

So there he sat, even after the carpenter had left, thinking and thinking. By dusk he could think of only one way out of his predicament. He would have to live with the Carpenter and his wife in their house.

As the sun was about to set, the Djinn tip toed to the door of carpenter. He took a deep breath and with nervous trembling fingers knocked on the door.

The door opened.

“I am the Djinn who lived in the walnut tree. I have come to live with you now.”

II

In the beginning, living with the Djinn was full of apprehensions and concerns for the carpenter and his wife. Generations of knowledge and established facts made the matters worse. Take for instance the culinary interests of a Djinn. Traditions and Grandmothers said that Djinns relished mashed human brains stuffed in fresh intestines and were very particular about the type of blood they drank. And their vegetarian luncheons were many a times found to be the cause of famines. But the carpenter and his wife found that this Djinn of their's, was not so fastidious. In fact he ate out of curiosity than out of need. And just within a week the Djinn was found to be violative of traditions and Grandmothers in more than just his eating habits.

“Well so be it,” the carpenter was heard saying to his neighbours, “Other families have grand uncles who forgot to marry in their youth, we have this Djinn.”

And for all practical purposes the Djinn indeed lived like an unmarried grand uncle. He kept to his own in the house, tucked away silently in a corner, speaking rarely. And soon he was treated like an unmarried uncle as well. "Why don't you make yourself useful. Go fetch some water from the stream." the wife would tell him. Similarly the carpenter would say, "Here Djinn, come lend me a hand. Carry this block for me."

Like so, months passed between them till one night at the dinner when the Djinn was reminiscing about walnuts, the carpenter said to him,

“They are building a road from the town up to here and need labourers to work in the mountains. Say Djinn what if you too go there and earn some quick bucks.”

The Djinn wondered to himself why he needed to earn some quick bucks or why they needed a road. But since the road was being built anyway, it somehow meant that he needed to earn quick bucks as well. All this time with them and he could still never quite understand the needs of Carpenter and his wife. He did ensure, like any decent patron Djinn would, that their needs were met, but they always wanted more. So the next day, there he was in the mountains- cutting trees, moving boulders, breaking rocks and bearing all the pangs that have to be borne before the birth of a road. The contractor, when he came to know that a Djinn was working for him, expected him to work like a Djinn as well, his non-conformity to a traditional Djinn notwithstanding. Thus while it took 5 men to cut a tree, the Djinn had to cut one all by himself. Similarly it was considered sloth on the part of Djinn if he carried anything less than what 10 men could. And whenever the Djinn said he was feeling tired the contractor assumed it to be his bad sense of humour.

By the time the road reached to the mountain pass, the Djinn had grown so thin that a mosquito could almost squeeze through him. Everybody said there was nothing to worry about. It was quite normal. The Djinns waxed and waned like the moon. He will grow back again. Let him work for now. But then one morning the Djinn just could not get up. Nor was he able to open his eyes.

"What shall we do?" said the carpenter first to his wife. And then to everyone else.

"We don't know. We never had an ill djinn amongst us before." all of them replied one by one.

Finally the village doctor who was also a barber, after much pondering said, "Well I am no expert on Djinns, having only treated humans so far, but Hakeem Jalenoos had once said prayer and medicine are same to all. I say leave the Djinn to himself and pray for him. That is the best we can do."

And the Djinn was left to lay down there all to himself, the carpenter worried about the loss of extra bucks while the contractor angry over loss of his supernatural-labour. And the doctor-barber smug in his satisfaction that he could now treat Djinns as well.

III

When the Djinn finally opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was a misshapen onion hanging above him and glowing with an unnatural light, as if some angry angel had rubbed on it accidentally. It was irritating but alluring nevertheless. "What sort of place is this? Is it the promised paradise or some devil's lair !"

Before he could decide, the carpenter's wife walks in and exclaims, "So you live !"

It was she who told him that the glowing onion was what they called an electric bulb. The Djinn had waked up after months during which roads were built in the vale and walls were raised, electricity was bought, houses were built and rebuilt (thank God for that extra work). They were even building a dam on the other side of vale. In short their vale had finally caught up with the rest of the world.

So I have managed to sleep all through this as well, the Djinn thought to himself. What a pity !

"You will find quite a different world out there now." said the carpenter's wife proudly.

The curiosity of the Djinn was piqued by then. His eagerness lent some frugal strength to his body. He got up and went out. Once outside he felt a shiver of uneasiness dancing down his spine.

Where was the vale !

He saw to his right and he saw to his left but whatever he saw, he could make no sense of anything. The vale was gone. It was just a wide expanse of artificial wilderness all around. Horrifying and bewildering, as if the

God had suddenly decided to curse the whole valley. Standing there the Djinn felt so out of place- so obsolete!

He walked around frenetically, a fallen leaf tossed around callously by the wind- senseless and helpless in its direction, looking desperately for some semblance of familiarity. But there was none to be found. "I should climb a tree. Mayhap that will help." After all he had spent a life time atop one. He looked around, the only tree he could find was a very strange one. Smooth and branchless except for a few stunted and misshapen branches at the top. What was even weirder was that there were ropes tied to those strange branches. With great effort the Djinn managed to climb up this tree. Once atop he felt a strange urge to get the tree free of those ropes. He reached out for them. As he grabbed one of the ropes it sent down a strong tremor throughout his body. He was afraid but he just could not let go of the rope. Just a few moments of terror and then it was all darkness.

IV

It was the carpenter who first saw the Djinn. He was walking back to his house grumbling to himself how he had been cheated. He had repaired three windows but had been paid for only two. It won't do. The customers must understand this. Everything was so expensive in the vale now. How was a man supposed to live if you do not pay him properly!

While thinking thus, something in the air caught his eye. He looked up and realised to his dismay that it was the Djinn. He shook his head. Ah! It had to be eventually like this. No place for such things as the Djinn in the vale now. Sprawled like an absurdity, clutching the wires, was the Djinn. He was electrocuted- quite aptly, if you come to think of it.

After all, a Djinn belongs up on a walnut tree and not atop an electric pole.