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The Maulvi and the Christian Girl*

SOMETIMES, the human figure teases you. Take a good look and you might lose your piety. Hamida was like that. Marked with liberal curves in all the right places. Her long braid danced on her back balancing the spring in her step. A small golden stud in her nose blinked red then green, as it caught different rays of light. It was all there, with the only thing lacking being an unglamorous fate. It had been eight years since Hamida began cleaning toilets at people's homes. At thirteen her mother put her to work for some of her own clients, making sure there were no mischievous young boys to distract her. The Maulvi was the perfect client. Not only did he have no sons, he was also the respected imam of the local mosque. With his wife and teenage daughter, the Maulvi was living with dignity and devout faith in a small suburb of Faisalabad. Always adorned in traditional Islamic attire, the long beard completed the façade. The Maulvi was the unsung king of this neighborhood. A humble abode measuring one thousand yards was made up of two bedrooms, a verandah, and a courtyard. The kitchen and bathroom stood between the verandah and courtyard. This was their world. The three-member family didn't need much ... after all, even a palace isn't enough for those who spread their needs too far. Contentment was the name of the game here. His wife was a real housewife, converting this brick house into a living breathing home.

"Hamida have you cleaned the bathroom?" Aisha called out.

Aisha herself was thirteen now. She was usually in school at this hour, but today was Friday, the holy day, and school was closed. Hamida liked Aisha a lot. Aisha treated her like a human. The Maulvi and his wife wouldn't let Hamida touch anything. As a toilet cleaner, coupled with being a Christian, Hamida's touch defiled everything. Should she accidentally come in contact with anything, it was rinsed well under running water to ensure its "cleanliness."

*"Maulvi 'Abdu'l-Ḥaq," from the author's collection *Dūsra Rukh* (Karachi: Scheherzade, 2011), pp. 80–91.

“Yes Aisha bibi, I’ve cleaned it. You can use it now,” Hamida smiled at her.

Saeeda, the Maulvi’s wife, was scared of Hamida’s smile. That smile resembled a blossoming flower, demanding attention from whomever it was bestowed upon. If it was up to Saeeda, the Maulvi would never see Hamida smiling. Why do these toilet cleaners have to be so attractive, she constantly grumbled to herself. A good cleaner should be unshapely, dark in color, with poor features, she declared steadfastly.

“Hamida, make sure the floor in the sitting room is mopped today. It’s Friday and people will come to see the Maulvi Sahib after prayers,” she instructed.

Saeeda went to her husband who was hiding behind a newspaper. “Hamida has cleaned the bathroom. When Aisha comes out, take a shower or you’ll be late for the prayers,” she commanded as she entered the room.

“Yes, I should do that.” The Maulvi slowly lowered the newspaper. As long as Hamida worked in the house, the newspaper was always installed in front of his face ... it provided a great cover for his roving eyes.

“Saeeda, would you please cut this passage of the Qur’an and put it in a safe place? These stupid people print such things in the newspaper not realizing they might be thrown on the floor, or be handled by untouchables. People just don’t think!” The Maulvi suddenly got angry.

It was a common occurrence in the Maulvi’s home. If they found any verses from the holy book printed anywhere, Saeeda cut them out, kissed them, touched them to her eyes, and then placed them in the attic. Once or twice a year, these were either buried or washed away in the clean waters of a nearby stream. Saeeda left the room to fetch a pair of scissors. Hamida, having finished the rest of the house, entered the room. She was carrying a bucket full of water in one hand, a mop in the other. Her pants were tucked under at the waist, exposing her legs. The weight of the old bucket bent her body sideways, like a tree bent under the burden of its fruit. The Maulvi’s eyes were glued to her white fleshy legs. He folded his ankles on top of the chair so his feet or pajamas wouldn’t touch the mop, water, or anything else she might be carrying. The newspaper engulfed his face.

“Hamida, see you left that corner?” he motioned. He had to start somewhere, he reminded himself.

“Okay,” Hamida replied softly. She kept her eyes lowered and redid the corner she had just mopped. She was never sure about the signals she received from the Maulvi. He was a man of high esteem, deference, and religious zeal. He was well known for his values. But something kept gnawing at Hamida. How could she ignore her sixth sense? For some rea-

son she was always afraid of him. She couldn't remember ever looking at him directly. Some eyes can make you feel stark naked. The Maulvi's eyes were definitely in this category.

"It's high time you recite the kalima and accept Islam as the true religion. Allah will reward you in the afterlife," the Maulvi preached. He began to lower his newspaper, ready to begin a lengthy sermon.

"It's okay the way it is, Maulvi Sahib," Hamida sighed. She had deflected this query many times before. It always made her uneasy.

