

A Man Keeps His Word

Life and Culture in Kabul, Afghanistan

A Translation of Dr. Akram Osman's Story "*Mardara Qawl ast*"

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A Man Keeps His Word

written in 1975

Kite-flying is a popular sport in Kabul. Indeed, it is the main form of entertainment for young boys and teenagers throughout South Asia. During the Taliban era, kite-flying was banned in Afghanistan. As seen in the story, kite-flying is a highly competitive sport. As a kite-flyer releases his kite into the air, the aim is to “cut” or slash the string of his rival, so that his kite will plummet to the ground. The one whose kite remains in the sky becomes the champion. For this reason, kite flyers make their strings razor-sharp by rubbing fine, crushed glass into the kite-string in order to more easily slash the stings of their rivals. Hence, quality kite-string is just as crucial as a quality kite. This story, *A Man of His Word*, is considered by many Afghans to be Dr. Akram Osman’s best story.

The snow was falling softly. Sher counted the flakes one by one through the windowpane – one, two, three ... one, two, three, four ... one, two, three, four, five. However, the cotton-cleaner from on high kept on blowing the cotton-like flakes so swiftly that in a few minutes the roofs and verandas of the old, straw-mud homes were hidden under a blanket of snow.¹ Sher held his breath and rested for a moment. He glanced towards the shelf on which lay a reel of colorful kite-string. Just above it, hanging on nails, were his kites – a medium 3-piece kite and his large deluxe kite. Sher had been making kites and kite-string for years. Throughout the streets and alleys of Old Kabul, all over Shor-Bazaar, Chawk and Payin Chawk, he was known as the unrivaled, champion kite-maker.

He used to make kites with traditional designs, vests with small eyes in the center, birds' heads and flowers. But now as he was reaching the age of 14 and beginning to sprout some peach fuzz on his upper lip, he had grown tired of these designs. He wanted to make more attractive kites, and so he chose brighter and better-quality paper and sketched more exquisite designs on his kites' borders and wings. But nothing quite struck his fancy. He wanted something else, something which he could not express verbally. Try as he might, he could not convey its shape on to any of his kites. Bored and uninspired, he gazed longingly at his kites hanging from the shelf, but he could not find what he was looking for.

Tahira, his cousin (his mother's sister's daughter), was huddled under the blanket thrown over the *sandeli* oven.² Noticing that Sher was busy in his own world, she called out, "Sher, what's wrong? You drank some vinegar or what?"

Sher lost his train of thought. He turned from gazing at the shelf to Tahira's black eyes, eyes beautiful and innocent, like those of a deer. Her sharp eyelashes narrowed. Something

connected between the two, as if a spark had leapt from her heart and fallen into Sher's breast. His fingers felt cold and clammy. His heart skipped a beat.

Without saying another word, Tahira's lips broke into a smile, showing a line of pearly white teeth. Sher was spellbound. He imagined her teeth were white like the pure, dazzling snow on a bright winter day. Sher looked at the snow through the windowpane. Tahira's cheeks seemed even whiter. His heart welled up with excitement. He felt proud to have such a cousin as he sat up straight and tall. Tahira slipped her hand out from under the blanket over the stove to pick a few raisins and nuts from a tray of dried fruit. Sher's eyes fell on Tahira's long, graceful fingers, which were decorated with beautiful turquoise rings. He glanced through the window to the sky and realized that the turquoise, green-blue sky could not compare with Tahira's sparkling jewelry. Sher's eyes burned passionately as he followed Tahira's slender hands pick some nuts and push away the raisins. Her fingers reminded him of the slender flower stems on the mountainside. As he looked through the window facing the mountains, he noticed how the snow decorated the mountain peaks like a blanket of pure silver. Sher said to himself, *How good it is for a person to be proud like a mountain, with his head held high.*

He quickly caught his thoughts and looked at Tahira thoughtfully, who was shelling nuts. Tahira said, "Were you dreaming or something? Did you forget what I asked?"

Sher answered, "I've got one head and a thousand things to worry about. Sorry, I wasn't listening."

Tahira said, "That's all right! Now is the time in your life when you have to dream."

Sher thought to himself, "Why is it time to dream? Is she talking about some event about to take place? What is going to happen?" He laughed and said, "Well, congratulations on your new job. Trying to be a fortune teller, or something?"

Tahira answered mischievously, "I've seen your future. You are going to become even more of a dreamer. You are going to lose sleep. You will stop eating and become pale."

Sher laughed and said, "You better speak some sense. Or do you have nothing better to say?"

Tahira kept quiet, but again, her beguiling and telling glance cast a spell on Sher. As she spoke again in teasing words, Sher became distraught and forgot what he wanted to say.

Laughing pretentiously, he answered, "Well, I don't know what to say. I guess you are right."

Tahira cried out happily, "You see, you confessed it with your own tongue."

