

A Thorn in the Eye

FINALLY, as a last resort, Amma sent for Ahmed Babu.

When the poor man first came and settled in this neighborhood at the time of Pakistan's independence, he was regarded as a young man. But now, after having been a clerk in the central government all these years, he was very much Ahmed *Babu*. On his tall, lean frame he carried a small head and face with a ponderous air. The appearance of his stooped shoulders gave the impression that the weight of all the files in the Chief Court building (where he worked), along with the weight of the scales that hung from the face of that building, rested on his shoulders. When he went out he wore a tight-fitting suit and on special occasions also donned a tie. He had taken on the responsibility of keeping the entire neighborhood abreast of all the current news. In addition, he wrote letters for the old women living in the small shanties strung along each side of the road and the shops that lined it. And for this reason, the whole neighborhood, which also included those living in the quarters, called him Ahmed Babu, a name that became a symbol of his popularity.

When Ahmed Babu came, Amma positioned herself behind a half-opened door and inquired about his family. Amma's casual purdah in the presence of the young men in the neighborhood was very much like the purdah of the young girls who had been born and raised in this very neighborhood. After some initial small talk, Amma suddenly said, "I say, why don't you get married before you leave? How will you find a girl in that foreign place."

Ahmed Babu was one of those fortunate people who were among the first to leave for Rawalpindi since the capital was shifted there. Treating the remark as if it were a tuneless melody, he broke into a sheepish laugh and said cursorily "Maybe you can arrange something, I'm ready."

Amma lowered her voice. "Yes, there is a girl who lives nearby," she said conspiratorially. "I say, you've seen her, our own Hajira." And she

casually opened the door far enough so that Hajira, who was grinding spices, could be observed.

Ahmed Babu trembled at the sight of Hajira sitting in the sun with her glistening cheeks and her arms peeking from the sleeves of her shirt.

Amma continued. "She's pretty, has some education, and she's well-bred, her family had a middle class status in Delhi, although here they have suffered much hardship. But I swear on my faith, there's no flaw in the girl."

Ahmed Babu had seen Hajira before on several occasions. But taking a wedding party to one of the shanties was a somewhat demeaning prospect. He expressed this thought to Amma in broken sentences, stuttering and foundering as he spoke. Amma was already prepared for his response. Nevertheless, she remained thoughtful for a few moments.

"We'll send the girl off from our house," she finally said. "The women can sit inside and a tent can be put up outside for the men. I'll also help with the dowry, now don't worry at all."

Ahmed Babu's face broke out in smiles when he heard this. He couldn't find words to express his gratitude. He merely stuttered. His mother had been ailing for a very long time and would not be able to search for a bride for her son, so there was little chance of any resistance from her, and in addition, Amma was taking care of all the arrangements, so right there, at the doorstep, Amma fixed the date and let Ahmed Babu know what it was. Hajira had left by now so she spoke openly, offering this last comment as a concluding statement. "Just have two or three suits made, also a few items of jewelry, and make sure you take her with you to Rawalpindi after the wedding."

When the daughter-in-law heard this a look of sarcasm appeared in her eyes and if Amma had seen that look it would have rankled in her heart like a thorn for the rest of her life. As far as Bahu could remember, Amma had disliked Hajira ever since the day she appeared in their house wearing a *burqa*. True Hajira had been going in and out of the house all these years. In the beginning she dashed about in her bare feet, her head uncovered. After a few years a flimsy rag-like piece of cloth was dragged about as a *dupatta*, and then, one day, she appeared wearing a *burqa*. That day she kept the lower part of the *burqa* on while she was working, her pink *dupatta* covering her ears and her hair before it slipped into the darkness of the *burqa*. When she had finished washing the dishes and was hanging out the baby's clothes on the line, Bahu called out from her room.

"Hajira, be a dear and sweep Amma's room, it's been so filthy since

morning, that cursed room.”

Despite the forced concern Bahu seemed to exhibit, the sarcasm in her voice, which was intentional, was not lost on Amma, who muttered “Hunh!” and turned over on her side in her bed.

