

THE NEW HORIZON

WITH A START SAIRA AWOKE TO THE CALL OF THE MUEZZIN.

Today of all days, she must not forget her prayers. She thanked the Almighty in Sijda for having realized her dream to make Arshad a doctor.

It had been Asad's wish. His last letter from Dubai had been full of it. He felt the life of a doctor in the villages of India –serving the poor and needy –was more worthwhile than the materialistic existence in Dubai. At least his son would be able to live the life he had visualized but which the constraints of fortune had not allowed him.

Yes, that had been his last letter written just two days before his death in a road accident.

At twenty her world had been shattered. She was a hapless widow with a year old son, with very little money to see them through. Since Asad had married her against his parent's wishes, she couldn't expect anything for them.

"Morning, Ma!" Arshad entered with a beaming smile- that endearing smile of Asad! He was Asad's replica: the same soft brown eyes and burnished hair which gleamed in the sunlight.

"Aslam alaikum betay," she said a little perturbed that Arshad never bothered to keep up their customary greetings which she so assiduously tried to imbibe in him.

"You should have said your prayers today," she rebuked. He responded with a grin. "Ma, are you going to rebuke me or going to give me some tea? I have to be on morning duty and also be ready for the convocation in the evening. Can you believe it? Your son will be Dr. Arshad then. Feel proud Ma?"

Saira glowed with pride. "Yes, my son," she said, handing him the teacup.

As he took it, she had a glimpse of that ugly scar, and as usual, a stab of pain passed through her.

How often she had winced with pain at the sight of that scar, but today it triggered off painful memories.

"My poor darling child," she murmured, as she remembered the incident, and tears welled up in her eyes.

Arshad was gulping the tea, impervious of her emotion. He was as usual, in a hurry to attend the hospital.

"Bye, Ma see you in the evening. Dress well. Wear the Kanjeevaram I bought for you, OK?"

Smiling through the tears, she said, "I will dress well but the Kanjeevaram I am going to wear only on one occasion and now that..."

"Oh, there we go again! Right onto my wedding, I have to rush. Bye, Ma."

"Khuda Hafiz," she said.

It seemed that he had forgotten that incident when his hand had been burnt so brutally. But Saira could never forget. How had it all started?

Yes, it had been in winter. An icy wind had been blowing outside; her mother had been coughing incessantly inside.

She was trying to put little Arshad to sleep, and Taibah Khala who had been visiting them had given that ill-fitted proposal. She had been completely taken aback and had protested vehemently when her mother requested her to consider the offer.

She had pleaded as usual, what would happen to her and the child when she was no more? Taibah Khala had become more persuasive. She had stressed the need of a father for Arshad.

"A child needs a father. Arshad is still young and will accept. A couple of years more and it will be too late. Moreover, it is not easy to manage a growing boy. And can you with your teacher's salary realize your husband's ambition to make him a doctor?"

With this, she had clinched the argument. Saira had nothing to say further. It was for this she lived. And though she could never have imagined any other man in Asad's place she had consented to marry Jaleel Kazi, a widower with two children aged six and eight.

But what a mistake it had been! She shuddered as she remembered those dreadful days. First of all, a woman should not marry someone when she still loves another. Yes, she had never forgotten Asad. Their brief marriage had been idyllic. Perhaps the brevity had been a safeguard against disillusionment.

Whatever the reason, the fragrance of those days was still fresh in her memory, and she remembered them more keenly when she was with Jaleel.

She was always consciously comparing. His touch, his caress was sheer agony. It brought memories of Asad's caresses, and she froze in his arms.

Did he realize that? Of course, he did. A dog can, so why can't a man. And especially when the motivation for marrying her was not providing a mother to his children but because he was smitten by her prettiness?

He had seen her at the school where she taught and had decided to marry her. The frenzy of his jealousy he directed at the child who resembled the dead man he detested. He was always looking for reasons to punish him.