Sher did not say a word and bowed his head. When he looked up from staring at the floor, he again noticed the lifeless, simple kites hanging on the wall. He wondered if Tahira would tell him what was wrong with the kites, but he felt embarrassed and held his tongue.

Tahira asked, "What are you thinking about?"

Sher answered, "About you."

Tahira asked surprisingly, "About me?"

Sher answered, "Yeah. Wouldn't it be great if the kites had such lovely eyes as yours?"

Tahira asked, "Whatever for?"

Sher answered, "Then I would fly the kite high over all the homes. And then, people throughout the streets, in Shor Bazaar, Ali Reza Khan, Reeka-khana and Ali-Mardan Park would be amazed at the eyes on my kite."

Tahira asked, "Then, how much would you sell your kite for?"

[51] Sher answered, "A hundred thousand *afghanis*."

Tahira said, "So little!"

Sher answered, "Well, a million then."

Tahira said, "So let's say you would become rich then, what would you do with all that money?"

Sher answered, "With all that money ... all that money ... I would buy some more paper and kite-wood and make more kites."

Tahira said, "Amazing!"

Sher said, "What is so amazing about that? In each of those kites, I would draw your eyes and then I would fly them in the sky so everyone could see what kind of eyes you have."

Tahira laughed and asked, "And then what would you do?"

Sher answered, "I would do the same thing, till the end of the world, as long as I lived."

* * * * *

The next day Sher took down several of his kites from the wall and gave them to a boy next door.

From then on, Sher worked till late at night cutting kite-paper and trying to design Tahira's face on them - the fire in her eyes, her ruby red lips and even her passionate love, a love that could steal a man's heart and burn the core of his bones.

The pile of paper grew. He glued them together one by one. He drew different faces, but no face looked like Tahira. And so for a whole month, Sher did not fly kites or challenge anybody.

One day while out on the street, his rival Fazlu asked him, "Sher, what's happening these days? Have you hung up your kites? No one sees you around."

Sher answered, "Fazlu, I'm making something else, something that you have never ever seen, not even in your dreams."

Fazlu asked, "What are you making? A balloon or a plane?"

Sher answered, "Better than that. A bride, I'm making a bride."

Fazlu laughed mockingly and said, “Congratulations. Hope we will soon eat *nuquls!*” Everyone loved these candy-coated almonds usually shared at weddings.

Sher did not say a word. He went back to his work. Even though Fazlu was an expert in making kite-string razor-sharp with crushed glass, the neighborhood had no respect for him. He was known as a weakling because he easily lost kite battles. He lied a lot and talked constantly. Hiding behind the landings on roofs, he would secretly stare at ladies like a gawking chicken and bother the girls in the neighborhood. For years he had been the next door neighbor to Mohsin Khan, Tahira’s father, and he always harassed his daughter when she was out and about.

Sher gathered from what Tahira had told him that Fazlu was also eyeing her. Whenever he saw Fazlu, his blood boiled and he felt like skinning him alive.

As for Fazlu, he too despised Sher, for he knew that as long as Sher was around, Tahira would never be his. And so he began to meddle. He informed Tahira’s oldest brother, the wrestler *Pahlawan*³ Mahmud, about Sher and Tahira’s mutual attraction for each other. This story, Fazlu added, had spread throughout the neighborhood. From then on, not only did Mahmud forbid Sher from setting foot in their home, but he caused the two families to cut off all ties with each other.

After this Sher was left alone in his own sorrow. And Tahira was separated from him, in her own home, with her mother, an angry father and her intimidating brothers all of whom were wrestlers.

Sher did not dare propose to Tahira because of the embarrassment he had caused. One day, when Mohsin Khan, Tahira’s father, was shouting and arguing with his wife, he retorted, “Let the skies fall, but I will not give my daughter to a kite-flyer and pigeon trainer. Are there so few real men around that I should give my daughter to your worthless nephew?”

Sher did not know what to do for all the doors in the world were shut before him. No longer did he see Tahira in his dreams. He grew pale, lost his appetite and spent the nights counting stars. He became sick with a strange, burning fever as if he were being roasted like a fish over a fire.

In the mornings, when he woke up, his hair was disheveled and his eyes were red and listless. He did not dare face Fazlu, who was constantly out on the street teasing him, “Hey, Sher, where is your airplane? What has happened to your balloon? When are we going to eat the wedding *nuquls*?”

But Sher did not stop his work. He kept on seeking Tahira’s face and cheeks in all the designs and sketches he was making for his kites. He continued making kites with this hope and desire in mind, but not one of the designs had the gracefulness of Tahira’s figure.

