

## Cairo

They had been married for three days. But she hadn't spoken to him. All she had done was sit in front of the computer and follow the revolution in Cairo. Kabir tried to talk to her. She did not pay any attention to him. His words appeared to be as meaningless and indistinct as the hum of the traffic that came in through the windows of their living room.

Kabir wasn't used to being ignored. He was a royal. He was a direct descendant of one of India's most famous *Nawabs*, the man who had designed and built both of Lucknow's jewels, the *Imam Bara* and *Bhoolbhulaiya* maze.

His mother had told Kabir on his sixth birthday that he wasn't like other children, whose parents were clerks, office managers and businessmen. He was a *nawab*. He came from a family of kings, who ruled India, before India had become a democracy, before India had even become India.

Kabir was a sensitive child. Centuries might have passed since his ancestors ruled Lucknow. But he still felt their import, faint yet significant, like a footprint of a sparrow on his windowsill. He took his mother seriously when she said that he had to do everything possible to keep alive the ways of his ancestors. By the time he was eighteen, Kabir was proficient in chess, Persian poetry, and sword fighting. The emphasis on staying loyal to the family's courtly ways also meant that he had never touched a woman.

He had hoped that this state of celibacy would change after marriage. But here he was, an entire seventy two hours after the event. And his wife hadn't so much as spoken to him, leave alone reach out to touch him.

He looked at the computer screen to see a car go up in flames. An angry Egyptian lobbed a stone at a tank. His wife leaned in towards the computer screen. Kabir felt that he couldn't stay in an apartment with so much unrest.

He went to his workplace.

He suffered through the playful jests of his building landlord, tea stall vendor, and office secretary. In their own way, they each teased him about the "seventy two hours of indoor activity" that had followed marriage. Kabir smiled without real feeling.

He spent the day tackling expense receipts, tax forms and other petty paperwork. When he returned home, his wife had disappeared from the apartment.

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Kabir wasn't a doctor, engineer or for that matter an architect like his famed ancestor. He hadn't even gone to America for his higher studies. Instead, he had chosen to become a private detective.

He was a disappointment to his parents.

But even his father had to admit that his son had done well for himself. Kabir's offices were in the posh Indira Nagar area of Lucknow. His clients were some of Lucknow's most prominent politicians, doctors and construction builders.

The times, they had changed. The Indian economy was growing. Lucknow was flush with money. The city's middle class no longer had to focus merely on daily survival. They had time to indulge in what the Lucknowites called "extracurricular activities". Cabernet Francs. Horse races. Extramarital affairs.

Wives wanted to find out if their husbands were having affairs. Husbands wanted to find out if what people were saying about their wives was true. Parents wanted to find out just how soon their daughter changed from a traditional *salwar kameez* to a mini skirt after leaving the house.

They had questions. Kabir was diligent and strove tirelessly to get them answers. His business grew. He prospered.

Kabir was tall and slim. He took care to dress well. He was soft-spoken yet confident. Even in relatively conservative Lucknow, women displayed their interest in public places. A turned head and a smile. A brush of the sleeve. A number on a napkin. But Kabir had never been interested in taking advantage of the recently lax ways of Indian women. Unlike his friends, he had no desire to indulge in what Indian magazines had begun to call "one night stands".

All he had ever wanted was a loving home where people would laugh. Caress each other. Play happy songs on the radio. Like the people did on the advertisements they showed during the holiday season. He wanted to be different from his mother and father, who as far back as he could remember, didn't spend a second longer than was absolutely necessary in the same room.

But things hadn't panned out quite as planned after his marriage. His wife had left him. Kabir wondered where she could have gone. His wife was from Allahabad. As far as he knew, she didn't have any friends or family in Lucknow. He was sure that she would not dare to go back to her parents. Her father would kill her if he came to know that she had left her husband.

People took marriage seriously in her home town. Just last week, the bodies of a newly married couple had been found on the NH1 highway. The man had been beheaded. The woman's eyes had been gouged out. They were from different castes. Their sin? They had run away from home and got married.

