

Safina Danish ELAHI

Originally published in the anthology *The Stained-Glass Window*

Motorcycle

I slung my purse over my back and adjusted myself on the motorcycle. The engine coughed and spat out fumes.

‘Peeru,’ I said petulantly. ‘Be careful! I could have fallen off!’

Peeru grunted. It wasn’t his fault. Our old and decrepit motorcycle was past its prime. We were the ones who were foolishly dragging it around town, exhausting what little energy was left within it. We would have to work for three months – or even more – to replace its engine.

When we were a few kilometres away from Farzana Baji’s house, the engine sputtered to a stop. Sweat trickled down my face and drenched my *niqab*. I leapt off the bike and clicked my tongue.

‘Peeru, just drop me off here. I’ll walk. Just do something to fix this bike. I don’t care what you do. Ask your *Sahab* for extra money. Just have it fixed.’

‘We already owe him Rs20,000, Shaheen,’ Peeru said despairingly. ‘He will not be happy. Already, I got into an accident last month. I’m scared if I ask for more money I will be fired.’

‘Okay, okay,’ I said, struggling to disguise my frustration. ‘Pick me up on time. Saira needs to be picked up from her madrassa at four. Tell your *Sahab* not to make you work overtime. Not that he pays you for it.’

Peeru was a driver at the Razdani House. Since they could afford to pay six drivers, many would assume they’d have the means to help the underprivileged. But Peeru’s employers were deviously stingy. They made him work long hours with alarming regularity and maintained that it was part of his job.

With a throbbing ache in my temples, I staggered towards the house, stopping at intervals to wipe the beads of perspiration that dripped down my forehead. When I reached Farzana Baji’s doorstep, I frantically knocked on the metal door to get the guard’s attention because the doorbell was out of order.

Silence.

‘Is anyone there?’ I screeched.

The house, with its intricate glass structures and minarets on its balcony, was enveloped with an eerie silence, as if it had been inhabited by ghosts. Had Farzana Baji gone on vacation without informing me?

After a few minutes, a new guard opened the gate.

‘I work for Farzana Baji,’ I explained, hoping that he wouldn’t mistake me for an intruder. ‘Please let me in.’

‘Okay, wait here,’ he replied coldly. ‘Baji wants you to wait for her. She’ll come down and talk to you.’

I pressed my hands against my head and sighed deeply. All I needed was a glass of cold water. Maybe Nasreen, the cook, could make me a tall glass of Rooh Afza.

I stood in the garage for a long time, waiting for Farzana Baji to emerge from her palatial home.

'Why aren't you letting me go inside?' I asked.

'Servants who don't live in the house aren't being allowed inside the house,' he said firmly.

Puzzled by his explanation, I waited outside until the afternoon sun brought sweat patches on my sleeves. *Something is wrong*, I thought. *Why would Baji stop servants from entering the house?*

'Shaheen,' Farzana Baji said when she finally opened the door. 'You will have to go home.'

The word flew out of her lips, pulling me into the grind of self-interrogation. *Had I done something wrong?* I felt nauseous. Was the heat weighing heavy on me or was I getting flustered?

'But...but...' I stammered.

'I'm not firing you, Shaheen,' my employer clarified. 'Come over to the house during Ramadan to collect ration. I will call you.'

After a long pause, she smiled.

'Don't worry,' she said, even though her face wore a puzzled look.

'Baji, what happened?' I said nervously. 'Why do I have to stay at home? Have you hired someone else? Is it because I'm late? It's that good-for-nothing bike, Baji! I promise I will not be late!'

Farzana Baji's phone buzzed softly and she glanced at the screen.

'No, that's not the reason,' she said distractedly. 'There is a virus. Baray Sahab has said that we can contract it from anyone. I can't let you in the house. However, if you can stay at the house until the lockdown ends, maybe I'll reconsider my decision. But for now, go home.'

Farzana Baji knew that I had children who required my undivided attention. Who would feed and bathe them if I moved into my employer's house to help her with household chores?

'Baji, what about my salary?' I asked anxiously. 'I know it's only the middle of the month, but...'

'Shaheen, I will give you your salary when the month ends,' she said impatiently. 'I don't have money right now. All you people care about is money. I will give it to you, for god's sake. Just come to the house at the end of the month.'

Farzana Baji shook her head and went inside the house before I could ask her for money to pay the rickshaw fare.

The days merged into each other and passed by in a blur. I stayed home with the children. After the government closed down the *madrassas*, Saira would revise the Holy Quran at home while Sobia and

Amjad would quarrel all day long. Faiqa was just over a year old and had fallen ill soon after I was sent home by Farzana Baji. She was constantly throwing up the food she ate.