Months passed. *Ramazan*, the month of fasting, came and then *Eid-e Qurban*, the festival of animal sacrifices. No one brought any news to Tahira from Sher, nor was there any one to bring a word from Tahira. As much as Sher tried, he could not find a way to visit her home. And so, he continued to focus on his kites and string. On the evening before the *Eid* holiday he wrote the words “Happy *Eid*” in bright, lovely letters on his deluxe kite.

When Sher went to bed, the weather was calm, not stir of wind. The dry, dying branches of the trees carried a mournful whisper to the lonely night. Sher listened from inside the house. But there was not a sound. The wind had died, or perhaps it had been captured in the far-off fabled valleys.

Sher recalled the days of his childhood, days when the lazy, listless wind would hover over the roofs of their homes, and he along with the other boys would try to wake up the wind with the children’s rhyme, “*Haidarak Jailani*, wake up the wind.”⁴

In the quiet of his mind, without thinking, he kept repeating the childhood rhyme throughout the night. Still, there was no stir in the wind. Again, Sher crawled under his blanket. Like someone afflicted with fever or delirious, Sher tossed and groaned in his sleep, like the rise and fall of the wind. All he could do was drown himself with thoughts of Tahira. This world of fantasy formed a small multi-colored whirlwind in Sher's thoughts. It grew larger and larger, filling the dome-like sphere of his mind. Terrifying sounds of thunder broke out and reverberated from one side of the dome to the other. Sher screamed and sat up in his bed. He saw that darkness had enveloped everything. Not a sound was to be heard. He cursed the devil and thanked God that it had only been a dream. He felt his pulse and noticed that his hands were icy cold. He realized he must not have any fever, and so he stretched out again. Laying down his heavy head on the pillow, he was soon lost in thought, *Tahira, Tahira! I've lost you. Tahira, the fortune-teller. Tahira, you were so much fun. Tahira, charming and full of laughter. Such lovely teeth, such lovely lips, such lovely, white hands - softer than the slender stem of a flower, whiter than the breast of a dove.*

In the wee hours of dawn before the sunlight had broken into the darkness, the kite-flyer noticed his large deluxe kite hanging on the wall. In a somewhat loud voice he said, "*Haidarak Jailani, wake up the wind!*"

A moment later, the wind suddenly stirred and rattled the door. The trees began to sing softly. Sher shot up. Although the weather was quite cold, he opened the window and filled his lungs with the wind blowing among the trees.

It was the night of *Eid*. The bakers had started work earlier than other mornings. The sharp smell of the burning wood filled the air, and Sher breathed deeply with a contented sigh. He grabbed the kite by the double string and gently released it into the wind that was rattling the

wooden window shades. He gave the kite several good pulls and then, as if he were pleading with it, he said, “*Eid* starts this morning. This morning, Tahira will wear new clothes. This morning, she will kiss the other girls. She will get some gifts from her parents. And you, kite, what are you going to do this morning? Are you going to stretch your wings and fly? Are you going to visit her house, or not? If you are going there, fine; if not, I will tear you to pieces, I will rip you apart, I will burn you.” Sher calmed down. He smiled at the stars and the stars smiled back at him.

The wind had picked up and was blowing hard. Beyond the cry of the wind, the mulla’s cry, calling the people to prayer could be heard, “*Allah Akbar* (God is Great!)” Sher responded, “Oh God, you are great. For the sake of the leader of the saints, for the sake of Muhammad’s four, pure companions, for the sake of the great saint, Imam Azam⁵ and all the shrines of the saints, grant me my wish. Make it windy!”

Sher felt he had performed some important ritual of prayer. He went back to bed and fell into a sweet dream that carried him into a far-off unknown land. When he woke up in the morning, the wind was also awake, and in a serious sort of way, was playing with the colorful clothes hanging on the clothesline on the flat roof of the house. Sher determined the direction of the wind by the way the clothes were tossing around. Excitement filled his heart. He hurriedly put on his new baggy pants, kissed his parents’ hands and wished them a happy *Eid*. Then he quietly went up to the highest spot on the roof with his kite and spool of kite-string. The wind breathed deeply and steadily like a dragon as it attacked the kite. Sher tied the string into a knot at the end of the double-string and with a shout, he released the large deluxe kite into the wind.

The kite shot up immediately and leapt forward like a fighting cock-bird, slicing through the air as it climbed higher and higher. Other kites, small and large, were flying high as well from

the houses around him. Like a propeller, Sher's large kite climbed upwards. Looking like a sharp-clawed eagle, it hovered over the other kites, and in a few minutes it had slashed several strings. When the kite-flyers in the neighborhood realized who their new rival was, they pulled back their kites, leaving the battleground alone for Sher. He stroked his razor-sharp string with his fingers and gazed at the feisty, agile kite turning and twisting like a pigeon doing summersaults. From the distance the design "Happy *Eid*" blurred his vision, and he remembered his earlier plan. His mind traveled to his special friend and he released more string for the kite. Like a restless wave, it veered and twisted and with one swoop, it sailed over his beloved's roof.