Kabir opened the Dropbox folder on his computer. He clicked on the video file of the wedding. He skipped to a moment when his wife had met her friend during the ceremony. It was the only time he had seen her smile. He took a screenshot of his wife's friend and emailed the image to the wedding planner.

*"Hope you are well,"* he began his email in a courtly manner. *"We want to send her a Thank You, but seem to have misplaced her contact information."*

He knew that the planner would respond promptly. He had helped rid her of a particularly persistent blackmailer with a handlebar moustache. And he was right. She got back to Kabir within an hour of his request.

The number began with a 011 area code. His wife's friend lived in New Delhi. When Kabir called, she recognized Kabir even before he had introduced himself.

"I don't want to lie to you," she said. "God knows you've already been through so much. She's here in Delhi."

"Is she thinking matters over?" Kabir asked.

"I'm going to be honest," she said. "She's already thought it over. She's not coming back."

"Did she say why?"

"I asked her. She said that she was never comfortable with the idea of an arranged marriage. She said that love cannot be forced. And she can't be with somebody that she doesn't love. I know it sounds silly. But it's what she believes. She's applying to several universities in America. She's planning to move there in September. "

Kabir knew that his wife's friend was right. You couldn't really change what people believed.

The Sunnis believed that the Shias had their own version of the Quran. The Hindus believed that a monkey had jumped across the Indian Ocean. And his wife believed that love slid over you as unexpectedly as a dream or an eclipse. Or else, it didn't come at all. There was very little he could do to change that.

His phone rang. Even as he answered it, he was hopeful that it might be his wife.

A woman wanted Kabir to find out if her husband was having an affair.

"I am sorry," Kabir said. "I'm not taking on any new cases now."

But just then a beam of sunlight forced its way into his room through the lily blossoms embroidered on the white curtains. Particles of dust danced energetically in the white haze. A crow cawed on the windowsill. Kabir felt a change come over him. Maybe this was no mere phone call from a prospective client. Maybe it was the universe calling Kabir, asking him to engage with it.

"I'll find out what your husband has been up to," Kabir said.

It wouldn't be as easy as some of his other cases. The woman was married to Lucknow's most famous heart surgeon. It would be impossible to tail him discretely. Like many wealthy men in the heartland, the doctor lived in perpetual fear of being kidnapped. He had arranged for a security detail that included two motorcycles that rode in front and back of the car.

Kabir looked up the husband on a website listing properties and their owners. The surgeon owned two bungalows. One was his home. The other was a property on Capper Road. Kabir didn't have to follow the man. The man would come to the bungalow.

And sure enough, he saw the surgeon drive up to his second residence that very evening. There was a woman in the back seat of his car. She took off her straw hat and placed it on her lover's lap. Kabir was filled with an admiration for the man. He was having an affair under the eyes of an extensive security detail. It was in every way a superhuman feat. It called for an especially high degree of shamelessness.

He showed the photo to the man's wife later in the office.

"I've got the bastard," she said. "I'll squeeze him by the balls till he coughs out the alimony."

Kabir was scandalized. Whatever had happened to Lucknow? It had once been renowned as the city of etiquette across the length and breadth of India. Kabir wondered what his great ancestor would say if he could hear the lady in front of him.

"What they say is true," she said.

"What do they say?"

"They say that you are the best detective in Lucknow."

Kabir waved away the compliment. His hand hit a fly.

Tell me, are you working on anything else now?"

"Not particularly," Kabir said.

"Low season?"

"People are behaving well in Lucknow Mrs. G..." Kabir said. "Well, most people are anyway."

"Have you ever been to Delhi?"

"Not in a while," Kabir said. "Why do you ask?"

"I've got a niece there," the woman said. "She's lost her cat. I don't want to offend you...because you are a detective specializing in humans...."

"Madam, is the cat important to your niece?"

"She loves it like a child."

"Then it is important to find her cat."

"So you will go to Delhi?"

He said that he would.

The case would take him outside of Lucknow, where every street, every restaurant and every garden breathed a possibility involving his wife. A change in environment would be welcome. And besides, things had been slow lately. His secretary had been with the business for as long as he had. She would manage.

