

Shandana MINHAS

THE RIGHT PATH

They were the sort of people who never paused to queue, yet on orientation day the couple stood meekly at attention with others outside the drawing room of a large two-story house in Karachi's Old Clifton, waiting to be seated. To anyone watching Saqib and Nisha as they smiled and nodded at little Nofil's mummy, already seated in the last row of beige padded chairs, and talked to each other while inching towards their own seats, they exuded bonhomie.

Rashid's fifth birthday party the day before, Nisha thought as she took her place, had gone well. The setting by the creek was tasteful, and the cake-cutting and gift-opening loud and cheerful. The guests had driven off in their shining big cars content and even a few hours later had doubtless remained suffused with the spirit of the evening.

The only flaw, she felt, had been the wind. One gust had sent Nofil's mummy, Mahjabeen Zaidi, tottering after her scarf, her stilettos stabbing the earth, her saffron silk kurti whipping her lightly on the back, before a waiter had had the good sense to step in and recover it for her.

Saqib, quietly contemplating the same, felt the sight of Mahjabeen running had been the highlight of the evening, but he pushed the image to the side and returned to the subject that had held his attention for the past few days. He was planning to divorce Nisha once school started and their son was out of the house, and most of his waking hours were given to fantasies of how it might unfold. When could he joke about it? Why was there such a dearth of divorce humour in muslim societies?

Nisha noticed the set of his shoulders when his thoughts shifted and wondered what he was planning. After eight years of marriage she had come to think of him as more animal than human, cunning enough to manipulate others but not evolved enough to understand how to silence his body language. That erect posture, she knew, meant trouble for someone, somewhere. He had made a decision in his head, and communicated his resolve to all appendages, and it would soon be the end of the road for the manager, the secretary, the cook, the gardener, or possibly, the dog. She caught his eye, and the corners of her mouth, and his, crinkled upwards. All across the room couples smiled at each other once, gently, before turning their attention towards the front like kind, conscientious, grateful parents of nursery school children did.

The two ladies behind the table at the front of the room, experienced 'educationists', sighed and gripped each other's hand before Mrs. Omar, the principal, stood to make her speech. 'Welcome to The Right Path Family', a banner hung behind her read.

The speech began, as such things did, with an affirmation of a privileged kinship. As she droned on, covering diet and academics, Nisha's mind began to wander. By the time Mrs. Omar began discussing the importance of keeping the number of armed guards around the house to a bare minimum, Nisha was lost.

Her eyes had fixed on the bronze gladiator sandals adorning the polished feet of the woman next to her, Farhat she thought her name was, when, again, a sudden image of Mahjabeen running during Rashid's party the day before came to her. Mahjabeen had been tottering on high heels but her movements had had a grace to them, a natural center of gravity Nisha felt she herself had never managed to find. From the way all eyes, including Saqib's, had been drawn to Mahjabeen's unsuccessful chase, Nisha hadn't been

the only one to feel that way. And though she believed her husband to be too good a businessman to destabilize a perfectly sound investment, Nisha had considered, briefly, watching Saqib watch Mahjabeen, the possibility that complacency was making her blind.

At the table, undeterred by the sound of fireworks and gunfire emanating from Bilawal House as jiyalas celebrated the ascension of Zardari to the Pakistani presidency, Mrs. Firdaus the administrator was now delivering a piquant passage on how morality was the ideal compass in a world without direction.

Saqib wished Nisha would stop fidgeting. He had disliked her birdlike movements, the way her whole head moved when her eyes did, when he first met her. Years later, that dislike was undiluted. To him, the time she was closest to grace was the time she had been furthest from it, when she was pregnant. Nisha, Saqib thought, was the sort of woman a man wanted to still, to sedate, while Mahjabeen was the sort of woman he wanted to move. He pressed his legs closer together and tried to stay with the lecture.

But it had finished. The floor was open to questions. There were none.

One man stood to voice his approval of the school's principled position on language; English and Urdu was all very well, but the inclusion of French was inspired. Pakistan needed citizens of the world, not prisoners of geography. What she wanted for her child, a woman said, were teachers who understood that the quest for knowledge was really a search for truth, and truth did not reside only in the pages of a book but also in activities, so she, for one, was thrilled at both the introduction of a tennis program and plans for a yearly field trip to a school for underprivileged children.