As for Fazlu, he was watching the twists and turns of Sher's kite from the corner of his roof, and soon sensed what his rival was trying to do. Immediately, Fazlu challenged him with his own kite, catching Sher by surprise.

Sher, who was at his peak of excitement, turned pale when he saw Fazlu's kite. He sensed danger but dared not lose his concentration. Before Fazlu was able to get his kite well up in the air, Sher made his own kite plunge from its heights like a falcon and sliced Fazlu's string as if it were butter. Sher said to himself, "Good old, dried yogurt needs hot water. And he got what he needed."⁶

Tahira was in her own world. After painting her eyebrows and eyelashes and braiding her hair, she put on her silky new clothes. Like a customer, she inspected herself, strutting in front of the full-length mirror. Admiring her figure, she imagined how others would view her flowerlike face. The mirror gave her a felicitous answer as though smiling at her.

Tahira twirled around in delight as she approached the window. The clear, glassy sky also smiled at her and the bright golden sun splashed a reflection of gold dust on her face. As Tahira busily played with her hair locks and hummed a tune, a white dove flew by, catching her

attention. The dove disappeared from view, but in its place a kite remained in the sky, attracting her attention. The words “Happy *Eid*” were written on it. At first, Tahira ignored it, but then she carefully read the greeting. Her lips blossomed into a delighted smile. She liked the kite, and without any pretension or intention, she responded, “A happy *Eid* to you, too!”

However, the kite was not about to give up. It swooped up and down, casting its shadow on the roofs. Tahira became curious and went up on the roof of her house. From a distance she could make out Sher on the top of his roof. Her heart pounded. Sher also noticed Tahira and his entire body trembled with exhilaration. He lost his concentration and as the kite twirled around, it crashed into Tahira’s yard. As fate would have it, Farid, Tahira’s younger brother, caught it and excitedly brought his new plunder from the sky to his father, who was about to slaughter the sacrificial sheep. Farid shouted, “Dad! Dad! I’ve got one!”

Mirza Muhammad Mohsin, who did not want to be interrupted in what he was doing, quickly drew his knife across the sheep’s throat and after a brief lull, spoke angrily to his son, “Damn you, son! What did you get?”

The little boy froze in his steps and looked at his father pleadingly. Quietly he said, “I got a loose kite.”

Mohsin Khan answered, “That was dumb of you. Come here.”

Nervous and fearful, Farid approached his father and laid the kite into his father’s bloody hands.

Tahira watched her father from the roof and worried about the kite. Drops of blood trickled onto the kite as Mohsin Khan was reading the words “Happy *Eid*.” Sensing some kind of plot or trickery in the air, Mohsin Khan looked around, and then noticed Tahira on the roof. Without

further thought, he ripped the kite apart with his hairy hands. Rolling up his sleeves, he swore at her, saying, "I'm going to deal with you."

Tahira pulled back from the edge of the roof and sobbed. Weeping and fussing, Farid threw himself into his mother's arms and cried, "Mom, my dad ripped up the kite I caught. My kite!" His mother held her son's little head in her arms and said, "It's okay, my son. Just be quiet so he won't hear. He's right."

Farid retorted, "Why? Why?"

Tahira, Farid and their mother observed that *Eid* holiday with a host of questions. But as for Mohsin Khan, the savor of charcoal-broiled *kabobs* from the sacrificed sheep doubled his anger and thirst for blood so that he growled and argued like an old tiger all day.

From that day onwards, Mohsin Khan forbade Tahira to go up on the roof and for months Tahira was imprisoned within the four walls of the yard. Just before winter, without any discussing with the rest of the family, Mohsin Khan bought a new house in an area far from their home and moved his family to that new location. However, Sher, unaware of what was going on, continued to fly his kites over Mohsin Khan's house, felling and reaping any kite in his way. But one day as he was wandering along the street, his eyes suddenly fell on the large lock hanging over Mohsin Khan's well-worn door.

When he saw the locked door and the sign, "House for Rent", he stopped motionless. For a few minutes he stared dumbfounded. He was crushed; the window of his hopes had slammed shut. He sighed with excruciating pain. *My world is ruined. What can I do? How can I find Tahira?* He searched the countless little neighborhoods throughout the city, the tiny alleys and winding streets always crowded with people. But none of these streets and alleys led anywhere. There was absolutely no trace of her. It was as if Tahira had disappeared into the mist at the end

of the streets. *Oh, how disastrous it is to fall in love, he thought, a pain with no cure! A man has no choice but to burn in pain and accept it as if from God.*

Tahira had filled Sher's world; her thoughts, her laughter, her stories and her teasing words when she would say, "You are going to become even more of a dreamer than this. You will stop eating and become pale. You are going to lose sleep."

