

# CASTLES IN THE SAND

By Harry Jivenmukta

## Prologue

We enjoyed building  
Our castle in the sand.  
In fact it's no different  
From building a castle  
Anywhere else.  
All our castles eventually  
Crumble.  
But it's good to know  
That the castle built in  
The sand,  
Is definitely going to crumble.  
The only better place  
To build a castle is  
At the seaside  
Because you don't have to wait long  
Before the tide turns and  
Floods everything into  
A uniform flatness.

The problem with most people  
Is that they start to think  
That their castle might be permanent  
And keep adding:  
A few window shutters,  
A nice sofa,  
A new kitchen....  
But if you know your castle is  
Going to crumble  
You can simply enjoy it  
For as long as it lasts.  
If you don't associate yourself  
With it, and fool yourself  
Into thinking it will last,  
Well then it's  
All fun and games,  
Isn't it?

Our castle in the sand  
Was a pretty simple affair.  
Just the regulation sandcastle  
Made from the preformed bucket  
Shaped like a castle tower.  
We didn't spend any time  
On frivolous additions  
Because we were too busy  
Making love,  
And patting the granules  
Of sand out of our clothes  
Afterwards.

But we did find out something.  
You can't speed up the  
Crumbling of your castle  
By making love,  
Or laughing.  
But if you have a bright idea  
Of how to improve it,  
And start tinkering,  
You can inadvertently  
Destabilise it,  
Bit by bit.  
Then you have to start  
Repairing it.  
Instead of all this wastefulness  
You could have left it  
As it was and simply  
Made love, or laughed,  
Or enjoyed yourself.

And the other thing  
Is that people start thinking.  
Where is the best place  
To build the castle?  
High ground?

Low ground?  
Right at the top of the hill?  
Far away from all the others?  
Near your friends?  
Near the shops and the hairdressers?  
All this expending  
Of energy!  
In the end  
What are you going to do  
With the castle anyway?  
Open it as a museum?

## Part One

The fakir walks along the riverbank with his bowl, the only thing he owns besides one set of simple clothes which he is wearing. Just on cue, a dog hurries to the river and drinks. The fakir, never one to miss a trick, thinks this is real wisdom. He looks at his bowl and thinks of the why? Why is he burdening himself with this bowl? The dog can manage perfectly well to drink without using a bowl. He considers all the other uses of the bowl, but can only think of one; for eating out of. But then, there are thousands of leaves. He can make his plate fresh each time he needs one out of the leaves. He casts the bowl into the river, frightening the dog, which then scatters into the long grass.

Isha, like a perfect timepiece, passes by, on her way to the temple. Today, she has the food of the gods; rice pudding. When Buddha realised himself, it was one night when he was exhausted. He rested, or more like, collapsed, under a small tree and fell asleep. When he awoke from his unconsciousness, it was early morning. There was a young woman, not unlike Isha, heading to the temple with an offering of rice pudding. On seeing Buddha, she faltered, in two minds; whether to take the offering to the temple or leave it here for this bedraggled holy man. In the end, she did both, leaving some for the holy man and taking

some to the temple, subconsciously hedging her bets. Buddha ate the rice pudding and at the same time noticed the dying moon reflecting itself on a lake in the distance. He immediately realised the dream world we lived in and became wise. Was the moon in the heavens, or was it in the lake?

Isha, like a perfect timepiece, passes by, on her way to the temple. Today, she has the food of the gods; rice pudding. She knows the fakir by sight and presents him with some of the rice pudding. She, just like the girl who saw Buddha, also hedges her bets. The rest of the rice pudding she is taking to the temple. The fakir, with his new wisdom welcomes the treat and holds out his leaf plate. He can't help talking to Isha; Where are you taking the rest of the rice pudding to? He asks. Isha, feeling uncertain, thinks the fakir wants some more rice, but he puts his hand over the plate to stop her.

She says, still uncertain, to the temple.

And what will you do there?

I will pray to my Devta.

And who will you leave the rice for?

The Devta.

How do you know the Devta?

There is a statue of him.

And who will eat the rice?

I don't know, she says.

And how many hungry people do you know?

There are many, she answers. Then; I must go. And off she goes to the temple.

The fakir knows who will eat the rice pudding; the fat priest who hungers not only for the rice pudding but also for Isha. He would eat both if he could. Huh! The fakir reflects on the stupidity of people. Who do they think eats all that food made as offerings? Can't they put two and two together? Lots of food; a very fat priest. Obvious. But then again most things are.

After his breakfast of rice pudding, the fakir spreads out his belly for a nap. People occasionally pass and laugh at the poor fakir, and their own good fortune. In his sleep, the fakir laughs at the passing people. It is a real comedy, this thing called life.

## Part Two

The love filled painting of an old woman, set in a lovely patterned frame. The fakir was at the market, and as usual, at one of the regular stalls of old antiques, that was both his favourite and least favourite stall at the same time. This picture, he reflected, of possibly someone's grandmother, lovingly painted and given perhaps as a gift, was now languishing on a stall, for sale. Where was the granddaughter, or grandson for whom it was intended? And why did this endearing old lady not appeal to anyone else. What, he pondered, is it that lets us love one old grandmother but elicits no reaction for another one? What was her story? Did she ever imagine that one day, her gifts would end up on the scrap heap of life?

