

DESTINY

By

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No! She thought that man being introduced by her friend and hostess Salma couldn't be Sajjad. Sajjad in Chicago? Impossible! She went a little closer and peered and then froze. The man was indeed Sajjad! Though gray and haggard it was unmistakably him. And the garishly dressed plump woman besides him must be his wife. She felt a lump in her throat as memories of their parting flooded her and she hastily excused herself and bolted from the drawing room. She took refuge in the bath room but the old memories came flooding back :haunting her. After all those years to be facing him ! But how changed he was! How different from the first time she had met him at his cousin and her friend Nafisa's wedding! But that was nearly twenty years ago.

Twenty years ago ,she in her early twenties , a graduate from J.J School of Arts and a commercial artist in a leading advertising company ,had met Sajjad Haidar , an attractive , serious and idealistic doctor .And though till then she had scoffed at the idea of love at first sight she had fallen irrevocably in love with him .She was sure she could spend her whole life with him-in any part of the world .

Since that part of the world happened to be a one –horse town set between the Balaghat ranges and the Manjura river in the district of Osmanabad, her mother and friends were aghast when she accepted Sajjad's proposal.

The wedding had been the usual affair :the *nikah* and *ruksati* .But since they were to leave for his town the next day , rooms had been booked at the hotel .She had felt repelled by the idea of spending her *suhag -raat* at the hotel .But she had silently followed him into the room ,her heart pounding and her nerves all flutter . He was smiling and moving towards her .She had stood transfixed ,eyes glistening with tears and her mind in turmoil .This was not how she had imagined it .She was however surprised when he took her hands in his , gazed deeply into her eyes and said softly: "I know how awful you feel .One doesn't look forward to a wedding night in a hotel room .If you agree we can have it at my place –my home where I grew from child to man."

She had wanted it – to achieve a union in his surroundings .She remembered wistfully their wedding night when they had achieved a oneness. It had been a moonlit night –the moon was so bright that its light shimmered in their bedroom through a prism and the emerald in her ring glistened green and the diamond shone luminously against his black hair as her fingers entwined it .

The days had flown by sketching, performing chores around the house with her mother-in-law , sitting and chatting with Sajjad , and later in the still dark night they would be together , their love melting into each other .

But as time passed the hope in her mother –in –law’s eyes gradually turned to despair and she started dropping hints that Sajjad should remarry .He didn’t seem to take the hints and therefore she had come out bluntly. “You are my only son,” she had said “and it is your duty to provide me with a grandchild .If Arjumand cannot conceive then you will have to remarry.”

She had held her breath while she had watched Sajjad’s reaction .His tone had been gentle but firm: “Ammi, Arjumand can have a son only if God wills it .And if I have to have a child it will be only from her.”

But the same Sajjad had made a complete *volte face* when his mother was diagnosed with cancer. The old lady had sobbed that she would die without her wish being fulfilled and that thought seemed to have completely overpowered his reason.

She could never forget that day when he had broken to her the shattering news. It had been raining, poring after months of draught and the parched earth sighed in relief exuding a fragrance she found intoxicating .Now, she thought the earth would sprout the seedlings, the leafless trees would again become green and the flowers again bloom. But not her womb .Hot tears mingled with the rain.

“Arjumand! You’ll catch a cold.” She had heard Sajjad as he came up from behind while she stood drenched in the rain .He had taken her inside and she had changed into dry clothes but the water continued to drip from hr straight black hair .Sajjad had gently rubbed her hair with a towel but when his eyes met hers he realised that they were wet with tears not rain.

“Now what is the matter?” he had asked in a concerned voice .She had broken down sobbing. “What is it, love?” he had asked again.

“Oh Sajjad !” Why is my womb so barren; so unlike the earth?”

He had taken her in his arms and gently kissed away her tears .And then said, “Arjumand, it seems that it is not God’s will.”

She had looked into his eyes and found them filled with pain .Was it a *fait accompli* that she could not have a child? She felt her body tremble .Sajjad tightened his arms around her and said softly: “I have something very distressing to tell you.” She had felt fear grip her heart. What was he going to tell her? That she was incapable of having a child? No, he had told her while her face was still warm from his kisses that he had agreed to remarry and the marriage was to take place within a month .She had been stunned .He had pleaded with her ; he was , he said helpless and assured her that the other woman was nothing more than a surrogate womb.