Sher said to himself, "If the entire world were covered with streets, and if all the doors in heaven and earth are closed, if I have to cross the seven mountains and the seven seas, I'm still going to look for her. One way or another, I will find her. I'm going to soften her father's hard heart. If he becomes soft, fine, if not, he better watch out!"

The lover does not fear death
For love does not fear mountains or the prison
The heart of the lover is like a hungry wolf
It does not fear the yells and shouts of the shepherd.

From that day onwards, from early morning till the evening prayers, he wandered throughout the city, desperately hoping against hope, asking everyone about Tahira.

One day, he managed to find the directions to his cousin's place from Morad, who owned a cart at the top of their street and had transported Mohsin Khan's belongings to their new house. With Morad's directions came a small glimmer of hope, and Sher trekked from one street to the next and from one alley to another till he found Mohsin Khan's house.

During the first few days he sneaked around the yard without a problem till one day when Mohsin Khan's servant was taking some bread-dough to the bakery, she noticed Sher peeking around their place. She told everyone in the house. Tahira's three brothers, all of whom were wrestlers, immediately ran towards the street, ignoring their mother's pleas, and caught Sher at the top of the Chahar Suq. Mahmud, the oldest of them, taunted him with insults, "You little mouse, what are you doing here?"

Without losing control of himself, Sher answered, “I’m your cousin, I am Sher, don’t you recognize me?”

Nadir, the second of the brothers and who also went to school, said sarcastically, “Who wouldn’t know that kite-seller and dove-seller. Everybody knows you.”

At this affront, Sher boiled with anger and yelled, “Hey, big shot,⁷ just hold on. Let’s see what kind of yeast your bread is made of.”

A vicious battle started. At first Sher battled like a lion, just like the meaning of his name. He had soon bloodied his cousins’ mouths, but after a while, as he lost his breath, he suffered one blow after another as they pelted him with fists and kicks. They beat him so hard he was almost unrecognizable. Finally, somebody showed up and broke up the fight. Wash, the youngest of the three brothers, feeling good about the fight, sneered at Sher, “You’re free to go now, go tell the police.”

Sher answered, “Who cares about the police? A real man takes his time to cook his stew!”

The kids on the street gathered around Sher as he brushed off his ripped clothing. He washed his mangled face under the public water-tap to stop the bleeding and freshen himself up. That very day, taking a bag full sweets and *nuqals* as a complimentary gift, he headed to the wrestling gym run by the trainer Yasin and joined up as one of his pupils.

After a year, his biceps swelled up like thick leather balls and his chest hardened into a strong glistening shield. On days when the wrestlers would tussle and warm-up with each other, no one could bring Sher’s shoulders to the ground except the coach, Yasin, and that only with a hundred different techniques and tricks. Sher became the leading champion and his fame spread throughout the wrestling arenas.

It was close to *naw-ruz*, the New Year's festival, when wrestlers gathered at the Houzuri Gardens,⁸ across from the Eid-gah Mosque, and challenged each other. Sher called on wrestler Mahmud, the strongest of Tahira's brothers, who accepted the challenge. It was agreed that they would wrestle each other on the afternoon of the first day of *naw-ruz*. Sher could not rest till then. The wrestler Mahmud was strong and could fight like a wild lion. There was little doubt that he would easily throw Sher to the ground and simply make him a laughing-stock in front of everyone. As the day approached, Sher prayed at the different shrines, and the night before the kite match he stayed awake all night, thinking about the battle.

The promised hour finally arrived. Sher and Mahmud stood shoulder to shoulder. Mahmud's arms were longer. Before Sher could move, Mahmud had grabbed him between the legs and threw him straight to the ground. The crowd cheered, some of them inadvertently called on God in the excitement.

Sher's passion came to a boil, but he managed to keep a hold of himself. While still lying on the ground, he made use of the last trick that his trainer Yasmin had taught him and threw his rival. Mahmud fell with such force that daylight departed from him and he saw nothing but stars flashing before him.

Sher graciously lifted Mahmud from the ground, kissed him and without a word, left the excited and cheering crowd. Mahmud, who had not expected anything like this, marveled at his cousin's skill. Like an honest champion, he went to his aunt's house that same evening – a house he had as much as forgotten. After being reconciled with Sher, he said, "Sher, you really are a *sher*, a lion. I was wrong. Let bygones be bygones. We will swear on the Quran, you and I are going to be real brothers – forever."

Sher shuddered as he heard these words, but he did not show it. They embraced together and pledged to be real brothers. Through Mahmud's mediation, Sher was reconciled to Mohsin Khan and the rest of the family, and so their former relationship was restored. In the midst of it all, Tahira was delighted that Sher, who had escaped her before, was now again in her power. And so, day by day, she became more cheerful and her countenance grew brighter. As for Sher, however, he grew more pale and slender day by day. He was caught between a rock and a hard place – between love and brotherhood. Tahira was Mahmud's sister and Mahmud was Sher's brother now, so Tahira was his sister.

