

# ATTEMPTS



*a novel*



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## Part I – An Attempt

**A**SANT STARED AT HIS friend's hand, and what was in it.

"Take it," the friend exhorted.

They stood by the back of a hut; its mud wall dark yellow, shaded and hidden below a giant magnolia canopy. Both wore jeans, yet different in that Asant's were clean and cheap dark blue, his friend's expensive, stylish, and marked with numerous drawings from a black pen.

Asant continued to stare, then, "No. I can't. I hate these things."

"What? We're robbing a bank man!" said his friend. The friend looked at Asant for a moment and remained quiet, as if trying to read Asant's mind before making a decision. "Fine," he said finally. "It's not a big deal. You won't use it. Don't even take it out. Just show this part," as he pointed to the handle. "Move your shirt like this, all right?" he added, pulling his own brown shirt to cover the better part of his hand and what was in it.

"No. No way. I want nothing to do with it."

## ISSA

“You’re the one who complained to me about being hungry all the time and not having money. So, do you want it or not, Asant?”

Asant looked away and covered his face behind his hands, as if to hide from everything, including the magnolia’s waves. “I do, I do. I just don’t see why we need it, why we need this.”

“It’s a tool. To help us convince them. It’s just a tool, that’s all.”

“No. I won’t carry one.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll carry it.” The friend, exasperated, rolled his eyes, moved his free hand in the air above his head and forced an exhale. “It’s too small a change to make a difference. We’ll write a note. You’ll go to the window, and I will stand next in line behind you. You won’t even say anything. The note will do the talking.”



It was minutes before closing. The security guard stood by the door, his back slumped, eyes focused on nowhere in particular. This was his same demeanor every time they walked in at exactly 4:56 p.m. - minutes before the end of the afternoon. Today, the only evident difference was in their appearance.

They wore baseball caps, fake eyeglasses, and fake facial hair.

In school, the friend often bought whatever food he wished for, at least once showing off a stack of cash. Asant would gape; his hands usually holding a metal cup with the same daily white rice.

## ATTEMPTS

It was some time before they were acquainted...when one day Asant decided to ask about the money.

In the bank, Asant's heart pumped harder and faster with each second.

"Hey, relax," his friend said. "This is child's play. Like I told you, I've done it before, and others have done it many times...and it's only right. It is our money they take anyway. Our sweat. We are just barely twenty years old, and we already work like dogs but get paid beggars' money. This is the right thing to do. It is our right."

Asant's heart pumped harder with each passing minute, reverberating through his body.

The friend sensed Asant's tension and anxiety. He continued to look at Asant, while Asant stared at the security guard and caught his eye. The security guard nodded, then looked away.

Asant and his friend walked through the guiding ropes and stood behind two customers. Asant gazed at his shoes, wanting time to pass; then, he felt a punch at the middle of his back. He raised his head and turned to look at his friend, who was gesturing for Asant to move up the line.

Asant took a step forward. Then, as if a sign from somewhere, he noticed the guard nearby. The guard had moved toward the glass counters and, now, barely yards away, was leaning with his right elbow on the glass and his hand holding up his chin, eyes peering into Asant's.

"I'm imagining it. I'm imagining it," he whispered to himself, then looked behind him at his friend.

The friend admired and considered anything his eyes could find, in an effort to ignore Asant.

## ISSA

Asant adjusted his glasses, turned back to the teller counter and looked at the person behind the glass wall. They stared at each other. Asant's face felt unusually warm, red and sweaty; the other's was tired with drooping and uninterested eyes. One frozen in time; while the other waited.

"Can I help you?" the person on the other side asked after a few seconds.

Asant heard the sounds but did not register the words. By then, he was unaware of anyone except himself. His heart persisted in pushing against his chest.

"Sir. How can I help you?"

Asant's eyes focused on the air, staring at nothing in particular.

"Sir?" the man behind the glass wall said with a louder voice.

It woke Asant from his frozen state. He cleared his throat. "Umm. Sorry. Sorry. I have this. This thing. One second."

His hand in his right pocket, he leaned right and halfway around, wanting to look at his friend, but then changed his mind, turning back to face the glass wall and raising his right arm to the level of the counter.

Note in hand, he looked at the yellow edges showing through his closed fingers.

"Umm. Please. Please take this. There are instructions..."

Asant could not do it. His mind lost control and shut down; his body now acting on its own. He turned left and walked to the door as fast as he could. He pushed it open with both hands. The yellow paper fell out and rested on the



## ATTEMPTS

frame just as the door closed behind him, the paper laying there in its new home.



Asant did not go to his mentor, spiritual teacher and caretaker's abode—his favorite space and usual destination. Instead, that evening, he asked to stay at a friend's house in an adjacent town. With only his imaginative mind as company, alternating between thoughts and images of being imprisoned and tortured, the night proved to be torturous.

By morning, school was not even a consideration. Months before, he had developed enough aspiration and ambition to pursue engineering in a public school, of course with the ardent support of his mentor. On this morning, however, engineering was not even an afterthought. Instead, he walked aimlessly in the town's center and by its shops, going around the circle several times and through one of its intersecting streets.

In a cafe, his ear caught words screaming out of a television about an attempted robbery nearby. The town's daily paper had a picture of the yellow paper. His yellow paper. Thoughts of jail began to consume him again – blood rushed to his face and trapped his breath. The world was closing in on him.

Thoughts of imprisonment, of losing freedom, of being entrenched in shame, overcame Asant. Then came the panic of intelligence officers and their inclination to torture prisoners; then, even worse, was that of prisoners taking advantage of each other and of him. He thought of his father; how he had died while in prison.

## ISSA

It was not right. Nothing was right.

In the cafe, he sat in a corner with hands holding his head and his eyes glued to the table's surface. He dared to look up only for glimpses of others to see if anyone was pointing at him, or in fear that a picture of his face would appear on the flat television screen in the opposite corner. During one of those glances at the television, pictures of fighter jets, city rubble, fire, and bloodied children standing alone, appeared as the reporter on the screen spoke of a war in a distant country. The picture switched to that of a man in military garb, his right arm raised as if in a sweeping motion he cemented his power. The word Daas slid below declaring his name. The reporter spoke some more about the war and that country's leader.

Asant looked away with temporary relief that the reporter did not speak of the local robbery, and that the screen did not show his face.

But even sitting became uncomfortable. He left the cafe and tried to hide among crowds, cars, and trees. He he could not manage to stay in any one spot for more than a few minutes. The coffee shop, the bookstore, the newspaper stands, the park, the main street—each became an unbearable world. He found his way away from the town center into the woods. The trees watched him with contempt. He begged to rest by one, for it to allow him to rest if only for a few minutes. He crouched down, and allowed his lower back to lean on its trunk with his head between his hands; he could not hold back his fear any longer and let out repeated erratic wailing cries.