Nisha and Saqib applauded together, her mind on the seamless joining of the scarlet ruffle and the beige silk on the table top, his on the way Mahjabeen's white pants clung to her thighs. Then a final round of applause for the staff that had made the evening possible, the peons, the assistants, the Goan secretary with her too-bright lipstick and shining cross; one grand flourish towards the refreshments laid out in the foyer – hors d'oeuvres arranged artfully before walls festooned with posters exhorting the saving of the whales, the snow leopards, the world – and the wave of musk, chiffon, Egyptian cotton and light floral scents broke against the door. But the door would not open, and it was not till the first shot was fired into the air that they understood for some of them it might possibly never open again.

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Women screamed. Couples collided, knocked over chairs, shoved each other, but there was nowhere to go. It was a room with only one visible exit, and there were three armed men in front of it.

Mrs. Omar and Mrs. Firdaus, determined in adversity, raised their hands and appealed for calm.

'Quiet! Please, parents, quiet!' said the Mistresses of Ceremony.

Called to order like this, the thirty-strong herd stopped milling about. The men disentangled themselves from their wives. The three men had ajraks around their heads and automatic weapons in their hands. One jeweled slipper and two handbags lay forlornly under an overturned chair. Farhat surreptitiously worked her cell phone out of her pocket and tried to text 'armed men, locked in school, shots fired, help' to her uncle, a general, but got 'message sending failed'. So did Saqib, who was caressing the touchpad of the iPhone Nisha had got him for his birthday the month before. Nisha, who had been separated from Saqib, wondered what Rashid was doing.

‘This is a jammer.’ Speaking in fluent English, one of the three men held up an object over his head. His voice was melodious. ‘Effective up to a radius of 80 feet. My name is Mujahid. Gentlemen, my friend here, who you can call Mujahid One,’ he waved towards the man on his right, who obligingly stepped forward, pulling a plastic bag out of the pocket of his leather jacket, ‘will be coming around and taking all mobile devices from you. Put your wallets, watches and the contents of your pockets in the bag too. Ladies, step forward one by one and put your bags, watches and any jewelry you are wearing down on the table. Mujahid Two,’ the third gunman raised his arm, ‘will be collecting them shortly.’

Mahjabeen Zaidi slid her diamond ring, the centerpiece of her divorce settlement and many a let’s- catch-up coffee, off her finger and under the waistband of her pants. Nisha saw her do it out of the corner of her eye and wondered if she should do the same with her wedding band but decided against it. The secret to a successful life was cost-benefit analysis, and jewelry versus seeing Rashid again? Did not compute. She had read too many stories about people being shot dead for resisting robbers. She wondered whether Mahjabeen hadn’t. She wondered whether Mahjabeen could read. She wondered why she was thinking what she was thinking.

The Goan secretary eased her way out of the line of women hugging the wall and tried to slide unobtrusively to the door concealed behind the banner. It opened directly onto the veranda outside. Later she would not remember why she chose to put herself at risk, but at the time it seemed like a good idea. She stopped when the muzzle of Mujahid Two’s gun swung to point directly at her. ‘I’ll kill you,’ he said. She reversed and eased back into her place.

‘Now,’ Mujahid said, ‘we’re just going to make sure none of you is hiding anything else on their person and then we’ll be on our way. No need for anyone to be alarmed.’

At a signal from him Mujahid One pulled forward a man and frisked him, quickly, before moving to the next one. Here he grunted and slapped the man casually across the face before shoving him back and waved a small phone triumphantly in the air.

‘Tauba tauba! Allah has given you so much and still you hoard?’ Mujahid rummaged through a bag of loot. He held up Saqib’s iPhone. ‘Whose?’

Nisha noted the way Mujahid’s shoes seemed to slap the ground as he took three paces to Mrs. Omar and pressed the gun into her wrinkled forehead. ‘Whose?’

‘It’s mine!’ Nisha squealed. Saqib grunted in irritation and said, ‘No, it’s mine’.

‘Make up your minds.’

‘It’s his.’

‘Your husband?’ Nisha

nodded.

‘Mashallah. See how she protects you.’ He tossed the phone to Saqib, ‘Unlock it.’

Saqib caught the phone but stood mutely. Nisha remembered the fanaticism of his attachment to it, the way he slept with it under his pillow, took it into the bathroom with the paper in the morning. Mujahid pointed the gun at her. Saqib unlocked it.

In the next few minutes the search yielded another two phones and a wad of dollars stuffed in a sock, plus jewelry a couple of women had ‘forgotten’ to take off. Mahjabeen’s diamond ring remained sequestered in the convent of her pants.

