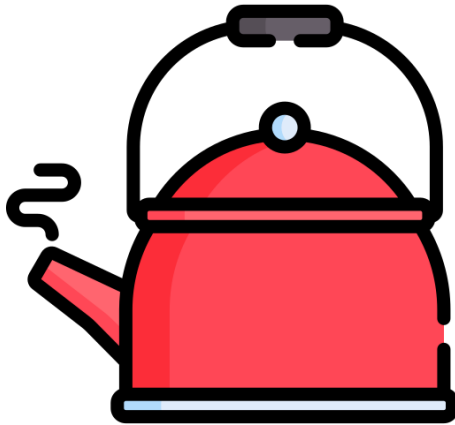


Kettle

Trust me, you need now a cup of tea!



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Kettle

Trust me, you need now a cup of tea!

I left the doctor's office after he told me that my father, lying there in the intensive care unit, only had a few days left in this world, perhaps even hours or mere moments. I went to my father and gazed at him for a few minutes through the front glass window of the room. I couldn't see his face behind those ferocious tubes that had completely devoured him. He was unconscious in his bed, his breathing laboured; he could barely breathe, his lungs rising and falling so fast under the pressure of the ventilator. I fought back the tears filling my eyes, but for once, they won. I struggled against my eyelids, laden with exhaustion, but for once, in this fight, I prevailed.

I headed to the hospital cafeteria for a cup of coffee to help me through this sleepless marathon; I hadn't slept for three days since I brought my father here. I took the coffee, and as soon as I started drinking the first sip, my phone rang; it was my father's nurse. I answered quickly. She said to me, breathlessly...

- Where are you, Ahmed? I have searched the entire hospital for you but couldn't find you. Please, come here immediately; your father has just woken up from his coma and keeps asking about you. He needs to see you urgently.

I threw the coffee away, hurried back to the hospital. I entered my father's room, sat beside him, and said

- What's wrong, Father?
- I have to do something important now. I want to say goodbye to my friend, I must bid him farewell before I die.
- Don't say that, Father. May God keep harm away from you. Who is this friend you want to bid farewell to? Tell me his name, and I will call him to come immediately.
- Death is inevitable, my son; we will all die... His name? I don't know his name.
- It doesn't matter if you don't remember his name now. Tell me where he lives and I'll go get him right away.
- No, my son, I remember very well, but I don't know his name, he himself doesn't know his name. I always called him "my friend". But he lives by our field.
- By our field, where, Father? There are no houses by our field, and no one lives there! Do you mean our neighbour in the field?
- No, my friend lives up there in the sky, right above the field.

It seemed to me that my father was delirious and didn't know what he was saying, but he continued, saying...

- Go home right now and open my closet, you'll find the kettle I take with me to the field every day, you'll also find the water bottle I filled last week next to the kettle. Bring them here quickly.

I was certain then that my father was delirious and didn't know what he was saying; there was absolutely nothing logical in his words. I had never seen a friend of his before, he had been alone his entire life. And how could this imaginary friend, whom my father wanted to say goodbye to, live above our field in the sky? And what does all of this have to do with the kettle and the water bottle in his closet?

My lips couldn't find any response to what he said, so I remained silent for a few moments. Then he looked at me and said...

- Why are you still sitting there? I told you to go home, get the kettle and the water bottle from the closet, and come back quickly. Go now, I must bid farewell to my friend.
- Okay, Father, I'll do everything you want, but you need to rest and sleep now.

He exploded in my face with all his might, despite his extreme fatigue, saying...

- Do you think I've gone mad? I swear by Almighty God, if you don't do what I've asked of you, I would die dissatisfied with you! Do you hear me?
- Please, Father, don't say that. Don't break my heart. I'll do whatever you want, but I don't understand anything at all! I want to understand what's going on, at least.

My father sighed deeply, raising his hands, pierced by tubes and covered in burns, and began to tell the story of his strange friend who is in the sky!

- When your mother died, Ahmed, and you hadn't yet turned five, life was extremely difficult for both of us without her. Grief accompanied me after her departure, and loneliness became my constant companion. Everyone advised me to remarry, saying, "Man, you need a wife to take care of you and your son. You'll go mad alone otherwise." I rejected that idea entirely and cut off all its tails from the moment your mother unwillingly left this life. But whenever I met someone from the village, they would tell me the same thing I didn't want to hear. So, I distanced myself from those fools forever. I was lonelier among them, and felt better after leaving them. Yet, loneliness remains hard to bear, my son.

