

## Just a Breath Away



(Note for cultural reference: A paranormal romance of a ghost with a Baloch girl. In Baloch culture it is considered that ghosts fall in love with the most pious girl.)

The story is excerpt from author's sixth published book, Takatu Nights and Other Stories.

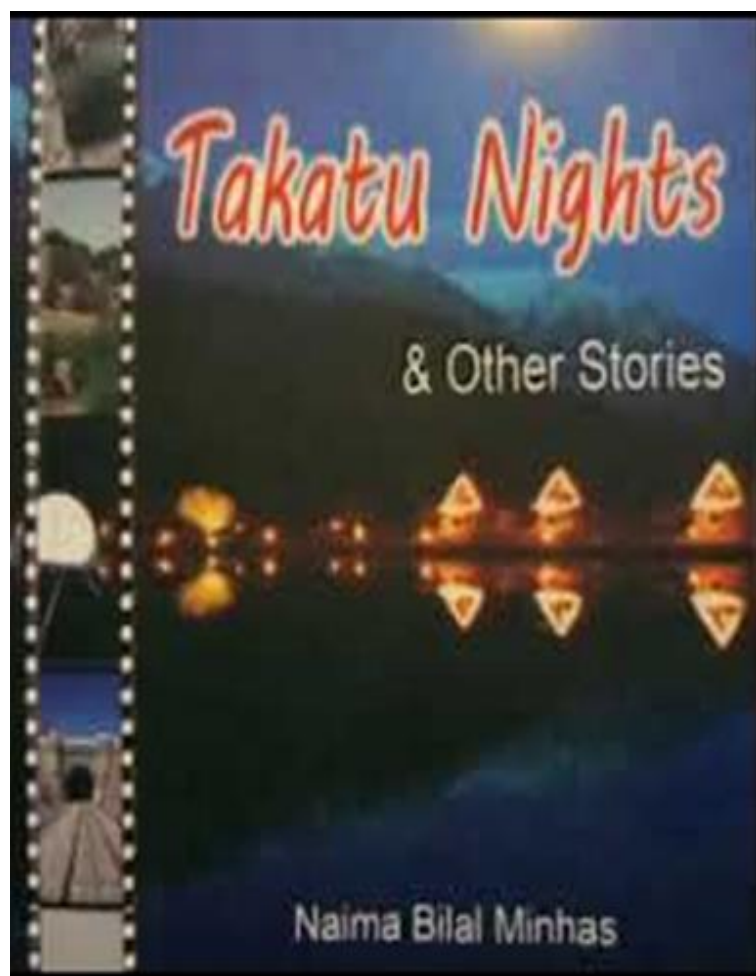
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Published in 2018, Takatu Nights & Other Stories  
comprises of eight short stories, 20 poems and a short  
play.

**PART A:**

**8 SHORT**

**STORIES**

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'Whooshhh', Shola was sitting on Mars' equator when  
he saw near Grus, what *they* called a shooting star.

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‘Haha, another one beaten and squashed,’ he made his voice heavy and grim, ‘FOR ATTEMPT TO STEAL NEWS FROM THE SKIES.’ He laughed at his own joke as he swirled to maximize his powers. Just then he saw another star shoot behind the first. ‘Ya, and now the two will play sharing is caring.’ Shola the jinn smiled

He converted to green light and began traveling towards Earth. The dot began to expand before his eyes till it become a green blue ball. He was absorbing the nearby powers of happiness as he saw the continents. The traffic to Earth was speedy as he encountered varying powers racing down at their customized speeds.

He landed in the crater of a mud volcano and gave away his thunder laughter. A nearby shepherd boy looked up in confusion for he was in constant sunlight. ‘Now if I tell Maa Ju that I have heard a cloud roar, she would attribute it to my ventures to school,’ he sighed. ‘Schools make youngsters jittery,’ he had heard her saying most days when he returned with his cattle to make to the noon school.

Shola hung upside down in the crater he had used as a cave in past, when a sudden thunder snarled the ground, showering down dust.

‘Ha’ with a sigh Shola flew out of the crater, ‘*Booosh!* *Their* desire to rip Earth of its possessions.’ He was just in time before the whole cave hugged down the earth making the cavity disappear.

