

Shaista had never heard the sound of Rafiq's anger. She did not think he had it in him, this thin non-entity that her brother had handed her off to, this man whose life revolved between the non-existent praise of neighbourhood poets and a job that had come to him as a dowry.

She had stopped to take a breath while Jamaal scampered around the courtyard laughing in that delightful way that caught in her throat when she heard Rafiq's raised voice. It had taken her a moment to reach close enough to hear him say, "If it's a girl, Jamaal will have a sister to guard and protect, and if it's a boy, Jamaal will have a brother to watch his back, at least one person to trust in this world."

What simple words, and spoken with no great flair for oratory, just a tight anger, and yet they meant so much to her, bringing sudden tears to her eyes. And with those tears something eased in her and she looked again at Rafiq, at her husband that she had never seen.

It was a strange love, one that came so late and in a woman who had long ago lost any thought or hope of any, and had never expected to love this man, of all people, this cipher of a person that her brother had handed her off to. But maybe all love is a misunderstanding of a sort.

Shaista held him that night, after Jamaal had slipped off to sleep, held his face before the lovemaking, kissing him gently, and held him afterwards, wrapping herself around him, keeping him safe, treasuring him. Maybe Rafiq should have asked her why, maybe he could have spoken to her about the danger of her pregnancy and saved her. With her newfound love for him maybe she wouldn't have been so desperate for another child, for another body to love. But he had never had the courage to speak to her before,

when she had not loved him. Now suddenly when he was loved, how could he be suddenly brave with all this to lose? He took the coward's way, and was merely grateful, not at all questioning. And really, is it that easy to blame him? How many men have been brave in the face of love, especially when they suspect that they are undeserving of it? And if there were such men, certainly there were few of them in the town of Moazzamabad, in the mohalla of Rasoolpur. Here courage was conspicuous by its absence. Nobody ever spoke openly about anything, all the accusations were by insinuation; every blow was a stab in the back.

The day after that confrontation with Ahmad Saeed, Rafiq found himself again at the gathering of poets. Of course Ahmad Saeed was there and Rafiq wanted to say something, to apologise. He meant to, and he really was sorry, but there was something more to him now, a happiness that he could not really hide. Ahmad Saeed was quick to note that Rafiq's distraction was not that of a penitent, but something like that of a lover's.

“What was that *shair* of Akbar Allahabadi's?” Ahmad Saeed asked the gathering. “Something about the mullah declaring that the train was passé, hadn't Islam given us the camel?”

There was a shifting of seats as people tried to recall the verse, but despite two or three efforts nobody could call it to mind.

Rafiq asked, stupidly, “Are you sure it was Akbar's?”

And to that Ahmad Saeed released the full pent up force of his anger. “Of course I'm sure!” he all but shouted. “Who else could put the stupid religious fools in their place better than Akbar?”

This time nobody shifted their chairs, but all of them noted the anger on Ahmad Saeed's face, the bafflement and guilt on Rafiq's, and they understood that things had changed.

Lal sahib started polishing his scratched glasses, and said in a soft voice, "Yes, Akbar had a lovely touch. I don't recall the *shair* you mean, Ahmad Saeed sahib, but there was that other one of his:

*Beparda kal jo nazar aieen chand beebian,*

*Akbar zamin mein ghairate Qaum se gar giya;*

*Poocha jo maine aap ke parda ko kya hua*

*Kahne lagi ki aql pe mardo ke par giya.*

Yesterday when I saw some unveiled Muslim ladies,

I, Akbar, was swallowed up by the earth in shame for my community;

When I asked them where their veil had gone,

They replied that it had covered the minds of men."

"A lovely one to remember, Lal Sahib," Shaukat Mian said in appreciation, and even Ahmad Saeed nodded.

"Not the one I was searching for, but a beautiful one. These silly religious types all talk in terms of veils and shame when it is their own minds that are blinded." He paused then, "And it is always the women that suffer."

This time the silence that settled on the group was both deep and embarrassed. This was a gathering of men, and where did women figure into their conversation? Then Khan Jamali looked up at shadow of a stubble on Rafiq's chin and growled, "Arre Rafiq, are you trying to grow a beard? You're not becoming a mullah, are you?"

“Yes, watch out for them,” Shaukat Mian chimed in, “you know what Faiz Ahmed Faiz said, *Shaikh sahib se rasm o rah na ki; shukr hai zindagi kharaab na ki / I didn't send time in discussing traditions with the Shiekh; let there be thanks that I didn't ruin my life.*”

Ahmad Saeed snorted his laughter at that one, and it caught on with the rest joining in, all except Rafiq.. He felt the blood rise in his face, but there was nothing he could say until the azaan saved him, or trapped him. As the loudspeaker crackled into life in the mosque only a few dozen yards away, Rafiq sprang to attention.