‘Don’t worry,’ Shamim Phuppo reassured me. ‘She’s probably teething.’

‘You’re right. She does have a habit of putting everything in her mouth.’

We had to watch the pennies to survive in these difficult times. Though Peeru’s Sahab still expected him to turn up to work, a large chunk of his salary went towards buying a new mask every day.

‘If your *Sahab* has so much money, why doesn’t he buy the masks for you?’ I’d asked Peeru. ‘Doesn’t he realise that you have a family to feed?’

Peeru would quietly listen to my rants, but couldn’t summon the strength to ask his employer to pay for the masks.

As time flew by, our motorcycle spluttered and died. Peeru had to borrow Afzal Chacha’s old bike to go to work. In return, I prepared meals for his ailing wife. This wasn’t an easy bargain to uphold. Groceries were costing me a fortune now that all of us were eating at home, except Peeru who was only given a few days off because of the lockdown.

On a sticky April afternoon, Faiqa just wouldn’t stop crying. I knew she was in pain. But Peeru wouldn’t take her to the hospital.

‘There’s no point,’ he said. ‘We don’t have any money to pay the doctor.’

It was the second day of the month and Peeru hadn’t received his salary. I had called Farzana Baji the previous day to ask for my salary.

‘Shaheen, all you care about is money,’ she’d berated me. ‘Did you even bother to say a proper *salam*? All you ever do is complain that you don’t have money to buy milk and medicines for your daughter. Seriously, don’t you people save any money?’

Stunned into silence, I couldn’t tell Farzana Baji that saving was privilege we couldn’t afford. It pained me that my employer wasn’t compassionate enough to understand my predicament. Faiqa’s illness had been weighing heavy on my mind. What frightened me the most was that we still didn’t know what was wrong with her. I suspected that she wasn’t eating properly. Our family of six hadn’t eaten a decent meal in almost three days. We found ourselves in a dilemma. If we asked for our salary in advance, it would seem as though we were extorting money from our employers. If we stayed silent, we went to sleep hungry.

My children complained that they didn’t have enough to eat every day and I couldn’t do anything to abate their hunger. Amjad, who didn’t want to burden us, started eating at our neighbours’ houses. None of them complained, even though the government had advised people against meeting their friends after the virus spread like wildfire. After all, I had sent them their share of *halwa* when Faiqa was born. They were just returning the kind gesture.

‘I’m here,’ I told a new guard at Farzana Baji’s house a few days later. ‘Please let her know.’

The mustachioed guard set the wrought-iron gate ajar and peeped out at me. I could sense his growing apprehension when he asked me to wait outside and abruptly locked the gate.

I waited for an hour in the scorching heat until Nasreen opened the gate, led me into the garage and told me that Farzana Baji was taking a nap. 'I'll wait,' I said. 'I can't possibly go home and come back when Baji wakes up. As it is, it's so difficult to pass our *chowrangi* now that police are harassing people who are out on the streets.'

Nasreen shot a cold, impassive stare at me before turning around to go back into the house.

'Can I have a glass of Rooh Afza?' I asked.

Nasreen shook her head.

'Baji has strictly asked me not to give food or drinks to anyone who comes from outside,' she wagged her finger at me.

Though I was shocked by her indifference, I did my best to conceal it.

'I know you must be thirsty, Shaheen,' Nasreen said uneasily. 'But I can't disobey her orders. In fact, she will be very angry if she finds out that I even spoke to you.'

'I understand,' I said. 'You can't disobey Farzana Baji.'

A few minutes later when the guard had momentarily stepped into his room, I ran towards the main door and rang the bell. Farzana Baji came out, rubbing her eyes drowsily.

'Yes, what is it?' she asked, stifling a yawn.

Comprehension dawned on her face when she saw me.

'Oh yes, Shaheen,' she said in a curt, almost business-like tone.

Before I could greet her, she flung a wad of notes at me. The gesture made it seem as if she were consciously trying not to make contact with me.

'Here you go,' she said.

My heart sank in despair.

'Baji, you've only given me six-thousand rupees.'

'What more do you want?' Farzana Baji said, her face crimson with anger. 'Did you really think I was going to pay you for work that you haven't even done? I've been sweeping the floors myself! You have no shame!'

'Baji, I did not tell you to sweep floors,' I said, holding back my tears. 'I would never let you sweep floors. But you're the one who told me to stay home. I have to feed my children. What am I supposed to do? Faiqa doesn't stop crying. She hasn't even been drinking milk. I don't have money to buy it for her.'

'Shaheen, these are just excuses! How can you not have money for milk? How expensive is this milk? What do you do with all the money I've been giving you? Last year, I gave you twenty-thousand rupees to build a washroom! What happened to that money?'