Hajira came in and started briskly sweeping the floor. Her pink *dupatta*, and perhaps also her energetic haste in carrying out the task at hand, had heightened the color in her cheeks. *These wretched crumb-eaters, just look at their complexions, like ripe pomegranate seeds,* Amma thought as she observed Hajira from her bed. When Hajira lifted up some of the furniture in the room and carried it outside, the thump of her heavy steps seemed to fall ponderously upon Amma’s delicate heart. *These wretched creatures, how strong they are, water will gush forth where they strike the earth with their feet.* Amma had always walked cautiously. On Judgment Day she would cry out against these earthbound creatures. If Amma hadn’t been told to do this since she was a little girl, she still would not have had enough strength to give the earth such an opportunity. From her childhood she had been like a shrinking plant.

When she had finished sweeping, Hajira went and stood by Mian-ji’s chair. He looked at her questioningly and then, observing the broom in her hand, he gave his chair a little push and walked to the other side of the desk.

“Why don’t you go onto the veranda,” Amma advised. “This cursed dust, the room is filled with it.” When Kallu used to sweep the floor, Mian-ji stood by his desk in exactly the same fashion and the minute he was done, Mian-ji returned to his chair and resumed his work. Who knows why Amma suddenly felt so overcome with love for him today. Mian-ji quietly went out on the veranda. Amma was watching Hajira’s arms that peeped from her loose sleeves; they leapt about as if they were bands of lightning. Amma absently rubbed her own rough-skinned arms. In a moment Hajira had finished cleaning the room and, all the rubbish collected, had reached the veranda. As he was coming back to the room Mian-ji asked casually, “Why doesn’t your brother bring the newspaper anymore?”

“He’s stopped delivering newspapers, Mian-ji,” Hajira replied.

Amma muttered, “Why shouldn’t he stop working? His sisters bring home enough from our houses.”

His wife’s strangely altered demeanor made Mian-ji feel as if it was he who had given these sisters the advice to go to people’s houses. Quickly he pulled up his chair and became immersed in his work.

Although she could smell the meat burning in the kitchen, Amma

didn't move from her bed. It was very simple; if the odor of burnt meat had entered her sickly nostrils, surely it must have entered Bahu's healthy nostrils first.

"Hajira, take a look, the meat is burning—I'm feeding the baby!" Bahu screamed from her room.

Actually she wasn't saying this to Hajira, because she knew very well that her voice could only carry to the adjoining room and not all the way to Hajira on the veranda. Irrked to no end by this craftiness, Amma dragged her slippers as she rushed toward the kitchen. Transferring the burnt meat to another pot, she rinsed the first pot and emptied the water into the drain. On returning to her room she found Hajira standing next to Mian-ji requesting a piece of paper and an envelope. For some reason this scene disturbed her immensely.

"Why? Whom do you want to write to?" she asked brusquely.

Mian-ji pushed the paper and the envelope to a corner of the table and again became absorbed in his work.

"Amma is going to dictate a letter to my older brother in Lahore," Hajira said, picking them up.

"The two vagabond brothers and their father have no consideration for the young girls who roam around toiling in other people's houses," Amma mumbled. Seeing that today Amma was feeling particularly sorry for the unmarried sisters, Hajira decided to ask her for a little money.

"This shrewdness won't work with me. First you got an envelope out of sweeping one room and now you're asking for money."

"Sweeping one room? And what about all the pots and pans I cleaned and the clothes I washed?"

"So, what do you want me to do? Go and ask Bahu for money." Amma turned away and Hajira set out for Bahu's room. After Hajira had left, with some money and an old shirt rolled under her arm, Amma decided to pay Bahu a visit. The moment she saw Amma enter the room, Bahu gave Nannha a wallop on his back. The sleeping child shuddered restlessly.

Amma saw all this and clearly grasped the meaning of it, but she curbed her anger because if she expressed her displeasure the altercation between the two would continue until five o'clock. That was when Amjad, the lord and master of one, and the precious offspring of the other, would return home exhausted from a day at the office, his distress having been heightened by the chaotic traffic along the way. At that time Nannha would be clinging to his father's legs clamoring for toffee, and it would be impossible for both women to prove that Nannha was fast

asleep when their altercation commenced. Also, Amma came to remember how her own mother-in-law used to control her displeasure and remain silent when she used to use the excuse of putting Amjad to bed to take a nap herself, which often stretched into many hours of sleep; not only that, because she was asleep, her mother-in-law would be forced to undertake several household chores in the afternoon.

