

Qadir didn't give a damn

Anup Narayanan, 9th of September, 2011

Mumtaz was 52. She wasn't beautiful in the true sense of the word and at that age the expectation was not reasonable. But, what age could not take away from her was her grace and elegance. When she came walking through the street to open her grocery store every morning, men, retired and otherwise, gave her a second look. Some thought it was the gentle sway of her hips, some thought it was her bosom, which she did not thrust, but gently angled forward and upward as she walked. To those men who were her regular customers she gave a half smile, just enough to acknowledge their presence. They responded eagerly, hoping for more, except Qadir Khan. He didn't give a damn.

Qadir Khan made the second of his weekly visit to her store. He purchased his usual. A dozen eggs, bread, vegetables and some other stuff. He paid, pocketed the change, turned back and walked out of the store. He was tall and elegant like a soldier, like the one he once had been. What irritated Mumtaz was that unlike other men, he never bothered to loiter after her. To compound her irritation that day he did not acknowledge her casual nonchalant remark about the lettuce being a fresh pick from her garden that morning and that he was the first customer to get it.

Mumtaz hated him. At least she thought she did. She knew he was a widower, had 2 daughters who never visited. The grapevine had it that his wife had died young. That was it. Nobody knew anything more. She felt there was something about him and though she would never admit it to herself, given an opportunity she wanted to know more about him.

Most people in the town found him aloof and distant, except Suleiman the tea shop owner, who let him be. But as always, Qadir didn't give a damn.

Qadir Khan walked to Suleiman's shop, his usual second stop of the morning. Though he did not show it, arthritis was taking a toll and his joints ached. Exchanging pleasantries stiffly, he gently lowered himself to his favourite chair and slowly stretched his limbs, easing the pain. He was served his usual cardamom and rose flavored tea. The first sip of the sweet, spicy and hot tea felt comforting that cold November morning. But definitely not as good as how it tasted those lovely winter mornings back in the pasture. Without his permission his mind took a trip to the past.

When he saw Zohra for the first time, he thought that she was like a morning dew drop hanging precariously at the tip of a fresh rose petal. She was tender, very tender. Just looking at her caused an ache in him. He hoped that this ache would stay with him forever. This was an ache he would suffer and suffer gladly. Holding her doe eyes with his and searching deeply, he knew instinctively that he must love and protect her. He was sure a life spent doing just that would be a happy and content one.

Their wedding was a simple and easy affair. He had no one to ask permission from and she had a step mother who was happy to be relieved. A simple home, overlooking the pasture, with no one around for miles was a true heaven. She adored him, pampered and loved him with every drop of her living. A samovar in the corner of the kitchen brewing fresh cardamom and rose flavored tea was her nectar for Qadir. She brewed it with love whenever she wanted to indulge Qadir.

When she bore the fruits of their love, their joy knew no bounds. Unseen by other tough men of the country, he would place her on his lap, underneath a Sal tree on the pasture. Resting her head gently on his chest he would comb her hair, caressing it and shining it to perfection. Then he would pleat and tie it. It was an activity that Zohra liked to think, "My jaan's secret little indulgence". She blushed when she thought about it.

The Russian occupation of Afghanistan meant he was called for action. He responded like a man, leaving the two recent additions to their family, in her care and her in the care of Allah. He descended the valley, enrolled in a camp along with men like him, men of warrior class. Ancient enemies had this to say about the Afghans. "May God deliver us from the venom of the Cobra, teeth of the tiger, and the vengeance of the Afghan." Men like Qadir frequently reminded the Ruski's the true meaning of this saying.

Qadir visited his family whenever he could and watched his two daughters grow with pride. His moments with Zohra were pure heaven and when he was at the war front, cold and alone, his tongue ached for the cardamom and rose flavored tea. His fingers longed to touch her hair.

The war ended after 10 years and he rushed home only to be greeted by his two daughters, crying and in shock. The retreating Ruski's had captured, tortured, raped and killed Zohra. She was gone, never to come back, like a dew drop that melted at the first touch of the strong cruel rays of the sun. The one he wanted to live for was gone. He could not even find her remains to give her a decent Muslim burial.

