

Paratha, and a Cup of Tea Afterwards

A Short Story

by

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As the sweltering, sweaty, and scorching Karachi Sun sent the first rays from hell shining down, an unusual scene unfolded: a gaunt woman walked the bold, upright walk unbecoming of a woman in streets at the early hour. Around her, shutters went up as metal ground against concrete, men turned up the heat on massive hot plates, and a busy morning began with breakfast vendors fast at work. Dressed cleanly but unremarkably, the early woman hesitated a moment before she stepped into one of the shops. Curious, confused eyes followed her as she relieved both her hands of a heavy suitcase, and seated herself on filthy a plastic chair. Not their first customer, but certainly the server's first pick.

"A paratha, and a cup of tea afterwards. Put cardamom in the tea."

The plain man hesitated before returning to the cook with the first order for the day.

"One paratha and a cup for the Baji."

"She's going to *sit* here and eat it?"

"Seems so."

Greasy paratha, creamy tea, and inquisitive looks were all patiently consumed without a show of nerves. Done with the fare, the most unusual customer they've had at such an hour put her cup down. As she did, the server came jogging, standing at attention before she was up and paying.

"Baji," went the simple man, "Do you need help lifting that?"

It was, very clearly, a heavy bag — *heavier still for a woman*, the server thought — and she accepted the kindly offer. The walk for the pair was longer than the server anticipated, and fifteen minutes after he began heavy-lifting for the woman he was compelled to start a conversation.

"How far do you need to go, Baji?" Customers who came for breakfast —especially customers who came this early — usually came from the vicinity, except for truck drivers.

"Far," was the curt, confusing response. The server was not exhausted in the least, the suitcase was lighter than he had expected, but he was needed in the kitchen. Chivalry was certainly turning out to be bad for business — but they'd never had a woman come in for

breakfast, and the experience was the first of its kind. He must, however, think of something else — and so he did.

“Do you not have a brother? Or a husband?”

“There was a man. He isn’t here with me — but his heart is. His heart is always with me.”

The server blushed then. He had never before heard such a passionate proclamation of affection, from a woman for a man even less so. To him the feeling was akin to that of accidentally chancing upon a married couple engaging in . . . married things. He didn’t want to think further — he was not married, and he was walking alone down a deserted street at six in the morning *with a woman*. He momentarily wondered if he had walked with a woman alone before—and stopped short because the cook’s face floated in front of his vision: distorted and enraged, wanting him back *THIS MINUTE YOU OWL*.

Knocked out of his reverie, another attempt ensued.

“I really must go back, Baji. My cook will cut my wages if I cause trouble.”

“That’s alright, uh . . .” she searched for a name. “You are called?”

“Nasir.”

“That’s alright, Nasir. Hand over the bag. I can easily carry it.”

“I feel bad for a woman carrying heavy weights, Baji. How far is your home?”

“Very far. I have run away.”

Wide, like a rubber band being stretched to breaking point, Nasir’s eyes gawked at the grim figure in front of him. *A runaway woman!*

“Run. . . away?”

In response, she stretched her lips from ear to ear, her eyes shone crazily, and she pulled her suitcase back from the server — a man far too stunned to react in time. In his mind disturbing images flashed one after the other: unhappy in-laws threatening with bride burning over scant dowry, an axe-wielding brother ready to honour-kill a sister who had dared to love — *there was a man*, she had said, *his heart is always with me*.

Overcome by a desire to help his waylaid and erring companion, Nasir prepared a hastily conjured didactic speech in his head, but alas for him—by the time he had regained his composure, a bus stood at the stop, and the runaway woman was stepping into it.

“Wait!” Nasir shouted in distress, “Baji!”

But the Baji only smiled, like a true sister would, and sent a dainty wave his way. Baji and suitcase were both gone — probably on their way to meet the man whose heart was always with her.

Upon streets no more deserted Nasir walked back, genuinely worried for the runaway Baji — the Baji herself was far from worried, and once more the centre of attention: this time not because she was a woman traveling so early in the morning (other women accompanied her in the front compartment), but because the big bag she carried wasn’t helping. This was school hour, work hour, peak hour — and the bus needed every inch for the travellers who would soon cram the bus close to flipping. The conductor was torn between telling off the woman with the suitcase to get right off the bus and being nice to her, as he should. Niceness to one woman meant unkindness to another — and each woman who got on soon had a problem with the space that the suitcase hogged.

“Her bag is taking up too much space!”

“Her suitcase is pinching me!”

“Tell her to put it in her lap! I will trip over someone!”

Flooded by a constant barrage of complains, the poor conductor was forced to take action — it’s not that he was a stranger to violent altercations (he dealt with *men* all day), but with women he could never tell what he had coming.

