



The relaxation exercises are not working. Neither is meditation. It is 2 AM, moon standard time and I am tense and jittery as I sit on my bed in a room in Lunatel, the unimaginatively named hotel on the moon.

My room is small. It is on the top floor, and does not have any windows. Instead, it has a huge glass roof that provides a breathtaking view of the skies once I shut off all the artificial lights in the room. A meteor shower has been predicted. I look up, hoping to see it, but remember quickly that this will not be possible. The moon has no atmosphere to burn the meteors and create a display.

I try to lose myself in the moon night but I cannot obliterate a vision that I keep seeing without the use of my eyes—the face of my wife, serene and beautiful even in death, serene and beautiful in spite of the marks of violence.

I ring up the room service.

“Could you send up two glasses of warm milk?” Milk is expensive on the moon, but I can afford it.

“Certainly, Mr. Ali.” There is no evidence of surprise. By now, they know some of my ways.

Within five minutes, the doorbell rings.

“Lights on,” I say. The roof becomes opaque and the lights slowly come on.

“Brighter”, and the lights grow perceptibly brighter.

“Come in.”

The waiter enters and deposits the glasses of milk on the center table. I look at the waiter. He appears to be Asian, probably in his late fifties or early sixties, close to retirement age. His face is lined and his eyes are empty. His name tag reads: Ram Prasad. Probably a fellow country man. He is about to leave but I want to try not to be alone as long as possible.

“Please have a seat, Ram Prasad,” I point to the couch. “I would

like to talk to you.”

His eyes show surprise. He sits down but his manner is awkward, wary.

“From India?”

He nods.

“So am I.”

He smiles, the barriers coming down a few notches. I pick up one glass of milk and offer him the other. He protests. I smile and over-ride his protests. He sips his milk. Suddenly, I see tears in his eyes.

“Are you okay?” I say, alarmed.

He bows his head and nods. “I guess I had forgotten how it feels to be treated as a human being.”

I let him alone for some time. Then I break the silence. “I have seen how badly the manager, Mr. Haysfire, treats you. Why do you stay?”

“Because I am a waiter and I cannot be anything else, and this is the only hotel on the moon.”

“Why not go back to India?”

“My wife and my daughter are buried here, on the moon. I cannot leave them alone.”

I wonder at how lives interweave. Here is another tie between this person and me.

“Mr. Haysfire is a racist, isn’t he?” I say.

“The worst kind.” His eyes express disgust. “If this was earth and the last century, he would be a KKK leader.”

“A person who would think nothing of raping and killing a non-white woman.” Something in my voice touches him. He looks up at me. Abruptly, he gets up. “I have to go, sir.” He leaves the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I step out of my room. The door clicks shut behind me. I step on the conveyor belt going right. Two rooms down, the corridor turns left. Two more rooms and I step off the conveyor belt and knock on the door in front of me.

“Come in.”

Colonel Nordstrad is a giant—a giant in a wheelchair. Ex-army, turned private investigator after retirement.

“Here’s my report.” He hands me a folder. Given his appearance, his voice is surprisingly soft.

“You have conclusive proof?” My heart is beating fast.

“Conclusive enough for you and me, but nothing that will hold up in a court. Sorry.”

Back in my room, I study the report. I finish reading it. Then I spread my pray mat and pray.

Nordstrad is right. The evidence is conclusive for him and me. One day, ten years ago, while staying at this hotel, I had gone moon-walking. Upon my return, I had found my wife brutally raped and murdered in our room. She had not been able to make any noise because her mouth had been taped. Subsequent investigation had resulted in no arrests. The perpetrator had not been found. I had been harboring my suspicions—suspicions to which I could now attach a name: Haysfire.

The ball is now in my court.

Ram Prasad. Ram Prasad is my key to the next step.

Haysfire sleeps alone in his apartment. He does not have a family. People like Haysfire usually do not have families. Thank God. When he is rudely shaken awake, he tries to sit up, but he cannot. He has been securely tied to his bed. He cannot even make a noise because his mouth has been taped shut.

He looks at me and there is fear in his eyes. He looks at the knife in my gloved hand.

“You remember me, don’t you?” I say. “And my wife, Firdaus.”

He tries to move and makes vague noises.

“For ten years, a sense of injustice has been burning through my soul. Time to balance the scales of justice.”

I move toward him. He is not moving any longer, as if he has given up every hope. Only his eyes move, and there is stark terror in them. Suddenly I sense a stench that starts slowly but grows strong. I recognize it. Haysfire has lost control of his bladder.

I raise the knife, pause, and move back in disgust. I cannot do it. I cannot kill someone in cold blood. I move away from the bed, put the knife back in the kitchen where I had taken it from, and leave his apartment.

I take the elevator down to the main floor. The lobby is cozy and beautifully lit. The girl at the reception desk smiles at me.

“I want to go out,” I say. She calls for the concierge who brings me

a space suit. I don it and move to the exit. The door opens and I step into the air lock. The door closes behind me and another door opens in front of me and I am out in the open. The deep, dark airlessness of moonspace. The silent, ghostly buildings of the settlement.

Old scenarios of moon colonies had depicted air tight domes. But in reality they proved unfeasible. What we have instead are individually air-tight buildings with air locks. Many of these buildings are connected to each other through underground tunnels.

The silence of the moon night calms me. The vast, overwhelming sky full of stars shows me the insignificance of my affairs and my existence. I remember the predicted meteor showers. The meteors may be on their way. Some of them may even hit the moon surface, though this is an extremely rare occurrence. It might be safer for me to go back inside.

But before I go, I raise my hands to the sky and pray. Then I make my way back to the hotel. I know that I will be arrested for assault and breaking and entering because Haysfire is sure to put the police on to me once he manages to remove the ropes and the gag.

I enter the hotel, a repair crew is busy working. It seems a small meteorite had managed to penetrate one of the hotel rooms, depressurizing it. Before I can find out what room was hit I am arrested for suspicion of murder.

Later, they let me go. The room that was hit by the meteorite was Haysfire's. They found the pebble-sized meteorite embedded in his head where it had hit him and killed him. A very strange turn of events. Also, it is proved beyond doubt that I was not in the hotel when Haysfire died. I was outside. The ropes and gag did indicate some sort of foul play but they do not have enough evidence to pin it on me.

Before going back to my room, I confront Police Chief Gardner.

"You have to admit that suspicion of murder was justified under the circumstance," the Police Chief said. "The rope, the gag..."

"But why is it that among the fifty or so people in the hotel I was the only person arrested on suspicion? No one else in the hotel was even investigated, as far as I know."

"Because... because..."

"Is it because I am a Muslim and the stereotypes created ages ago back on earth are still clinging to our psyches?"

The Police Chief had the grace to look sheepish.

More than a century ago, A.C. Clarke, a writer, had hoped that we would not take our baggage—our borders, our prejudices—to space. But I guess that was hoping for too much.

Back in my room, I analyze my feelings and find that there is a peace of sorts in my heart and mind. In a way, I think I have avenged my wife.

Underneath the starry skies of the moon, I had prayed—prayed hard—for Haysfire's death.