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**THE
STRAY
DOG**



Several small shops designed to satisfy hunger and other primitive needs of life – a bakery, a butcher shop, a drugstore, two cafes and a barbershop – formed the Varamin(1) square. The square, with its half-broiled inhabitants, withering under a burning sun, looked forward to the first evening breeze and the cool of the night. For the present, however, men, beasts, shops and trees were all silent and motionless. The heat hovered over the village and a light dust, thickening continually in the traffic, wavered against the azure sky.

On one side of the square was an ancient plane tree that stubbornly spread its crooked and gnarled branches in every direction despite a rotted and hollowed-out trunk. In the shade of its dust-laden leaves sat a large and spacious platform from which two boys hawked their wares, rice custard and pumpkin seeds. The water running in the juy in front of the cafe, clotted with mud and dirt, pulled on ever so sluggishly.

The only building worthy of attention in this miserable hamlet was the famous Varamin Tower, of which half of the cracked cylindrical body and the conical top were visible. Even the sparrows nesting in the crevices made by fallen bricks were dozing the afternoon away, stultified by the heat. The only complaint came from a dog who intermittently broke the silence.

He was a Scottish breed of dog with a blue-black muzzle and black spots on his hind legs. His hanging ears, pointed tail and curling, dirty coat were splattered with mud, as if he had run through a swamp.

Two intelligent human eyes shone from his shaggy forehead; from the depths of those eyes shone a human soul with a message as impenetrable as the darkness that shrouded his whole being. Whatever this message was, it was not of the substance of light or color; it was some other incredible thing, like the expression in the eyes of a wounded gazelle. Not only did his eyes resemble those of a human being – they had the same expression. And while these two brown eyes were filled with the pain, suffering and expectation characteristic of the face of a vagabond dog, nobody saw or comprehended his painful, beseeching expression. In front of the baker's, the errand boy beat him; in front of the butcher shop, the apprentice pelted him with rocks; had he taken shelter in the shade of a car, the spiked shoes of the driver would surely have entertained him. When the others tired of hurting him, the boy who sold rice custard took a special delight in tormenting him. Each of the poor creature's complaints, roused by the sting of a rock against his side, was followed by the boy's laughter and the harsh words, "Lousy mutt!" With their raucous laughter, others gladly seconded his efforts. In their eyes, the torture of an unclean dog, cursed by religion and possessed of seven lives, was quite natural and worthy of eternal reward. To please Allah, they beat him.

Today the rice-custard vendor continued his punishment until the helpless animal escaped, dragging his hungry body in the direction of the tower. There he took refuge in a sluice, placed his head on his paws, thrust his tongue out and, hovering between sleep and wakefulness, looked out at the lush fields of green. His body was tired and his nerves ached. In the cool and damp of the sluice, a special solace and tranquillity engulfed him. Many smells, the smell of half-dead plants, the smell of a putrid old shoe, the smell of things dead and living, revived confused and distant memories. Whenever he looked at the field, the animal instinct in him revived and with it came pleasant memories of the past. This time, however, the sensations were very strong, as if a voice were whispering in his ear, calling him to get up, move and jump around. He felt an ungovernable urge to run and gambol in the fields.

This was his hereditary instinct; all his ancestors were bred to be free in the lush meadows of Scotland. His body, however, was now so fatigued that he was unable to move even slightly. Pain, mingled

with weakness and inertia, overtook him, exciting vague and lost sensations. Once he had been obliged to obey certain needs and requirements. He had felt bound to respond to his master's call, to scare strangers and stray dogs off his master's property, to play with his master's child, to treat those he knew differently from strangers, to eat on time and to expect to be petted at a proper time. But now all these restrictions had dissolved.

In their stead he had learned how to grab something off the trash pile, how to tolerate daily punishment and how to howl and whimper. The latter was his sole means of defense. In the past he had been bold, courageous, clean and vivacious, but now he had become cowardly and pathetic; every noise, every vibration startled him. He was afraid even of his own voice. He had become accustomed to dirt and rubbish. His body "itched, but he did not have the will either to catch the ticks or to lick himself clean. He felt that he had become one with the dirt and that inside him something had died; something lustrous had gone out.

During the two winters since he had entered this hell, he had not eaten a full meal and had not had a good sleep. His passions and feelings had suffocated. Nobody petted him and no one looked him in the eye. It seemed that the inhabitants of this place, although they resembled his master, differed from him in feeling, behavior and temperament. It was as though the people in the past were closer to his world; they comprehended his predicament and sympathized with him. They supported him.

Among the scents that he perceived now, the smell of the rice custard excited him the most. This white liquid, so much like his mother's milk, reminded him of his puppyhood. A feeling of numbness overtook him as he recalled how, as a pup, he had sucked that nourishing, warm liquid from his mother's nipple while her soft, firm tongue had licked him clean. He recalled his mother's pungent odor and then the scent of his brother as they suckled together at their mother's side. Recollection of the strong and heavy smell of his mother and her milk enveloped him.

