

The Kite

Baber left his grandmother's house to return to his parents' flat nearby. In his hand was a small plate with two shami kebabs that Grandma had given him to take back home. In Baber's opinion his grandmother was the best cook in the world, and since it was she who had made the kebabs, he was delighted to have them.

Outside the house he was met by a beautiful evening, bathed in a cool wind, and approaching sundown. It was the hour of the day he loved best. And so, when his grandmother waved a napkin from the house calling to him, "Baber, take this to cover your kebabs," he only partly heard what she said. And, unwilling to go back indoors he looked back, smiled and waved; and continued on his way.

Now he was crossing a small park. Flocks of birds were returning to roost in the many trees of the park. 'What a lot of trees, and what a lot of birds!' Baber thought, 'How does every bird know which tree to fly to in order to roost?'

And while the thought was crossing his mind, there was a great flapping of wings over his head, and a large bird with a long, sharp beak swooped down and carried off his kebabs.

How close to his head that bird with the big wings had flown! It had seemed to Baber as if a bomber aircraft had skimmed over him. Actually, it was a kite, a black kite, which is possibly the largest bird in Pakistan.

All in a sweat, Baber almost ran home, and told his mother of his dreadful experience.

But what did his mother say? She said, “Never mind son, we’ll ask Grandma to send you some more kebabs,” and began to dial his grandmother’s number. Baber was astonished, and quite hurt. His mother had shown no anger at all for that rude bird and her evil deed!

However, in a very little while Grandma sent Baber three kebabs in place of his stolen two. And so, the greatest cook in the world made her grandson’s anger vanish.

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A few days ago, an old lady had rented the flat next to Baber’s. The lady lived all by herself in her apartment. Since their balconies were side by side, sometimes if after school Baber saw her sitting in hers, he would raise his hand and salaam her. She would smile and wave to acknowledge his greeting.

Shortly after her arrival Baber noticed that the lady had started sitting in her balcony with her dinner in the late evening every day. And soon after that, birds began to arrive. First, it was a myna, who sat on the parapet wall. She turned her head this way and that, and looked at the lady. The lady then took some of the rice from her plate and spread it on the balcony’s parapet wall. And the myna pecked at it.

Pretty soon, the news had spread in the bird world, and several more birds joined the myna. Among them were more mynas, sparrows, pigeons, and sometimes a crow or two. They came every day. The old lady kept water for them to drink in an earthenware vessel, and scattered enough of her rice on the parapet to satisfy them all. Sometimes she also gave them bits of boiled eggs or potatoes. Unnoticed by the lady, Baber watched her and the birds' activities with fascination.

One day, just as the birds were about to leave, Baber saw a large new bird fly in. The rest of the birds left in a hurry. Baber looked at the newcomer. It was the same bird which had reminded him of a bomber aircraft. His heart missed a beat, but straightaway his brain sent this message to his heart, "It is sitting far away. There's no need to panic," and his fear left him.

The kite sniffed the rice, but did not eat it. It kept sitting on the parapet, turning its head this way and that, and soon flew off.

Usually, most of the old lady's dinner consisted of a boiled egg and a boiled potato, with some rice. Perhaps, since she lived all alone, she cooked the simplest food for herself.

The next time the kite came to her balcony the lady crushed some of the egg and sprinkled it on the parapet wall. The bird ate it up, and flew off.

The old lady seemed to be getting weaker as the days went by. She was now much slower in her movements. But she never gave up feeding the birds. For the kite, it seemed she felt a special warmth. Although it usually

came after the other birds had left, she waited for it and never failed to give it a part of her egg or potato, since it didn't like rice. So, although at first the kite used to come only infrequently, it was now coming every day. It came when the other birds were about to leave, but the old lady used to wait for her, and it was only after she had fed her that she slowly went back into the flat. When Baber told his mother this, she said, "Kites are never short of food, they eat mice, small birds, chickens; and of course there are plenty of insects, so they have no shortage of snacks. So why does this kite have to deprive the poor old lady of half her dinner every day!"

So, this time it was his mother who was annoyed with the kite, not Baber, for he was watching it and the other birds with great interest, and seemed to have lost his fear of the big bird.

Then, one day when Baber returned from school, he heard that the old lady had died of heart attack the previous night. It seemed that she had no family, and no one she knew in the city, so neighbours arranged for her last rites. She was to be buried at Zohar that day.

That evening, as Babar sat watching sadly the empty balcony and its unoccupied chair, the birds started coming in. There was nothing for them on the parapet, so they flew down to the floor where a few grains of rice had fallen yesterday, and pecked at them. Some of the birds then flew away. A few perched on the empty chair and twittered. Perhaps they were

saying ‘Where is the good human who used to feed us? Why is she not feeding us today?’ Then they too flew away.

And then came the kite, flapping its great wings, and sat on the parapet. It moved its head from side to side, taking in everything with its sharp eyes. Where was its food? Where was the human who fed it every day, encouraging it with a few gentle words now and then? It looked, listened, but there was nothing but silence and the empty chair. Then it uttered a loud screech and took off, beating the air with its wings.

The kite and the other birds never came to the old lady’s balcony again.

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