“Bahu, did you send for Hajira?” Amma asked in a calm tone of voice. The tranquil nature of Amma’s tone put Bahu on guard because it always preceded an overpowering onslaught.

“Yes, what could I do? Ever since Kallu left us, the rooms have been such a mess, and as for the dirty dishes, they were stinking up the house.”

“But Hajira is not a child anymore, you shouldn’t send for her. There are so many little girls in the shanties you can call—after all, there are young men in the house to consider.”

Having delivered her attack, Amma left the room without waiting for a rebuttal.

“Hunh!” Bahu muttered irately. “Which young men is she referring to? Amjad, poor man, leaves the house early in the morning and returns at six, Samad comes back from college and goes to sleep after lunch and wakes up in the evening. No one is home during this time of the day, except for Mian-ji.” She didn’t give up when she couldn’t express her views in her mother-in-law’s presence, refusing to rest until she had delivered her arguments, even if only to the walls.

The next day when Bahu sent for Hajira she quietly told her not to tell Amma that she had asked her to come. “Just say you wanted to get something,” Bahu advised. Hajira was not a child anymore; she had a good enough grasp of the little underhanded tricks that were commonplace in these households. So, the moment she arrived she immediately went up to Amma pretending to be there for a purpose; sometimes she’d ask for a *paan* or a tobacco for her father, or for a *fewannas*. On hearing her voice Bahu would call out to her nonchalantly.

“Hajira, now that you are here, would you do a few chores for me?”

The few chores would take hours to do and Amma, seething inwardly with rage at Bahu’s audacity, would engage in squabbles with the vendor outside the front door, or the *paan*-seller, or even Mian-ji himself.

Suddenly Bahu noticed a very pleasant change appear in her mother-in-law. She saw that Amma was working hard in the kitchen. This was a far cry from her usual habit of procrastinating until eleven o’clock, waiting for Bahu to start cooking; here she was today, busy since nine in the morning. The pots and pans had been washed and arranged

properly, shiny and neat, the dough had been prepared, and Amma was sitting on a stool, peeling vegetables. Just then Hajira arrived.

“Get out of here, wretch!” Amma scolded. “Here she is with her cursed face.” She addressed Bahu. “Bahu, I’ve done everything, you can saute the meat and then cook the rotis. Don’t encourage this girl. Why, she makes an appearance every day just to dupe us into giving her six or seven *annas*.”

Bahu agreed with her, but behind her back she motioned to Hajira, who hid her face in her *dupatta* and departed giggling. A few minutes later when the sound of running water was heard in the bathroom, Bahu feigned surprise and said, “The wretch! No matter how much you tell her to stay away, she doesn’t listen. She must have taken Nannha’s clothes when we weren’t looking. I’ll not give the wretch a penny today.”

“You’ve spoiled her.” Amma became indignant. “She’s into everything and when something gets lost tomorrow or the day after, you’ll weep.” Suddenly Amma’s anger rose to such a pitch that she dropped the vegetables, and leaving the kitchen in a huff she went to her room to lie down.

Hajira continued to come every day on one pretext or another. If Amma got the chance she would throw her out, but half an hour later Hajira would be back. Either she wanted some change for a rupee, or she had bangles and earrings she had bought from the street vendor to show Bahu. Ever since she had been made to wear the *burqa* and her comings and goings had been curtailed, she was always looking for an excuse to leave the house. As for Amma’s complaints, they went in one ear and out the other. Amma continued to gripe about Hajira. It was strange that at first her arguments appeared very substantial, but after she was finished complaining, they seemed trivial and she would begin to search for other, more tangible excuses to keep Hajira out.

One day when Amma was scolding Hajira for galloping about aimlessly and not studying, Mian-ji suddenly screamed. “What is this constant *tar, tar!* I can’t get any work done with all this noise. What difference does it make if she studies or not?”