I wanted nothing from this life except to raise you with dignity and to see you become a man I could be proud of someday. Every day, I would take you to school in the morning, then go straight to the field and work until noon. Afterwards, I would return to the village to pick you up from school. We go back home, prepare food together, then we take a stroll to the field again to play and breathe in some fresh air, drinking tea while sitting in the field and then return home happy in the evening. That's how life was, my son, until you grew up to become the person you are now. Surely, you remember some of that too.

However, one of those days when I set out on my way and approached the field, I found the sky to be exceedingly strange. It was summer, and the sky was completely clear

blue everywhere within my sight, except above our field, our field alone!

From a distance, it appeared to me as a dark, gloomy mass standing alone, struggling against the daylight. I was shocked the moment I saw it and my heart started pounding so intensely that it felt like my chest would shatter. I stood in the middle of the field, raising my head, staring at the sky in amazement. It was completely overcast. The clouds were all alike, black and depressed, covered with worry and sorrow, constantly multiplying in madness, wandering aimlessly over the field, casting their dark ghosts everywhere.

The next day, the same thing happened. I stood silently contemplating the sorrowful clouds, and suddenly the clouds began to drift slowly downward, hovering incessantly as if searching for something. They were getting closer and closer until they were parallel to my head. I didn't know what was happening there! I was standing amidst a dark mass of fog bridging the earth and the sky.

A cloud landed between my arms. It was cold; I felt it trembling in my hands. I gently brought it close to my chest, softly blew into it. Don't ask me why I did that, because even now I don't know. But when I did, something strange happened that I never expected. The cloud began to take shape, forming into letters and words. Suddenly, I found a message made of mist in my hands, saying, "Is anyone here? I want to talk." Then it vanished instantly.

I couldn't believe my eyes. I was terrified and threw the remnants of the cloud away. I grabbed another, and the same thing happened. I grabbed all the clouds, not leaving out a single one that day. Madness overcame me, I was running in the field, hugging the sad clouds, reading what they revealed. All the clouds carried the same message: "Is anyone here? I want to talk." I didn't know what to do. Who is this looking for me? What does he want to say? I felt trapped in an endless nightmare. The clouds were groaning from their depths, I could hear their sobs clearly.

That day, I fled from the field, running back home in terror, to the point where the villagers thought I had gone mad. I cared about nothing at that moment; all I wanted was simply to escape.

I took a shower, and tried to sleep, trembling from what I had seen. I woke up in the morning afraid to go to the field again, but I decided to go. As I approached the field, I found the sky completely clear, my heart was reassured. I put the kettle on the fire to make myself a cup of tea before starting my work as usual. The water began to boil as I put some tea and sugar into my cup. Suddenly, the sky started to cloud over quickly, the clouds were gathering again. My heart began to pound heavily; I didn't know what was happening. Surely, some curse had befallen my mind.

I grabbed one of the clouds and did the same as I did to its siblings yesterday. I found the same message: "Is anyone here? I want to talk." I thought about selling that piece of

land. But if I sold it, what would I do with my life? There was no other job for me.

I left the kettle boiling on the fire behind me and prepared to run away again, not caring whether a fire broke out in the field or not. As I was running, all the clouds above me vanished in a blink of an eye, the sky became completely clear. I stood frozen, unable to move. Then, a large cloud began to form, It looked extremely sad. I don't know why I sympathised with it; I was no longer afraid of it. The cloud drifted into my hands, I held it gently and blew softly into it. I found him saying to me "Please, man, don't leave. I need someone to talk to. I am very lonely here."

I read his message, not knowing what was happening or what I should do. I sat down with my head bowed, crying. I feel the loneliness of that man deeply. At that moment, I wanted from the depths of my heart to ease his loneliness and talk to him, but how could a simple man like me converse with the dwellers of the sky?

I was not awakened from my crying except by the sound of the metal kettle lid clinking to my right. It was boiling fiercely over the fire, steam was pouring continuously from its spout. I sat contemplating the steam for minutes as it rose quietly before me, piercing through the space and settling into the depths of the sky.

And suddenly, I found myself holding the kettle in my hand, removing its lid, and whispering to its water with great tenderness, saying "Don't worry, my friend, you're not alone; I am here with you!" Then I closed the kettle and

gently patted it with my hands before placing it back on the fire. It began to boil vigorously, and steam started flowing from its spout once again.