Mujahid, his gun now hanging loosely by his thigh, was playing with the iPhone, chuckling occasionally and raising his head to wink approvingly at its owner, who seemed fascinated by the reflection in his burnished shoes. When they were done, the gunmen drew together. One opened the doors.

‘One of us will stay behind, outside,’ Mujahid said.

‘Anyone stepping out of here in the next ten minutes will be shot. Any questions?’

Mrs. Omar asked, ‘Why did you do this?’ Nisha noted the subtlety with which she worked her courage into the tale for its inevitable retelling.

‘For Allah, of course. For funding Jihad against the sinner and the infidel.’ Nisha caught the faint trace of mockery in his voice, but from the strangled gasps around her it seemed some of the others couldn’t.

‘So all the orphaned Muslim children thank you,’ Mujahid said, ‘and especially you, sir,’ he nodded to Saqib. ‘And you, Mahjabeen Bibi. Or should I say sexy bitch?’ He raised his hand in Nisha’s direction.

‘Your husband’s texts to you will help keep them warm at night.’

They left. The Right Path family waited in silence an extra twenty minutes before opening the door.

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Adultery. Betrayal. Cheating. Infidelity. Affair. Hanky- panky. Nisha woke the morning after with a thesaurus in her head. It seemed a long time ago that the erstwhile hostages had thanked Allah for His mercy. The men had had a hushed conversation and the women had hugged. Farhat could be heard saying ‘Oh my god, did you see how mean they were to that poor Christian woman,’ as she followed her husband to their car. Mrs. Omar and Mrs. Firdaus had said that nothing had been lost that could not easily be replaced.

Then Nisha and Saqib had traveled home. His only words to her before disappearing into the den had been that the men had decided to keep ‘the situation’ out of the press and the notice of the police for now, so she should not talk about it to anybody who was not there. Nisha had taken off her shoes, tossed her dupatta onto the floor and crawled under the duvet.

When she awoke, twelve hours had passed. The other side of the bed was undisturbed. A pot of tea sat on the white oak desk by the window overlooking the garden, warmed by a paisley print tea cozy she had bought the previous year in London. Through the open window overlooking the garden, she could hear Rashid’s happy squeals mingled with the excited yaps of Bahadur, their six-month-old black Labrador.

‘Good afternoon, madam,’ Penny the Indonesian, imported recently to replace Sylvia the Filipino, stood in the doorway. Her smooth face as expressionless as always, she held out the daily papers. Nisha noted the way her lilac uniform of a short-sleeved tunic and straight pants outlined her form. She wondered if that was why Riaz the night driver had tried to rape Penny in the pantry last month.

‘Who is outside with Rashid?’

‘Radha, madam. Sir said not to disturb you so when he came back from school and wanted to come in and wake you I had her take him outside.’

‘Did he eat all of his breakfast today?’

‘Yes, madam.’

Nisha skimmed the headlines while Penny bustled about tidying the room. Summations of the new political reality in the wake of Benazir’s assassination, they ranged from ‘A victory of process over personality’ (*Dawn*) to ‘Democracy’s worst revenge’ (*Friday Times*).

‘Madam, should I send this dupatta for dry cleaning now or wait for the shalwar kameez you are wearing?’

‘Wait outside,’ Nisha said, by way of dismissal.

‘Yes, madam.’

Still the Indonesian lingered by the door. ‘Is there something else?’

‘Madam Mahjabeen has called several times since morning asking for you. She said it was urgent. I would have woken you but sir had told me that you were not to be disturbed for any phone calls.’

‘Okay,’ Rashid screamed, and Nisha started. Lukewarm tea sloshed over the edge of the cup and onto her creased clothes.

‘You change, madam, I will go check if everything is all right.’

Was Penny’s consideration an example of the kindness of strangers or the value of training, Nisha wondered as she brushed her teeth. How much did Penny know? How would she remember what the lists in her bag had said before it was stolen?

When she came out Rashid was sitting on the bed with Radha on the floor by his side, frowning as he watched Steve Irwin wrestle a crocodile onto a riverbank. She nodded at the Hindu ayah, who left the room, pulling the door shut behind her. At last Nisha wrapped her arms and legs around her son, bowled him over and rolled around with him till he protested.

‘Mama!’ he straightened his clothes, at five already an old man, picky about clothes, food, finicky about his routine. Nisha had convinced Saqib to allow a dog into the household because, she thought, it would keep the child in him alive a little longer.