‘The road we are planning will lead us to the coal mines,’ Shola heard the chief engineer saying to his dis-

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interested son who had come from the country's capital to visit his father in Duki.

Wandering between the mud huts, enjoying the straw roofs shiver at his blows, Shola stopped over a brick house where five kids were eating food inside a room lit by the rare generators that rumbled as much as politicians. The protection shield that he had always experienced there was down this time of day. 'Bones, buffalo bones,' his heart danced in joy, he just loved unprotected food. 'Such food is always tasty,' he rejoiced.

He sat on the head of the girl who was painting her nails red while simultaneously filling her mouth. 'But I like green,' Shola declared and just then the girl's finger knocked the bottle over. The nail polish streamed out of the bottle making a red line on the Sohbaat she was eating. 'Maddened Dictators,' she cursed while pulling the bottle up.

She felt she heard thunder.

'What fuss! I'll become a dadi telling you to eat your food with grace. No prayers, just dive into the food,' the new comer placed her bag near them and pulling a chair she uttered, 'hopeless cases.' She patted her youngest brother on his head, a glitter of mischief twinkled in her glass green eyes as she completed her dialogue, 'Pakistani politicians,' and sat down with such a sigh that made them all giggle.

Some power glow began tormenting Shola. It was then that Shola observed her aura. It was pushing him away, blurring her face. 'She veils herself well,' he

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understood, and out of curiosity he observed her boy cut maroon dyed hair, but just then Shola felt himself vacuumed out of the house.

‘Ha, if she would have prayed a few seconds later, I could have enjoyed her longer.’ He felt remorse. He moved towards the tree in the courtyard, but that too now had become out of bound.

‘Why do they pray in the middle of an action? Now, will keep me dying of suspense!’ He webbed himself on to the branches of a TV antenna and started inhaling the oxides some nearby traffic was emitting. ‘Hmmm so intoxicating,’ Shola smiled before drifting to sleep.

‘What the hell, so many protection shields,’ Hanging down the roof of the ancient remains that the National Historical Department had marked ‘T’ he talked to himself.

‘Have tried penetrating her through food’, swimming among the sand flies he counted ways he had tried to allure her, ‘but she prays before eating, have tried caressing her but she never remains in open area after sunset, her house is always locked for us,’ he stopped in front of a stupa that marked the boundary between the ancient remains and the arterially unit that was deployed there. He read the logo of Happy 34 on the wall, eying with disgust the word Happy, and then continued, ‘neither can I penetrate through those shutters of hers as she has a no eye contact policy with

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males nor can I charm her through music and wine,' he recalled now racing between the grave and the Unit wall. Even he was startled at the vigour of the laughter that made the clouds to rain. 'Ha, I had chosen this place for it didn't rain here,' he whooshed in snake form to a hollow trunk sinking down with its roots, deep to the inner layers of Earth where no water would penetrate. 'Ha! So powerful a jinn; yet afraid of water?' Shai- tan laughed again. 'What a disgrace to the Nazr clan?' He had followed Shola down.

'I am not afraid,' Shola flipped and became a flicker, form that best suited his name.

'It just disgusts me.'

'If you say so! Anyways,' he changed to his mischievous form and started to pour in information, 'It's her Qi,' giving a pause as to enjoy Shola's state, he continued after a while, 'So strong, that no jinn have been able to penetrate her yet. In every century, there is only a single woman who has such strong a Qi. Unpenetrable to all spirits,' His hue was changing as he continued to speak, 'And you had to fall for her.' His voice became venomous when he uttered, 'Pity of the seven skies!'

He circled Shola leaving a mark on the dark crust that first burnt and in the very next instant vanished, 'And out of all the soil made, Shola had to fall for Nihal,' he said to Shola who was looking at the burnt flames that were now mere ash surrounding him like a curse.

'But I want to unite with her.' Shola uttered.

'I smell desperation,' Shai- tan enjoyed.

