

Qudsia Begum - story by Parveen Talha

"Sabiha" Qudsia Begum almost screamed at Vakeel Sahib's daughter who was so taken aback that she dropped the knitting needles from her hand and took some time to regain her composure. And when she did she looked questioningly at Qudsia Begum.

"What did I do? Why did you get so angry *Apa*?" Sabiha was perplexed.

Sabiha was doing her BA from a local college and lived in a large house in the next lane. She would drop in quite often to pick up a knitting pattern or to learn some embroidery. Qudsia Begum too would visit her on her holidays. Sabiha's parents were very fond of her and respected her. There were three girls and a boy in that family. Sabiha being the eldest among the girls exercised considerable influence in the family. But what was it that made the calm and composed Qudsia Begum lose her cool. It is true that ever since Arshad Mian had married a girl who had been studying with him, without his parent's approval, Sabiha had been talking of nothing but her brother's *bad taste*. Today she had been telling the older woman how dark and unattractive her sister-in-law was. Sabiha found it difficult to understand how her brother, who was otherwise so obedient, could keep her parents in the dark about such an important matter. After all he was aware that *Ammi* and *Abba* had given their word to Justice Ikramuddin whose daughter was as beautiful as the moon. Even if he did not want to marry her he could have at least married a girl from a decent background. Sabiha said she shuddered to think how her father would face his colleagues at the *kachehri*. People would soon get to know that his son had married the daughter of a *peshkar*, a low court official. Poor Vakeel Sahib! With his roaring practice and place in society, he had dreams of becoming a judge. The whole of Lucknow will now laugh at him. Qudsia Begum was listening to all this without any comment. She continued to iron her heavily starched white uniform with undivided attention. After all she was proud of being the most efficient nurse at Balrampur hospital and a good nurse had to be immaculately dressed.

Young Sabiha was too involved in her problem to be unnerved by Qudsia Begum's lack of attention. She continued to talk, and at last came out with a solution which her mother had found to the problem the family was facing right now.

"You know *Apa*" she pulled at Qudsia Begum's *anchal* to draw her attention, "Ammi and the rest of us have decided to get *Bhaijan* married again. If he has got one wife of his choice, he should get one of our choice also."

It was this remark that drew the scream from the hitherto inattentive woman. The charcoal iron nearly toppled off the *takhat*. And all that Qudsia Begum could do was to stare at this educated girl almost a generation younger than her. She said nothing more to Sabiha. Setting her *dupatta* on her greying hair, she said it was time for her namaaz and moved towards the tap for her ablutions.

But that evening her namaz was said only mechanically. Qudsia Begum was in a daze. She felt nothing had changed since she walked out of her husband's affluent home with nothing but the clothes she was wearing.

She remembered that evening all too vividly. The day light was gradually pulling into night when she heard a tonga stop at her gate and soon after she saw her husband Faiyaz enter the house with his

new bride. There followed an atmosphere of quiet embarrassment about the house. For some time she got apologetic glances from her in-laws and sympathy from her servants and neighbours. But soon people became vocal. Her in-laws encouraged her by saying she had nothing to lose, she would be looked after well. Faiyaz was a nice boy, after all. He would put her on the same pedestal as his new bride.

But Qudsia Begum could not understand the logic of such a relationship. Between herself and Faiyaz there was place only for love, and love can exist between one man and one woman. And then, one night Faiyaz quietly entered her room just as he used to do. She was on the prayer mat saying her *isha* namaz. He settled down on her bed and waited for her to complete her prayers. She finished her prayers and walked to the *takhat* and sat down near the *paandaan*.

"Qudsia, what is wrong with you? Why don't you talk to me?" Qudsia Begum had imagined that he would never be able to meet her eye and if she was ever directly accosted by him she would break down, but nothing of that sort happened. She could only feel ice forming round her heart.

"Qudsia, please listen to me, nothing has changed between us, I love you as much as I did before," Faiyaz mustered all the softness he could to console her. But she could bear no more.

"Liar," she shouted and turned her face with such disgust that Faiyaz felt quite insulted. His ego hurt by her indifference and coldness, he stood up, and declared. "How dare you behave like that with me? You are my wife?"

And all that ice which had formed round her heart melted through her eyes. Qudsia Begum pulled her *nath* from her nose and threw it at Faiyaz's face and shouted, "*Kameene*, no man can be husband to more than one woman at the same time." She then rushed out of her room into the courtyard and into the kitchen, where she picked up the grinding stone and breaking her glass bangles she shouted, "This much for my *suhag* which had no meaning the moment you ceased to be faithful to me." Faiyaz and his mother froze where they were. And Qudsia Begum took a decision which few women in her place would have courage to take. She crossed the threshold of her husband's house never to look back again.

A knock at the door woke Qudsia Begum from her reverie. It was more than twenty years ago when she had lived through that nightmare, but her life that followed, though full of challenges, had brought her such satisfaction that she never regretted her decision. Her career as a nurse which had started amidst stiff opposition had brought her success, recognition and satisfaction. Could life with Faiyaz have given her that satisfaction, that confidence, and that self respect? Qudsia Begum had her doubts.

The knock on the door became louder. It was Khilawan, the sweeper.

"Open Bibi ji, Dulariey is very ill." Dulariey was Khilwan's seventh born and like the other six kids was always in frail health. Begum knew she would have to go to Khilawan's house to see Dulariey. She took out the medicine chest and poured some milk in a bowl. Should the child require some nourishment Khilawan's hovel was not the place to find it.

She unlatched the door . “What is the matter ,Beta? Don’t get upset,have faith in Allah .Here,take this lock and put it on my door ,I am rushing to your house .”

Qudsia Begum knew her way around Kachcha Hata .She was considered a messiah in this *basti* .When she was returning home after treating Dularey it was past midnight .She noticed that the lights were still on in Vakeel Sahib’s house. Surprisingly a rikshaw was parked outside the house .There was some luggage parked outside the house .There was some luggage on it .

“*Salaam Apa*” Chuttan the rikshaw puller flashed his yellow teeth in a friendly grin.

“Is someone going somewhere from Vakeel Sahib’s house?Which train could be leaving at this unearthly hour? “Curious ,she asked Chuttan

Just then she saw Vakeel Sahib’s son Arshad approach the rickshaw with his newly married wife .

“I am leaving *Apa* .”Arshad mian said .

“You are taking dulhan also ?”

“Obviously .Wherever we go , we go together .”And Qudsia Begum sensed that something serious had happened in the family .Arshad continued ,“*Ammi* and *Abba* did’nt want me to have a family , they wanted me to have a harem,” and he helped his wife into the seat and then sat down beside her ..Both smiled at Qudsia Begum .There was no one at the door of thatbig house to say farewell to the couple .The lane where Vakeel Sahib’s house stood was always dark and lonely.In the dead of night it looked lonelier and darker .But for Qudsia Begum suddenly the sun had emerged in all its glory .As the rickshaw moved away ,she turned towards her house and said ,“Allah is great,” and walked back with much greater confidence than she had ever done before .

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