

# What's In A Name?

*A Short Story*

by

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There was blood on the carpet. A description is required to explain a phenomenon that creates such a mystery but in this case it was just blood and not a lot of it, smeared on the carpet.

She looked at the mess with a growing paroxysm of fear. “What have you done you fool?” she muttered under her breath. She got a wet cloth from the kitchen and started cleaning it with astonishing dexterity. The blood on the carpet faded away yet she still hovered over it. A moment passed and she compulsively started picking at the loose strands of the carpet, “Four years and nothing.” The strands were coming out more easily now. “Four years of hoping away my life.” There was an ant hill of the discarded strands. “Thrown away like a burden and taken in for a pittance”. She forcefully dragged the heels of her hands along the carpet. She thought of her husband and winced.

She walked out of the room, faltering as she did, towards the balcony. Her hands grasped the wall after each step; drops of blood still ran down her thighs and stained the hem of her shalwar. The balcony was an abysmal sight. The stray cats had knocked over the clay pots, the plants she had so lovingly taken care of, were now scattered on the floor. She stood at the banister with her right hand on her stomach and sighed. The miserable profile of hers fit right in with the mess at her feet. Noise like hot air had started to rise from below and she started to make sense of what was happening in the street. It was a narrow and muddled little thing, surrounded by three storied buildings which were mostly empty due to the rising rent. A woman was bargaining with the man selling vegetables, ‘Ten rupees for just one? Nonsense! Give me two for twenty’, women here took their bargaining skills very seriously, except for a few occasional screw ups. Her lower lip twitched at the slip-up of the woman below, it was a half-formed smile but a smile nonetheless, and then she shook her head wistfully as if to discard any remaining signs of it.

There are not a lot of things you can think of when your husband is beating you. But after a time and a lot of beatings the thoughts start forming on their own. The first time she was lost in the horror of it. The second and the third time included fighting back and getting bludgeoned. Then one day he couldn't find his watch and blamed her for losing it in the process of cleaning the room. So he tamed her. There are a lot of things you can think of when your husband is beating you. Did I water the plants in the morning? Has the milk on the stove boiled? Can the neighbors hear his shouts? His, not hers, because he swore he will beat her even more if she makes a sound. If I bear his child would it stop? What if I beg my parents to take me back? Is that even an option? There was no subtle transition, no ceremony; just the rhythm of his fists on her bare back and the smooth flow of her thoughts, sometimes trivial and sometimes pleading with her own conscience for a change.

She slid the door close and stepped back into the room and over to the kitchen, towards the tap and poured herself some water. She realized the dishes from the morning had remained unwashed and the mess obviously had to be put right. She gathered all the dirty dishes in the sink and let them soak in the soapy water. She was standing over the sink, tapping her fingers on the marble slab, when she suddenly keeled over and gasped for breath. She looked down to see if the blood had stained the floor. It hadn't. This didn't mean the blood wasn't dripping down her legs; it was, just not in the same amount as before. Her kurta was short enough for anyone to see the dried stains of blood on her shalwar. The white cloth was marred with the different shades of red silently coalescing together, removing the lines between the old and the new. But the kurta needn't be short for the patches of blood to be exposed, for they covered the most part of the shalwar, the shortness, however, did the most provoking thing: it enabled one to trace the origin of the blood stains.

Mediocrity had consumed almost all of her existence; it cannot be assumed if it was her mediocre life that served as an antecedent to such blatant acceptance of her fate, however, it can be assumed that she never really bothered to think that she could have a life better than the one she had at the moment. And what did she have to compare it with? Her life before marriage wasn't a strong basis of comparison either. She had seen her mother labor away all her life to raise her daughters only for her husband to cheat on her. Her mother knew it; in fact, the whole neighborhood knew it. Her mother hadn't questioned him about it. She knew she had daughters and she depended too much on her husband for their safety to risk having her and her daughters included, renounced and thrown out on the street. While preparing food one day her mother looked up from rolling the flat bread on the marble slab and said to her, 'Remember that a man, no matter what he tries, cannot destroy a home. A woman, if she wanted to, can destroy a home with the end of a needle.' What was she supposed to do with those words of advice? She finished putting all the washed plates in the rack, wiped her hands on her kurta and murmured 'The end of the needle is my patience right about now.'