When he had been fully satisfied with milk, his body became warm and comfortable; a liquid warmth flowed through his veins and sinews. Sleepily he let go of his mother's nipple, trembling throughout

his body; then he fell into a deep sleep. What pleasure could surpass such satisfaction? Even when accidentally he pressed his mother's nipple with his paw, without any need for struggle and without difficulty, milk flowed out. His brother's fluffy body, his mother's bark, all these were intoxicating and soothing. He recalled his wooden house and the games he and his brother had played in those lush, green meadows.

He used to bite his brother's floppy ears and together they would roll on the ground, get up and run. Unforgettable were his master's caresses and the lumps of sugar he had fed him. Later he had found another friend – his master's son. He would run after his new friend at the end of the garden, barking and biting his clothes. He had especially liked his master's son, because the boy was his playmate and never hit him. Later, suddenly, he had lost his mother and his brother; he had remained alone with his master, his master's wife, their son and an old servant. He could distinguish the odor of each quite well and knew the sound of their footsteps. When it was time for their dinner, he walked around the table to smell the food. Sometimes his master's wife, despite her husband's objections, gave him one or two choice pieces of meat. Then the servant would come and call his name, "Pat ... Pat..." His food was put in a special bowl in the corner of his wooden house.

Pat's misfortunes began when his rut came on; his master would not allow him out of the house to run after bitches. Then, as fate would have it, one autumn day his master and two others whom he knew and who often visited their house got into an automobile, called Pat and put him beside them in the car. Pat had traveled in a car with his master several times, but this time he was in heat and felt a special agitation and restlessness. Hours later they arrived at Varamin square and got out of the car. His master and the other two were passing the alley beside the tower when Pat picked up a scent – this scent of a female canine brought him close to insanity. Every few steps he stopped and smelled the ground; at last he entered a garden through an open sluice.

Near sunset, once again, he heard his master's voice calling, "Pat... Pat!" Was this his master's voice or merely an echo of that voice ringing in his ear?

(1). Varamin, a small village about 18 miles from Ray, south of Tehran, is well-known for its tower, especially the cone shape of the tower, built during the ascendancy of the Mongols in the region. Indeed, the destruction of the metropolitan city of Ray by the Mongols in 1220 affected Varamin in a most positive way. First the village became a town, and soon after that, it became the capital of the province. Its agriculture, the mainstay of Iranian towns and villages of the time brought it a great deal of prosperity.

In a way, the destruction of Ray was also the cause of Varamin's fall in the long run. Varamin's rival, the village of Tehran, gained even more prominence than Varamin. And, as Tehran grew in importance, it drew on the man power of neighboring towns and villages, including Varamin. This demand placed a great deal of strain on the ability of these villages to continue their farming practices in the manner of their ancestors. The pace of departure from the town of Varamin was quickened by a number of earthquakes that destroyed the towns major centers, including its main mosque (Masjid-i Jami') built in 1326. Visitors to Varamin can still distinguish some of the mosaics and brickwork typical of the period on the remaining walls and arches of the mosque.

The main attraction of Varamin, however, is a 13th century mausoleum built in the shape of a tower. The structure of the tower, built in the manner of Central Asian towers (cf., for instance, Bukhara's Kalyan Minaret), starts quite wide at the base and tapers off as it reaches the top, giving the structure a conical feel. This structure, too, like the mosque, was affected by both by the same ravages of time and the earthquakes mentioned above.

Suddenly, amid the dust, the automobile began to move. Pat, too, without hesitation, began to run after it. No, this time he did not intend to lose this man. He was panting; despite the pain in his body, he was right behind the car and running with speed. The car left the village and was now passing some fields. Two or three times Pat caught up with the automobile, then again lagged behind. Out of despair, he had given all his energy to this run, but the car was faster than he was. He had made a mistake: his weak and broken body was no match for the speed of the car. He felt queasy and suddenly he was no longer in control of his parts – he could not move, not even slightly. All this effort had been useless. He knew neither why he was running, nor where he was running. He was spent and there was no way out. He stopped. He was panting, his tongue hanging out of his mouth. His sight was darkened. With a lowered head and with difficulty he pulled himself off the road and into a juy by the field; he lowered himself onto the hot, damp sand. He knew he would never leave this place. His instincts had never been wrong. He was dizzy; his thoughts and sensations grew dull. He felt an intense pain in his belly and a sick light glowed in his eyes. Gradually his paws became numb and a cold sweat engulfed his body; it was an intoxicating and comforting, cool sensation.

Near sunset three hungry crows hovered above Pat's head. They had picked up his scent. Approaching cautiously, one of them perched nearby and watched carefully. When he was sure that Pat was not yet completely dead, he flew away. These three crows had come to pluck out Pat's two brown eyes.

His master's voice, cumbering him as it did with every duty and responsibility, had a special effect on Pat, but a force above and beyond the forces of that alien world pressed him to stay with the bitch. This obligation dulled and deafened his ears to the sounds of that world. Strong sensations awoke in him; the smell of the bitch was so strong and poignant that it made him dizzy. His body and his senses disobeyed him and he lost control. Before long, however, some club wielders discovered him in the garden and drove him out through the sluice.