"It's not okay at all. If you keep following Christ it will only lead you to Hell on the Day of Judgment. Why did you have to turn God's messenger into His son?" The Maulvi constantly reminded her that according to Islam, Jesus was one of God's messengers, amongst numerous other messengers, but not His son. "Aren't you afraid your body will burn in Hell?" He looked at her body as if he was eyeing it for the last time before it became fodder for Hell.

"Maulvi Sahib, it's okay. Things are working just fine," Hamida protested feebly.

"I don't see it working out. Once you recite the kalima and become a Muslim, I will marry you to a decent man. How long will you go on mopping?"

"Maulvi Sahib," Hamida stopped short. She felt a warm flush spread across her face. She could feel the Maulvi's probing eyes burning her in different places. She spread her dupatta across her chest. She was trying her best to finish as quickly as possible and get out of there.

"Just recite the kalima once. I have high hopes for you. Maybe not a bachelor, but we can still find you a good match as a second wife." The Maulvi was an expert archer. And Hamida was an unsuspecting target, walking in front of the arrow herself.

To Hamida's relief, Saeeda entered the room with a scissors. The Maulvi's newspaper went back up. The mopping was almost done and soon Hamida picked up her bucket and went out.

"Stay in your chair for a few minutes. Walking on a wet floor often leaves marks behind," Saeeda chastised. The Maulvi was not sure what she really meant.

"Hamida, make sure you empty my wastebasket as well," Aisha called out.

Hamida grabbed a fresh trash bin liner and went to Aisha's room.

"What happened ... get scolded by Dad?" Aisha asked.

"No, he was asking me to recite the kalima," Hamida responded.

"Recite the kalima?" Aisha repeated, puzzled.

"Yes, meaning convert to Islam. Aisha bibi, you know I'm a Christian."

“Okay, so recite the kalima. What difference does it make? All Muslims will go to heaven,” Aisha said, as naïve as ever.

“No bibi, our Holy Father says the same thing. All Christians will go to heaven. If I say the kalima, I will not be a Christian anymore.”

“Okay, then don’t recite the kalima, but stop being so scared,” Aisha said, exasperated. In Aisha’s age-old wisdom everything was black or white.

“I get scared when I read the newspapers about Christians being in trouble. My mother says all religions are good—Muslims are good as well. Is it necessary that all Christians convert to Islam?” Hamida was wise beyond her age.

“All right, empty my trash and leave. I need to finish my homework.”

The Maulvi put on clean clothes after taking a shower and left for the mosque. He was early. Only a few of the faithful had shown up so far. He shook hands with everyone, asked about their families. He knew the regulars personally. The Maulvi was a staunch Muslim, unbending, without even a hint of compromise in him. He had borne the hard lashes of a police baton many a time, defending his cause. He wore the marks proudly. His sermons were delivered in a very articulate, decisive voice, and were usually well received. By prayer time, the mosque was full. He directed the faithful to stand shoulder to shoulder in a straight line. Today his sermon was about blasphemy. Recently a Swedish newspaper had published provocative and controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. This had infuriated the Maulvi, along with many other Muslims, so he decided to talk about it today. His fervor, sensationalism, and passion instilled fire in people’s hearts. The simple, God-fearing worshipers cried at the unjust degradation and attack upon their belief. The Maulvi played with their sentiments the way a child plays with a ball: hold it, let it drop, toss it in the air.

When most of the people had gone, the Maulvi left for home on foot. He followed the straight, paved road for a furlong. He passed the second right, and his house was fourth from the corner in the third lane. He had barely turned onto the straight road when he saw Hamida. The Maulvi’s own road suddenly developed many curves. Having finished her work at Shafique’s house, Hamida was headed toward her shanty neighborhood with a sheaf of newspaper pages clutched in her hand.

“Since when did you start reading,” the Maulvi demanded.

“Maulvi Sahib, these pages were being thrown out. I picked them up so I can give them to your wife tomorrow. I know these are sacred writings, so she can put them in the attic,” Hamida stammered, startled at the Maulvi’s closeness.

“Dirty scoundrel!” the Maulvi roared. “You touched papers with sacred

verses printed on them! You desecrated them!” The Maulvi snatched the papers from her hands.

“You ruined our sacred verses!” his voice was seething with anger. Some of the men returning from prayers stopped and came closer. A man took the newspaper from the Maulvi’s hands.

“God damn you Christian! Why do you have these? Were you going to burn them?”

Meanwhile a small crowd had gathered around Hamida, who stood motionless like a deer caught in the headlights. The color had drained from her face and she felt as if she was drowning in this commotion. Nobody has hit me yet, she consoled herself, but it was only a question of time. The Maulvi’s sermon was running hot in everyone’s blood. The fury could erupt at any moment, destroying Hamida in its lava.

