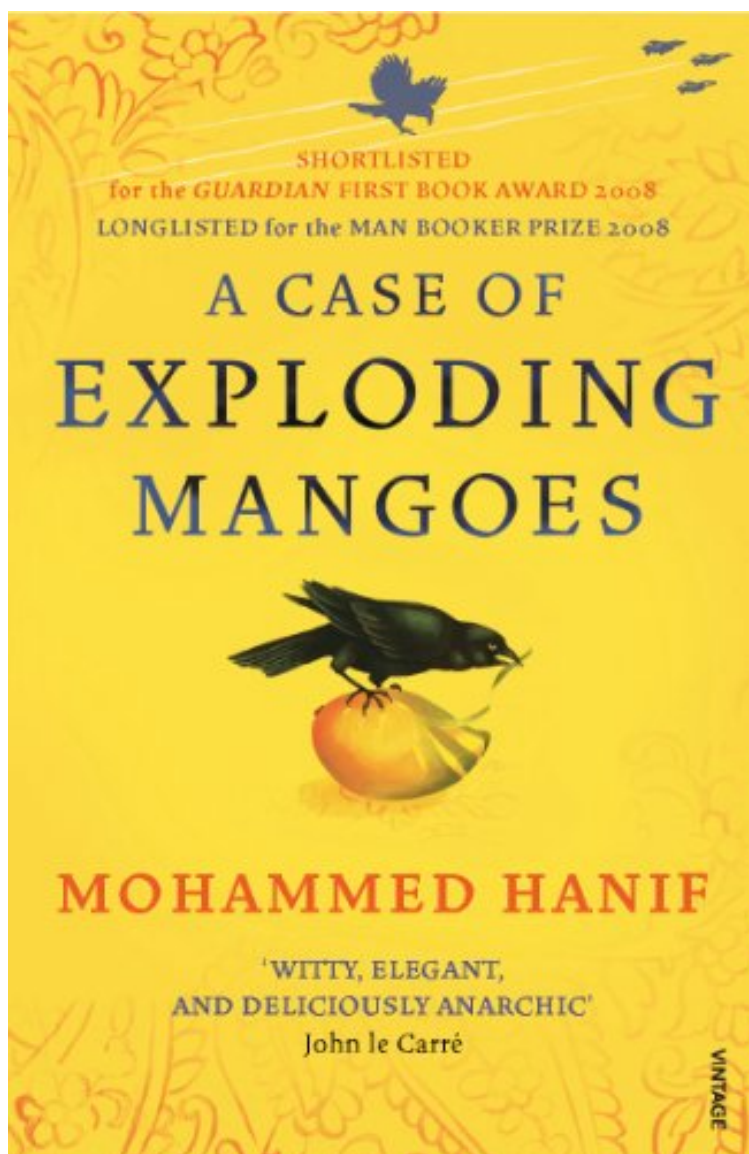


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A Case of Exploding Mangoes



Par Mohammed Hanif
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThere is an ancient saying that when lovers fall out, a plane goes down. This is the story of one such plane. Why did a Hercules C130, the world's sturdiest plane, carrying Pakistan's military dictator General Zia ul Haq, go down on 17 August, 1988? Was it because of:1.Mechanical failure2.Human error3.The CIA's impatience4.A blind woman's curse5.Generals not happy with their pension plans6.The mango seasonOr could it be your narrator, Ali Shigri?Teasing, provocative, and very, very funny, Mohammed Hanif's debut novel takes one of the subcontinent's enduring mysteries and out if it spins a tale as rich and colourful as a beggar's dream.Winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Novel and shortlisted for the Booker Prize 2008..com Best of the Month, May 2008: On August 17, 1988, Pak One,

