

The Bitter Harvest*

by Muhammad Alshareef

*Translated by Muhammad Alshareef from the book Azzaman Alqaadim compiled by Abdulmalik Al-Qasim.

I was a teacher in the Qur'anic study circle at our neighborhood masjid at the time. I would see this young boy after Maghrib prayer who was about fifteen years old. He held a pocket Qur'an and sat alone reading from it. He wasn't actually reading from it, he was just trying to make it seem as if he was. Now and again, he would shyly steal a few glances at us, curious to know what we were doing. Once in awhile, you would see him straining to make out what we were talking about. Every time I caught his eye, he would avert his head and continue with his recitation, as if he had not intended to look this way.

Day after day, he sat in the same reserved manner, revealing the same timid glance. Finally after Isha Salah one day, I resolved to confront him.

"As salamu alaykum. My name is Salman. I teach the Qur'anic study circle in this masjid."

"And my name is Khalid."

It was strange that he replied so fast, as if he had been waiting to share this piece of information for a long time and expected to be asked.

"Where do you study Khalid?"

"In the eighth grade...and I...I love the Qur'an a lot."

Why did he add that last sentence?

Confidently, I asked him, "Listen Khalid, have you got any free time after Maghrib? We would be honored to have you join us in the class."

"What? The Qur'an? The halaqah? Yes...why, yes of course (happiness overcame him). I'll be there, in sha Allah."

That night, I couldn't think of anything other than this young boy and the haze that surrounded his behavior. Sleep would just not come. I attempted to interpret an answer for what I saw and heard, but there was none. A verse of poetry came to mind:

The coming days shall unravel the mystery
And the news may appear from where you could never see.

I turned on my right side and slipped my right hand under my cheek:

O Allah, I have surrendered myself to You and to You I turn over my affairs.

PART II

Subhan Allah, the months were passing quickly. Khalid was now a regular in our Qur'an circle, energetic and successful in memorization. He was friends with everyone and everyone was friends with him. You could never catch him without a Qur'an in his hand, or find him in any other line in Salah other than the first.

There was nothing wrong with him except for his occasional long lapses of attention. There were times when his stoned eyes would reflect the fathomless thought going on in his mind. Sometimes we knew his body was with us, but his soul was somewhere else, suffocating in another world. Occasionally, I would startle him with a question. All he had was a mumble to reply with, and he would have been the first to admit its fabrication.

One night, I walked with him after class to the beach shore. Maybe his big secret might meet something equally large, relax somewhat, and release its distress and pain.

We arrived at the beach and traced the waves. The full moon was out. It was a strange sight. The darkness of the night found the darkness of the sea, with a lit moon in-between them.

I sat somewhat embarrassed at its intrusion, similar to my shyness towards Khalid right then. The rays of the silent moon rested on the silent waves of the sea. I stood behind the silent boy. The scene was silence.

It all shattered and crushed to the ground as the young boy fell to the bottom, bleeding his heart out with tears. I chose not to interrupt Khalid's emotional release, perhaps the saltiness of his tears might help him relax and cleanse his distress.

After a few moments he said from behind his tears, "I love you all...I love the Qur'an...and those who love it. I love pious brothers, moral, pure brothers. But...my father...it's my father."

"Your father? What is wrong with your father Khalid?"

"My father always warned me not to hang around with you people. He's afraid. He hates you all. And he always tries to convince me that I should hate you too. At any chance he gets, he tries to prove his point with stories and tales.

"But...when I saw you people in the halaqah reciting Qur'an, I saw something entirely different. I saw the light in your faces, the light in your clothes, the light in your words, even when you were silent I could see the light even then.

"I doubted my father's tales and that's why I would sit after Maghrib, watching you, pretending that I was part of the circle, trying to share in the light.

"I...I remember Ustadh Salman...I remember the time you approached me after 'Isha prayer. I'd been waiting for that moment for such a long time. When I began the classes, my soul locked itself into a world of purity with your souls. I began the circle and was persistent. I wouldn't sleep; my days and nights became Qur'an. My father noticed the change in my routine. He found out, one way or another, that I had joined the circle and that I was now hanging out with 'terrorists'.

"Then, on a dark night...we were waiting for father to come home from the coffee shop, his daily ritual, so that we could all have dinner together. He entered the house with his hardened face and slaps of anger. We all sat together at the dinner mat. Silence settled on the gathering. As usual, all of us were afraid to speak in his presence.

"He knifed the silence with his roaring and immediate voice.

"I heard you're hanging out with the fundamentalists.'

"I was caught. My tongue looped and failed. All the words in my mouth attempted to come out at the same time. But, he didn't wait for the answer. He snatched the teakettle and threw it maliciously at my face. The room spun and the colors united before my eyes. I could no longer tell the ceiling from the walls from the floor, and fell.

"My mother held me. A damp cloth on my forehead reminded me of where I was. The vicious voice turned on my mother, 'Leave him alone, or you'll be in the same lot.'

"I crawled out of my mother's lap and whimpered away to my room. He followed me down the corridor with the cruelest curses.

"There was not a day that he didn't beat me in some way – curses, kicks, throwing whatever was nearest to his hand. My body had finally become a shiver of fear, grotesque colors formed all over. I hated him.

"One day while we were sitting at the dinner mat, he said, 'Get up! Don't eat with us!'