She could hear the noise of car horns and the loud scurried mess of individuals who were scampering across the roads – a slight manic episode before the street settles down into a gentle quietness. She hurried over to the kitchen to put the kettle on the stove. It was the latter half of the afternoon and like clockwork her mind craved tea. Once the water boiled she poured the tea grains in the boiling water and let it brew. She wondered if the milkman had given enough milk to last the entire day, something which she had always worried about. The milk had been added and the tea had been made, yet the ceremony wasn't complete. After the rapidity of her actions was to be analyzed, one could imagine there is a conclusion, a significant entry to these periodical steps, without which the ceremony looked sterile. She took the cup of tea and went over to the

balcony. The sun's position was low enough to shine on the building opposite hers. The building itself was inconsequential; the poster on it, however, was not. Nothing gave her more joy than to look at it at this time of the day when the sun illuminated it. Passing by, no one would have looked at it twice but for her, who had seen it every day for the past five years; it had become a second nature. It was an old decrepit Lollywood poster for *Armaan* that had turned a slight hue of brown from all the rain and dust, Waheed Murad was holding Zeba's cheek and it looked like he was staring into her soul, whereas Zeba was more interested in staring at you. She always thought Murad was a smug bastard but she didn't care enough to treat him with anymore attention; Zeba was not, why should she? She would spend hours staring right back into Zeba's eyes with a cup of tea in her hand and feel complacent; she would do the same now. It had taken her time to get accustomed to Zeba's paralyzing gaze but after lots of cups of tea and sheer loneliness, she welcomed it. There was a slight itch in her thigh and she scratched it. Without removing her gaze from Zeba's she wiped the blood on her fingers on the cold steps of the stairs she was sitting on. She took a sip of tea every now and then but her eyes never left the poster.

This intimate routine was an integral part of self actualization for her. Sitting there, at that moment, made her realize that the world will choose to move on, without considering her misfortunes. The anxiety of being alone in her adversity made her nauseous. 'But she had been happy sometimes, that should count for something', she bargained with herself. As the shadows grew shorter and Zeba's gaze grew less visible, she knew her husband would be back soon. She got up to go inside, nodded slightly towards the poster and left.

She went back inside and closed the window. Tiny particles of dust danced in the streaks of sunlight that had escaped and she stood there for a moment, mesmerized by the performance. Then she passed her hand through it, disturbing its flow. Dragging her hand across the walls of

the room, she let it rest on the kitchen counter again, the cool marble finishing sent sudden chills down her back to her lower abdomen and her insides contracted. The tap water was dripping and every time a drop hit the ground, she gained a little strength. Time works differently when you pay attention to little details, it's slower and that is the salvation she needed right now. She took the empty cup of tea to the sink and began washing it. As soon as she was done with that she took the kitchen cloth and dried the sink. The kitchen counters were clean but a wipe away from being absolutely pristine. She decided to wipe them too. The sunshine had illuminated the room in a bright orange but it was dusk now and there was almost no light. She made her way to her bedroom, carefully avoiding the full length mirror that faces you almost right away as you are about to enter the bathroom. She went inside and turned on the shower, she checked to see if it had turned warm and decided to let it run for a few seconds more before she got in. Taking off her clothes, or changing them was always a chore and she never liked putting them on anyway, but it needed to be done and here she was, doing it. The clothes dropped to the floor and she stepped into the shower. She liked this part, the hot water hitting her back and the steam engulfing the bathroom. She cleaned her body and the inside of her thighs with soap and let the water rinse it away. Her shoulders dropped with ease and she stood there for a moment, letting the hot water hit her back. She got out when she made sure she wasn't bleeding anymore and dried herself with the purple towel she had brought from her parents home. She changed into a new set of clothes that smelled of washing powder and discarded the old ones into a wicker basket of dirty clothes. She brushed herself down and looked in the mirror. Nice and clean, she thought, as she put a lock of wet hair behind her ear. She went out of the room with a hair brush in her hand and her hair still dripping wet. She sat down on the carpet, the drops of water turned the light brown carpet dark where ever they fell. She brushed them for a couple of minutes. She put the brush aside eventually and focused on the door. Her fingers traced the carpet; pulling away

loose strands here and there, the movement quickened its pace. She dragged the heels of her hands across the carpet, away from her body. Her husband was expected to return anytime now.