the airplane carrying Pakistani dictator General Zia and several top generals, crashed, killing all on board -- and despite continued investigation, a smoking gun--mechanical or conspiratorial--has yet to be found. Mohammed Hanif's outrageous debut novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, tracks at least two (and as many as a half-dozen) assassination vectors to their convergence in the plane crash, incorporating elements as diverse as venom-tipped sabers, poison gas, the curses of a scorned First Lady, and a crew impaired by an overindulgence of ripe mangoes. The book has been aptly compared to *Catch-22* for its hilarious (though not quite as madcap) skewering of the Pakistani military and intelligence infrastructure, but it also can trace its lineage to Don DeLillo, doing for Pakistan what *Libra* did for JFK conspiracy theory, and Kafka's *The Trial*, with its paranoid-but-true take on pathological bureaucracy. Recent events pushing Pakistan into the worst kind of headlines make *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* a timely and entertaining read, and when a mysterious bearded man called "OBL" makes an appearance at a Fourth of July party for U.S. military brass, we're coolly reminded of the fickleness of opportunistic policy in unpredictable lands. --Jon Foro

Mohammed Hanif on his experience in the Pakistan Air Force Academy Once upon a time, when I was eighteen, I found myself locked up in Pakistan Air Force Academy's cell along with my friend and partner-in-crime, Khalid Saifullah. We had thought we were doing charity work but the Academy officers obviously didn't share our ideals. We had been caught trying to help another classmate pass his chemistry exam, something he had failed to do twice already and this was his last chance to save himself from being expelled.

The logistics of our rescue effort involved a wireless set improvised in the Sunday Hobbies Club, a microphone concealed in a crap bandage around the left elbow of our academically challenged friend, and a Sanyo FM radio receiver. We were running our operation from the roof top of a building next to the examination hall. We were caught red-handed whispering reversible chemical equation into the transistor. We were in breach of every single standard operating procedure in the Academy rule book, and faced certain expulsion. We had just started our glorious careers and now we faced the prospect of being sent home and having to explain to our parents how, instead of training to become gentlemen-officers, we were running an exam-cheating-mafia from the rooftop of the most well-disciplined training institute in the country. For two days, while we waited in that cell to find out about our fate, we planned our future. Khalid, always the world-wise in this outfit, immediately decided that he was going to join the merchant navy and travel the world. I tried hard to think what I would do. I came from a farming family where even the most adventurous members of our clan had only managed to branch out into planting sugarcane instead of potatoes. Education, jobs, careers were absolutely alien concepts. The Academy was supposed to be my escape from a lifetime that revolved around wildly fluctuating potato crop cycles. And here I was, already a prisoner of sorts, facing a journey back to a life I thought I had left behind. "Maybe I'll become a teacher," I said vaguely. The farmers in my village used to show some vague respect to teachers in the primary school I attended. "Or a mechanic." I was a member of the car-maintenance club in the hobbies club after all. It was considered an elite club since there was no car to maintain. It was basically a hobbies club for people who hated hobbies.

"You can't even change a bloody tire," Khalid reminded me. We managed to stave off the impending expulsion through a combination of confession and denial: we lied (we were listening to cricket commentary on the transistor radio), we grovelled (we were ashamed, ashamed, ashamed of our unofficer like behaviour) and we pleaded our undying passion for defending the borders of our motherland. They looked at our relatively clean record, our sterling academic achievements and let us off the hook and awarded us a punishment considered just short of expulsion. We were barred from entering the Academy's TV room--and from walking. For forty-one days. During the punishment period, we had to stay in uniform from dawn till dusk and when ever we were required to go from point a to b we had to run. Khalid went on to become a fairly good marathon runner (before, years later, dying in an air crash, while trying to pull a spectacular but impossible manoeuvre in Mirage fighter plane). I discovered Academy's library. I had barely noticed that the college had a very well-stocked library. We knew it was there, we occasionally used it as a quiet corner to hatch conspiracies but I had never noticed that the long rambling hall was lined with cupboards full of books. All the cupboards were locked, but you could see pristine untouchable books behind their glass doors. The librarian, an eagle-nosed old civilian, walked around with a large bunch of jangling keys although his wares were not in any danger of being stolen. I was to find out later that he was quite a professional. The library was immaculately catalogued. You could of course go to him, fill out a form and request a book. But I never actually saw anybody fill out a form. I spent some afternoons staring at the books from behind the glass doors as my classmates watched videos in the TV room (including the fellow who had scraped through his chemistry exam and survived but would die years later in our current president's General Pervez

