

## THE HAJJ

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Eldar was a thirty-year old farmhand in Central Anatolia when he made his move. At the time, all his knowledge of the world centered on how to grow wheat in his uncle's holding in Sulutas, a hamlet outside the ancient city of Konya. Eldar had never gone beyond Konya and all his travels had been to the countryside around Sulutas.

The crucial outing in Eldar's life had occurred when he was a lad of seven. He had taken the primitive road going north from Sulutas and, after some hiking, was resting for a bit, sitting on a boulder in a copse of oak and wild pear trees not far from the hamlet of Tat koy. Eldar was getting ready to turn back, because

there was long-standing enmity between the villagers of Sulutas and Tatkoj, and he was afraid of not being welcome if he ventured too close to the other hamlet.

Just as he got up, he noticed another child coming south from Tatkoj and entering the copse. Eldar was not particularly brave, but he reckoned that, if he made a move to leave, he would be jeered at as a coward. So he stood his ground and faced the newcomer.

“Good day,” he greeted politely.

The other child scowled and grunted: “What are you doing here, you speck of goat shit?”

The kid was taller and probably a year older than Eldar. He had a dark skin, tangled black hair that had not met a comb in a long time, a hooked nose and lips that were too large for his thin face. His ugly features were accentuated by a large mole below his right eye.

“I was just exploring,” Eldar explained, trying to stay calm.

“Like shit. You were checking to see if you could steal our chickens. That is what all scum from Sulutas do.” His expression was a mixture of anger and contempt.

“That’s a lie,” shouted Eldar, beginning to lose his patience.

“Are you calling me a liar, you turd?” the other kid shouted in turn. “Take it back, or I will break all your teeth.” He swung his fists in the air only inches away from Eldar.

Eldar realized that there was no way to avoid a fight with this Tatkoj boy other than through outright humiliation. He squared his shoulders and screamed: “Liar, liar, you filthy son of a mule!!”

The other kid jumped at Eldar, grabbing him by the neck. In a moment, they were rolling on the stony ground, where the stranger, bigger and stronger, overpowered Eldar and began pummeling him on the face, the chest, and the stomach. Eldar felt

a wetness on his face that was not tears, and realized that his nose felt funny and was aching a lot.

Eldar let go of the other kid's body, who was squatting above him and was getting ready to unleash a savage blow on Eldar's face. His fingers combed the ground looking for something, and his left hand came in contact with what appeared to be a fair sized rock. He desperately grabbed it and, putting all his body's strength into the motion, swung up and struck the other kid in the middle of the chest with the rock.

His opponent staggered and pulled away. Eldar jumped up, quick as a flash, transferred the stone to his right hand, and struck the other boy savagely on the face. The kid tumbled to the ground and Eldar loomed over him, hitting him as hard as he could, time and again, watching him twitch and scream at every blow.

Eldar lost count of how many times he brought down the rock over the other kid's face, which had turned into a bloody pulp. Eldar stopped to catch his breath and noticed that the other kid was not moving, and his chest was not heaving. "I killed him," thought Eldar in horror, and fled the scene as fast as his bruises allowed.

When he got home, all battered and bloody, he told his mother that he had taken a bad tumble when trying to go up a mountain. She tended to him with devotion and put salve on his bruises and dabbed healing herbs on his wounds. His uncle excused him from working on the farm for a couple of days and Eldar was confined to the straw pallet that served as his bed. It seemed the end of the incident, but it was only the beginning.

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During the first few weeks after the encounter, Eldar lived in fear of being called to account for his crime. He looked over his

shoulder every so often, expecting to see the gendarmerie coming to arrest him or irate citizens of Tatkoy seeking vengeance. But nobody came, and his initial trepidation gave way to surprise. Surely by now someone must have found the corpse, for the fight had taken place only feet from the road. Wouldn't the kid's family be combing through the countryside seeking the missing boy? On the other hand, wolves may have carried the body away. He thought of trying to make discreet inquiries at Tatkoy, but the bad blood between Sulutas and Tatkoy prevented him from approaching the people of the other hamlet.