Nisha was going through the bags in her closet when the door flew open again. Turning around she saw Nargis silhouetted against the sun. She forgot to give Rashid his cue to greet his Dadi, but her mother-in-law took care of it, rapping commandingly on the doorframe till he looked away from the TV.

‘Say salam, you little monkey.’

‘Monkeys don’t say salam, Dadi.’

‘Well, say it anyway.’

‘Salam, Dadi. What did you bring me?’

‘Manners.’

Taking Nisha’s arm, she drew her into the lounge outside. Her dramatic eye shadow, a hallmark of that generation, accentuated the feral look in her eyes. Since the death of her husband she had run the family business like a woman possessed and for as long anyone could remember the lives of those who would let her. ‘Why didn’t you tell me, you silly child?’ she now demanded.

‘Tell you what?’

‘About last night! I had to hear it from someone else!’

Nisha wondered who knew. Who was discussing it?

‘I just woke up.’

‘How could you sleep after a night like that? I would have been wide awake, at least talking to somebody about it.’

‘There is nothing to say, Ammi. These things happen. Who did you hear it from?’

‘Lailu! She said you were sitting next to Farhat.’

‘I was.’

‘I tried calling and calling.’

‘They took our phones...’

The sun caught the goldfish in the tank. Red, bronze, blue, golden, a hint of black, Nisha had not known the vividness of pigmentation in the *Carrasius auratus* was dependent on their exposure to light till the owner of the pet store had told her. She had been inexplicably delighted and demanded one of each color. It was only the second year of their marriage and Saqib indulged her. The tank had grown larger once Rashid was born. She had spent hours by it with him, able to read while he stared at the fish, gurgling and kicking his legs on the cushioned play mat spread on the carpet, obediently turned like a bird on a spit by the ayah whenever she gestured.

Nargis was still talking.

‘... Yes, beta, I understood eventually that they took the phones. When I finally tracked Saqib down he told me the whole story. I mean I got robbed last year but that was some kid in need of petty cash, and it was my fault for not looking around before leaving the ATM. This wasn’t so simple, was it? I mean it’s frightening to think that they’ve got so close to us.’

So it was the robbery she was talking about. Snapping to, Nisha made up her mind to go with the red bag that haunted her closet. She had never had the courage to use it before, thinking she could not carry such a strong color. To her mother-in-law she said, ‘Yes, Ammi, this was on a bigger scale, yes, and they were very organized, but apart from the fact that they spoke English, which isn’t that surprising because remember a few months ago when Shazia’s car was snatched and she said she’d never heard an accent so flawless outside the convent, I don’t know what all the fuss is about. The school should arrange more security next time.’

‘Nisha, what is the matter with you? How can you be so calm about something so serious?’

‘I don’t understand what the fuss is about.’

‘Well,’ Nargis paused, ‘I suppose your ability to deal with things so calmly is a good thing. It’s just that if I had been held up by Taliban who took all my money for Jihad and barely stopped themselves from shooting the only Christian in the room I’d be very upset indeed.’

Suddenly Nisha was too.

Saqib was going back to the office after a lunch meeting with his driver Rehmat Shah and the security guard in the back seat when Rehmat Shah’s phone rang. He looked at the caller ID and handed it mutely to his boss. Saqib cursed the screen.

‘I saw Nisha,’ his mother began. ‘I want to know which one of you is lying and why.’

‘Lying about what, Ma?’ Saqib felt his chest tighten.

She had made it very clear shortly after his father died that if he ever did anything to ‘dishonor his memory’ he would pay for it with if not his life then certainly its perks.

‘You told me the gunmen were Taliban. Nisha says they weren’t. So, who were they?’ Saqib’s discomfort subsided, slightly. This was more easily handled than a full-blown marital scandal. He hadn’t actually told his mother the gunmen were Taliban, her friend Laila had. She had heard it from her Farhat, her daughter-in-law. Saqib had let it go when his mother had gasped over it earlier, not bothering to correct or contradict her. Even now there was space enough between the cracks for him to wriggle to safety. ‘Nisha wouldn’t know the difference between a piranha and a goldfish,’ he said.

‘You listen to me. In two hours I am meeting the Corps Commander. He says he will do everything in his power to help. But if I go in there complaining that the Taliban are now looting in Clifton only to be told they were common thieves and end up looking like a fool...’