Hearing the sound of this thunderous voice, Hajira grabbed her *burqa* and hurried off, but Amma broke into a fit of weeping that would not end. When Mian-ji picked up his walking stick and left the house, Bahu came in to console Amma. But Amma cried hysterically, complaining that her husband had belittled her in the presence of a worthless girl. “If she enters the house now, I’ll break her legs,” she threatened. Bahu tried to calm her down, reassuring her that Hajira would not dare to set

foot in their house again. She also made tea for Amma and this way Bahu spent the entire day in the kitchen while Amma stayed in bed.

For a few days Hajira didn't show her face. Amma helped Bahu in the kitchen regularly and continued to tell everyone who came to visit to look for a houseboy or a cook for them. But people were aware of the difficulty of finding a cook in Karachi. Gradually the mother-in-law again began entrusting Bahu with most of the work. Because of a weakness in her bones she suffered constantly from headaches and backaches. One day when Amma had a severe headache and she herself was tied up with something else, Bahu sent for Hajira to come and massage Amma's head with oil. Amma wasn't too happy with the idea, but she didn't say anything. Also, Mian-ji was not around at the time so it would not be embarrassing to have Hajira there, and anyway, Hajira was so good at massaging that the very thought of her rubbing her head made Amma's skin tingle. But the consequences of giving Hajira this leeway were not altogether favorable, because she started making several visits a day in her usual brazen, impertinent manner. This was when Amma realized that if she had scolded Hajira instead of letting her massage her head, Hajira would not have had the courage to behave in this manner. However, the mistake had been made, and both Hajira and Bahu were now taking full advantage of Amma's miscalculation.

Finally, one day when Hajira was sitting in the courtyard grinding spices and Mian-ji pulled his desk to the window to do his work, Amma had no recourse but to send for Ahmed Babu.

After her conversation with Ahmed Babu she called Hajira's mother and gave her the news. It was as if a dry field had suddenly been showered with buckets of rain. Hajira's mother clasped Amma's feet and piled blessing upon blessing on her. Today, after who knows how many years, a glimmer of joy had illuminated her eyes. When she came to her senses after a short while, she wiped her tears with a corner of her *dupatta* and said, "Amma, there's something I want to say. My younger daughter's marriage is not such a problem, it's the older one I'm worried about. She's not getting any younger, you know."

On hearing this Amma pulled her feet away, arched her eyebrows, and turned on her side. "Well, it's up to you then. Find a groom for your older daughter. Of course Ahmed won't marry her. After all he's a clerk, and only I know with what difficulty I've convinced him to agree to the match. One has to examine what one has, you know. Now the older girl has neither looks nor appearance and she's always sick." When Amma turned away and was silent for a long time, Hajira's mother realized her

mistake. After a half hour of cajoling, the conversation finally returned to the pleasant point where it had begun. Amma explained some golden rules to her.

“No matter what it takes, prepare a few things so you don’t lose your honor in the presence of the in-laws. Make Hajira stay at home and do some work. I tell you, if I see her galloping about I won’t have anything to do with this wedding. And if she behaves, I’ll help in any way I can.”

As the news spread that she was helping with Hajira’s marriage, Amma’s interest, which had been minimal in the beginning, grew to the point where it became overpowering and she was seen engaged in preparations for Hajira’s wedding as if the matter at hand was her own daughter’s wedding. She took one of her new *dupattas*, cut up a silk *gharara* of hers and had a quilt stitched for Hajira. All this time she had carefully saved the cotton from the old quilts, but now she immediately retrieved it from storage and handed it out for pillows. The copper utensils which Bahu had asked for on several occasions, appeared; they were polished and given away as well. And to top it all, Bahu’s workload was increased with the request from Amma that she stitch Hajira’s shirts.

Oh God! What dedication. And then Bahu saw money being taken from the rusty trunk and doled out to Hajira’s mother. All this made Bahu very apprehensive. She finally approached her husband one day.

“It seems as if suddenly her heart has opened up. She never put even two *paisas* on Nannha’s palm, and whenever Hajira came asking for money before, she had to return empty-handed. But now Amma is spending money very generously. I’m afraid she might give away her jewelry.”

And Amjad Mian, who was, after all, his mother’s son, added fuel to the fire by saying, “Well, if she wants to give it away she can, it’s her jewelry, what can anyone do?”