He was tempted many times to return to the scene of the altercation, but always fought those impulses for fear that someone might see him there. In reality, he was scared of what he would find – or not find – around that clump of trees.

So the years passed uneventfully but not peacefully. The memory of that day haunted Eldar every morning and every night; he experienced frequent nightmares in which his crime was rehearsed in a number of variations, all leading to the fatal blows on his opponent.

He found himself wondering whether he should have hit the fallen child just once or twice and then ran away. Those musings invariably led to a feeling of guilt for having taken a life without justification. He realized it was the one mistake he could not change or undo, the biggest mistake he wished he had never made.

Eldar came from a religious family and knew the verse in the Quran that went "whoever kills a believer intentionally, his punishment is hell; he shall abide in it, and Allah will send His wrath on him and curse him and prepare for him a painful chastisement." So he was afraid, not only of punishment in this life, but also of retribution upon his death.

At the age of twenty-two, he married a pretty girl he met in one of his trips to Konya. She was industrious and submissive, and managed to ignore his moodiness and the strange cries he uttered in his sleep. She gifted him three handsome children, two boys and a girl. He was proud of his wife and children and loved them distantly, as if an invisible cloud loomed over his head that could any moment unleash itself on him and his loved ones.

Imperceptibly, his dealings with family and friends became harsher, as if they somehow bore some of the blame for his crime. It was only when his wife demanded to know how she had failed him that he realized he was ruining everybody else's life. He examined himself and decided that he must somehow atone for his crime.

He considered turning himself in to the authorities, but concluded – perhaps self-servingly – that more than twenty years had passed since the murder and the day-to-day torment he had experienced was enough of a prison sentence. But what was the alternative?

Islam does not condone leading a monastic life, so becoming a hermit was not the answer. After much soul-searching, Eldar decided that he would perform the Hajj and would go to Mount Arafat, the Mount of Mercy, to seek redemption and be granted mercy by Allah.

This was a nearly impossible task for him, a poor farmer in a forsaken land far away from Mecca. He lacked money and was ignorant of the ways of the world, so he did not know what perils he would encounter, let alone how to protect himself. Nonetheless, his thirst for inner peace was so intense that his mind was made up. His pilgrimage may not happen for years, it might be difficult and perilous, but he was certain he would undertake it.

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Eldar and his family moved to Konya, where he aimed to become a carpet weaver. Konya was a renowned carpet-weaving center. They moved into a squalid garret in a house in the central district of the city, and he began going from shop to shop seeking employment as an apprentice weaver. He learned that, by ancient tradition, all carpet weavers were women and the few men working on the trade did so as carpet repairmen – fixing torn, damaged, or defective carpets that were otherwise worth salvaging.

After days of fruitless search, fortune shone on him: one of the carpet repairmen at a large shop had just died after being kicked by a horse. Eldar was hired as an apprentice with the understanding that it would be a long time before he was experienced enough to tackle repairing any of the better, most expensive carpets. He got started repairing kilims, simpler pileless flatweaving textiles. The shop owner soon discovered that Eldar had great manual dexterity and a sense of color and shape that allowed him to improvise where the original design was hard to discern. That discovery led to additional training and more demanding assignments, and in less than two years Eldar was ready to be declared an expert Konya carpet repairman.

The job as carpet repairman did not pay much, but Eldar and his family lived frugally and Eldar was able over the following three years to accumulate enough savings to allow him to join a caravan of the faithful going to the Hajj that would arrive in Mecca during the following Dhu al-Hijjah, the last month of the Islamic calendar. Eldar gave a tearful goodbye to his wife and children, promising to return after the Hajj was completed. He left them most of the money he had and departed as a pauper, hoping that Allah would provide for him during the trip.