A man stood at the stall and looked vacantly out into the throng of shoppers.

Is that a painting of your grandmother? Asked the fakir.

No, the stallholder replied.

What does your grandmother look like?

I don't know. I never saw her. The stallholder was disinterested, until:

Well, continued the fakir, I knew your family, and I can tell you that this painting is a picture of your grandmother.

The stallholder was immediately awake. He picked up the little frame and looked at the image before him. He remembered seeing the fakir at the market ever since he started trading, many years ago, and it was possible that he might really have known his grandmother. Are you sure? He ventured uncertainly.

Of course I am; otherwise why should I have said it. Anyway, how much is it?

The stallholder was torn between a family heirloom and the sale of an item.

Actually, now that you have told me, it's no longer for sale.

Oh dear, began the fakir, well, never mind then. But I will tell you this; look after the painting. You only get two grandmothers in your life.

The fakir turned and wandered away. He didn't know anything about the stallholder's family but chuckled to himself that he had reunited a lost grandmother with a lost grandson. After all, did it matter if they were related? He couldn't think of any reason why it should matter. Another good deed had been done for the simple people that lived around him.

### Part Three

The next stop was for lunch, and the fakir went to the shop of the fat man, who sold cloth from rolls; all sorts of silky, shiny, delicate and oriental designs. As usual the fat man was sitting outside his shop and eating; today it was some sort of small pasties. Well, the fakir reflected, pasties it is. The fat man looked slyly at the approaching fakir and took a bigger bite than he could manage and had to spit it out during a choking and coughing fit. The fakir just waited till the fat man composed himself.

Why do you always come at this time? The fat man wasn't happy.

I have no watch, replied the fakir. What time is it?

The fat man resumed his eating, mentally counting how many small pasties he had left, and how many he had eaten.

I just came so that you could thank me for saving your life, said the fakir, simply.

And when did you do that?

Well, every few days I pass by here and you give me some of your lunch. Of course, I take it out of politeness, but there is another reason. You are already overweight and wont last much

longer if you carry on eating like this. By relieving you of part of your huge lunch, I save your life, little by little, and you in turn do a good deed in feeding a fakir.

The fat man was not convinced but after a bit of thought, and mentally testing himself to decide whether he was full up or not, reluctantly passed two small pasties to the fakir.

Thank you for the pasties, but you have forgotten to thank me for saving your life and putting my health in peril by eating this extra food.

The fat man, had had enough, and after a few attempts, hauled himself out of his chair and disappeared inside his shop.

Ah well, reflected the fakir, some good deeds never get the thanks they deserve. The pasties were very tasty, and the fakir sat down to rest after lunch.

#### Part Four

After an afternoon snooze, the fakir saw a young man passing, with a bunch of flowers. The fakir was interested.

Who are the flowers for?

The young man said, with a sparkle in his eye; for my girlfriend.

We are getting engaged.

Does she like flowers then?

Oh, yes she does. And I love taking them to her.

The fakir pondered and just as the young man thought the discussion was over, the fakir continued; do you love her?

Well, of course I do. The young man was a bit exasperated. Why else should I spend so much time and effort?

What I'm thinking, the fakir asked; what is the connection between love and death?

The young man just looked at the fakir.

Well? Persisted the fakir.

I don't know what you are talking about. The young man started to take a few steps on his way when the fakir clarified the situation.

How can you express love by killing beautiful flowers?

The young man paused,  
You see, continued the fakir, those flowers were alive and  
blowing happily in the breeze just an hour or so ago. Now,  
because you are in love you are driven to kill them to prove your  
love. Do you see why I am wondering about the connection  
between love and death?

The young man was confused. He didn't want to insult the fakir  
by simply walking away. But he didn't want to hear the fakir's  
arguments. And his heart was burning up to see his beautiful  
girlfriend.

I didn't kill them. He began. I bought them.

So, it's alright if you don't actually take the life yourself?

They are only flowers! The young man raised his voice.

And you are only a person. Who says that people are more  
important than flowers, or even a blade of grass?

The young man had gone, with enough teachings in his ears to  
last for quite a while. The fakir was still reflecting on this matter,  
when he realised that his leaf plate was also a form of killing.  
Killing leaves just so he can eat his food. If he had a bowl, like he  
used to, then there would be no need to keep killing meal after  
meal. He decided to ponder on the issue for a few days and then  
decide what to do.

## Part Five

On his way through the park, the fakir met a friend and they sat  
down on a bench. They never talked to each other.

What is the point of talking

To someone who knows?

If there are two people

Who both know,

Then there is no point

In talking about it

Because explanation

Is only needed  
To inform someone.

And there is no need  
For frivolities and small talk.  
That is only required  
By the ignorant  
Who need to keep talking  
So that more fundamental  
Questions don't have  
A chance to enter their  
Small minds.

