

Hajj Stories

Life Tragically Shortened

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I do not know why, but I seem to attract those who seek financial assistance. Stories of wallets being snatched in the Haram, bags containing money being lost in Madinah or foreign exchange being delayed seem to be repeated verbatim year after year. I was once approached by a man outside the Haram in Makkah about a week before Hajj was to commence who claimed to have lost his money and was in dire need of funds to feed his starving children. When I offered to buy the food, he initially said that they do not eat just any type of food. I pointed out to him that I frequent a restaurant that served his nationality's cuisine and would buy it there. He hastily retreated and later on I saw him focusing his story on someone else.

At times these experiences desensitises us to those who really may be in desperate need. I once was a victim myself though my loss was not that great. My wallet was once snatched in Janatul Baqee cemetery in Madinah and I vividly recalled a man virtually 'tripping' right next me and holding onto me for an inordinately long time to supposedly regain his balance just prior to me becoming aware that my wallet and I had parted ways. Because of my own experience I

always try to keep an open mind, but the reality is that most of the stories are rehashed versions of what has been narrated on previous occasions. I could hence have been forgiven for being apprehensive when a gentleman approached me one year in Makkah.

Hajj was about one week away and, after a long and busy day seeing to patients, I had some time to visit the Holy Mosque without any further duties to still perform. I always find a Tawaaf on the roof immensely uplifting as I can look at the Kaba'a all the time and with all Hujjaaj on the multiple levels of the Haram be part of one united and continuous circumambulation. There is always the feeling of being blessed to be able to be part of this as it is the only place in the world where it takes place, a true magnet pulling at the heartstrings of all Muslims. Afterwards I went to sit right in front of that level where I had a bird's eye view of the cyclic movement around the gravitational centre of Islam. I was simultaneously reciting, looking at the Kaba'a and being overwhelmed in my own cocoon when he came to sit next to me.

I am not certain where my thoughts were when he greeted initially as I did not respond. It

was not an intentional ignorance, it was more a case where I was filtering out all sensory inputs to the already overwhelming cacophony. He held out his hand and greeted again. I returned the greeting apologetically, shook his hand and then returned my gaze to the Kaba'a. 'May I ask you something, one very small thing please?' he asked. I must confess to being a bit irritated

big cities to seek employment from where he would regularly send money home. It would not have been possible in their case though, as they belonged to opposing factions. Word of their acquaintance surfaced.

'Leave this village now,' his brother one evening told him. His older sibling loved him dearly and heard that tribal punish-

ment would be invoked. This could have ranged from physical beatings to death. The brother had worked in a city previously. 'Take this money, take the arranged transport and go to this address in the city,' he was in-

born. For many, like in her case, life was prematurely terminated due to human unfathomable factors.

'I shall come back one day and perform Hajj on her behalf,' he said. We sat a minute or two in

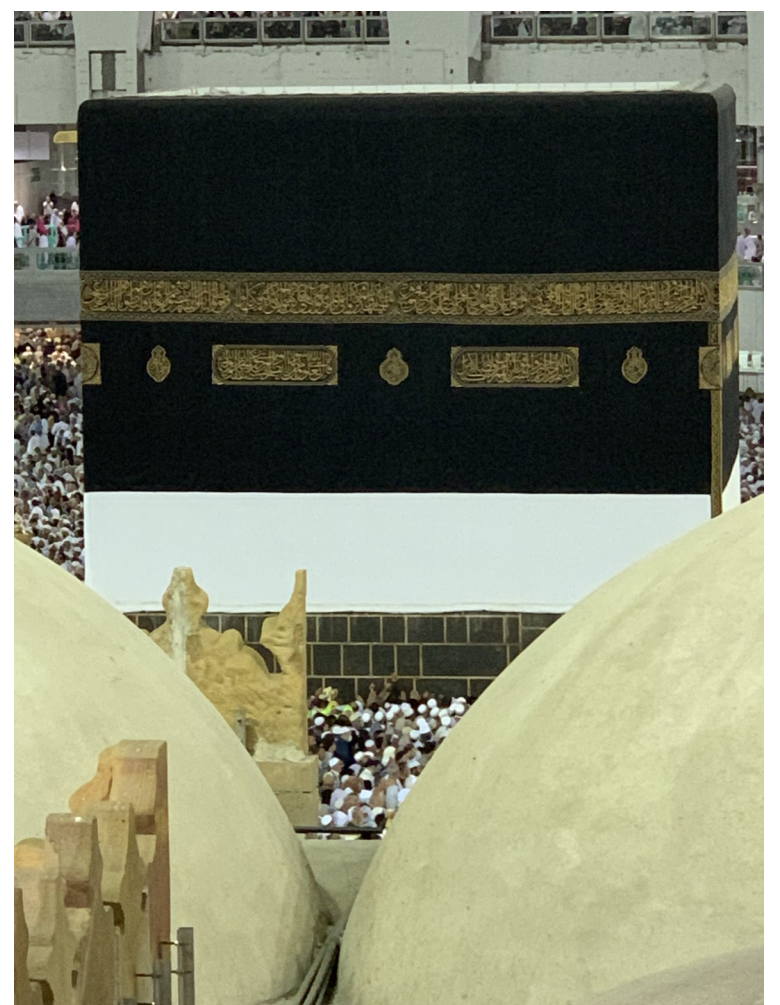
"I shall come back one day and perform Hajj on her behalf"

and probably appeared to respond very abruptly. He was a young man in his late twenties, dressed in typical subcontinent attire with his light jacket bearing the English flag. 'Yes,' I responded distantly. 'Please make Duaa for me and for the one that is not with me any more,' he said. I noticed the tears in his eyes. 'We make Duaa for all those gracing the earth and those who have departed,' I replied. Tears were now freely flowing.

He just sat and stared at the Kaba'a. It was evident that he was severely depressed. 'Who is the one who is not with you anymore?' I asked. The floodgates opened and I listened to his heart-wrenching story with again the deep discordance between our beautiful, forgiving religion and cultural traditions. His English was really good with his accent revealing his recent acquisition of the language. He lived most of his life in a rural part of Pakistan where tribalism was and probably still is very rife. As a teenager he was acutely aware of which families were feuding with each other and generally was not involved in any of the many verbal and physical altercations that characterised his and adjacent villages.

He did not detail how he met the young girl who stole his heart. All he mentioned was that they never did anything more than talk, and always with some of her friends in the immediate vicinity. She was in his words 'an angel who would not hurt a soul' and dreamt of the world seen on mobile phones way beyond her reach. They both knew that they would both most likely stay in their villages and continue the age-old traditions that beset their lives. Or the young man would get married and go to one of the

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No one knows what tragedy struck any of the pilgrims

structed. At that time, he did not think of the girl. In his frightened and hasty state, he did as he was told. He immediately left, and after about two years, via a number what he himself referred to as connections, moved to England. He studied hard, got a good job and now, nearly ten years after fleeing his village, was on the verge of repaying his debt to Allah. 'What happened to the girl?' I asked.

Deep down I knew the answer already. Everyone was told it was an accident. Everyone knew that it was not. Her body was found in a shallow hole next to a

silence after he finished his story. My phone rang. There was an emergency that I had to go and attend to. 'Are you a doctor?' he asked, having clearly understood my telephonic conversation. I replied in the affirmative. 'Please go and see to your patient. I could not save anyone except myself,' he replied. I tried to console him that everything is by Allah's decree. 'Is there anything I can do for you?' I asked. 'Please keep us in your Duaas,' he replied. He greeted, walked a few steps and then started looking at the Kaba'a.

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