"I'll make your travel and stay arrangements," the surgeon's wife said. "First class all the way. Because of you, I can now afford it."

She handed Kabir a passport size photograph of a girl with curly hair, a round face and thick glasses.

"This is my niece," she said. "She will pick you up at the airport."

He caught the Kingfisher Airlines flight the next day. The flight was delayed by an hour. Due to air traffic at New Delhi, the airplane had to circle the airport for thirty minutes. The roads. The rivers. And now the skies. Was there a single place in India that wasn't congested? As he looked out of the window, Kabir wondered which one of those buildings waxing and waning out of view was now a home to his wife.

The television monitors in the airport terminal showed scenes of the fighting in Cairo. The Egyptians had asked for a democracy. They had received it. And yet, they were

not satisfied. They would never be satisfied. Kabir wondered if the people of Cairo had somehow influenced his wife to walk out of their marriage.

The baggage claim area was crowded. A teenage girl struggled to lift a heavy suitcase from a carousel. A middle aged man pushed his way past her. He collided against an old lady and walked on without apologizing. Kabir had arrived in the land of boorish men. He was now in Delhi.

“Are you Kabir?”

She had long hair that fell along the sides of her oval face. She wore silver earrings. They sparkled in the sunlight. Her eyes were frank and friendly. She had a mole over her lip.

“I am,” he said. He wondered how the woman in front had recognized him. Maybe she would also know his client’s niece. He showed her the photograph.

“Would you happen to know this woman? Her name’s Uma.”

“That’s me,” she said. “From ten years ago. I can’t believe Aunty still has that photograph.”

“You’ve changed,” Kabir said.

“Thank God,” she said. She laughed.

They exited the terminal and walked towards the parking lot.

“I heard you got married recently,” she said.

“Four days ago.”

“Didn’t your wife want to join you?”

“She left me yesterday,” Kabir said.

“Left you? As in left you for good?”

“It certainly seems that way.”

“My God,” Uma said. “What did you do to her?”

She was clearly surprised. She came to a halt in the middle of the street. An Ambassador car braked to a halt. The driver rolled down the window. He shouted out an expletive.

“New Delhi,” Uma said. “It’s full of rude people. And speaking of rude, please forgive me. I had no right to go on about your wife.”

He asked her not to worry about it. The sunshine played with the canopy of a banyan tree. It lit up a cluster of dark green leaves. Kabir thought of something.

“How did you recognize me?”

“Aunty told me to look out for a handsome man.”

“There are other men here.’

“But you’re the only one who looks kind enough to actually care about finding a cat.”

She threw her purse down on the car seat. She tucked her hair behind her ear. She smiled at Kabir and merged into the heavy traffic calmly without a honk.

“When was the last time you were in Delhi?”

“I came here as a child. But I don’t remember much. So it’s like a new city for me.”

A car in the adjoining lane slowed down. The window rolled down. A man blew her a kiss.

She placed a cigarette in her lips.

“I’m not going to react. There’s no point. You know, I’ve decided to save up my energy for shouting when I’m actually getting raped.”

It was a disgusting thought.

“Nothing’s going to happen to you,” Kabir said.

She slowed down as the light turned as red as the tip of her cigarette.

“I wouldn’t be surprised. This is Delhi. But let’s not talk about it.”

She fiddled with the knob on her radio. But she didn’t turn it on.

“Can I ask you one last question about your wife?”

“Sure,” he said. He was glad for any change in the topic of conversation. The very thought of rape was offensive to his sensibilities. Through the poems of his ancestors, he had learned that the act of love could never be forced. It was something that would slip away from those who tried to grasp it, a flame that would burn on more brightly the more one tried to douse it.

“Where did she go after she left you?”

“To New Delhi.”

“Is that why you are here?”

“I am here to find your cat,” he said.

But he wasn't entirely sure.

She pulled the car into the courtyard of a two floor bungalow.

“I rent the top floor,” she said. “The bungalow belongs to a retired colonel. He lives with his family on the ground floor.”

“Do they know I am visiting?”