Someone's birthday,  
A marriage,  
A death,  
A festival,  
And other things,  
Insignificant but enough  
To silence the inner voices  
That are always asking why?

The fakir sits next to  
Another seeker,  
And neither of them  
Are seeking.  
There is no need to seek.  
There is no need to look  
A second time  
For a door to leave  
A room  
If you have already  
Found it previously.

When the breeze began to lose its warmth, and the people in the  
streets in the distance began to thin out, the fakir went his way

and his friend another, both satiated with the exchanges they didn't have with each other.

The fakir was troubled. He was flying through life but was a bit disappointed by the processes of his body. Why was he so hungry? It was mildly ridiculous to have to eat every day. And not only that, but eat several times each day. He knew that he needed a vehicle to get him around in life, but the human body was a poor vehicle to have; always in need of fuel, and cleaning.

When he got to his bit of the river, or rather, the bit of the river where he stayed overnight, the familiarity was comforting.

## Part Six

Today, there seemed to be a lot of death around. Some days, the burning grounds were completely empty, but today, the first procession came early, at about eight o'clock. The fakir wasn't really interested in this cremation because he had heard there was a much better one later, with more goodies to eat and gifts from the body to collect. But just as people sit through a poor performance in a theatre waiting for the main event, the fakir sat and tried to enjoy the cremation as best as he could. There were benefits, certainly, because the early morning was much warmer with a fire, and he could watch and guess which mourners were the father, mother, uncles, and so on. Like a quiz show, he thought. And he wasn't the only person in the audience. He was a bit put out that he had to share with so many others. There was a time when you could be the sole beneficiary of a good cremation. Things were changing. Ah well! The inevitable march of time and the changing seasons.

There was always the baffling question of why everyone cried so much. The fakir did understand that people should cry, and he would cry as well if he had a connection with the dead person, but he couldn't understand why some people cried so much more

than the others. Adding in the factors and variables of how close a person was to the deceased, there was still a disproportionate amount of crying amongst some people. After many cremations, the fakir decided that there could only be one possible reason; the ones that cried too much were crying for themselves and their own fears. He was convinced, although had no scientific evidence, that the more people had to lose by dying, the more they cried at cremations. There must be a link between wealth and materialism, and the extra grief they displayed.

The second cremation was much more fun, and by the end of the day, the fakir had also solved his dilemma about using a bowl, or making plates out of leaves. He decided to adapt one of the empty skulls into an eating utensil. He had to do some hammering away, to ensure that ordinary people didn't realise it was a skull and not a bowl. After all, he didn't want his food supply drying up because of the misunderstandings that some people might have.

After much hammering away, stone on skull, he sat back satisfied with the result and decided it had been a very constructive day.

## Part Seven

There was a bit of a hullabaloo. The local priest had announced that a little boy of eight had learned to recite the Qur'an off by heart. Everyone said he was sent by God, but the fakir couldn't work out why this was a big deal. It was just a photographic memory or some method of remembering. And being able to read something doesn't mean that the person reading it understands what is being read, or that the reading material is any more valid than before. But people were in a celebratory mood which also meant that the generosity was greater. The fakir ate well and even began to put a bit of a belly on. That

would never do because who is going to feed a fat fakir? Every silver lining has a cloud!

It reminded the fakir of a story he had heard once. There were two brothers; one was quite materialistic, and the other one was spiritual. He gave his whole life to God and the search for truth. The other brother just lived, got married, had children, and ended up quite comfortable and well off. One day he met his spiritual brother and told him what he had achieved in his life. He was very self important by this time and pointed to his success of marriage, house and children.

The spiritual brother said; I have learned to walk on water. He expected that everyone who heard this would be impressed. He took his materialistic brother to the riverside and told him to watch. After a few minutes preparation he stepped out on to the water and easily walked in even well spaced out paces across the river.

Is that all you've achieved in thirty years? His brother asked him. What do you mean? Asked the spiritual brother in surprise. How many people do you know who can walk on water?

The materialistic brother said; I can pay a few pennies and be transported to the other side in a boat. And it doesn't take thirty years to do it.

The fakir was very disappointed with the locals. For years they had been going to the Mosque five times a day and the various temples, and the only sign they could point to, regarding God's greatness, was an eight year old boy who could remember long texts.

## Part Eight

The fat shopkeeper, who had given the fakir some small pasties a few days ago, met the fakir again, a few days later, when the

fakir had thought it was about time to save his life again. But this time, the fat shopkeeper was in a different mood.

I don't want to die early, he said, after the fakir had opened him up a bit.

Well, you know what they say, began the fakir. You reap what you sow. You eat too much, (like a pig, he wanted to say, but was being polite), and want to live as long as a normal man. It is not possible, is it?

What can I do then? The fat man pleaded; I love my food so much, and I can afford it as well.

You have made a choice, and the price to pay, because everything has a price, is an early grave. The fakir thought he had dealt with this little issue very well and looked forward to sharing some of the fat man's lunch. But it was not going to be so simple.