“Tahira or Mahmud! Brotherly loyalty or love?” Sher said to himself, “A real man keeps his word. I gave my word to Mahmud to be a real brother. Her love is forbidden for me now. I will no longer go to their house, no longer talk about her. I won't think about her anymore.”

And so, after swearing this oath, he totally changed his ways and began to wander through cemeteries and centers where Sufis and mystics gathered. In the afternoons he meandered around graveyards and performed extra ablutions and prayers. In secret he wept bitterly. He noticed bushes and ants covering the graves of humans and said to himself, “Everybody is going to die. This world is passing away, it is not worth all its sorrows. In just a few days it is over.”

But nothing gave him peace. At night he would return back to his house and go up to the top of his roof from where he had sent the greeting “Happy *Eid*” to Tahira. He saw the sorrowful moon as it rose above Bala Hissar, the ancient fort to the south of Kabul,⁹ and spread its light over the city. His tongue felt free, as he held nothing back, “Oh, moon, oh full moon. You are by yourself. Do you see me? Do you see this lion crying?” But as his tears flowed profusely down his pale, bony cheeks and moistened his tattered collar, the moon gave no reply and

without a sound passed by in front of him, disappearing behind the mountains. Sher spat on the ground and cursed the unfaithfulness of the world.

On Thursday nights he sat with the Sufis and mystics at the Ali Reza Khan mosque, enjoying the passionate, sorrowful chants of the religious recluses. This, at least, gave him some peace. But when morning came Tahira appeared before him again, just like the rising sun, warming his worn-out and sleepless body.

How could he escape from Tahira? He saw Tahira in the long tobacco pipe and in the snuff. Tahira was hidden everywhere. Tahira was his best dope, his greatest high.

Late one evening after the sun had set, confused and lost in thought, Sher was coming down from the Cemetery of Pious Martyrs¹⁰ overshadowed by Bala Hissar, when two veiled ladies appeared. Sher turned to avoid them, but one of ladies stopped in front of Sher and cried out, “Sher, my dear! Sher, my dear! Where are you going?”

It was Tahira’s voice. Sher froze in his steps, like the dried-up mulberry tree beside him. Tahira pulled back her veil, her moonlike face brightening the gravestone nearby. For a moment Sher stared at her face, then lowered his eyes and remained quiet. Tahira asked, “Dear Sher, what are you doing here?”

Sher answered, “Nothing.”

Tahira asked, “What do you mean, nothing?”

Sher remained quiet and both stared at each other, their eyes burning with love for one another. The servant, who knew Tahira’s secret, watched them from a distance and prayed from the bottom of her heart that God would grant them their desires. Finally, Sher asked Tahira, “What are you doing here?”

Tahira answered, “I was just tying a piece of cloth to the grave and praying.”

Sher asked, “ For whom? Is everything okay?”

Tahira answered, “For my own heart.”

Prodding further, Sher asked, “For your heart?”

Tahira cried as she said, “Yes, for my heart, for you, that God won’t destroy you. That God won’t take you away.” And then she was quiet. Sher’s burning sigh blistered his lips as he spoke bitterly, “Tahira dear, a long time ago you told my future. Now that I don’t have sleep, I don’t eat and I have turned pale, what else do you want?”

Tahira answered, “Yourself. All of you. I said all that because I liked you, and still ...

Sher asked, “Still what?”

Tahira answered, “You know, don’t tease me.”

Sher said, “What do I know?”

Tahira answered, “The truth, you know about us – you and me.”

Sher spoke sadly and sorrowfully, “There’s nothing more between you and me. It’s over. Those years have gone with the wind.” Tahira was shocked as Sher told her the story about Mahmud and him, how he and Mahmud had pledged to each other to be real brothers. Tahira wept bitterly as she listened closely to Sher’s sorrowful words. When they bid farewell, Sher said to Tahira, “We will see each other in the next world.”

Tahira said, “Dear Sher, you gave your word to Mahmud, you swore an oath. But I haven’t. I love you. I will always want you. If you do not come for me, you will pay for it on Judgment Day.”

Without a word, Sher pulled himself away and Tahira went back home.

A few months later, the news spread that Mohsin Khan had forced his daughter into an engagement and that Tahira had tried to poison herself, but had not died. When Sher heard this,

his entire body burned with pain. He felt as if he could destroy the world. But he restrained himself and once again, remained true to his pledge.

A few days later Sher and his mother were invited to Tahira's wedding, so the two of them made their way to Mohsin Khan's house. That night, Sher nervously chewed his fingernails so hard that his fingertips bled, but he made no slip nor was he caught off guard. No one knew what was going on in his heart that night. However, while the musician was singing the traditional wedding song, "*Ahesta Buro*" (Go Slowly), Tahira slowly walked away from Sher, away from those by-gone days, away from those *Eids*, away from those moonlit nights and those rooftops. As the distance grew, she made her way to the house of an old, pudgy governor whose stomach stuck out further than his nose.