“Of course not,” she said. “That would only give the colonel's wife an opportunity to make inappropriate remarks about my character. And as for her son, there's no telling how he could interpret my having another man in my room. He already has a remarkably low regard for women. It's a miracle he's not in jail.”

She rested her hands on the steering wheel. She looked vacantly at the dashboard. She appeared tired.

“My lease is nearly over. I was all ready to move out this week. However, I extended my stay by a month.”

“For the cat.”

“I am hopeful that she will come back. You know what they say about cats.”

“What?” said Kabir.

“They say that cats don't belong to people. They belong to places.”

Uma opened the door to the bungalow. She placed her index finger over her lip. The hallway was dark. The carpet was musty. A lone bulb shone from the ceiling.

Uma's room was functional. There was a twin size bed and an office table. Kabir sat on an old wooden chair in a dimly lit corner.

“I never felt at home here,” she said. “So I never took the effort to do up the room. You know, add personal touches.”

She opened a drawer and pulled out a photo album. There was a picture of a black cat on the cover. It had gray eyes that shone with an unnatural brightness.

“Radioactive eyes,” Kabir said.

“Her name’s Luna,” she said. “It means the moon in Spanish.”

“That’s a unique name,” Kabir said. “

“Cats need a name that’s particular,” she said. “A name that’s peculiar, and more dignified, else how can he hold his tail perpendicular, or spread out his whiskers, or cherish his pride?”

“T.S. Elliot,” Kabir said.

He had read the book as a child. It had made a deep impression on him. It was why he felt confident that he could solve this case. He didn’t know a lot about cats. But he had read Elliot’s book. He felt as though he understood their essence.

“How long have you had Luna?” he asked.

“I found her last year. It was right after one of those Hallmark holidays we’ve begun to celebrate in India.”

“Mother’s day?”

“No.”

“Father’s Day?”

“That’s not it either.”

She looked out of the window as though the answer were floating in the sky.

“Halloween?”

“That’s the one. It seems to be a happy enough festival. Chocolates and *rasgullas*. The landlady’s son decided to celebrate it. You’ve heard of the tale of the frog and the scorpion.”

“I have,” Kabir said.

“Well, then true to his nature, his mind gravitated right to the most disturbing aspect of the festival.”

“What could be disturbing about Halloween?”

“Every year in America, over twenty black cats are sacrificed during Halloween. People who kill the cats claim they are being faithful to a thousand year old belief. Apparently, at the time, the church considered black cats to be evil spirits that had taken on physical forms.”

“Don’t tell me the landlord’s son wanted to sacrifice the cat?”

“I found him on the terrace with one of his friends. They were wearing masks. And he had a knife.”

“And?”

“I screamed. I threatened to call the police.”

“And?”

“He called me a few names. This and that. But I continued yelling. They left the terrace. I adopted the cat. I called her Luna.”

“I’m surprised you continued to live here.”

“Oh, believe me, I would have left. But I had put down a two month security deposit. I couldn’t afford to lose so much money. I changed the locks on the room secretly. And I kept Luna locked in at all times.”

“And now she’s gone.”

“She’s gone” she said. “A part of me is scared that he has harmed Luna.”

“We’ll find out,” Kabir said.

He posted Luna’s photos on Facebook and Craigslist. He composed a 140 character tweet. He hoped that the important announcement of her disappearance wouldn’t be swallowed up in the vortex of self-involved babble.

They decided to go for a walk. For the fresh air. And to investigate.

“Isn’t it strange?” she said.

“What?”

“That your wife disappeared. And then my cat disappeared almost at the same time.”

“They are two independent events,” Kabir said. “There’s no reason why they shouldn’t happen at the same time.”

“I wonder,” she said.

They turned right at a corner.

“I think we need to define a radius around your residence,” Kabir said. “From what I understand, cats can be very territorial.”

“Luna wasn’t like that,” Uma said.

“I had read that all cats are...”

“Why would you assume such a thing? Why would you think Luna is like other cats? Why would you assume that all cats are the same?”