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Then converting to a brown hue he said, 'Soil made today are knowledgeable, yet un- practicing and that is what makes us successful,' Shai- tan informed him. 'But not her, no, not her,' He pulled a diamond out of the hardened stones. 'Her knowledge is her practice and her deeds her strength.' He was swirling his hand making his flickering fire carve the diamond to a delicacy humans hadn't mastered so far.

He stopped as Shola started shrugging his head in a definite no. 'There has to be a way,' he hissed. Making his mind race, he added, 'There was only one who made The Promised Cursed change his way, none other,' He paused, and as his flicker became fierce white he concluded, 'I know a thousand ways to penetrate a soil made. I'll. . .' His day dream was interrupted by Shai- tan who said, 'No, you can't. You've just left the caves of Duke and joined us in Sibi, swear to Iblees, we all have tried.'

'But there has to be some weakness? She isn't an angel,' Shola still was in a fix.

'I tried for five years. Full five years; followed her from school then from college, stood outside her chemistry labs, I was there when the lab caught fire and her hair got burnt, I have been at her friends' parties, followed her to her grandmother's house, but where ever she goes she carves such a protection that we can't enter, thus we know her

outer life, but have never been able to even enter her dreams.' He focused on the diamond. 'We don't know her beliefs; we only have her behavior in front of us, just like the tip of an Ice Berg, all her value systems, is



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buried deep down somewhere. You should try your luck somewhere else.’ He tossed the diamond towards Shola who broke it to a thousand pieces in a single glare.

‘Shola is his own luck.’ He professed as the dust of the diamond settled on the ground.

‘Then try her sister, Shukriya Bibi,’ a wicked smile came to Shai- tan’s lips as he recalled a memory.

‘She is fond of watching movies and listening to songs. I keep entering her dreams.’ This time he allowed the memories crack laughter. ‘You enter her memory and who knows may be from there you might get some clue.’ Shai- tan flew towards the surface of the Earth, still laughing.

‘But that can only be done on the 16th of the moon.’ Shai- tan was shouting as he was moving away. ‘For then Nihal goes to her grandmother’s house where they both practice cupping therapy for three consecutive odd lunar days. If somehow she misses out carving protection over her parents’ house, we’ll get lucky. That is your only chance. For after the session of wet cupping her spirit grows so strong that none of us can even pass her lane.’ Shola was itching every shout onto his memory.

Touching water and waiting for the lunar calendar to turn were equally painful, Shola declared. For next fifteen days Shola kept his distance from Nihal yet followed her everywhere. ‘She is so careful,’ he observed, ‘I wonder why!’

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It was lunar 16<sup>th</sup>. Shai- tan had just joined Shola and now they both were sharing space on the left shoulder of the driver who had come to pick Nihal from her house. 'She will be out, hearing the horn,' Shola boasted off, he had followed Nihal religiously enough to predict her behaviour.

'No worries, we all have gathered to help you.' Shai- tan pointed to all the spirits hanging in midair. 'They have all joined in from all recesses of Balochistan. This is the biggest mission of the century.' Shola listened to their chanting with pride.

'Don't worry; you will win your love.' A female one said to him. 'We are master at tricks to make *them* forget to carve protections,' Just then Shola saw Nihal leaving her house. They followed her car and kept sitting at an electric pole till she boarded the train.

She stepped inside the boggy; her seat number was visible before her eyes. She placed her bag beneath the seat. 'Oh! And you, you are a vampire. You have eaten away all happiness of our house.' A male voice was shouting.

'Ha, Ha, people, listen to him. It has been him and that whore of his who have. . .' A female voice had left the sentence in mid as the boggy heard a slap.

The couple kept fighting the whole journey.

The rest of the trip, Nihal heard either the fights or a couple of boys singing in hoarse choir. A group of enthusiasts had started to perform atten while another group had circled around the fighting couple, taking and

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changing sides when they felt the fight might get over, making sure the fight remains ignited.

Shukriya Bibi was singing with joy as she walked back from school. With her orange painted nails, she patted the shopper she was swinging in her left hand. It had been gifted to her by Deeba for helping her out in Math quiz.

‘Oh that was easy, just complete your own test and then fill in others’ sheets. Teachers never have time to concentrate on handwritings.’ She thought. ‘And in return you always get something flashy,’ she giggled.