From then on, every year Sher aged ten years. Before he reached the age of 45, his hair turned white like cotton, and half his teeth fell out. He soon became known as Papa Sher and rented a small shop at the far end of Siraji Market. Kids who loved kites would buy string and kites from his shop and challenge each other with their kites. However, Sher, who had lost all the gambles of his life, no longer cared for kite battles. Here, alone in the hidden corners and dark narrow alleys, he became a broken, gnarled old man.

He limped and pulled his aching body forward with a cane. From the bench at his shop he could always hear excited voices of the kids as they sang loudly from their rooftops, "*Haidarak Jailani*, wake up the wind."

Then he, too, whispered this invigorating tune as he sat at the corner of his shop and imagined himself as a 20 year-old. In this way, another half a year passed by and *Eid-e Qurban* drew near. Once again, Sher set out to craft a kite and prepare kite-string. More and more kite-paper piled up and different sketches and designs appeared on the borders and wings of his kites.

But no matter what he made, none of them struck his fancy. He thought of the past. He thought of Tahira. He thought of the cupboards and the small nails on the walls. He remembered the night before the holiday. In the center of one kite he wrote the words, “Happy *Eid*.” But then he said, “For whom? For what?” Regretfully, he hung up the kite on the wall of the shop and lowered his head between his knees.

Just then Fazlu, that same Fazlu who by now had become known as Papa Fazlu, passed by the shop and noticed Sher in his dejected mood. Mockingly he called out to him, “Oh Sher, Sher, where is your balloon? Where is your airplane? When are we going to eat those wedding *nuquls*?”

Sher lifted his head and with bloodshot eyes stared at Fazlu from head to foot. Fazlu shouted at him, “You deaf fool, you windbag, what are you so lost in thought for?”

Sher answered, “I’m thinking about cowards, about runts, about you.”

Fazlu laughed sarcastically. His worm-eaten teeth, and rotten, reddish gums reminded Sher of an old fox who knows nothing but cheating and conniving. Sher answered contemptuously, “Get lost Fazlu, I have nothing to do with you.”

Fazlu said, “But I have business with you. Those days are history when you were champion. Now it’s my turn, it’s time to beat you up.”

Sher said, “So you are still looking for a rival?”

Fazlu said, “I have no rival.”

Sher said, “My God, you have nerve!”

Fazlu said, “What a stinky cave this shop is. Get lost, you mouse. All you can do is talk, nothing more.”

Sher flew into a rage. He felt like ripping open Fazlu's stomach with his two-edged dagger, but he knew God was watching. Then with a shout so loud that all the shopkeepers around his area heard him, he yelled, "Okay Fazlu, 'here's the line and there's the battlefield.' I'll bet my whole life on this one. If you are a real man, come tomorrow to Du-Rahi on the road to Paghman and throw up your kite."

Fazlu said, "All right, just calm down. If we're going to fight it out, 'let's fight it right at the start, before we begin to plow'."¹¹

The entire street could hear the argument between the two and it even reached the neighboring streets. On Friday afternoon Du-Rahi was filled with hundreds of keen and skilled kite-flyers. With two young wrestlers strolling on his right and left, Papa Sher neared the field. His silk turban and baggy pants could be seen from far away and kite-flyers cleared the way for him as he set himself up on a slight slope in the field. Fazlu came after him, arrogantly, as if had no care in the world. Some from the neighborhood followed him, listening to his empty prattle. The conditions of the bet were again made clear, and both accepted it. Sher told one of his helpers, "You get the kite into the air, and I will do the fighting."

That same kite, the blue and white one, on which he had written the words "Happy *Eid*" leapt into the air like a cock-bird and sliced the air as it climbed upwards.

Fazlu's kite was red and black. It pierced through the atmosphere like a bullet and drew itself up next to Sher's kite. Soon the two kites were flying shoulder to shoulder. One of Sher's helpers called out, "Is this right?"

The other answered, "Yeah, right on!"

With crafty skill Fazlu dragged his kite string over Sher's kite string and a bitter battle ensued between the two rivals. Fazlu's kite was in a better position and whirled around

vigorously. Some of the fans raised their stakes on him ten to one, while others, who knew Sher from years back, held their wagers on Sher, cheering him on, “Sher’s the champion! Sher will win. Nobody can match Sher.”