'We built a washroom with it, Baji.'

She clicked her tongue, took out two thousand-rupee notes from her wallet and tossed them at me. I held the notes in a tight fist, knowing well that my employer still owed me four-thousand rupees of my salary.

'Here, this is your *Zakat!*' she exclaimed. 'I spoil you women so much!'

After she banged the door on my face, I pulled up my *niqab* and searched for the phone inside my pocket. It was a lot safer than keeping it in my purse and inviting pickpockets to snatch it. I couldn't afford to lose my phone at a time when problems had assailed our lives.

How will we survive this month? I pondered as he walked out of Farzana Baji's house and proceeded homewards.

A mosquito buzzed near my earlobe and made its way towards my neck. Awakened from my slumber, I made an attempt to swat it, but the darkness made it impossible to aim. By now, the entire colony knew about the virus. Corona, they were calling it. As far as I knew, no one had it – not yet. People were coughing and falling ill, but that was nothing new for us. If you live in a neighbourhood that is surrounded by huge piles of filth, you're likely to fall sick – corona or no corona.

Last week, Farzana Baji had called me back to the house after over a month. Though I was ecstatic to return to my job, I was mindful of my employer's instructions, careful to not violate the new parameters that she had set. I was expected to stay outside and wear a mask.

'Baji, no one has corona-*warona* in my colony,' I'd assured her.

'Don't be stupid,' she had snapped at me. 'This is a serious issue.'

Her words resonated in my mind, reminding me of the mortal fear that had seeped into my employer's heart and made her suspicious of the world outside her glass palace. As I looked out the window, I noticed that it was still dark and would be for a long time. Once I'd swatted the mosquito, I lulled myself back to sleep.

Faiqa's condition hadn't improved. Every time she cried, a cold fear settled in my heart and I became painfully aware of the fact that she was slipping away. When I resumed working at Farzana Baji's house, I would leave the children with my neighbour and distant cousin Sajida. One day, Faiqa's condition worsened and I decided to stay home and take care of her.

Farzana Baji was furious when she realised that I hadn't turned up for work.

'Shaheen, where are you?' she shrieked over the phone. 'Why haven't you come in to work?'

'Faiqa is not well, Baji,' I responded meekly. 'I have to take her to the hospital.'

'Does she have fever?' Farzana Baji said with trepidation in her voice. 'Is she having trouble breathing? Does she have corona? Stay home. Don't come to work till you know for sure.'

'Okay Baji, I will let you know.' I said before disconnecting the call.

Over the last few weeks, we had spiralled deeper into debt. Peeru had asked his *Sahab* for money so we could pay our rent. Driven by desperation, I had asked Aslam Chacha, the grocer who ran a small shop in our gully, for some *dal* and flour, and promised to pay him soon. He's a man of God and understands the value of helping people who are in need. But these are trying times and we already owe him five-thousand rupees. How will we ever pay him for the ration we've taken from his shop?

At five o' clock, I held a weeping Faiqa in my arms and consoled her. Though she eventually stopped crying, she remained lethargic. Her small hands went limp and her eye seemed weak and weary. Overwhelmed with guilt, I wondered if I'd been a good mother to her. *I should have found another part-time job to ensure that there was enough money, I chided myself. Maybe then, I would have been able to take her to the hospital earlier.*

An hour later, I could no longer bear to see my daughter's ordeal. I picked up my purse and decided to take her to the nearby hospital. *We'll sort out the finances later,* I told myself as I wore my mask and left my quarters.

I rushed towards the derelict main road with Faiqa asleep on my shoulder. I made a mental note to ring Peeru and ask him to meet us at the hospital. Since it was difficult to find public transport during lockdown, I walked past the shuttered shops, determined to get to the hospital on foot. Fortunately, I was able to find a rickshaw along the way that ferried me to Jalal Hameed Hospital in fifteen minutes.

Seconds after I entered the premises, I dashed over to the reception and resisted the temptation to weep. '*Assalamulikum*, my daughter is not well,' I said, nervously pointing towards Faiqa. 'Can someone please help me?'

'Please wait,' the nurse said grimly. 'I will see if there is space in the emergency.'

I nodded and looked around the room for an empty chair. The hospital was small, its once-white walls dappled with stains and cracks. The mere sight of the dusty, dilapidated furniture made me cringe. I sat down between an elderly man and a child, and rang my husband.

'Peeru, I'm at the hospital,' I whispered into the receiver. 'Yes, I had to take a rickshaw. I know I shouldn't have, but I couldn't wait. Faiqa isn't well. Have you left work? Come directly to Jalal Hameed Hospital.'