From then on every night Bahu had a dream in which she saw Hajira dressed up as a bride, and there was Amma taking out all her jewelry from a small box and arraying Hajira with it while Bahu watched in surprise and shock, her mouth hanging open like the naked, hollow emptiness of the jewelry box.

One by one Bahu started remembering the instances when she had mistreated her mother-in-law. Truly, she had tormented Amma often just for the sake of a little comfort for herself, and had on many occasions deliberately angered her. This situation with Hajira was an example. What if Amma was doing all this to get even with her!

Well, whatever was in the past could not be erased. She tried to make

up for her shortcomings by preparing all the meals without a single word of protest and by doing whatever Amma asked her to do. Amma, who was certain that Bahu would place hurdles in her path during the preparation of Hajira's dowry, was surprised to see the pleasant change in her. This new development added to the good mood Amma was exhibiting these days. And as for Mian-ji, he spent the major part of his time in the bazaar in connection with Amma's long shopping lists.

The wedding finally took place. The neighborhood rang with Amma's praises. Amma provided the food; Mian-ji had spent an inordinate amount of time looking for the proper cook. These were accounts that were repeated as part of the accolades heaped on Amma. Ahmed Babu was also happy. After many years of a barren existence, he had gained a lively, beautiful bride as suddenly as if she had fallen from the sky into his lap. And who could plumb the depths of Hajira's mother's happiness? When she walked it seemed her back was bent from the weight of Amma's benevolence. Amma herself felt a strange kind of spiritual peace, the kind very old people who are on death's door feel when they have performed the Hajj pilgrimage. Bahu's happiness was of a material nature, no doubt, but it wasn't any less important than Amma's, because, perhaps due to Bahu's good behavior these last few weeks, Amma had held back the jewelry box without disturbing it once.

Today, now that Hajira's wedding is two-months old, which is long enough for people not to be talking about it constantly, but not so long that everyone should have forgotten it altogether, Ashi's mother arrived without warning. She had lived with her daughter in the nearby shanty town for a few days, and then moved into a servant quarter some distance away from here, but her old acquaintances took care to provide her with news of the latest happenings in the neighborhood. Subsequently she multiplied by two everything she had heard about Amma's contribution to Hajira's wedding and recounted it to Amma, adding that a jewelled palace was being constructed in heaven in Amma's name because of all her good deeds. Then she proceeded to inform Amma that her daughter Ashi was engaged, but she lacked the means to prepare a proper wedding for her. She also subtly hinted that Ashi was more worthy of assistance than Hajira because she was an orphan and had no brothers. In addition, Ashi's mother said, she didn't want to trouble Amma by having the wedding here. All she needed was some financial assistance so she could arrange a decent wedding for her daughter. She had travelled a long way on her old, rickety legs, her hopes pinned on Amma, who was the last refuge of aging mothers and unmarried girls.

Amma listened patiently to all this. “Look here,” she finally said, “I don’t have anything now. There was a great deal of expenditure at Hajira’s wedding.”

Silence fell heavily in the room. Bahu, standing behind the curtain, smiled. Suddenly Amma retrieved a four-*anna* coin knotted into her waist-string and placed it before Ashi’s mother. “Take a bus on your way back.”

Saying this, she turned her back to Ashi’s mother and closed her eyes. She was getting sleepy. Her face mapped with lines of disappointment, Ashi’s mother continued to bless Amma, but her manner belied her intent.

“May you always be happy, may your faith never be shaken,” she was saying as if she actually meant, “May you always be miserable, may you die without God’s mercy.” Today she felt as if all the stories about Amma’s generosity were completely false and she was convinced that this was the same niggardly, stingy Amma whom she had tested many times before when she lived in this neighborhood.

A few moments later Bahu passed by Amma’s bed and feigning innocence, asked, “I say, what is this four-*anna* coin lying on the floor? It isn’t the same one you gave Ashi’s mother, is it?”

“It must be the same,” Amma said, stretching out a hand without turning to glance at Bahu, and muttered, “I’m not in charge of all the world’s unmarried girls, am I?”

And she carefully knotted the coin in her waist-string. □

—*Translated by Tahira Naqvi*