“Let her go, people,” a clean-shaven man intervened. “Didn’t she say she picked them out of the trash to save the passages from desecration?” he tried to reason with them.

“Who are you? Are you related to her? How can you know what she wanted to do with them? Does she work with you?” Questions were thrown from all directions drowning out the man until he quietly backed away from the circle closing in on him. Logic and justice were all but non-existent in the throes of extremism.

“I’ve often heard her laughing at our Prophets,” declared Shahzada, who ran the corner bicycle shop. Shahzada often taunted Hamida, calling out to her, “Hop on my saddle, girl! Take a ride on my bicycle!” Hamida always ignored him. Now was the time, he thought, to send her a message. Perhaps it would make her more receptive to his advances and ease his way toward achieving his goal?

“She laughs at our Prophets and you do nothing!” the Maulvi exclaimed, now in tears. “These are signs of doomsday.” His desperate pleading really ignited the crowd. This was religious fervor at its worst. Logic, sympathy and compassion were little more than coal added to a rapidly growing fire.

Luckily, Hamida was saved from a lynching. Someone suggested she be handed over to the police to get a well-deserved punishment. A petrified Hamida’s moans turned into hysterical wailing. She reminded the crowd about the sayings of God and His Prophets. She swore her innocence. The crowd turned deaf. Someone grabbed her hand and roughly pulled her towards the police station. Hamida glued her feet to the ground like an animal marked for sacrifice. This enraged the people further. Now a few of them tried to pull and push her from different directions. This jolted her firmly planted feet off the ground and she fell. She was dragged to the police station. Her skin was lacerated and bleeding; her shirt was

torn in numerous places. She had exhausted all her tears. With a dusty face, a blood spattered forehead and dirt in her hair, she appeared to the Police Inspector to be on the verge of death at the hands of the crowd. He was an experienced officer who had served at this station for twenty years. His long-standing connections with the ruling party had secured him his position at this precinct. It was a much sought after station, and its proximity to the Faisalabad industrial area had turned it into a gold mine. The Inspector was well acquainted with most of the neighborhood élite. He came forward and kissed the Maulvi's hand, as if this very act would erase all his misdeeds and replace them with a clean slate.

"What's wrong Maulvi Sahib? Why did you trouble yourself? You could have called me instead."

"Inspector, she has committed blasphemy. It was my religious duty to participate in this jihad. This trip to the station is like my key to heaven. She should get her rightful punishment."

It was worth watching the Maulvi's aplomb, his composure. He was oblivious to Hamida's condition. Her unstoppable tears, her torn clothes, and her violent treatment needed no proof or attestation. The demands of the Maulvi cut deep furrows in the Inspector's forehead. The situation was grave. He had assumed the matter would be quite easy ... adultery or perhaps theft. At least with those he could have made a profit through bribery. But here, the water was deep and the crocodiles had smelled blood.

"Nazeer, make a report and put her behind bars," he called out to the sub-inspector.

Nazeer buried Hamida under numerous penal code violations and put her dead soul behind bars.

"The rest of you can leave now. Let the law take over from here," the Inspector declared using his oft-repeated words. Most of the people left. Some curious onlookers were driven away by Nazeer. The Inspector requested the Maulvi and some other individuals to stay behind.

"Maulvi Sahib, it is a grave allegation. She could receive capital punishment!" The Inspector eyed the Maulvi closely.

"That will be the right punishment for her crime," the Maulvi insisted.

"You're the authority on religion. Find me a loophole to charge her with and I'll deal with her clan. Perhaps a monetary donation from them could be useful for a mosque upgrade," the Inspector suggested. He was careful in wording his dubious statement. "Once an official complaint is lodged, things will get too hot for both of us."

The Maulvi kept silent. His silence encouraged the Inspector to press on. "There must be a way out, Maulvi Sahib."

"Well there can be a way out ... if she recites the kalima," said the

Maulvi decidedly.

“What do you mean?”

“The meaning, Inspector, is this: if this infidel recites the kalima and converts, asking God’s forgiveness, I am sure she will be forgiven.”

The Inspector’s face lit up and he heaved a deep sigh of relief.

“With your permission, I’ll hold off lodging an official complaint. Let me speak to her. When the police speak, people are willing to renounce their parents, let alone their religion! I’ll discuss matters with her clan as well.”

“All right, Inspector. Remember, if she recites the kalima, God will bless you as well.” The Maulvi raised his hands in reverent prayer for the Inspector, then left the station with his colleagues.