Shukriya Bibi entered her house humming ‘Open your eyes to love’ and placed the shopper near the stairs. She pulled out the contents and observed the three glossy yellow

pots. Sitting down on the first step she caressed the smallest one. She traced her fingers on the figure made on it. It was a goddess wearing bright maroon blouseless sari. She was on a single leg while the other was in air making a 270 ° tilted V. Her tongue was out and she seemed to be in a fierce mood.

‘Shukriya, come for lunch,’ Placing the pots on the edge of the stair case, she ran inside at her mother’s call.

‘Listen to it when you are alone,’ Shaan had urged her as she was coming out of her Physics lab this the morning. She had felt proud when her classmates passed them giggling. ‘It needed courage for a boy to come to the labs when it was Girls’ period,’ Pashmina, her senior

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had once said. Thus, now, walking from one corner of the veranda to the other, she was listening to the CD he had given her. She had just finished the second track and was feeling her cheeks blush when she felt as if bell had rung. She pulled out the headphones. The bell rang again. She rushed to open the door.

‘Hey, we have come from Bokee Studio. You had applied for the concert tickets?’ The boy in red outfit asked. Her enthusiastic nod made him smile as he handed her an envelope. ‘You have won a couple’s ticket to the concert in Quetta.’

‘Wow,’ in her enthusiasm she hugged the boy and leaving him in surprise ran to her brother’s room. The boy started his bike and was still smiling when he took the turn to the main road.

Some passerby had thrown a loaf of meat in their yard. A bitch saw the door open and entered, followed by a dog. ‘New home,’ they both hoped.

‘Ha, what will I wear at the concert?’ Shukriya Bibi was texting her friend while eating her dinner. Shai- tan smiled at Shola who nodded and dived into the bones in the Qabli Palao she was playing with.

The memory house was filled with remnants of movies and lyrics of songs. There were small traces of Bio lab and toys she had broken in her journey to adolescence.

He kept chanting Nihal Nihal as he made his way through the jumbled memories in every corner.

There were images of her, of all he already knew. Then as he changed course to another sphere, he came

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to run into a name Omar bin Khitaab. It was not the last time he had encountered that name, for afterwards every memory about Nihal he came across, he saw his imprint there. The books placed on the teen age Nihal's shelf, in her History book, in the section of My Favourite Personality in Middle School Friends' Opinion Books and even in her childhood stories narrated by grandmother. 'She is obsessed with Omar as Shola is obsessed with Nihal,' he told Shai- tan later. 'I couldn't find any other secret about her.'

'Take his appearance; come before her, act like him and you'll see, love breaks all people.' Shai- tan laughed. 'She is obsessed with him. Use it to your benefit.'

'Tried,' sighed Shola. But I couldn't find his picture in Shukriya Bibi's memory. He was getting furious. 'Because Nihal returned and threw out the doll pots and the dogs, I couldn't check her book shelves.'

'But we have other resources as well,' Smiling, Shai- tan stood up and put a handful of soil in his mouth. He chewed the soil and raising his left foot and hand in air, he started dancing. 'Call upon thee, all of you, who love the dark, the dread, the eye. Go and seek all lands above and below and find a picture of the man Nihal is obsessed with. For her romance,' he laughed his loudest laughter, 'We shall shatter with our planned love affair.' Shai- tan had stood on a single leg for seven days when finally all his spirits returned. 'It needs a gang to be successful, whether one is on the right path or on a wrong one, thus we gang up.' Shai- tan had said when

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Shola thanked him for his efforts. 'No one wins alone,' he lectured.

Shola had brought for them, collected bones of deceased who had been burnt after their death. 'Neither is there any book having his picture nor do the books hold his

complete description that could be imitated.' Angaar was interrupted by Shola's impatience cry, 'Why?'