She stopped in front of a banyan tree. She had been talking in a raised voice only a few seconds ago. But now, she had become as silent as the large tree trunk.

“I am sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to sound lecture you. But you know...what you said...it made me think of something.”

“Tell me,” Kabir said.

“My father was an artist. But unlike what most people think about artists, he was a very outgoing person. He would seek out people at parties. He would love to hear them tell the story of their lives.”

She sat down on a stone and plucked at a blade of grass.

“But he would disengage from people who tended to stereotype...people who said things like all French people are arrogant. Or all tigers are aggressive. He didn’t even like to think that all of Delhi was rude and uncouth. He believed that when you generalized people and things, you missed out on the individual details. These individual details, he liked to say, lend richness both to life and art.”

“Everyone has their own unique qualities.”

“Exactly,” she said. “We spent one summer in Ooty. A flock of geese had migrated to the lake. My father decided to paint every one of these geese. He wanted to bring out each of their individual details. I watched him that summer. “

She leaned against the tree and closed her eyes.

“He was right,” she said eventually. “Each of the geese was as different as you and me. Three of the little baby geese in that flock were extroverted. They flapped their wings heavily in the water as they ran towards their mother. The other two were shy, all wrapped up in the canopy of their wings. The mother had to take extra special care to make sure that they were fed. My father painted the mother and each of their babies.”

“I’d love to see the paintings,” said Kabir.

“I’ll show them to you someday,” Uma said. “But that wasn’t all. After a month, another family of geese migrated to the lake. This time, a mother with five of her children. Over the next two weeks, the children in the two flocks bonded. And then one day, the

children of the second flock – the one that came later – they joined the first family. They left their mother all alone.”

The expression on her face was now marked by suffering.

“I have never seen sadder eyes than those of the mother. They were so big, so black. I remember the word my father used to describe them. He said that her eyes were *molten*.”

“Did she ever get her children back?”

“She did eventually. But she had to join the other flock.”

“I wonder why her children left their mother,” Kabir said.

He had begun to listen to the story with nothing more than a polite interest. However, now, it seemed especially important to him that he know the answer.

“I wonder,” she said.

Kabir bent down on his knees. He looked under a bush. He placed his hands under its carefully trimmed base. There were two green plates. One of the plates was filled with food. The other had water.

“Cat food,” she said.

“Do you know who has been feeding the cats?”

“No,” she said. “But I am happy that there are people who are looking out for cats. It makes me hopeful for the city.”

“I think we should wait here for however long it takes. Maybe Luna will show up.”

They sat under the shade of the banyan tree. She reached into her purse and took out the photo album. She opened her purse. She pulled out two bottles of water, a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich and a hairbrush. She pulled on the handle of the brush. A knife gleamed in the sunlight.

She smiled.

“Isn’t this impressive? You can comb your hair. And keep the men of Delhi at bay.”

“Impressive,” Kabir said.

They ate their sandwiches and drank their water. The canopy provided by the tree was large enough to maintain a cover of shade even as the sun made its way through the

sky. Eventually, the sky turned orange before it turned black. They could hear the chirping of the crickets.

Kabir touched Uma on the shoulder. He pointed at a lady with short hair. She was crouched in front of the bush. Three cats and a kitten approached her hesitantly like iron filings moving towards a magnet. Yet another kitten ran to her in a straight line. It licked her hands. She tickled the kitten behind its ears. She filled the trays with food and water.

“Excuse me,” Kabir said. He gave her the photograph.

“Ah,” the lady said. “Who can forget those bright eyes?”

Uma gasped. Kabir saw that she had tears in her eyes. Her affection for her cat was so real that Kabir felt the lack of empathy within his own soul. He now believed that finding this animal was the most important thing that he would ever do.

“She’s a shy one,” the lady said. “She’ll wait for the others to leave. And then she’ll come by. I would bet that she’ll be here in a couple of hours.”

They decided to wait for a couple of hours.

“This must be the most boring case that you’ve ever been on,” Uma said. “All this sitting around.”

“Most cases involve a lot of sitting around for a long period of time,” Kabir said. “That’s why you’ll find many private investigators are comfortable being alone. Like Buddhist monks. Or alcoholics.”