Shattered, he tried to be brave. He tried his best to give a decent life to his little girls but they needed a woman, like all girls do, especially in a society like his. No, he would not marry again. Soon, they left with their Mother's sister and though he visited often, soon he became the father who visited once in a while. A while later, the daughters married, settled in Kabul and there was an occasional letter and nothing more.

What hurt him most was that he could not take revenge. The enemy was unknown. Who would he make pay for his pain? He felt what any strong man but helpless man would feel. Miserable because he could do nothing though he wanted to. It happened to the best of men. Things just happened out of their control and they could do nothing, nothing at all, apart from being a mute witness as life fell apart right in front of them.

Soon his country had a new internal enemy to fight and he was not interested. He retired, took whatever money he got and bought a little home in the valley town with a single road through middle. He soon noticed that the town was filled mostly by people like him. Old, retired and living out their lives. The kids had left, in search of a better life or to join the war. They never bothered to come back. Soon he fitted in, because it was easy to. You just existed in that town and if you managed to do just that, it was fine, you fitted in.

“Well...she has the eyes for you”. Qadir was jolted awake by Sulaiman’s words.

“Who?” asked Qadir

“C’mon, don’t tell me that you have become blind”

Qadir understood and did not even bother to reply

“...she is alone. Her father left her the store and her ex-husband is trying to take it away. Comes often and makes a ruckus at her shop”

“Hmmm.....have noticed”

“...her kids don’t bother...and poor thing she must be feeling miserable, able to do nothing, nothing at allhelpless. She needs someone”

Suleiman looked at Qadir for some response. Got nothing...

Suleiman plodded on, “Wife was saying that maybe I should invite you and Mumtaz home for some tea one of these evenings”

Qadir stood up. “Khuda hafiz Suleiman Jaan....” and he walked out.

Suleiman sighed.

Qadir thought about that phrase, “able to do nothing...” as he walked. He understood very well how that feels. That night when he slept, his last thought was Mumtaz and how miserable it must be for her to be able to do nothing.

The next day, he woke as usual, finished his morning chores and visited the small clerical office near the court where he helped people write petitions to the judge and civic authorities. He charged a little for his services and that was enough.

Finishing his work, he did not feel like going back to his empty home. Instead he walked to the town, aiming for Suleiman’s. But as he neared Mumtaz’s shop he sensed commotion and saw a crowd. Hearing loud curses from a man alongside a woman’s shrill and helpless cry he pushed aside people and moved forward. He saw a huge man, strong and cruel, his right hand wrapped around Mumtaz’s hair, in a fist yanking her up by the neck.

He saw that she was tough. She screamed through her pain informing the brute of a husband that she would not give him the store, no matter what.

The husband did not like it. With his hand around her hair, he lifted her off the ground. She yelped like a helpless puppy, afraid and wide-eyed. It was hurting and the big beast was enjoying her pain. He kept yanking her up and dropping her as if she was his toy of pleasure.

Nobody moved. When you are old, you want to preserve whatever bones and flesh you are left with. That was understandable. But Qadir refused to understand. For too long he had tried to understand and make sense of everything that happened to him. He had failed miserably. He was going to fail again.

He stepped forward, something stirring inside him. May be it was the soldier? May be it was the helpless husband? May be it was the heart aching for revenge? Helplessness he had lived with, but had not accepted. That was a shame he had lived and suffered. Not anymore, not another time in his life.

At that moment, Qadir didn't give a damn.

He stepped forward and caught the big man by the scruff of his collar and turned him around. Though stunned initially, the beast was amused by the bravado of the old man in front of him. He did not hit him, but casually swatted. Qadir flew, tumbled and crashed down in a heap. He felt the better part of the life in him gush out. He felt pain, a cold numbing pain. Commonsense told him to lie down and not get up.