The caravan gathering point was in Damascus. Eldar joined a handful of Konya residents (mostly wealthy merchants who could

afford the expenses of a prolonged trip) and took the shorter caravan trip to the Syrian capital, where they joined several thousand pilgrims already gathered in a valley south of the city awaiting departure. At last the caravan got underway: thousands of camels carried pilgrims, merchants, goods, foodstuff, and water, plus armed guards to protect against Bedouin incursions. Because Eldar was so poor, he often begged for support and welcomed whatever charity came his way.

The trip from Damascus to Medina was entirely overland and took over two months of agonizing heat, boredom and privation. Eldar bore it all stoically, judging that the discomforts of the travel were part of the atonement for his sin.

Medina is the site of the Prophet's Mosque, which is the burial place of the prophet Muhammed. Eldar spent each of the nights the caravan stayed in Medina in that mosque, where he joined other pilgrims in prayer, intoning hymns of praise to Allah, and contemplating the tomb of the Prophet. He went through all the motions but his spirit did not feel unburdened.

From Medina the caravan proceeded at a more leisurely pace and reached Mecca a week later, just as the Hajj rituals were about to start. Upon arriving in Mecca, Eldar, like other male pilgrims, wrapped himself in a seamless white garment symbolizing purity, while women wore simple white dresses and headscarves.

Eldar and the other pilgrims began the Hajj with seven counter-clockwise circlings around the Kaaba, a cube-shaped structure which is the most sacred shrine of Islam. The pilgrims spent the first night of the Hajj in the city of Mina, where they shared meals and prayers and were temporarily sheltered in tents.

Eldar was assigned to a tent near the edge of the encampment and lay on the ground on his sleeping roll, ready for another night of horrors. As he was removing his garment, he noticed that, some distance away, there was another pilgrim that seemed somehow

familiar. The man was tall and thin and was unremarkable except that his face was covered with scars and its right side was somewhat sunk, as if it had been crushed and not set back properly. Eldar's heart skipped a beat, and he was seized by anguish. Before he could react, however, an attendant blew out the candles and the tent became a pool of darkness.

Eldar was in the grip of strong emotions and did not expect he would sleep a wink. Nevertheless, he fell into a dreamless, trance-like slumber. He was awakened the following morning by the same attendant, beckoning him to arise and make his morning prayers. He gasped and looked around – the stranger from the night before was gone.

Now came the day of the Hajj that Eldar had eagerly awaited: Eldar and thousands of other pilgrims gathered at Mount Arafah, the Mount of Mercy, where the Prophet Muhammed was believed to have delivered his last sermon. They sat on the slopes of the mountain, uttering prayers, incantations and recitations from the Quran. Midday, a cleric gave a stirring Hajj sermon. Throughout the day, pilgrims repeated praises and supplications to Allah, proclaimed repentance for their sins, and asked Him for forgiveness.

Eldar had been waiting for this very moment on this sacred day to raise his eyes to heaven and pray to be forgiven, with all the sincerity of which he was capable. "I was only a child, and did what I did in ignorance and fear. Please grant me Your pardon so that I can live the rest of my years in peace." He felt no sign that his plea was or would be answered. He breathed deeply and, swallowing his disappointment, joined the prayer that was being voiced by a chorus of a thousand voices.

After sunset, pilgrims traveled to Muzdalifah, a plain area halfway between Mount Arafah and Mina. After arriving at Muzdalifah, pilgrims prayed and collected pebbles for the Stoning



of the Devil to take place the following day. Eldar took part in all these activities, although he thought them silly and could not see how they could assist in his redemption. A thought kept flashing through his mind: "Maybe by the end of this I will be finally absolved. I will be able to return to Konya and resume my life."

That night he slept in a communal dormitory in Muzdalifah. There were five other people in the small room. He knew nobody and retired to a night of peaceful sleep without nightmares.

The following morning the pilgrims walked back to the valley of Mina and the Jamarat Bridge, the location of the ritual of the Stoning of the Devil. They threw the pebbles they had collected the night before, commemorating the occasion when the Prophet Abraham stoned the Devil that came between him and the command Allah had set him.