I threw myself on the ground next to the kettle, watching the steam piercing the sky. At that moment, I wished with all my desire that the heart of that rising steam to the sky would soften, be gracious with me, and carry my message to that lone man up there.

I truly don't know why I did that, but it seems that the steam had compassion on our loneliness and carried my message to him. After a while, I saw the sky clear again until it became a bright blue canvas. Then, a new cloud began to form. It was a very beautiful and happy cloud this time. I watched it, while I was lying on my back, slowly drifting, searching for me until it settled on my chest.

I embraced it gently, then breathed into it calmly from my soul. I found him saying to me, "Thank you, my friend, from the depths of my heart for answering my call. You seem like a kind person. I am so lonely here in this vast sky, with no one to talk to. What is your name, my friend?"

I read his message, then found myself running in the field, jumping with joy like a child, to the extent that I carried the boiling kettle; to thank it for its extreme generosity, which gave me the burns you see on my hands, but in my extreme happiness, I didn't feel the heat of the kettle and didn't care about it at all.

Since that wondrous moment, I have kept that kettle and that particular water bottle, they are the dearest possessions I have in this life after you, Ahmed. They are my lips through which I whisper to the ears of the heavens!

Strange is the state, and peculiar is loneliness; it dispels itself by itself. The loneliness of the earth and the sky met, and they both vanished, replaced by our long-standing friendship that has stretched since that wondrous moment. I told him my name and asked him his, but he did not know his name; in fact, he knew nothing about himself. He was a completely blank page, a pure soul lost among the folds of the sky. I fear, Ahmed, that my soul might get lost like his and drown in the seas of its loneliness before it finds a companion to accompany it on its journey!

Do you remember, Ahmed, when you finished the high school and entered the engineering college as you had wished? Do you recall that picture I gave you that day, saying it was a gift from my only friend in life? That was his gift to you. When I told him you had succeeded and become an engineer, he sent me a giant cloud smiling proudly. Yes, it was smiling! Inside it was his congratulations to you.

That day, I took a picture of that cloud as it drifted gracefully downward, and wrote his message on the back of that picture, and adorned it with an elegant black frame from behind so that you wouldn't see the text of his message. He was as happy as I was, perhaps even more so, as if his own son had succeeded. He truly considers you his son, Ahmed.

You are fortunate, my son, to have a father on earth and a father in the sky!

Now I know that I will not live longer than I have lived, and I will not take more from this life than I took. I feel that deeply. Now, I must bid farewell to my lifelong friend. I must tell him that I will depart from this life. It is his right upon me, my son. I am not only his lifelong friend, but I am now his entire life. I am all he has. I am his mirror through which he rediscovered himself. I cannot leave this world without telling him. I feel that I would be betraying him if I did. I sense his confusion and worry about me now as he has been searching for me for a week without receiving any response. He must know, for we have not parted since we met, this is how we are pledged to each other. Please, Ahmed, go home and bring what I asked of you immediately.

My father slapped me with that story of his friend, leaving me completely confused. Is he really delirious? Or did what he say actually happen? His story isn't a figment of madness; it is madness itself! Yet, it seems so convincing and perfectly crafted, I can't find any flaws in it. I remember his meticulous care for that kettle and that worn-out plastic water bottle, filling it every day. I also remember the day he returned home with his hands covered in burns. My heart nearly broke for him, but he seemed calm and extremely happy. I know my father well, he has never been delirious. But in the face of death, who knows?

My mind was on the verge of madness; nothing in that world makes sense at all anymore. I had no choice but to fulfill his

final request in life. I left him and hurried back home. Opening his closet, I found the kettle there, spotlessly clean, and beside it, the water bottle filled and tightly sealed. I took them and was about to leave.

As I was leaving the house, my bedroom door was open, and my eyes fell upon the picture of the cloud my father had just told me about. I entered my room and quickly contemplated the picture, unsure if the cloud was truly happy or if it's just my imagination now. My mind was completely paralyzed, unable to think, but it looked exceedingly happy. I remember that moment well when he gave me that picture and told me it was a gift from his friend. I was surprised, as I had never seen him with a friend before, I asked him saying...

- Where is this friend of yours, Dad?

He waited for a moment before responding, saying...

- I don't know, as my friend travels a lot. But all I know now is that he's there...

And pointed to the cloud in the picture between his hands before hanging it on the wall and quickly left.