'Because his aura was so strong that even the devil boss used to change path if he saw Omar treading there,' He replied and then eyeing the bones continued. 'But there is an island near South America. Upon the island there is a lighthouse. Find *The Well of Iraq* there. The ancient souls say that in the bottom of the well is his biography written by the very spirit who had assisted his murder. There are seven spells casted over the book. For each of them you have to dive in the seven seas and bring pearls scattered by the Supra witch who in those times ruled over land and water. The pearls will be slipped into the seven needles that have been placed in the heart of the doll that protects the book.'

Angaar was interrupted by Shai- tan. 'Shola can't do it; he dreads only one thing, Water.' He stood up.

'Anyways for your efforts, do feast on the bones.' He was about to leave when he heard Shola. 'I'll go.'

'It might break you.' Angaar told Shola. 'One never fights his animussa.'

'All is fair in love, all shall hail in love,' Shola's mind had been made.

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‘Then, we’ll pray to darkness to help you with its might.’ Angaar and Shai- tan had said in unison.

As he felt the water burning him away he understood what it meant to go against one’s animussa. With every pearl he pulled out, his soul burnt to the core. He experienced such severity of pain that he had never thought could exist. Standing at the tip of the flag pole on the deserted light house, he finally opened the book.

The face wasn’t clear in the beginning. But Shola could see in the writings that he was tall and strong. He was born in Arab, even as a young boy, Shola was seeing him to be of a serious nature. Shola noticed that he was not indulging in time wastes, but was busy, learning skills. Then his

youthful figure was busy practicing sword fight and wrestling. Then in other pages, Shola found him as a cloaked figure wandered streets at night, at one time helping an old woman cook food and at another just observing life in his city. In the morning he would make decisions on the base of information he learnt at night. He was making Shola reminded of Batman who would likewise protect and learn from his streets at night. ‘The producers might have reincarnated Batman from this historical figure,’ Shola had decided.

As he completed the ten million pages, he felt he could now see an image before him. He tuned his mind, ‘make images of all I read, I command you.’ An evil smile broke on his lips as he thought about Nihal. He pushed away all the pointed stones that had hidden the well so

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perfectly that it had taken him three days to find the well's location. He dived into the water and kept the book back to its safe location. He took a few moments to regain potency when he came out of the well. Then before flying towards Balochistan, he had made sure to cover the well again with the same stones in the same exact order as he had been instructed to.

The first sun ray had pierced its way into the darkness. He had learnt enough, he felt him to be *his* acquaintance. 'Now, I'll win.' He checked his Arabic robe. The house aura was different; he could see it even from a distance. Though the protection shield was there, but when he came near the house he could hear one of his friends singing,

*"Love me, for today is the day to love  
For love is life and we are born to love  
Breaking all the ties  
Thinking of no one  
Love is life  
Just love o love o love o love"*

Shola smiled as he saw from the window two figures dancing inside the room.

'M.m.m.m.m.music makes me happy,' he laughed a thunder.

'Ting ting,' the alarm clock was ringing, but Nihal had not got up on its voice. In fact she got awake by the voices of her parents' fight. Half-heartedly she got up and prepared for her university. All the way her mind was



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webbed in her parents' growing quarrels. 'Am I forgetting something,' she wondered and rechecked her bag third time.

She had just completed the prologue of *'The Wangled Hiss'* when Rafia brought her tea. Just as she pulled her face out of the book, she felt she had seen a known figure. 'This appearance was somewhere carved in her mind, or was it in her heart,' she thought.

Yes she knew him. He was walking towards her, with a loving glitter in those clear eyes. He was tall and strong and was in the same Arabic robe she knew him in. He was coming closer and closer. He was just a breath away from her when he vanished. She was jolted. In her haste to find him, she swirled. Then she ran towards the gate as it was the only direction in which someone could go. The tea had spilled over *The Wangled Hiss*. She couldn't miss this chance. All the years she had longed to meet him, she had absorbed his rituals, his preaching, his ways to an exact way. In all her decisions she always told herself to do 'as he would have done it.'

'Now he was before her, brought back from the past, as a reward to her devotion, to her secret admiration, her passion had borne fruit, he was her ideal, her idol, her image of a perfect husband.' Her heart was congratulating her. 'Can't let this chance miss,' her mind in unison with the heart, instructed the whole body, and all her senses came to life as she started running, searching the whole area.

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