“Baji,” he began without much confidence, “Your bag is hogging too much space. It’s troubling other women.”

The Baji didn’t seem to mind his comment. She had, in fact, a solution —couldn’t she sit in the men’s compartment instead? It wasn’t as full as the smaller women’s compartment, which was mainly filled with house maids making their early commute to earn bread and butter.

“You *want* to sit in . . . the *men’s* compartment, Baji?”

“O yes,” she replied, standing up, and dragged her bag with her to the neighboring compartment, where the men grunted but made way for the woman anyway. She had not one but two seats all to herself — but the men who ran out of seats when they stepped into the bus held their heads high. There is dignity in standing as compared to asking a woman to stand in their stead.

Across and nearest to the runaway woman was a wizened old man whose walking stick stood balanced by the suitcase. Several times he had looked over at the woman and smiled kindly — a few others had smiled too, but their smiles that had been far from kindly had been conveniently ignored. The wizened old man’s smile she returned with one of her own, which encouraged him to ask some questions he had obviously been aching to ask.

“Are you traveling, daughter?”

“You can say.”

“You are alone?”

“I am. I am called Nasira.”

She had given a name, but the man knew better than to call her by such a familiar term. It was, moreover, a dangerous sign — no sane woman traveling alone would tell a stranger man her name.

“My name is Sadiq. You can lift that heavy bag?”

“Just so.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way — I don’t mean to offend. But you should be careful. You are sitting in the men’s compartment and there’s no man with you.”

“I have a man.”

“You do. . . ? Where is he?”

“His heart is with me.”

Old as he was, and married too, the old man reacted with the same blush, almost ashamed and embarrassed of himself. Thankfully for him, before he could pretend to regain composure, his unusual companion stood up and walked out, her bag dragging behind her. He hoped she wasn't in trouble, or hadn't run away from home, or anything like that. *Women these days.* . . Still, the old man's experience assured him no woman would venture too far inside the boundaries of trouble, and this one had looked fairly decent.

The fairly decent woman was now making a slow walk in a fairly crowded neighbourhood, and everywhere night watchmen took over their morning shifts as car cleaners — their eyes followed her, and at her bag. More than one wondered what was inside that bag. More than at least one wondered if it had money and if he should make a run with it. At least one followed her for some miles before she turned, evidently aware of the stalking. Nothing was said. She looked at him, and looked — unblinking — and looked and looked until he was rendered uncomfortable and was forced to backtrack. Five minutes later fury overtook him — fury at being such a pansy — and he decided to follow her again. He was forced, once again, to backtrack: she was speaking with a policeman. Policemen scared him — more than thieves, more than the notion of men like himself around his sister, it was almost sweetly satisfying that she should talk to one. But she was going with the policeman now, and he hurried to make himself look harmless.

Bag and Baji both entered a police station not long after, where two-tone walls had decades-old paint almost off and utterly bored policemen sitting with their legs on the tables. Half picked teeth, half picked noses, and a disinterested one picked off from where the runaway woman's previous morning investigators had stopped: what was her name? where did she live? why was she here? had someone wronged her? did she want to file an FIR?

Her name was Sadiqa, she said, and she had run away from home. She wanted to go to a place she knew the name of, but not the address.

“You have run away from home. Why?”

“Because of my husband.”

“What did he do?”

“Bad. He was bad. He said his heart was with God, but he was a bad, bad man.” No shock for the police — they’d heard worse, and seen much worse. Bad husbands? They had at least ten cases a day.

“And you say you have a place to go, and you want the address? Who lives here? Someone who can help you?”

“Yes. He will help me.”

“*He?*” At this the policeman raised an eyebrow. “Is it a lover?”

“Please just give me the address.”

The policeman — Officer Saleem, his tag read — knew he should take the investigation up a notch, not because he had a duty as a policeman, but because his moral duty required him to stop a married woman from running to her lover, no matter how bad her husband. But this morning — as on most mornings — he was too bored, and so he wrote down the address for her. It was an easy address, and there was a very popular mosque near the location.

“Be careful, lady. There’s lots’a bad people around. This city is hell. Since I began my shift, twelve mobiles have been snatched. Two burglaries in homes. One kidnapping. Three clashes. In fact, watch the news and you’ll know — four target killers apprehended. A man violently hacked his friend and ran away with the wife. A group of friends went to a boy’s house for dinner and held everyone at gunpoint, robbing everything and then shooting the family. It’s bad. Men are bad in this city.”

“Men?”

“Especially for a lone woman like yourself, yes, very bad.”

“What about the women? Can I trust them?”

“Ah ... the women can be just as bad. But they are not very violent. Manageable. Composed. Don’t trust anyone, but especially not the men. Go straight where you want to go, and get elders involved with the husband.”