You are a fakir. Everyone respects you because you dedicate yourself to being spiritual, to benefit all of us in this place. Well, benefit me, now. The fat man slid his lunch further away from the hungry eyes of the fakir, to make him try harder.

Well, you know the story of the woman who begged Buddha to bring her son back to life. Buddha told her to collect a pinch of salt from any house she pleased, as long as no-one had ever died in the family she visited, and then he would revive her dead son. She went from house to house and in every one, someone or other had died, maybe only a short time ago, or perhaps many years ago. She slowly realised that everyone has to deal with death. And her son was no different. So, if Buddha didn't do anything, how do you expect me to do it?

You must do something. The fat man wasn't going to accept half an effort from the fakir.

When the angel of death comes for you, you will have to go. It's as simple as that.

I'll run away and then the angel of death won't be able to find me. And then, he will be so busy looking for others he might forget all about me.

Your lunch looks lovely, the fakir said, and fakirs can think much more clearly on a full belly.

The fat man had no choice but only gave the fakir a little bit, because his own greed was too much, even in this time of adversity.

After a time, the fakir said; I'll tell you a story.

There was a man called Abubakr who was told to expect the angel of death on a certain day. He, like you, decided to make a run for it. He usually drank at a certain bar and bribed the barman to tell anyone looking for him that he wouldn't be long. Meanwhile he got hold of a very fast horse and sped off to a distant town called Muskhairah. He was really pleased with the deception and went to a bar there to celebrate. Meanwhile back home, the barman was looking and waiting for anyone who might look like the angel of death. A new person did walk in and the barman practiced his story under his breath. The man looked around and the barman thought, this must be him. He asked if he was looking for someone in particular.

The man said:

Actually I was supposed to be meeting the angel of death here; he's my friend. But he's had to go to Muskhairah to collect someone, and I was just looking to see if there was anyone else in here I knew. You know, to pass the time.

So you see, ended the fakir, you can run anywhere you want to but the angel of death will be there before you, every time! I can help you, of course by making sure you don't eat so much. And as you know, even before you became worried, I have been saving your life for some years already. With that, and an impolite burp, the fakir dawdled off into the crowds; shopping as if their lives depended on it.

## Part Nine

The young man, who had taken flowers for his girlfriend, was sitting on the ground with his head in his hands. The fakir, who was very observant, asked him if he was alright.

What can I tell you, the young man began? After a lot of sitting quietly, and a bit of cajoling, the young man finally opened up. You know there is a custom that you can't marry someone if you already have a relative married in the same village or town?

The fakir did know. It was simple really; in order to protect the population from inbreeding, some tribes followed the custom of not allowing more than one person in their family to marry someone from the same village. It made sense when it had been decided but didn't any more. In these days, many of the villages were more like towns, and with the wars, lots of people had been displaced. So it no longer really made any sense since most people were indeed in the mix. And in uncertain times people who loved each other just wanted to get on with it.

Well, continued the young man after a sniffle and a pause, my grandmother's sister was married into the same tribe that my girlfriend belongs to. I want to get married to her, she says that her family won't allow it, and I think my family will say the same. My friends say ignore the old traditions, and I think it is stupid because I only want her.

The fakir was continually amazed at how brainless people could be; his grandmother's sister! It was amazing that anyone could even remember so far back. You should make up your own mind, said the fakir. The more advice you seek, the more difficult it will become. And in the end, you will look as stupid as they are.

What do you mean, asked the young man?

After a pause, the fakir said his most favourite line; let me tell you a story.

A man and his son were going to market to sell their donkey. As they led it along the road a man coming the other way commented; you're foolish. Why make the young lad walk when he could ride on the donkey?

The father thought this was a good idea so he seated his son on the donkey. As they went further on, another person commented; thoughtless young lad, making his father walk whilst he rides.

The Father heard this and sat on the donkey, whilst the son walked by his side. Another person passing by said; why make the young lad walk? You could both ride on the donkey.

The father thought that there was a lot of good wisdom about that day, and he sat his son on the donkey with him. A passing stranger was very angry; you fools! Making a poor little donkey carry two people. You should be ashamed of yourselves. You should be carrying the donkey.

The father felt sorry for the donkey. So he and his son got off the donkey and taking one end each, they lifted the donkey up and carried it the rest of the way to the town.

When they got to the town everyone started laughing at the two fools carrying a donkey.

You see, the fakir continued, rules and opinions are made by many people, and when a new one is made, the old ones are kept as well, by some people. So you end up with lots of stupidity. If you listen to everyone, you will also end up stupid, like them. Just follow your heart and ask your girlfriend to make her own mind up. Then you can be happy.

But what about the traditions, the young man asked?

The traditions are precisely that, the fakir stated emphatically; they are old, worn, and out of date!

The young man brightened a bit, but then felt the weight of history, and his family, bearing down on his shoulders.

Think about it, the fakir said, and if you can do it, do it, and if you can't, just let your family tell you what to do.