There were six street lights on the pavement. Only one had come on. Hundreds of insects began to circle around it. It appeared that they would bump into each other. However, in a matter of mere moments, they settled easily into stable orbits. If only the drivers of New Delhi could learn from the give and take spirit of these insects. India’s capital would be a more even tempered city.

“About Luna...” Kabir said. “Why do you think she left? Was she unhappy?”

“Of course she was happy,” Uma said. “Why would you even think otherwise?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to suggest...”

“There is no otherwise,” Uma said. “Luna might have left for a number of reasons that had nothing to do with her happiness. Maybe she was curious. Maybe she had an urge to find out more about what’s out there. When someone leaves you, it’s not always

because of the kind of person you are. Sometimes, all that other person is doing is following her own inner urges.”

They had started by talking about her cat. But the conversation had shifted. Uma was talking about someone else. Kabir couldn't help wonder if she was referring to his wife.

The leaves rustled. The bush shivered. A black cat with brilliant gray eyes stared at them. She did not blink.

“Luna,” Uma said.

“Call out her name,” Kabir said. “But whatever you do, don't approach her. Let her come to you.”

Uma called out the cat's name softly. She opened up a can of Friskies. The cat became more alert and attentive. She walked towards them slowly. Eventually she lay down on its belly and raised its legs.

“She wants to be tickled,” Uma said. “But just a little. That's why she's showing you her claws.”

“Just like my wife,” Kabir said. “She kept showing me her claws. But all I wanted to do was tickle her.”

Uma stopped looking at the cat. She looked at Kabir with all of her attention.

“You're smiling!” she said.

“I smile all the time” Kabir said.

“No, this is different. Your eyes are crinkled up at their corners. You actually have a twinkle in your eye.”

“No one's ever told me that before,” Kabir said.

“Well, maybe you've never smiled before.”

They walked back to the bungalow. Uma sang to the cat. She hummed a folk song about a fisherman who had crossed the high waves and come home. The cat smiled. Kabir felt content.

A man stood next to the gate of the bungalow. He wore a red striped T-shirt. He fingered a gold chain.

“Oh look at our little tenant,” he said. “She's got a new client to satisfy today.” He made an O shape with his mouth. He made a sucking sound.

Kabir walked up to then man. He twisted his arm. The man yelped. Kabir hit the man on the back of his head. The man became silent. He came down to the ground slowly and silently, like a feather.

“I am sorry,” he told Uma.

Kabir kicked at the man’s still body till it wasn’t in the way.

“I can’t stand rude people,” he said.

“It’s ok,” she said. She smiled.

“It really is,” she said.

She switched on the light in her room. She inspected her cat carefully. She made soothing sounds. She fussed over a scratch. Eventually, she released the cat. It ran up to the corner of the room. It leaped on to the table. Kabir leaned forward. He looked at the cat carefully.

“She’s got a scar running down her cheek,” Kabir said. “I didn’t see that in any of the photos...”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Are you sure we’ve got the right cat?”

Uma picked up the cat in her arms. The cat rubbed its nose on her cheek.

“I am sure,” she said. “Her affection is so natural. It has to be her. You can’t force a love like this.”

He hadn’t expected her to say that, use the very words his wife had used to leave him. He felt betrayed. Almost like the protestors in Cairo. He felt a rage overcome him. He felt an urge to hit something. He moved to get up from the bed. He had to leave.

She sat down next to him. She held his hands. She kissed him.

“You can’t force love,” she said. “But you don’t have to. Because you don’t have to try and find love. Sometimes, it will find you.”

Kabir looked for the cat. But it had disappeared into a corner. He didn’t have to look for her anymore. She would eventually come to him. He ran his fingers down the length of Uma’s face. He closed his eyes.

## **About the Author**

Arun Krishnan is a writer of Indian origin based in Seattle. He is the author of *The Loudest Firecracker* which was published by Tranquebar Press. The book was nominated for the Crosswords Books Award and won favorable reviews from Time Out, The Pioneer and The Hindu.

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