Musharraf's moronic military adventure in Kargil on India-Pakistan border). How do you ask for a book when you are eighteen and have been brought up in a household where the only book was the Quran and the only reading material an occasional old newspaper left behind by a visitor from the city? "I want that book," I asked the librarian pointing tentatively towards a cupboard which contained a thick volume of something called *The Great Escapes*. The librarian, relieved at having found a customer, took out his bunch of keys, removed a key and asked me to go get it myself. I took my time and browsed for a long time before filling out the form and borrowing the book. So grateful was I for getting that book that I brought him a samosa and cup of tea next day. That turned out to be a very good investment as the librarian handed me the bunch of his keys as soon as I entered. I browsed randomly, recklessly, reading first paragraphs and author bios, and made nave judgments. *The Cross of Iron* wasn't a religious thriller but a war novel. *Crime and Punishment* had very little crime in it. Was Rushdie related to the famous pop singer Ahmed Rushdie? Mario Puzo and Mario Vargas Llosa. The strange covers of Borges. Abdullah Hussain, I had heard of. A whole shelf devoted to Gabriel Garcia Marquez. *Chronicle*. Was that little book about the wrecked ship really a true story? I didn't know which one was a thriller and which one was literary. As I Lay Dying--sounds like a nice title so let's read it. So does *Valley of the Dolls*. It is probably not the right way to read. Discovering books was like a discovering a second adolescence. I discovered new sensations in my body. It was even better. It was guilt-free and I could show off. Not that anyone except my librarian friend was impressed. Outside the library, the world revolved around parade square, hockey fields and series of punishments and rewards that didn't seem very different from each other. The vocabulary used to run the Academy life comprised of about fifty words, half of which were variations on the word 'balls.' Every order began or ended with balls, it was used as verb, adjective, qualifier or just simply a howl. Balls to you. Balls to mother, my balls, I'll cut your balls.... Every order, every threat, every compliment was a variation on the same testicular theme. Now that I look back at, it is quite obvious that this place was drowning in its own testosterone. From outside, life could seem orderly. Uniforms were starched, rifles were oiled and sessions on the parade square hard and long. I yearned for that jangling of the keys in the library corridors. Once I was caught in my Navigation class reading Notes from the Underground hidden under a map that I was supposed to be studying. After our second year in the Academy, there were sudden attempts to turn us into good Muslims. Compulsory prayers. Quran lectures. Islamic Studies classes. In the third year we were caught stealing oranges from a neighbourhood orchard and as a punishment we were sent out to a mosque outside the Academy where Muslim cousins of Jehovah's Witnesses taught us how to knock on random doors and preach Islam. "But they are all Muslims," I had protested. "So are you," came the reply. "And look at yourself." At that time I didn't realise that we were an experiment in Islamisation of the whole society. General Zia was a distant presence. He was our commander-in-chief and the permanent president of Pakistan. He thought he was never going to die. So did we. Years later, sitting in the officers' mess of a Karachi air base, we heard about the plane crash that killed him and several other generals. We were sad about the pilots and the crew of the plane. To drown our sorrows we pooled our meagre savings, ordered a bottle of Black Label whiskey, and instead of hiding in our bachelor quarters as we normally did, we opened the bottle in the officers' mess TV room and discussed our future. I left the air force a month later. --Mohammed Hanif