She was angry. She didn’t even know the whole story and she was already angry. It was unfair. He said stiffly, ‘I told you, Ma, they were fundos. High on Allah. It’s a miracle no one was hurt.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Am I sure!’ He modulated his tone, ‘Of course I’m sure. Nisha is probably in shock. You can’t take anything she says seriously. Anything. Look, if you don’t want to believe me why don’t you ask someone else? Iffy, for instance, or Adnan. I’ll send you their numbers.’ He knew she wouldn’t call them. She would be too embarrassed to show she did not know. He could tell he was feeling cornered. He reached out.

'Ma, the women were in the back of the room. They didn't get a good look at these guys. They probably couldn't even hear them, they were screaming so loudly . . .' But Saqib was talking to dead air.

'Bhenchod!' he shouted as he threw the phone into the backseat and pounded the horn at a motorcyclist who cut across in front. Catching a glimpse of Rehmat Shah tightlipped in the reflection, he yelled at him for not cleaning the windshield properly and turned into the service lane that led to Ahmed Enterprises and jammed the car angrily into his slot.

He didn't reply to the doorman's 'Salam, sa'ab'. Or acknowledge the secretary telling him that Nisha had called six times in his absence. Inside, he locked the office door, loosened his belt and lay down on the chesterfield.

But sleep was elusive, as it had been all night, and the solace of his porn collection was not at hand. Instead, he focused on their little lie. The men had decided the previous evening that they would play along with the man who called himself Mujahid. Of course he was a two-bit thug. Only women, so easily excited, could believe he was Taliban. Well, let the women say that it was, one of the men, the son of an MP, had counseled. Meanwhile, he would use his connections to find the men and the goods. Both would be taken care of. Quietly.

Yes, let the ladies talk of Taliban. Saqib rose at the thought. At his desk he reread the document from the lawyer. He could divorce Nisha in one of three ways, Talaq, Khula, or Tafriq. A Talaq initiated by him would involve his thrice repeated 'repudiation' of Nisha, then a three-month period of time in which the union council which had registered the marriage contract would send them form letters urging them to work towards a reconciliation. The letters could, the lawyer said, be easily ignored, as could the arbitrators from either side the council was mandated to appoint.

Reading the legalese in translation, Saqib felt the phrase 'I repudiate you' sounded obscene. For a second he was overwhelmed by the feeling he was doing something obscene, that there was an element of degradation implicit in the act outlined before him. But he read on.

Khula was the exercise, by the wife, of her right to divorce herself on behalf of her husband, hence it was not an option. But here too were form letters urging the concerned couple to reconcile. Saqib wondered who wrote them.

He barely glanced at the third option, Tafriq. It involved a judicial process. He did not want the end of his marriage to be a public spectacle.

About depriving Rashid of his mother he felt no compunction. The maids he paid for would still cater to Rashid's every need. Nisha might have breast-fed him, but Saqib felt he had no illusions about the extent of her involvement in the actual raising of the boy. The bathing, the bottom-wiping, the rocking to sleep through difficult nights, the entertainment of a toddler's mind, these tasks he knew had been delegated so that Sleeping Beauty could lie around some more. Of course, Nisha could see her son whenever she liked, in theory. Saqib knew that he was sometimes a ruthless man, but he felt that he could never be cruel. It was, he believed, a subtle difference, but an important one. An intelligent mind would find it was quite like the difference between Pervez Musharraf and Zia ul Haq.

He took calls till sunset, signed papers, gave a senior manager a dressing-down for lacking the killer instinct. After the man had left, ashen-faced, Saqib wondered why it was that his mother insisted on keeping him around when a hundred younger, hungrier candidates could be more cheaply hired. Nargis sought to celebrate the memory of his father by keeping the relics of his existence around. Saqib honored him by seeking to enrich the edifice he had constructed.

On his way out, he asked his secretary to send a strawberry cake to a People's Party parliamentarian, inscribed 'As long as democracy lives, Benazir lives!' Then he had Rehmat

Shah take him home.

In the car Rehmat solicited Saqib's opinion on the new world: Benazir dead, Zardari as supreme leader. Saqib was brief. Pakistanis deserved Zardari. They were rudderless, witless flotsam in a sea of corruption. Who better to navigate such currents than a pirate like him?

At home, the daily electricity load-shedding had started. From the back of the split-level 2,000-yard house, the generator roared its defiance at the approaching darkness. As he got out of the car Saqib explained to Rehmat, with what he thought was admirable restraint, that every time he accelerated too quickly the car used more petrol. He urged him to have some pity on the poor fucker who had to pay for it.