She had remained silent .What could she say if he had decided to take destiny in his hands? But that day, after he went to the hospital, she had left his house forever with a request for separation.

But the ways of God are strange .Just a couple of days before the wedding she realised that she had conceived .But she had not informed Sajjad. Why should she? Had he not given up hope of her ever conceiving? Was she supposed to contact and tell him that God had given her a child? No, she had decided that she would never let him know.

As soon as she had her separation she had left India and joined her brother in the States. Here she had their daughter, with Sajjad’s velvet –black eyes and dark curly hair .She had named her Mehek- the name Sajjad and she had chosen for their unborn offspring.

There was a knock at the door and she heard Salma’s anxious voice inquiring: “Arjumand? Are you there?” She had opened the door saying, “Why, what’s the matter?”

“Amer is looking for you .Why did you just disappear?”

“Salma, that couple you have been introducing ...”

“Who? Sajjad Haidar and his wife?....’

“Yes .He is my ex-husband ...”

“Oh no .I didn’t know, love. Alam invited him. Mrs. Haidar is related to him –distant cousin .But now it has put you in an embarrassing position .I suggest you make an exit from the other door .I will tell Amer.”

“No .I can’t just leave Mehek and Amer .Amer may misunderstand .I will have to face the situation .By the way, how many children do the Haider’s have?”

“None .Mrs Haider has some problems.”

Arjumand lowered her eyes .She didn’t wish Salma to see the triumph and joy in them .She felt ashamed at her reaction : but she was after all human .And human beings didn’t forget or forgive so easily .With averted eyes she replied ,”I’ll just join you all in a few minutes .”She again went to the bath room and had a quick look in the mirror .The visage reflected was older ,more mature than the one which had left Sajjad ten years ago ,but she was still pretty .Time and life had not treated her unkindly .She had been lucky to meet and marry Amer .

Amer, a widower with two sons had been a close friend of her brother .He was a gentle, kind and affectionate man in his early forties. A warm and relaxed friendship developed between them .And when Mehek was about four Amer had proposed to her and she had accepted , mainly because she wished to provide Mehek with a family .She had never regretted it .If the marriage lacked the passionate intensity of first love ,it was amply compensated by a calm ,mature understanding.Amer was a devoted husband and a considerate and affectionate father to Mahek showering her with the same love and affection which he did on his sons .Though enveloped in the warmth of a contented marriage she could neither wipe away the memories of her first love nor the deep hurt within her .And today...

She shrugged her shoulders and walked into the drawing room she was completely taken back to see Amer and Sajjad standing together. But while Amer spoke Sajjad’s eyes were glued to Mehek who was sitting a few feet away .Seeing the direction of his gaze Sajjad had called Mehek and she heard him say, "Sajjad, this is my daughter Mehek.”

Sajjad’s eyes were filled with anguish .Was not Mehek the name he and Arjumand had chosen for their unborn child.

Amer had sensed her presence and turning to her said with his warm smile: “Where have you been? I want you to meet Dr and Mrs Haider”. Sajjad’s eyes met hers; with recognition there

was anguish and remorse in them. He could hardly believe that Destiny had played such a cruel trick on him .Arjumand stood before him smiling, serene and pretty, with her husband. She had found contentment in the arms of another man. And the fragrance of the child he longed and prayed for filled the house of another man. Yes, she was his child –he knew for certain. She had his eyes and hair. She had the name which they had both chosen. Had Arjumand conceived when he had told her about his intention to remarry ?Why had she not informed him ?But had he given her the opportunity ?He had been so eager to please his mother . He had trampled on her feelings; simply to gratify those of his mother .A lump rose in his throat .His mother had died without seeing her grandchild though. Mehek had been born in her life time. But then, she didn't know. His sacrifice had been in vain and he was saddled with a woman he neither loved nor respected. Watching Mehek, he felt pain at this loss and his suffering showed on his face.

Arjumand understood his suffering .A wave of pity enveloped her, replacing the hurt: she no longer held any rancour against him .On the contrary, she forgave him and the past ebbed away. She looked steadily into his eyes and in a calm and gentle voice said: “Hello, nice to meet you.”