I took the picture out of its frame and indeed found a message addressed to me from my father's friend, who claims to be in the sky, in which he says...

- A million congratulations, our beautiful engineer! I hope you achieve everything you desire in this life, but from the bottom of my heart, I hope you don't worry too much about this life, and no matter what happens, be strong, for nothing remains the same, my son. Just be a kind-hearted, light-

spirited person that people love to meet. That's all you want in this life, my son. Please forgive me for calling you “my son” as I don't remember whether I had children or not when I was on Earth, but now I consider you my son, Ahmed! Congratulations once again, our beautiful engineer.

I read his message and cried, still unsure if I was dreaming or what exactly was going on. I had no explanation for what was happening, and I didn't have any time or energy to even understand. Why all this now, of all times, father?

I took the kettle and the bottle and hurried back to the hospital. I gave them to my father to bid farewell to his friend as he wished. He asked me to leave the room. I quickly exited and stood watching him from the front window. He struggled to adjust his position, then with his trembling hand, he removed the lid of the kettle and opened the bottle of water, pouring all its water into the kettle. He leaned close to it and began whispering to it for several minutes. I stood there in astonishment, unable to believe that what was happening before my eyes was actually real. He replaced the lid on the kettle and pressed it several times to ensure it was securely closed. Then he gestured for me to enter. Barely able to speak, he said to me...

- Go to our field, light a fire, and leave this kettle over it until the water boils. That's all I ask of you now, Ahmed.

I was about to leave when he gestured for me to come closer. I approached him, his trembling hands held my head, then he kissed me on my forehead gently and said

- Goodbye!

I kissed him on the forehead while crying, it seems it was it was time to say goodbye.

I took the kettle and hurried to the field. It was midwinter, the sky was covered with clouds, and the atmosphere was filled with melancholy, even the wheat stalks around me were drooping, surrendering in brokenness and sadness. I lit the fire and placed the kettle on it until it started to boil. Minutes later, I received a call from the hospital. It was my father's nurse again this time. She said to me

- I am deeply sorry, Ahmed. Your father passed away moments ago. The last thing he said before he died was that he was very sorry if he ever told you that he might die dissatisfied with you. He said it and then passed away. He loves you very much!

I hung up the phone and sat crying beside the kettle, head bowed like the sorrowful wheat stalks around me. I don't know why my father wanted to tell me his secret only now. Is all of this real, or is he delirious, or am I dreaming?

My father has departed forever, departed and became also one of the dwellers of the heavens. Where is his soul now amidst the expanse of that vast sky? His kind soul, which will suffer once again from loneliness, the loneliness that has always engulfed him with its fires without mercy.

Those cloudy thoughts were violently crashing in my head, and all I could do was cry. The only certain truth now was that my father had died. In that moment, the only thing that consoled

me were these words sent to me by this man whom my father thought was his friend.

Before I headed to the hospital to bid farewell to my father for the last time, I looked at the kettle to my right, it was boiling vigorously. I sat for a few minutes watching the steam race to escape its prison, carrying my father's whispers and settling them in the depths of the sky.

And in the blink of an eye, all the clouds suddenly vanished from above our field right before my eyes, our field alone! Until the sky above it became an empty blue page, and the sun approached me alone, showering me with its light. I felt I possessed the sole outlet of hope on this earth; I was in paradise, even the wheat stalks straightened around me, imbued with spirit, shimmering like gold.

Then a cloud began to form, quietly taking shape. It looked incredibly beautiful. I was watching it in amazement as it slowly drifted towards me in peace until it settled in my hands. I couldn't believe what was happening and I didn't know what to do. My father was not delirious then, I knew that well!

His friend sent him a message that bewildered me greatly, a message that made me forget my grief over my father's departure, but rather made me feel overwhelming happiness for him and for his kind-hearted friend. A message that left me unsure whether my father was bidding farewell to his friend or to me by sharing his secret. My father has a kind soul that does not deserve to get lost in the folds of the sky, to be slapped by the fierce waves of loneliness, and to drown in the depths of its seas before it finds its mirror.

His friend's message was short and extremely succinct, yet in its brevity, it was as expressive as it could be. When his delicate cloud settled in my hands, I embraced it very gently, breathing into it calmly from my soul, just as my father used to do.

At that moment, I found in my hands only one word, only a single word of five letters, a word that would open a new warm chapter in my father's journey towards immortality. All his friend sent him was

Hello.