The fakir wandered off, all the time ruefully smiling at the dim-witted people he had to live amongst.

## Part Ten

The fakir had started something in the head of the stallholder when he told him that the random painting of an old woman was, in fact, the image of his grandmother. The next time the fakir went to the market, the stallholder was a very different man than the one he had met the last time.

Oh! Am I glad to see you; the stallholder urgently welcomed the fakir.

Well, it is nice to see you again as well, replied the fakir.

You know, continued the stallholder, since you told me about my grandmother, I have been thinking about finding the rest of my family. As you will know, they all left many years ago and promised to send for me when they arrived in a safe place. It was during the early days of the wars, you know.

The fakir, knowing nothing of his family, was in a bit of a pickle. I have been feeling so much better in the last few days. If I can find out about my family, even if they are no longer alive, it will let me get on with my life. It will close a chapter of sadness. Can you help me?

The fakir was always a good thinker in an emergency, and this was a big one. Thinking on his feet, after the briefest of pauses, he said, give me a few days to locate them, and without further ado, melted into the crowd, shopping around him.

What did it matter in any case, he thought as he wandered around, trying to find a solution to a problem he had, in fact, created himself. After a good lunch, supplied by a local shopkeeper, he sat down under a tree to find a solution. It didn't take long, and he soon remembered a story:

Rashid was from Yemen, who had left the small town he had been born in at a very young age. Now he was old and getting frail. He wanted to travel back to his home town before he died. But his memory was very poor so he took some friends with him.

When they got near the town where he had been born, the friends decided to play a trick on the old man. Rashid, there is the town in which you were born. They pointed out a town far down in the valley. Rashid rushed along to get there and already felt familiar with the place.

When they got to the town one of the friends pointed to a burial ground and said; Rashid, this is the place where all your ancestors are buried.

Rashid walked over and felt the spirits of his ancestors in the air. Rashid, over there, that is your father's grave. The friends pointed to one of the mounds. Rashid felt sorrow and sat and cried at the grave side for many minutes.

Suddenly all his friends started laughing out loud. Why are you laughing, can't you see how distressed I am? Rashid protested. The friends told him that they had played a trick on him, and that his home town was still some way off.

Rashid quickly dried his tears and composed himself. Why did you play a trick on me?

The friends told him that even though he was an old man, he still lacked wisdom. You should try to feel the same joy and sorrow for all regardless of whether they are your relatives or someone else's. It does not matter whether this is your father's or someone else's father's grave, does it? The wise person cares for everyone.

Rashid understood that it was foolish to cry for relatives he had hardly known or to seek out his own relatives in particular, because everyone is the same, coming from the same source and going from this world the same way.

The fakir decided to simply adapt the story for his purposes and seek out a cemetery. There were a few he knew, but in particular, there was one where there were no names on the headstones; people who had died without being recognised because of injuries in the wars. He was happy now; a full belly and a solution to his immediate problem. He still believed very strongly that the truth was of no use and what he was doing

would free the stallholder from his anguish, and get the fakir, himself, off the hook.

## Part Eleven

One day the Guru was supposed to have dinner at a rich man's home. As he was walking he saw a very poor man who lived in a very small tumble down house at the side of the road. The Guru sat down to eat dinner at this man's house. The man didn't have much but he was prepared to share it.

Meanwhile the rich man had a great feast prepared, served on silver platters, which the Guru didn't go to eat. The rich man was very upset.

The next day the Guru met the rich man. The rich man became very happy when the Guru asked him to do a favour for him and forgot his previous disappointment. He thought that it was a great honour to be asked a favour by someone as great as this Guru.

Will you take this pin from me and return it to me when we meet in heaven? The Guru asked the rich man.

The rich man laughed and replied; that is impossible. No-one can take anything with them when they die, not even you!

Then why do you spend all your time making money and building an empire, if you are going to have to leave it all behind when you die? The Guru asked.

The man realised that he had spent much of his life, sometimes lying and cheating, to build up his wealth and businesses. He also realised why the Guru had preferred to eat with the poor man. The poor man didn't have much but he shared it and he had gained what he did have by fair means. Whilst the rich man was blinded by greed and the glitter of wealth, the poor man was true and honest.

The fakir, whose good deeds were endless, had just finished telling the fat shopkeeper a story. Since the fat man realised he

was in for an early grave, he had been thinking about how he could avoid his fate. He couldn't stop eating, and knew inside that this was something that was impossible for him. He had decided to ask how he could guarantee that his future would be in heaven, and how he could ensure that he could take all his wealth and goods with him. The fakir's story didn't help him at all.

In any case, the fakir continued in a matter of fact way, everything you need in the other life will be provided for you, whether in heaven or in hell.

But I don't want to go to hell, insisted the fat man.

The fakir knew there wasn't such a thing as heaven, or hell, but this foolish fat man wouldn't be able to understand.

There is only one way for you to save your skin.

Tell me, implored the fat man.

You have worked hard and that is a positive thing. But you have also made lots of money by cheating and lying.

Never! Insisted the fat man. I have never cheated.