It became a daily affair for her two stepsons Ali and Nisar to pick a fight with Arshad. Then Jaleel blamed Arshad, spanked him made him go hungry to bed. Her heart bled for her child, but she felt helpless. What could she do? Where could she go? Her mother had expired, and she had no one to turn to.

But one-day things reached a point of no return. Saira remembered the day. She had been getting ready for school when she heard Arshad's heart-rending scream from the kitchen. She rushed there and found that Jaleel had burnt the child's hand as a deterrent against hitting Ali. She had never believed that he was capable of such cruelty.

In a split second, she decided: No matter what, she would leave his house forever. She had rushed with Arshad to the hospital and never returned to Jaleel Kazi. As she couldn't give him "talaq"(divorce) which was his prerogative, she took a "khula"(legal separation) foregoing her "mehr"(sum of money in consideration of marriage).

The drawing- room chimed six, and with a start, she realized that she had to be at the convocation hall in an hour's time. In a mad rush, she draped the green silk which Asad had presented her 20 years back. Powdering her face, she took a last quick look at herself in the mirror.

The reflection was indeed complimentary. In spite of streaks of gray, she didn't look much older than the day Asad had taken her out in the same sari to the Ritz.

“Oh Asad, how I wish you were here today!”The tears rolled down her cheeks but quickly wiping them away; she rushed to the convocation hall.

She was in time: the function had just commenced. Her heart glowed with pride and joy as Arshad ascended the stairs to take his degree. Tears again flowed – tears of joy.

Outside Arshad hugged her, “Ma, you look lovely. I am glad you wore this sari and not those awful whites.”

"Congratulations Saira." A voice came from behind. It was a familiar voice, a voice she detested. It was the voice of Jaleel Kazi.

She swung around and with shocked eyes looked at Jaleel after 15 years. He had completely grayed and had become shrunken and pale. Time had not treated him kindly.

"Congratulations," he repeated. "Your son has become a doctor. She looked at Arshad who was watching them nonchalantly. Should she introduce him or not? Jaleel came to her rescue with a smile. "We have met."

Arshad did not acknowledge this. Sara was startled at the strange turn of events. How did Jaleel and Arshad meet? Did Arshad recognize Jaleel?

Jaleel was speaking again. He was telling her how Arshad had saved Nisar's life some days back when he was severely injured in an accident. It was Arshad's presence of mind that had saved his son.

"I must thank you, Saira, for you have made your child a good doctor.

"He turned to Arshad. "Son, you went away that day before I could thank you. Today, I want not only to thank you but also beg forgiveness for..."

Before Jaleel could finish, Arshad said gruffly, "It's O.K. I was only doing my duty," and quickly walked away.

A bewildered Saira hastily excused herself and tried to catch up with her son who was striding ahead briskly. His behavior was inexplicable. Did he know the identity of the man?

"Arshad!" she called out breathlessly. "Wait for me, son."

He slowed down till she caught up with him but he was silent, withdrawn, so she too didn't broach the topic. But, as soon as they were at home, she asked, "Arshad, did you know that the gentleman was your stepfather?"

"Yes, Ma, and I also recognized Nisar when they brought him in –bleeding." He paused for a while and then continued, "I want to confess Ma, for a moment I was blinded by an overpowering desire for revenge. It was easy. I could just allow him to bleed to death. No one would know. I was alone on duty. But this was only for a moment, for the very next instant I realized the gravity of the responsibility which we, doctors shouldered. I cannot use my knowledge—the knowledge to save lives – to wreak revenge. A man goes to a doctor in the throes of pain, with hope and faith, and places his life in his hands. And I wanted to make use of it for vengeance! For personal vendetta! I couldn't do it. I did my best, and the grace of God saved him.

Saira cried with joy, "Shabash, my son! Today you have become a doctor in the real sense of the word. You have broken the shackles of revenge and bitterness. I am proud of you."

She moved towards the window and flung it open. It was a glorious night. The moon shone like a silver ball amidst a thousand stars, and a fragrant wind blew.

Through the bright moonlit night, she could see a new and bright horizon- a horizon without the bitterness of the past. She was sure there was a beautiful future ahead.