Extrait There is something about these bloody squadron leaders that makes them think that if they lock you up in a cell, put their stinking mouth to your ear, and shout something about your mother, they can find all the answers. They are generally a sad lot, these leaders without any squadrons to lead. It's their own lack of leadership qualities that stops them mid-career, nowhere for them to go except from one training institute to another, permanent seconds in command to one commander or the other. You can tell them from their belts, loose and low, straining under the weight of their paunches. Or from their berets, so carefully positioned to hide that shiny bald patch. Schemes for part-time M.B.A.'s and a new life are trying hard to keep pace with missed promotions and pension plans. Look at the arrangement of fruit salad on my tormentor's chest, above the left pocket of his uniform shirt, and you can read his whole biography. A faded paratrooper's badge is the only thing that he had to leave his barracks to earn. The medals in the first row just came and pinned themselves to his chest. He got them because he was there. The Fortieth Independence Day medal. The Squadron Anniversary medal. Today-I-did-not-jerk-off medal. Then the second row, fruits of his own hard labour and leadership. One for organising a squash tournament, another for the great battle that was tree-plantation week. The leader with his mouth to my ear and my mother on his mind has had a freebie to Mecca and is wearing a haj medal, too. As Obaid used to say, "God's glory. God's glory. For every monkey there is a houri." The 2nd OIC is wasting more of his already-wasted life trying to break me down with his bad breath

and his incessant shouting. Doesn't he know that I actually invented some of the bullshit that he is pouring into my ear? Hasn't he heard about the Shigri treatment? Doesn't he know that I used to get invited to other squadrons in the middle of the night to make the new arrivals cry with my three-minute routine about their mothers? Does he really think that "fuck your fucking mother," even when delivered at strength 5, still has any meaning when you are weeks away from the president's annual inspection and becoming a commissioned officer? The theory used to be damn simple: Any good soldier learns to shut out the noise and delink such expressions from their apparent meaning. I mean, when they say that thing about your mother, they have absolutely no intention--and I am certain no desire, either--to do what they say they want to do with your mother. They say it because it comes out rapid-fire and sounds cool and requires absolutely no imagination. The last syllable of mother reverberates in your head for a while as it is delivered with their lips glued to your ear. And that is just about that. They have not even seen your poor mother. Anybody who breaks down at the sheer volume of this should stay in his little village and tend his father's goats or should study biology and become a doctor, and then they can have all the bloody peace and quiet they want.