Do you remember the camel caravan that was hijacked three years ago, asked the fakir? Where did the cloth from that raid end up?

The fat man was surprised. How do you know about that?

I know about everything. Do you want me to list all your dodgy deals?

The fat man was afraid now. No. OK, there have been a few misdemeanours.

So, continued the fakir, picking up the thread of his advice again, you should cleanse your spirit by doing good deeds with your ill-gotten gains.

The fat man was in a spin now. He was speechless. He went a strange shade of purple as things began to sink in.

Think about it and we'll talk again later. The fakir knew there was no point in carrying on at the moment. Whistling a favourite ditty, the fakir wandered off, to save more people or at least to wake them up.

## Part Twelve

The priest who secretly ate the offerings that innocent, (or ignorant), people like Isha took to the temple, was stoned to death. It was only a matter of time because he lusted after the female devotees who visited the temple, religiously, every day. Not being satisfied with piles of fresh food, a roof over his head, and the great respect he never deserved, the priest one day succumbed to a greater thirst than water could quench, and he touched a woman and tried to lead her into his bed. The congregation was outraged and at the same time were left bereft because their simple beliefs were suddenly pulled from under them, like a rug being pulled, leaving them on their backsides, sitting in a heap, on a bare concrete floor. In a fit of pack fury, they dragged the priest to the edge of town and stoned him to death. On the positive side, the vultures and the feral dogs had a feast of fresh, if slightly bruised, meat!

The fakir was the only one in town who wasn't surprised. He had seen this coming, and had seen it before, many years ago. But, although the fakir thought the people deserved what they got, he did have an inkling of a feeling that some of the congregation deserved better. He thought of the innocent Isha who, after rising before dawn, would lovingly cook the rice pudding, or something similar, and taking it, along with her innocent heart, would lay her soul bare to her Devta every day. And the fakir was sure that there would be all sorts of turmoil going on in her heart. The fakir sought her out but made it look like a chance meeting.

You see, he continued, there are all sorts of holy people. Some just don't have a big picture; they live in a little world of limited experiences. Listen to this story:

One day the frog that lived in the ocean came to visit his cousin, who lived in a well. The well frog had always lived in the deep well and was too small to leap out of it, into the outside world.

The ocean frog had seen much of the world and was very learned. The well frog was very happy to see his cousin and they talked about all sorts of things.

How big is your home? Asked the well frog.

It's very big, answered the ocean frog.

The ocean frog thought that unless someone had actually seen the ocean, it would be very difficult to explain its size, and in any case the well frog's experience was so limited that it would be impossible to explain anything of any size to him.

Is it this big? The well frog asked as he jumped up into the air about a third of the way up his well.

Bigger than that, said the ocean frog.

This big? The well frog jumped up halfway the height of the well.

Bigger.

The well frog leapt as high as he had ever leapt and almost reached the full height of the well. This big?

Bigger.

The well frog became furious with indignation. That's not possible. This well is the biggest thing I've ever seen, there can't be anything bigger. You are lying. To the well frog even the sky was only the circle he could see when he looked up. Everything in his understanding was limited by the walls of the well and the circle of sky above. The ocean frog could not convince the well frog.

People look to the wrong place to find God, the fakir ended.

There is no point asking the frog that lives in the well, about anything else, except those things that exist in the well itself.

Your heart is where you need to look; not the temple. All the answers are there.

Isha was uncertain but thought that there was some truth in the words of the fakir.

It's like losing your keys, the fakir started on another tack. You search through all your pockets, then retrace your steps to search everywhere you have been, but still you can't find the keys. Then, in an accidental moment, you hear a jangle, and realise that the keys were in the only pocket you had forgotten to

search. People wander near and far, go on pilgrimages and make sacrifices. But one day, they realise that there was no need because everything is within them.

The priest was like the frog that lived in the well. He simply didn't know any more. And as for the offerings you make; feed the hungry. In any case your Devta doesn't need to eat. All Devtas and Devis are beyond ordinary food. They don't need anything you can give them, but if you really do want to give something, burn incense, because their sense of smell is acute and they really appreciate a good sandalwood or rose perfume.

The fakir looked lovingly at Isha, the simple one who was like a daughter to him, walked off towards her home. He felt a bit sad that people have to go through all the rubbish and stupidity that life throws out at them. That people, like Isha, would be stripped, inch by inch, of their originality, innocence, and essence; to end up old and fat, with half a dozen greedy children; ignorant generation after generation. Ah well! That's life, he concluded, as he rose to go for lunch. Where today? He thought. Mmm... perhaps a bit of Omani food, at that new place on the edge of town, near where the desert begins to flow out like a tap left on for three hundred years.

### Part Thirteen

Jasmina was mechanical when she was in her kitchen, preparing the ingredients; unflappable and exacting. The desert had ended and they had found themselves in a country just like the one they had left, sandy and Arabic. Except, she had been told, this country was not at war. How do you know where one country ends and another begins? She had always wondered if the enemy missiles could differentiate, especially when there were no lines drawn on the Earth to inform them.