Pat felt a little dizzy and tired, but at the same time lighter and more relaxed. Confused, he began to look for his master. All he could pick up was a weak scent in several alleys. He followed all the alleys and intermittently left his own sign. He went as far as the ruins outside the village; then he came back, knowing that his master would return to the square. There, however, his master's weakening scent was lost in all the other scents. Had his master gone and left him behind? A mixture of dread and apprehension seized him. How could Pat survive without his master, his God? His master was like a deity! Surely his master would come back, seeking him out. Terrified, he ran down several roads, but his searches were useless.

At night, tired and beaten, he returned to the square. He found no sign of his master. He toured the village several times more, finally arriving at the sluice where he had met the bitch. Heavy rocks now blocked the sluice. With a special zeal, Pat began to dig his way into the garden, but he made little headway. Losing hope, he began to doze, eventually falling asleep in that same spot.

Near midnight, Pat's own moans and groans awoke him. Terrified, he began to run through the alleys, smelling the walls and searching. He felt an acute pang of hunger. Reaching the square, the smells of many different foods struck him: the smell of leftover meat, the smell of freshly baked bread and the smell of yogurt all mingled tantalizingly. At the same time he felt guilty for trespassing on the property of others, for having to beg from these people for food and for expecting, if there were no rivals to force him out, to make this his own locale. Perhaps one of these creatures who resembled his master and who carried food in his hands might keep him as a pet.

Cautious and trembling, he approached the bakery which had

just opened its door, filling the air with the aroma of freshly baked bread. A man carrying bread under his arms called to him, "bia... bia!"¹ How alien was that voice! Its owner threw a piece of bread to Pat who, with some hesitation, ate it and wagged his tail. The man then put the bread on the platform of the shop and fearfully and cautiously petted Pat on the head. Using both hands, he unfastened Pat's collar. How relieved Pat felt! It was as though all binds, responsibilities and duties were removed from him. But when he wagged his tail again and approached the baker, he was rewarded with a strong kick in the side. The baker walked to the juy and, ritually, washed his hands three times. Pat recognized his collar hanging in front of the bakery.

Since that night Pat had experienced no other attitude from these people. They kicked him, pelted him with rocks and beat him with clubs. It was as though they were his bitter enemies, gaining a particular pleasure from torturing him.

He did not recognize this world he was entering. In it no one shared his sentiments and ways. The first several days were the hardest. Then, gradually, he became accustomed to this new life. Besides, at the corner to the right he had discovered a trash pile in which he could find tasty pieces like bones, fat, skin, fish heads and many other edibles that he could not name. He spent the rest of each day in front of the butcher shop and the bakery. His eyes were riveted to the butcher's hand, but the amount of punishment he received always exceeded the number of delicious pieces. He became accustomed to this new life though, and his previous life was soon no more than a vestige of some smells and the recollection of a series of vague and discolored events. He kept this lost paradise in his memory, escaping to it in desperate moments.

What most tortured Pat was his need for caressing. In spite of being continually beaten and maltreated, his feelings had remained tender, like a child's. Especially in this new life, full of pain and suffering, he needed to be fondled. His eyes begged for love and he was ready to give his life for anyone who would be kind to him and pet him on the head. He needed to convey his love to someone, to sacrifice himself and to show his devotion and loyalty, but it seemed that no one needed such an outpouring of affection; nobody took his side,

¹. Persian for "come... come!"

and in every eye he saw nothing but enmity and malice. The more he tried to attract their attention, the more, it seemed, he excited their anger and rage.

Today Pat slept in the sluice while nightmarish dreams passed before his eyes. He moaned several times, then woke up. He was extremely hungry. The smell of kabob filled the air. A relentless hunger tortured his insides, making him forget all his other miseries. He rose painfully and headed cautiously for the square.

Now, amid commotion, dust and dirt, an automobile entered the Varamin square. A man stepped from the car, approached Pat and petted him on the head. This man was not his master. Of this he was sure, because he knew the scent of his master quite well. But how was it that someone should appear and fondle him? He no longer wore a collar for which one would caress him. The man returned and petted Pat's head again. Pat followed him. His surprise increased when the man entered a room that Pat knew well, a room from which emanated the aroma of many foods. The man sat on a bench beside the wall. They brought him freshly-baked bread, yogurt, eggs and other foods, and he took pieces of bread, dipped them in yogurt and threw them to Pat. Greedily at first and, later, more slowly, Pat ate the bread. Out of helplessness and a sense of gratitude, he fixed his beautiful brown eyes on the man's face and wagged his tail for him.

Was this really happening or was he dreaming? Pat ate a full meal without interruption or punishment. Could it be that he had found a new master? Despite the heat, the man got up, went to the alley by the tower, halted there a moment, then continued on his way, passing through several other labyrinthine alleys. Pat followed until the two of them had left the village limits. The man then entered some ruins where now only a few walls remained. Pat's master had visited the same site. Perhaps these, too, were seeking the scent of females! Pat waited in the shade of the wall; then both returned to the square by a different route. Once again the man patted Pat on the head and, after a quick stroll around the square, he went and sat in one of those automobiles that Pat knew. Pat, who did not dare enter the automobile, sat beside the car and watched the man.