"Before I could get up though, he pounced immediately and kicked me in the back, making me slam into the pots. At that moment, lying there on the ground, I pretended to stand taller than him and shout back in his face. 'One day, I'll pay you back. I'll beat you just like you beat me, and curse you just like you cursed me. I'll grow up and become strong and you'll get old and become feeble. Then I'll treat you just like you treated me; I'll pay you back.'

"After that, I left home and ran away. I just ran, anywhere, it didn't matter anymore. "I found my way to this beach. It helped me wash away some of the sadness. I held my pocket Qur'an and began reciting until I could continue no longer because of my excessive crying."

And here, a few of those innocent tears descended again, tears that sparkled under the moon like pearls under a lamp. I couldn't say anything. The surprise had arrested my tongue.

Should I be aghast at this beast of a father, whose heart knew nothing about mercy? Or, should I be amazed at this patient young lad, whom Allah had wished guidance for and inspired with faith. Or, should I be shocked at them both, at the father-son bond that had broken, causing their relationship to transform into that of a lion and a tiger, or a wolf and a fox.

I held his warm hand and wiped away a tear from his cheek. I reassured him, prayed for him, and advised him to remain obedient to his father. I told him to remain patient and that he was not alone. I promised that I would meet his father, speak to him, and try to evoke his mercy.

PART III

That incident slipped further away with each passing day. I tried thinking of ways to bring up Khalid's case with his father. How should I speak to him? How was I going to be convincing? How was I even going to knock on his door?

Finally, I collected my courage, rehearsed my plan, and resolved that the confrontation, or meeting, would be that day at five o'clock.

When the time arrived, I left for Khalid's house with all my ideas and questions for his father dangling from my pockets. I rang the doorbell. My fingers trembled and my knees were melting. The door opened. There he was, standing in the shadow with his frowned lips and veins beating with anger.

I tried beginning with a candid smile hoping it might smooth out some of the wrinkles before we even started. He snatched my collar and jerked me towards him. "You're that fundamentalist that teaches Khalid at the masjid, aren't you?"

"Well...uh...yes."

"God help me, if I ever see you walking with him again, I'll break your legs. Khalid won't be coming to your class anymore."

And then, he mustered all the saliva in his mouth and spit on my face. The door slammed shut.

Slowly, I unfolded a tissue that was in my pocket, wiped what he had honored me with, and retreated down the stairs consoling myself. Allah's Messenger sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam suffered more than this. They called him a liar, cursed him, stoned him with rocks and caused his feet to bleed. They broke his teeth and placed dung on his back and expelled him from his house.

PART IV

Day after day, month after month, there was no sign of Khalid. His father forbade him from leaving the house, even for the congregational prayer. He even forbade us from seeing or meeting him. We prayed for Khalid...until we forgot about him. Years passed away.

One night, after the 'Isha prayer, a shadow walked behind me in the masjid and rested a familiar harsh hand on my shoulder. It was the same hand that held me years ago. The same face, the same wrinkles and the same mouth that honored me with what I was not deserving of. But something had changed. The savage face had shattered. The angry veins had subsided, belittled and still. The body looked tired of all the pain and conflict, weakened by sadness and grief.

"How are you?" I kissed his forehead and welcomed him. We took a corner of the masjid. He collapsed on my lap sobbing.

Subhan Allah, I never thought that that lion would one day become a kitten.

Speak up. What's wrong? How is Khalid?

"Khalid!" The name was like a dagger piercing his heart, twisting inside, and breaking off. His head slumped.

"Khalid is no longer the same boy that you used to know. Khalid is no longer the generous, calm and humble young lad. After he left your circle he befriended a pack of evil boys; ever since he was little he loved to socialize. They caught him at that time of life when a youth wants to leave the house.

"He began with cigarettes. I cursed him, beat him, but there was no use; his body had grown accustomed to the beatings, his ears were used to the curses. He grew quickly. He started staying up with them all night, not coming home until dawn. His school expelled him. Some nights he would come home to us speaking abnormally, his face loose, his tongue confused, his hands shivering.

"That body, which used to be strong, full, and tender, passed away. What remained was a feeble worn frame. That pure frosty face of his transformed; it became dark and filthy. The scum of misguidance and sin clung to it. Those shy and simple eyes of his changed. They shot red like fire as if everything he drank or took showed immediately in his eyes like some sort of punishment, in this life before the next. Hostility and disrespect replaced that shyness and cowardice he once knew. Gone was that soft, respectful young heart. In its place grew a hardened center, like a rock, if not harder.

"Seldom would a day pass without incident. He would curse, kick, or hit me. Imagine it, my own son. I'm his father, yet he still hits me."

After releasing all that, his eyes returned wet and bitter. But he added quickly, "I beg you Salman, visit Khalid. Take him with you. You have my blessing, the door is open. Pass by him sometime. He loves you. Register him in the Qur'an study circle. He could go with you on field trips. I have no objection. In fact, I am even willing to allow him to live in your homes and sleep over. The important thing, Salman...the important thing is that Khalid returns to the way he was. I beg you lad. I'll kiss your hands, warm your feet, I beg you and beg you..."

He collapsed, crying and wheezing, into the memories of the grief and pain. I allowed him to complete everything he had to say. Then I addressed him:

"Despite what has passed, let me try. Brother, you planted this seed. And this is your harvest."