But there is another part for the mind of a brave man, which asks the man to get up and go one more round. Qadir answered to that part his mind. He got up and limped forward. People thought it was a stupid move and it truly was. The beast was amused and irritated. He went for Qadir's stomach, kicked him hard there with the pointed toe of his army boots. Qadir doubled over, breathless and spat a globule of blood. He was finished, almost. He coughed and spat more blood on the dusty Afghan soil. The beast moved forward and raised his feet to kick him again. Qadir saw his move with his half open eyes and of all the things, at that moment, he remembered a joke, a joke he heard in the men's shower room at the barracks.

During shower-time a jock was showing off his muscles, boasting about the weights he lifted to sculpt them. Qadir's friend Pasha had pointed to the jock's balls and said, "Well...you can have muscles everywhere, except...out there, no matter how many weights you lift". The whole shower room had cracked up at that.

As the beast raised his leg to kick, Qadir, amazing himself with his speed, grabbed the man right out there and squeezed. The beast yelped, and when Qadir squeezed hard with his bony fingers, making the bones bite into soft pulpy flesh, the yelp became a scream. Qadir hung in there, not letting go. The beast ran dragging Qadir. Qadir hung in there as if his life

mattered on this. The crowd came awake, seeing this spectacle of a life time. An old man, hanging on to balls, not letting go.

Unable to bear the pain, the beast fell down and Qadir stood up, making the advantage count. Standing over his enemy, he suddenly looked taller than he was, like the soldier he once was and his enemy was at his feet. He showed no mercy. He kicked the beast right there in the muscle-less spot. He kicked and kicked. He did not stop till he had mashed the man's primary possession into pulp...a meaty pulp. The beast had lost consciousness and was in spasms, biting dust.

Qadir looked at him with contempt and turned back. He remembered Pasha with gratitude...."you were right...you can have muscles in a lot of places, but not there. You could kick a brute in his balls and it would hurt, no matter how big he was. Inshah Allah.... may the helpless of the world remember this."

He allowed a little smile to escape through his blood streaked lips. That smile had taken a long time coming. As he walked, people parted, looking at him with respect, nodding and smiling.

Qadir did not give a damn. Cowards they were, he thought.

Then an arm grabbed his. Turning around, he saw Mumtaz, cheeks streaked with tears, hair un-tied, looking at him with gratitude. He saw something, what he thought was a little bit of pride, in her face, her eyes. The pride of a woman who has a man to ask for her and protect her. He looked at her, searching her eyes, her face. He felt intrigued, attracted though he did not know how exactly to define what he felt. Then he noticed the untied disheveled hair. He recalled an earlier time, a happier time. His mind stirred and vocal chords responded.

"Tie your hair woman", he commanded softly and surprised himself saying that. Mumtaz looked at him surprised. Then she smiled and obeyed. It felt good to obey him. Then it was her turn to command. "Come with me". Qadir obeyed and he too felt good about it.

She pulled a chair for him at the store, warmed a pot of water, wiping the dirt and blood from his face. She felt like a mother to a child. She was cleaning a dirty, disobedient but lovely child. The child needed her tender and loving care. She immersed herself in her task and she felt she could do just that for the rest of her life. She thought about that life and felt it would be a good one.

"I'm closing early". Mumtaz looked at Qadir and said with conviction, as if she had authority over him. Qadir nodded and stood up. She thought he looked obedient when he did that. As they said in the Hollywood movies playing at the only cinema in town "She kinda liked it".

Mumtaz locked the store and stepped out with Qadir. Qadir hesitated. Which way? To his home? Or? Mumtaz solved it for him. "Some cardamom and rose flavored tea would do a

world of good for you". Qadir agreed. He strode forward, though not very straight, but still elegant and Mumtaz joined his stride.

Looking out of his shop, Suleiman, smiled and muttered to himself..."there goes a man with balls".

As Suleiman was saying that, Qadir and Mumtaz turned the corner of the street, a tough corner in their lives and headed towards her home. She slipped her hand into his and gently leaned against him, keeping pace with his stride, in perfect harmony. Qadir did not mind.

Some of the elders in the street looked and smiled lecherously.

Qadir... well, he didn't give a damn.