The café belonged to her family; she helped out. It was only a small sandstone room. There were no other Omani cafes in this town, although there were quite a few people, fleeing, as they

had done. She was looking forward to the day, not least because she would meet so many women and hear the gossip. The only man she ever talked to outside the family, was the fakir. He was allowed to speak to anyone because he was a holy man. He had told her all sorts of stories and predictions about her life. He said she would have to keep travelling yet for thousands of miles, to arrive in a country where there are no deserts of sand, but many other kinds of desert. She never understood that bit, but you never question a fakir. And she had made a special meal for him, as she always did on the days she expected to see him.

The fakir was waylaid that day. The fat shopkeeper had seen him and rushed up. What's all this I hear about camels and eyes of needles? He gasped out after his short rush of ten yards to reach the fakir. The fakir thought for a moment and then said: Well, it's simple. If your camel is fat you can't get it through the eye of a needle.

And? The fat man persisted.

That's it, I think, said the fakir, who was being deliberately obscure so he could get to the café and his lunch.

No! Insisted the fat man, there is more to it than that. It's not about the camel, is it?

Taking a deep breath, the fakir silently thanked God for giving him this job. Sinking down to sit and patting the ground next to him so the fat man had somewhere comfortable, the fakir explained everything.

It was a prophet that said it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it was for a rich man to get to heaven.

The fat man digested this massive message, and was silent for a long time. The fakir's stomach was rumbling. If the fat man's stomach ever rumbled, thought the fakir, no one would hear it because of the layers of sound insulating blubber he had.

The silence continued and then the fat man said slowly and deliberately; why didn't anyone tell me all this years ago? Why was I told to get good marks at school, and then work hard all my life, and secure a future for my family, if, if at the end of it all, I would go to hell?

It's a strange world, mused the fakir.  
Are you going to heaven? The fat man fired a broadside.  
I have no idea, and I don't care, said the fakir nonchalantly.  
How can you be so relaxed about it all?  
Well, I have nothing to lose, and nothing to gain.

The fakir eventually got to the café and his lunch. He had put up with a barrage of silly questions from the foolish fat shopkeeper until his head began to pulse with overload, and hunger. Jasmina served him a banquet. She was always so generous towards him and the fakir thought he would like to do her some great service in return. However, she didn't ask him for anything. One in a thousand, he thought!

## Part Fourteen

The young man, who was in love, had saddled his camel and was walking it through the town towards the desert. The fakir, having burped his last burp of appreciation for his lunch, was sitting against a tree, letting his belly have its way, and spread itself out a bit.

I'm leaving. The young man said simply.

On that side of the town, the desert will lead you into the war.

The fakir informed him.

I don't mind, answered the young man, because there is already a war going on inside me. That war can't be as bad as this one.

Why fight at all? Asked the fakir.

Why not?

Yes, but why expend all that energy in fighting?

Because I want something.

And there you have it! The fakir concluded. It is only because of your greed, because love is a form of greed as well, you know. It is all because of wanting and greed that we all fall into this abyss of despair. People work all their lives in some pointless job, have children for no good reason, build houses when they already have perfectly good homes, and go to war, to kill, because they

want another handful of sand. And if you go out there, and fight, and kill, and get killed, will that make you any happier? Will the girl you love be overjoyed with your behaviour? Will it make any difference to the world? The Sun will keep rising and the stars will keep twinkling, and no-one will know, when they find your bleached skeleton in the desert, who you had been. And everything will just keep on as it is, except there will be one less idiot. The fakir was surprised by his fluency and the import of his conclusions.

The young man tied his camel to a branch of the tree, and sat down next to the fakir. They just sat there and watched the day coming to an end. The big, fat, low moon appeared and the stars woke up for the night.

## Part Fifteen

The fat shopkeeper and the young man were sitting either side of the fakir. It seemed that the young man had attached himself to the fakir semi-permanently, and the fat man was becoming inconsolable as each day passed. The fakir was thinking of an uplifting story, to help them rise from the doldrums, and remembered one which involved frogs; somehow frogs were playing an increasing part in his tales.

One day two frogs fell into a bucket of milk. The bucket was made of metal and had very slippery sides. The frogs were in danger of drowning unless they kept paddling around. If they stopped they would sink.

The larger frog swam quite well at first but soon got tired. After a while he said; I can't go on any longer.

The other frog said; we must both keep on paddling around or we will die. Keep going and we might be saved.

They both continued paddling round and round in the bucket but there seemed little hope to the larger frog that they would be saved. After a while longer the larger frog said that he couldn't go

on. He stopped paddling and sank to the bottom of the bucket and died.

The other frog was now alone and it seemed even harder to keep on paddling. He kept on and on until he was completely out of energy. I am going to die like my friend. He thought.

Finally after the last possible stroke he could muster, he gave up the struggle. As he began to sink, he felt something hard under his feet. The frog had paddled so much that the milk had turned into butter. Using the hard surface of the butter, the frog mustered the last of his strength and jumped out of the bucket.