The kites looked like tiny dots and were finally lost from view. The kite strings worked like a butcher’s knife, bloodying the finger-joints of both men. Hundreds of people were standing under the kites some distance from the gamblers. Kids and even the bigger teenagers were rubbing their hands and running here and there underneath the kites. With their eyes glued to the skies, everyone was ready to catch a loose kite. Sher’s kite slowly came to a pause in the air. His string sagged. The gamblers shouted out new bets, “Fazlu is winning! Fazlu is winning!”

Sher, half bent-over and almost on his knees, paid out more string but he sensed danger. He knew that the time of Fazlu’s revenge was near and the fans would tear his own kite apart. Everyone watched Sher, but he knew that the game was over. Fazlu had gained the upper hand. But then, at the last moment, when Sher’s kite was about to spiral downward, he yelled to his helper who was holding the reel of string, “Reel it in, kid! I’m pulling it in!” And so with utmost speed, one, two, three, he yanked his kite. The string in Fazlu’s hands hung loose.

Contrary to what everyone had expected, Sher won the competition. He let his kite go even higher to guard it from Fazlu’s loose kite.

Fazlu was so embarrassed he tried to make himself scarce. Sher stoically held back his thrill like a real champion and gave his kite-reel to someone else to bring down the kite.

The sun had set and it looked like the sky had sprinkled red tulips over its blue skirt. Like lambs, white clouds were gamboling across the wide, reddish desert. From afar the *Eid* moon appeared, resembling Tahira’s eyebrows. The crowd knew that tomorrow would be *Eid* and so they congratulated each other in advance. Sher’s kite soared down like a bride, like an airplane

or like a balloon. The words “Happy *Eid*,” were easy to read. Sher stared at the design on the kite, at the words “Happy *Eid*” which had been carved in his heart for 25 years.

In his mind, he could see Tahira appear on the roof, wearing those same silky, new clothes. Her braided hair, like two curled black snakes fell over her shoulders. Sher imagined that he was going up onto his roof and flying his kite towards Mohsin Khan’s house. Then, Tahira cheered. Next he vividly remembered the fight with his cousins, his time in the wrestling arena, the brotherly reconciliation with Mahmud, meeting Tahira at the graveyard, and finally her marriage to that fat-bellied governor. It all came to life as if written in his memory. After all the days of becoming paler and paler, after his youth and all the years which the wind had blown away, Sher heard the words from Tahira’s lips, *I have seen your future. You are going to become even more of a dreamer than this. You will stop eating and became pale. You are going to loose sleep.*

Sher said, “Tahira dear, you were right. You told the truth. It is surely true that a lover breaks the back of a mountain.”

Then Tahira cried out from a distance, from that cemetery, from among the gravestones, *Dear Sher, you gave your word, you swore an oath. But, I haven’t. I love you. I want you. If you won’t come for me, you will pay for it on Judgment Day.*

But Sher said to himself, “A real man keeps his word. I did not turn back on my pledge,” and with the tip of his turban, he wiped his eyes.

Chapter One: A Man Keeps His Word

¹ Note the metaphor: Throughout Afghanistan cotton-cleaners use special looms to clean cotton. The loom throws small pieces of cotton onto a pile of fresh, fluffy cotton.

² *sandali*: The traditional Afghan wood (or coal) stove that is located in the middle of the room. A large blanket is spread over the stove and during the late evenings and nights members of the household huddle under the blanket.

³ *pahlawan*: champion, wrestler. The word is an honorific title for wrestlers and vigilante heroes. See the story, “Barat the Wrestler and I.”

⁴ A traditional children’s rhyme which young kite-flyers repeated as a prayer to stir up the wind. Its original meaning seems to have been lost.

⁵ Imam Azam: The title given to Abu Hanifa (d. 767), founder of first four schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam.

⁶ Dried yogurt (*qurut*) is a favorite dish in Afghanistan. In order to soften dried yogurt, one must use hot water, or better yet, dried yogurt needs (or deserves) hot water. The idiom means, “He got what he deserved.”

⁷ *kakuli*: person who tries to be popular and fashionable. “*kakul*” – the front locks of hair.

⁸ Chaman-e Houzuri is a large open field at the foot of the Tapa Maranjan and across from the large *Eid-gah* Mosque and beyond the Soviet-built apartment blocks. It was used as a golf course during the reign of Amir Habibullah (1901-1919). It continues to be used as a place of celebrations during holidays and religious festivals.

⁹ Bala Hissar: Ancient fortress to the south of Kabul used as the place of residence of rulers. The Moghuls ruled from here, and later the British occupied it.

¹⁰ Cemetery of Pious Martyrs (*Shuhaida-yi Salehin*): According to legends, this well-known graveyard to the north of Bala Hissar is where the first Arab Muslim missionaries to Kabul were killed and buried by the Hindu rulers of the time.

¹¹ Literally: “To fight or plow the ground, fight before plowing.” Hence, “let’s fight it out before the ground is ploughed.” It is often used before getting in to a taxi, to bargain on the price before one takes the ride.