Eldar stood at the foot of the bridge, amidst a crowd of pilgrims, and was mindlessly tossing stones when a man came to stand beside him and did likewise. Eldar turned to greet him and was stupefied: it was the same scar-faced individual he had noticed two nights earlier. "Do I know you?" he asked.

The man's response was irate: "Yes, and I know *you*!! You are the bastard that beat me up and left me for dead twenty-seven years ago!!"

"But that's not possible! You were dead. You were not breathing when I left you lying by the road."

"Not so. I was near death, bleeding from many wounds, when a man from my village drove by in a mule driven cart. He picked me up and returned me to Tatkooy, where a good doctor spent weeks bringing me back among the living and trying to make me whole. He almost succeeded."

Eldar took a close look at the man's face and had trouble matching the distorted features with the image he remembered.

Then he noticed the large mole on the right cheek and it all fell into place.

"I'm sorry! I thought you were dead and have been tortured by remorse all of these years. But how come you never denounced me? Not a word was ever heard in my village about a fight or someone from Tatkoy getting hurt by a kid from Sulutas."

The man let out an ironic chuckle. "The first three days after I arrived in Tatkoy I was unconscious and remained delirious for a while after that. When my parents and I were finally able to have a discussion of what had happened, I could not bring myself to admit that a little kid from Sulutas had beaten me up so badly, so I said I had taken a bad fall from a tree. I doubt they believed me, but that was the end of the matter as far as my family was concerned."

"Why didn't you come looking for me when you recovered?"

"Ah!" said the man ruefully. "That is one of my life's big regrets. When I was still convalescing, my father, who was in the reserves, was summoned to Ankara to serve in the military. We moved to the capital and have lived there ever since. But now that I have found you, I have a mind to break every bone in your body."

"I'm sorry for all you have suffered, but I have suffered too. I have sacrificed a lot to make the Hajj and ask forgiveness from Allah, and I hope He will pardon me. Won't you forgive me also? I am a poor man but I will give you all I have, which is very little."

"I don't need your money. Since moving to Ankara our family's fortunes have improved. I was able to get an education and I am now an agent for an important British firm." He started to move threateningly towards Eldar.

"This is a sacred place and a holy pilgrimage. Must we fight here? If you need to settle the score with me, let's wait until the

Hajj is completed. I promise I'll give you satisfaction before we leave Mecca."

The man looked at Eldar suspiciously. "Will you complete the Hajj with me?"

"Yes. Let's return to Mecca. If we rush, we will be able to walk around the Kaaba before nightfall and complete our devotions."

"Yes, let's do that." They left, side by side, and as the sun was setting over the sacred city, Eldar and the man from Tatkoy completed the seventh ritual circling of the Kaaba and walked away from the center of town.

"Is this a good place for us to fight?" asked Eldar, pointing to a narrow alley that opened to the side of one of the city's squares.

"As good as any," replied his adversary. Without more ado, they entered the alley and went at each other fiercely.

The fight became a reprise of the previous one. Eldar's opponent was taller and more muscular than he, and began pounding at him without mercy. Eldar, for his part, put up only an ineffectual defense.

Soon Eldar was sprawled on the ground, bloody and covered with dirt. The other lifted him forcibly to his knees, and raised his clenched fist in preparation for a devastating blow. And then he stood, frozen in mid-action.

"It just dawned on me," said the man slowly, dropping his arm, "that it must have been the hand of Allah that brought us to Mecca at the same time, and had us meet among all the worshipers that are gathered here. He must have willed that the enmity between us be washed away together with our sins. Praise be to Allah."

"You may be right. Alḥamdulillah," agreed Eldar, trying to keep doubt out of his voice.

Eldar retrieved the bundle with his possessions and turned away from the scene of his fight. He had come seeking Allah's mercy and had discovered that mercy, if it exists, must lie in the

heart of man. He was not sure he believed in Allah as firmly as he had before, but was relieved all the same at being able to complete the Hajj, leave Mecca, and return home alive.