By evening, the news had spread throughout the neighborhood, even reaching as far as the city, and the whole province. There were conflicting rumors. The Inspector told people the situation wasn’t clear. Hamida was possibly caught stealing from the mosque. It was a very busy night for the station. The Inspector was confident he would strike a favorable deal. Hamida was allowed to shower. Her wounds were dressed, but she returned her tray of food untouched. Nazeer and two constables headed to the shanty town where Hamida’s clan lived and fetched her father along with a couple of relatives. The Inspector laid out the case to them plainly. Hamida had committed a capital offense; she had uttered derogatory remarks about the Prophet Muhammad. Numerous witnesses were willing to come forward. The offence carried a capital punishment, and no lawyer or politician could save her. A resolution was being offered—should she recite the kalima and convert to Islam, she would only have to then ask for God’s forgiveness and pay a paltry fine of two hundred thousand rupees to the Inspector. The Inspector could then generously change the offense to theft from a mosque, merely a slap on the wrist.

The Inspector spoke to Hamida as well. When his initial pleas fell on deaf ears, he began threatening her, even asking Nazeer to give her a little “physical interrogation.” Hamida would not budge. After the initial shock, her family went into overdrive. Hamida’s parents, friends, and siblings all begged and pleaded with her to accept the deal. Hamida’s only answer was a stony silence. She was ready to ask for forgiveness, but reciting the kalima was a deal breaker.

“Just recite it in the presence of everyone to save your life. Jesus knows your heart, he will forgive you,” the priest at her local church counseled her. He was a God-fearing man, friendly and gentle. She asked to meet him alone. The Maulvi allowed it ... after all, this meeting could result in her reciting the kalima. Hamida and her priest met in a separate, private

room.

“Father, her situation is critical. I’ll no longer be in control of her fate after dawn. The press is already on the story. From tomorrow, politicians will start lining up to make big statements. You only have tonight to work with her,” the Inspector warned the priest.

The priest put a cross around Hamida’s neck. He reiterated that it is okay to lie to save your life. “You should recite the kalima just to assuage the public. Then, leave town. People have short memories. Jesus is forgiving,” he advised.

Hamida listened intently to all he had to say, then asked only one question: “If you were in my shoes, what would you do?”

“My case is different,” he sputtered.

“So is mine, Father. I will not recite the kalima. It’s not recitation, it’s living by the Maulvi’s dictates.”

The priest couldn’t understand her logic. Her parents couldn’t stop crying. “She’s lost her mind. She’s in shock. If I could have a few more days...,” the priest implored the Inspector.

“Things are out of my hands now. Tomorrow morning this place will be swarming with reporters. They’ll launch their own investigation, and I’ll be accused of orchestrating a cover up,” snapped the Inspector.

Hamida’s whole clan had assembled outside the station before dawn. Some slept on the floor, others just sat there with their backs against the trees. The Inspector had a message delivered to the Maulvi. When he came to the station door, Hamida’s father put his turban at his feet, the sign of ultimate submission. The Maulvi simply jumped over the turban and entered the station. He remained firm. “The only way out is if she recites the kalima,” he shouted over his shoulder challenging Hamida’s father.

“Maulvi Sahib, Hamida has lost her mind. She knows the punishment and is ready to ask for forgiveness but will not recite the kalima,” he begged.

“I knew it, I knew it!” the Maulvi totally lost it. “We’ve already delayed justice for almost twenty-four hours. God forgive us. She really should be punished immediately.” Despite the Inspector’s pleas, the Maulvi left the station to meet the press, which was eager for news.

“This girl has been disrespectful to our Prophet in the presence of witnesses. She is not even willing to recant it. We will not tolerate disrespect to our religion. This is a Zionist plot. It is a preplanned chain of events starting with those Swedish cartoons.” The press was busy, captivated by his poison.

Hamida’s trial lasted only one week. With so many witnesses, prosecutors had an open and shut case. The appellate court refused to overturn her death sentence. Sweet confections were distributed the day Hamida

was hung. People celebrated and rejoiced at the justice done to an infidel.

The Maulvi still reads the newspaper, but it usually sits in his lap now rather than shielding his darting eyes. Aisha and Saeeda clean the bathroom, since the local clan of cleaners refuse to enter the house. The Maulvi is cleaning up his own mess. Today, after reading his newspaper, he folded it under his pillow and left for Jamil's house. He tutors Jamil's children in Arabic and Qur'anic teachings. One afternoon, after the Maulvi's session was over, he sat down with Jamil in the sitting room. They had barely begun to speak when a middle-aged woman entered the room, mop in one hand and a bucket of water in the other.

"Jamil Sahib, you should tell your cleaner to recite the kalima or else she'll burn in Hell," the Maulvi exclaimed.

Before Jamil could utter a response, the mop dropped from the woman's hand. She put her palms together in front of her and bowed to the Maulvi. "I will. I will recite the kalima. I will respect the Prophet as well. I will do anything you want, just let me live, please." □

—*Translated by the author*