So, which one of those two frogs am I? Asked the fat man, missing the point of the story completely.

Just because there are two of you and two frogs in the story, it doesn't mean I am referring to you in any particular way. It is a story of hope. If you don't give up you will succeed.

But if success means losing everything, the fat man asked, thinking about his ill-gotten gains, then what kind of success is that?

When you die, explained the fakir, you will leave it all behind anyway. So, if success involves losing material things, actually you are not losing anything at all, are you?

There was a silence before the fakir continued; in fact, it is the things that you cling to that lead you to fail. The very things you want to keep are the things that are making you miserable.

But it's like an insurance policy, isn't it. The fat man defended himself. If there are bad times, I would be safe.

No, the fakir said emphatically, it's not like an insurance policy. It's like an insurance policy that doesn't pay out. You deal with the pain of regular payments, but when you die, there is no payout, is there, because you can't take it with you. There is a payout for your children, who, having not earned the money themselves, will probably squander it on trifles, and in turn be confused themselves, when it is their turn to go.

All of this time, the young man had kept silent. Then he began; what about me then?

Your case is simple. If you want to live according to tradition, you can't marry your girlfriend. If tradition is not important, you can marry her.

Of course, if you want to go with tradition, I can arrange a good marriage for you, to a girl who is the epitome of an angel. He was thinking of Isha. Although they were of different religions, the fakir had worked out that this arrangement was still possible. It would give Isha a very loving husband, and he would get a very loyal and dedicated wife. And most importantly, it would end the young man's increasing reliance on the fakir, and the fakir would be happier.

The blessing of the fakir on a marriage match was the highest recommendation anyone could hope for, and although the fakir knew that marriage was only a peripheral and material matter, he managed to get the deal done. He reflected; both the young man and Isha were of this world and so he had done a good deed in matching them up. Isha was spiritual but she would divert her energy into her children. It was natural, and that's why female fakirs are rare; but he knew that about ten percent of fakirs were women. They had to remain unmarried because you can't pour your energy into two places at the same time; one cup would be only half full and the other would be half empty.

## Part Sixteen

One morning, at about three o'clock, the fakir woke up. He had found a solution for the fat man. The problem was that the fat man couldn't see himself changing, or giving money from his ill-gotten gains, away. The fakir remembered a story and later that morning, after some of the fat man's breakfast he told him:

An old man and a young man were crossing a river in a boat. As they came to the shore the old man asked the boat man; we want to get to the nearby town this evening. I know they shut the

gates at night to keep the wild animals and thieves out. Can we get to the town in time before the gates are shut?

The boat man answered; Yes. You can get there if you walk slowly. The young man who thought he was very clever exclaimed; What on earth do you mean? Everyone knows that if you go slowly it takes longer to get somewhere.

The young man leapt out of the boat and began jogging along the path towards the town. The old man walked slowly, taking the boat man's advice.

Soon the young man twisted his ankle and fell over. When the old man caught up with him he said; Now, how will you get to the town before they shut the gates for the night?

The young man understood then what the boat man had said. The old man reached the town just as the gates were being closed. The young man was eaten by wolves in the night.

So you see, began the fakir, you should start with small steps. Don't think about heaven and don't think about all your wealth; just put a little bit aside and try it. Donate enough to feed the hungry after Friday prayers and see how you feel. Then, if it is a good feeling, think about what else you can do? You can do it by getting there slowly.

## Part Seventeen

After all the recent endeavours to solve the problems of the simple people of this little town, the fakir felt he could take it easy for a while. The stallholder had been reunited with an invented family, the fat man was slowly getting there, the young man no longer pined for his girlfriend, and Isha was to be married to a nice young man.

Meanwhile, whilst the fakir slumbered in his simple lifestyle, more problems were beginning to raise their heads, like weeds in a Sultan's garden. Another young man had fallen in love, another

priest was getting fat on the proceeds of offerings made by innocent girls, another shopkeeper was smuggling in rolls of cloth from raided camel caravans, and families were being separated because of the wars. The clock of life was winding itself up to ring the beginning of a new day.

A woman with only five chickens one day looked into the coop and found five big fresh eggs. She thought to herself; If I hatch out five chickens, I will have ten chickens altogether.

She looked after the eggs and continued to plan. They will lay more eggs, and then more and more, and soon I will have more chickens than I need. I will sell them to other people.

She felt very good indeed as she continued to plan. I will buy a goat with the money I get from selling the chickens, and then I will have lots of milk to drink. But living on my own, I don't need much milk so I will be able to sell it to others.

The woman was getting quite excited about the prospect of having more chickens than she knew what to do with, and having goats and selling milk. After selling the milk I will have enough money to buy new clothes and even start thinking about a new house. By the evening, she had planned out all of her future and found that she would be very well off indeed. No need to worry about anything ever again.

She stood up and went over to look at her five eggs which were to start her off on this great venture. Slipping on the wet floor she stumbled and all the eggs broke.

That morning the fakir had a lovely breakfast of omelettes, made with fresh eggs, served by Jasmina, at the Omani café.