“I’ll get an elder involved. Thank you.”

The policeman's advice was as good as nothing, for she talked to many passers-by on her way: to Sajid the vendor, Tahir the mason, Zain the little boy playing in the street, Mumtaz the fishmonger, Rizwan the roadside barber. Half of her addressees were genial and curious — the other half simply looking for a chance, before watching the suitcase dragged off after the woman who walked away. Her name was Saleema, she said, and Sajida, and Tahira, and Zainab, and Mumtaz, and Rizwana. The Sun crept slowly down as she walked, at long last, towards her destination. Darkness and gloominess fell as street lights flickered off for the next hour: it was the hour of loadshedding in the city of lights.

Hidden from general sight until the generators went on in the quaint neighbourhood, the runaway woman stood small and insignificant in front of a majestic stone structure. As one window after the other came to life with light resuscitated into its bulbs and lamps, she walked away: retreating from the warm lights into the poorer neighbourhoods that remained as dark as the starless night sky above them. Back in the street that was now glimmering with light and resounding with the mechanical sounds of generators, a man walked out of the local mosque, looking up at the sky — and hit something hard, and tripped, and fell.

“Ow!”

The perpetrator was a giant suitcase, red and black, standing in the gateway. It bore no name, and with it stood no bearer.

Soon, little boys and old men and nearby shopkeepers and the head Imam circled the bag, examining it. Should they open it? Should they wait any longer for the owner to show up? Could it have a bomb inside? That last question horrified the onlookers for a good long time, after which the impatient men decided that it was time — and they opened Sesame. Half an hour later, a police van pulled up, parked with no clear intention to park, and out jumped two fellows. They were all-question-everything, from the start. It was quite a commotion.

“You say you found a bag?”

“I didn't, Safeer did. I was there when they opened it though.”

“And you found *meat* inside it? And you called the *police*?”

“It wasn’t just meat ...”

“You could’ve eaten the damned meat, instead of wasting our time.”

“It wasn’t meat — it was a *heart*, Sir. We did think at first that it was a cow heart. Beef. But a man who had finished praying — he’s a medical student, Sir — said it was a *human heart*.”

Between the two of them, the policemen looked just about ready to punch the man — not Safeer, who had found the bag — and so he was wise enough to flash the evidence right in their faces: a red, bloody, and gruesome chunk of meat with veins showing. The lawmakers pinched their noses, shielded their faces, and hit the ‘heart’ with a baton as if hitting a bouncer in a game of gully cricket.

“Get that away from my face, donkey! Is that all you found?”

It was not. They had found also, a bag, men’s clothes inside, sunglasses, and fake hair and beard. One look was all it took for Officer Saleem to recognize it.

“O Allah! That’s the bag that woman was carrying — what was her name? Sadiqa! She was over at the station this morning!”

A general gasp ran around the crowd. Slowly, Officer Saleem began connecting dots — he was having the first detective moment of his career.

“Akhtar, what did they say the man who hacked his friend and ran away with his wife looked like?”

“He, uh, wore a black shalwar qameez” — there was one — “sunglasses, and had red hair and beard.”

“That’s it!” Officer Saleem was euphoric. “The man and this woman are involved! She must’ve been helping him get rid of the evidence! We must report this and ask if the man was missing his heart. Was he, Akhtar? In the report, what did it say?”

“He was missing much of his body, Sir. He had been hacked badly.”

“Then we must find this woman — and she’ll lead us to the man! An accomplice walked right into my station with a victim’s heart and I didn’t even know! Come, Akhtar, let us be off!”

But Akhtar looked like he was having an epiphany of his own — “Sir. . . what if this woman was more? Not an accomplice, I mean.”

“The actual murderer? Hahaha! O Akhtar your mind is so off! A woman couldn’t do this! This is a man’s handiwork.”

Akhtar thought it over for five seconds, and agreed. No woman could do this —they were too weak, and they could only use knives on dead cattle meat. He didn’t like the idea of a woman cutting her knife through a man’s chest — she was an accomplice. They must find the *man* behind it. The next morning, every TV set in the city exploded with the dreadful discovery, a sketch of the man was displayed on screens, and a blurred clip of the lost-and-found heart was played with a VIEWER DISCRETION ADVISED warning. In one quiet home, a woman watched the news unfold, glued to the screen. It clearly intrigued her more than anything else — she had been watching the news with unbroken attentiveness. She spoke to herself at regular intervals, marvelling at the brutality of the incident. Now and then, she shot an excited question at the maid working behind her.

“Gul, tell me, if you ever pulled a heart out of a man’s body, what would you do?”

“Oh Baji, I would . . . cook and eat it. With a paratha, and a cup of tea afterwards. I’d put cardamom in the tea.”