Panic raced through my heart and I walked over the reception.

'Please,' I beseeched the receptionist, tears pricking my eyelids. 'Have mercy on my child. She's not in a good condition. Can you please call the doctor?'

Peeru sat on a chair next to Faiqa's bed in the emergency room, with a stoic expression on his face. Tears rolled down my cheek as I noticed the pipes that had been inserted in my daughter's mouth and nose. It had been two days since Faiqa had been admitted to the hospital. Earlier in the day, they had drawn blood from her wrist to determine the cause of her illness. But we hadn't been told anything as yet.

A nurse had come in an hour ago to check her heartbeat. She'd mumbled something about a stomach ultrasound and scuttled out of the room, leaving us in utmost confusion about our daughter's condition.

Farzana Baji had been generous enough to give us some money to have Faiqa admitted to the hospital. She hadn't offered to pay for the treatment and Peeru was deeply concerned about how we would shell out for the hospital bill. For now, I had decided to file away these concerns in a hidden crevice of my mind because I was more concerned about Faiqa's recovery. Financial woes were part of our lives; my daughter's illness was a matter of urgency. For the past two days, Faiqa had been mostly unconscious and had been administered food through a drip. She was no longer the bubbly child I had grown to love.

'The doctors will come see her later today,' Peeru told me.

With a long sigh, I rested my head against the dusty wall and closed my eyes.

Peeru shook me out of slumber. I saw them take Faiqa out of the emergency room on a stretcher.

'Where are they taking her?'

'She needs an operation,' he said, running after the stretcher. I ran behind them. The doctor was barking instructions at the medical staff.

'Please wait outside the operation theatre,' he told us distractedly.

Hours passed by and no one came out of the operation theatre. With swollen, bloodshot eyes, Peeru muttered a prayer for our daughter's wellbeing. I closed my eyes and tried to remember my daughter's face. She was the only one of my children who had my mother's almond eyes. Her lips curved into a broad smile every time she saw me come home from work. She would wrap her slender body around my legs and tug at my *burqa* to get my attention. Faiqa would often mumble indecipherable words that made her siblings laugh. On rare occasions, she would shock them by uttering an entire sentence.

How could life be so cruel to us?

Peeru and I rose from our seats when the doctors came out of the operation theatre. Under their masks, it was difficult to read their expressions. But their silence filled the air with dread and confirmed my fears. I must have fainted because when I woke up, I was wearing a robe and lying on a hospital bed – just as Faiqa had for three days.

'Shaheen,' Peeru shrieked as I came to.

I rubbed my eyes, hoping that I'd had a nightmare.

'Faiqa?' I asked him.

Peeru shook his head. He blinked back tears as an inhuman howl escaped my mouth.

While Peeru collected my belongings, I changed my clothes and prepared to go home.

'I want to talk to you about something,' Peeru said, lowering his head. 'The hospital management has offered to pay for the operation. They also gave us some extra money.'

'Why did they give us money?' I asked, puzzled by their generosity.

'They said Faiqa had coronavirus. And all her organs had stopped working.'

Something wasn't right. As far as I could recall, Faiqa hadn't coughed or suffered from a fever.

'Are you sure she had corona? Peeru, do we also have...'

'*Choro* Shaheen,' he said reassuringly, with his arms slung around my shoulder. 'Stop asking questions. This money will help us. We can pay off our debts. Think about it.'

I stared at him in speechless amazement, as if to confirm that I was speaking to the father of my children. He turned towards the door and left the room to escape my scrutiny.

'The bodies of corona virus patients' bodies are taken care of by the hospital,' Peeru told me as we left the hospital.

'I wanted to take Faiqa with me,' I said tearfully. Peeru ignored my request and led me out of Jalal Hameed Hospital.

On the way home, I wept profusely and my palms were drenched in sweat. As we entered our house, Peeru nudged me and handed me a bundle of cash.

I peered at the stack of notes that felt heavy against my trembling fingers.

'Did we just sell our dead daughter, Peeru?' I questioned him.

Ignoring my question, Peeru glanced over at Afzal Chacha's old bike that was parked in the small patio.

'I'll go return this old thing tomorrow morning,' he mumbled between sobs. 'We'll buy a new motorcycle.'

Glossary of Words:

Niqab: Veil used to cover one's face

Sahab: Boss

Madrassa: A place of Islamic studies

Halwa: Dessert made out of toasted semolina

Baji: Term used out of respect for a boss, literally meaning older sister

Chowrangi: Intersection

Choro: Leave it

Assalamulikum: Greeting-May peace be upon you

Baray Sahab: Big Boss

Zakat: Alms paid according to the Shariah