“I'll be going,” he said. “It's time for maghrib prayers.”

That silenced them. For all their mockery of the mullahs and sheikhs, and whatever words might have been said about religion, none of them could say a word that would stop a man from going to the mosque. And then, maybe because he was a fool, Rafiq went one step too far. As he exited the patio, he bowed to Lal Sahib and said, “As salaam aleikum.”

It could have been nothing. After all what do the words mean except for a wish for peace upon the receiver. It was merely a greeting, but it was also a Muslim greeting, spoken by a Muslim to a Hindu, the only Hindu among them who made his way almost every day to this neighbourhood dominated by Muslims because of his love of poetry, where he had been treated always as just another poet.

As Lal Sahib fumbled to respond, Ahmad Saeed leapt up in his defence. “You forget your place, Rafiq.”

“I can't even wish peace to one of your guests, Ahmad Saeed sahib?” Rafiq asked in false surprise.

The response sent Ahmad Saeed into a fury, his face turning purple with congested blood. "Out!" he yelled, one quivering finger pointed to the gate.

"From your house to God's," Rafiq answered, and bowed.

His behaviour was amazing, more amazing to himself than anybody else. His head spun with what he had just said and done, the sarcasm in his voice with which he had addressed Ahmad Saeed. What was the matter with him? Had he gone insane?

And then the fear hit.

He was nothing without the favour of Shabbir Manzil, his job, his marriage, even his house, were in the hands of the person he had so gratuitously insulted. And for what? It was not something he could tell.

At the mosque the ritual of ablution brought him some calm as he splashed the water on his face, stroked it over his arms and washed his feet. The prayers were soothing as well, and he stood, then bowed, and straightened only to genuflect again in the company of the fifty or so faithful gathered in the courtyard.

But maghrib prayers are short, and very soon he had nothing left to do. Usually he would sit at the gathering of poets till quite late, getting up just in time to make his way to the house for dinner. Now he had nowhere to go.

So he went home.

Shaista was surprised to see him back so early. She had a knife in her hands with a potato half cut. Jamaal clung to her shalwar and looked up at his father's face from behind the safety of his mother.

"I decided to come home after the namaaz," Rafiq explained, his words hurried and slightly ashamed, and Shaista understood something of it. She knew that his

confrontation with Ahmad Saeed would have cost him, and she burned with his humiliation. Turning quickly so that he would not see the anger in her eyes, she said, “I have been teaching Jamaal the numbers. Will you do that so that he doesn’t bother me in the kitchen?”

So father and son sat down for the first time in the drawing room and Rafiq addressed him solemnly, “As salaam aleikum Jamaal.”

Jamaal only watched him, solemn faced, until Shaista who could hear everything through the open door to the kitchen, said, “Answer your father, Jamaal.”

“As salaam aleikum, Baba.”

Sweat broke out on Rafiq’s scalp, and he found he could not speak to his son. Instead he called out to Shaista, “How much does he know?”

“I can count up to ten,” Jamaal asserted, and Rafiq’s heart felt as if it would pound its way out of his chest for sheer pride.

“Mamujaan,” Jamaal said, meaning Ahmad Saeed, “gave me a Cadbury’s éclair the first time I counted up to ten.”

“Your father will give you two éclairs,” Shaista said promptly.

“*Sach?*” Jamaal asked, asking if it was true in his excitement.

“*Sach.*” Rafiq promised.

Of course poor Jamaal got it wrong, remembering only up to six and then jumping straight to nine, and remembering nothing else. And Rafiq, who had so desperately wanted to buy his son one toffee more than Ahmad Saeed had, could not hide his disappointment. Instantly Jamaal stood up and ran to his mother for shelter.

“Ammi, Ammi!” he demanded. “Second chance. Please ask Baba to give me a second chance.”

Rafiq followed his son to the kitchen, but did not enter the door. This was Shaista’s domain and although Jamaal could barge in, Rafiq could not.

“Uffo,” Shaista exclaimed, “you’ll make me cut my fingers, Jamaal,” but she was laughing, and although Jamaal had failed, he was too young to take it too seriously, especially not in the kitchen, safe in his mother’s love.

“Of course you can have a second chance,” Rafiq said, and looking up at his wife, her eyes alive with joy, “everybody deserves a second chance.”

It was a lie. He knew that, as foolish, as vain and as small as he was. He knew there were things he could never return to. His reputation at the gatherings in Shabbir Manzil had been decimated, partially out of his own pettiness. He felt ashamed now at putting Lal Sahib in such a spot and realised suddenly that he would rather have his forgiveness than Ahmad Saeed’s. But that chance too was gone. Still he could ignore all that for the present, could laugh with his wife, take pleasure in their son.