Because as a soldier, noise is the first thing you learn to defend yourself against, and as an officer, noise is the first weapon of attack you learn to use. Unless you are in the Silent Drill Squad. Look at the parade square during the morning drill and see who commands it. Who rules? There are more than a thousand of us, picked from a population of 130 million, put through psychological and physical tests so strenuous that only one in a hundred applicants makes it, and when this cream of our nation, as we are constantly reminded we are, arrives here, who leads them? The one with the loudest voice, the one with the clearest throat, the one whose chest can expand to produce a command that stuns the morning crows and makes the most stubborn of cadets raise their knees to waist level and bring the world to a standstill as their heels land on the concrete. Or at least that is what I believed before Lieutenant Bannon arrived with his theories about inner cadence, silent commands, and subsonic drill techniques. "A drill with commands is just that--a drill," Bannon is fond of saying. "A drill without commands is an art. When you deliver a command at the top of your voice, only the boys in your squadron listen. But when your inner cadence whispers, the gods take notice." Not that Bannon believes in any god. I wonder whether he'll visit me here. I wonder whether they will let him into this cell. The 2nd OIC is exhausted from his business with my mother and I can see an appeal to my better sense on its way. I clench my stomach muscles against the impending "cream of the nation" speech. I don't want to throw up. The cell is small and I have no idea how long I am going to be here. "You are the cream of our nation," he says, shaking his head. "You have been the pride of our Academy. I have just recommended you for the sword of honour. You are going to receive it from the president of Pakistan. You have two choices: graduate with honour in four weeks or go out front-rolling to the sound of drums. Tomorrow. Clap. Clap. Tony Singh-style." He brings his hands together twice, like those Indian film extras in a qawwali chorus. They did that to Tony Singh. Drummed the poor bugger out. I never figured out what the hell Tony Singh was doing in the air force of the Islamic Republic anyway. Before meeting Tony Singh (or Sir Tony, as we had to call him, since he was six courses senior to us), the only Tony I knew was our neighbour's dog and the only Singh I had seen was in my history textbook, a one-eyed maharaja who ruled Punjab a couple of centuries ago. I thought the partition took care of all the Tonys and the Singhs, but apparently some didn't get the message. Tony Singh didn't get the message even when they found a transistor radio in his dorm and charged him with spying. "Top of the Pops" was Sir Tony's defence. They reduced the charge to unofficerlike behaviour and drummed him out anyway. A lone drummer--a corporal who, after carrying the biggest drum in the Academy band all his life, had begun to look like one--led the way, keeping a thud, thud, thud-a-dud marching beat. More than one thousand of us lined both sides of Eagles Avenue, which leads from the guardroom to the main gate. "At ease," came the command. Tony Singh emerged from the guardroom, having spent a couple of nights in this very cell. His head was shaved, but he still wore his uniform. He stood tall and refused to look down or sideways. "Clap," came the command. We started slowly. The 2nd OIC removed Sir Tony's belt and the ranks from his shoulder flaps and then he took a step forward and whispered something into Sir Tony's ear. Sir Tony went down on his knees, put both his hands on the ground, and did a front roll without touching his shaved head on the ground. The bugger was trying to be cocky even when his ass was raised to the skies. His journey was painfully slow. The drumbeat became unbearable after a while. Some cadets clapped more enthusiastically than others. I glanced sideways and saw Obaid trying hard to control his tears. "Sir, I swear to God I have no knowledge of Cadet Obaid's whereabouts," I say, trying to tread the elusive line between grovelling and spitting in his face. The 2nd OIC wants to get home. An evening of domestic cruelty and Dallas beckons him. He waves my statement in front of me. "You

have one night to think this through. Tomorrow it goes to the commandant, and the only thing he hates more than his men disappearing is their clever-dick collaborators. He is looking forward to the president's visit. We are all looking forward to the visit. Don't fuck it up." He turns to go. My upper body slumps. He puts one hand on the door handle and turns; my upper body comes back to attention. "I saw your father once, and he was a soldier's bloody soldier. Look at yourself." A leery grin appears on his lips. "You mountain boys get lucky because you have no hair on your face." I salute him, using all my silent drill practice to contain the inner cadence, which is saying, Fuck your mother, too. I wonder for a moment what Obaid would do in this cell. The first thing that would have bothered him is the smell the 2nd OIC has left behind. This burnt onions, homemade yogurt gone bad smell. The smell of suspicion, the smell of things not quite having gone according to plan. Because our Obaid, our Baby O, believes that there is nothing in the world that a splash of Poison on your wrist and an old melody can't take care of. He is innocent in a way that lonesome canaries are innocent, flitting from one branch to another, the tender flutter of their wings and a few millilitres of blood keeping them airborne against the gravity of this world that wants to pull everyone down to its rotting surface. What chance would Obaid have with this 2nd OIC? Baby O, the whisperer of ancient couplets, the singer of golden oldies. How did he make it through the selection process? How did he manage to pass the Officerlike Qualities Test? How did he lead his fellow candidates through the mock jungle-survival scenarios? How did he bluff his way through the psychological profiles? All they needed to do was pull down his pants and see his silk briefs with the little embroidered hearts on the waistband. Where are you, Baby O? Lieutenant Bannon saw us for the first time at the annual variety show, doing our dove and hawk dance. This was before the commandant replaced these variety shows with Quran Study Circles and After-Dinner Literary Activities. As third-termers, we had to do all the shitty fancy-dress numbers, and seniors got to lip-synch to George Michael songs. We were miming to a very macho revolutionary poem. I, the imperialist eagle, swooped down on Obaid's Third World dove; he fought back...