

Drenched in Qorma and Dread

by

Sumayya Arshed

She had been in Lahore for three days, though time in this house didn't so much pass as it fermented. The rooms were thick with scent — of *motia ittār*, oversprayed *oud*, chicken *qorma* — and with conversations that began and ended mid-sentence, carried over by people who saw themselves less as relatives and more as unpaid television actors. It was Eid, technically over but now resurrected in its true form: the grand post-Eid dinner, a gathering where the food was plentiful, the laughter performative, and the judgements wrapped in muslin-soft civility. She had been listening, smiling, nodding — performing familiarity like everyone else, waiting for the curtain to fall.

The house, naturally, was in full war-dress. The foyer had a giant arrangement of faux orchids and a freshly laid Persian rug that everyone was forbidden from stepping on. The drawing room glowed with chandeliers, and every surface glimmered as if the furniture had personally been exfoliated. There was gold thread in the curtains, floral arrangements taller than most of the children present, and enough decorative crystal to host a UN banquet.

It began, as all great Lahori epics do, in the kitchen.

Her khala stood over a massive *deg* of *qorma* with the intensity of someone awaiting a divine sign. The oil refused to separate, a betrayal so severe it altered the mood in the room. A cluster of aunts hovered nearby, one clutching a fan brochure,

dabbing her forehead between quietly passing devastating comments about the masala balance. The heat had turned their foreheads dewy, and their smiles tight. Even their gossip sweated.

No one said it outright, but they were all thinking it: the *qorma* was failing, and by extension, so was the host.

She sat at the edge, perched near the back door of the kitchen where the faintest breeze teased the nape of her neck. Her presence was neither invited nor dismissed, just suspended in that peculiar familial limbo reserved for young women who were not married or had children and whose professional choices confuse rather than impress. Earlier, she had offered to help and had been waved off with the sort of indulgent pity and dismissiveness reserved for lost causes. There was always something about the distribution of labour in such gatherings that was never announced but universally understood, a choreography of obligation coded so deep it looked like instinct.

Beyond the kitchen, the rest of the house bloomed with noise. The lounge was a battleground of verbal one-upmanship. The uncles, arranged across cushions like a council of ancient gods, were holding forth on matters of extreme national and international importance. Babar Azam's performance, the IMF's wickedness, and the incompetence of the youth were all weighed, measured, and extensively

evaluated. The television murmured the latest cricket match, not watched so much as invoked, a background liturgy against which all these verdicts were made.

The children had gone rogue. Someone's toddler had gotten into a tray of *mithai* and emerged sugar-slicked and victorious. A chorus of shrieks echoed through the hallway, not from the child, but three separate aunties, each loudly diagnosing a different tragedy: the child was too mollycoddled, too thin for his age, or simply too much. One of them lunged in with a wet wipe with the vigour of someone neutralizing a time bomb, muttered a half-hearted "*ya Allah, koi tameez nahi*", and shuffled back to her tea. Nothing changed. No one expected it to. Children, like everything else, were props in this huge-scale production, expected to perform cuteness and chaos in equal measure. Just beyond this sugary battlefield, another quiet performance was underway.

Among them was the newest entrant into the family theatre — a recently married cousin, still shimmering under layers of post-bridal attention and anxiety. She moved stiffly, her freshly threaded eyebrows raised in permanent concern. Every few minutes, someone would call her over with a coo or a command. She smiled through it all, her nods robotic, eyes flicking between faces like a trapped deer on Eid morning. Her husband remained in the men's circle, blissfully unaware of the thoroughly invasive inquisition his wife was navigating.

And then there was the expat uncle. Visiting from the UK, or as he pronounced it, "Yoo-Kay," with the air of someone carrying a knighthood in his carry-on. He spoke in clipped syllables, his Urdu mangled beyond recognition, spiced generously with second-hand colonial idioms and anecdotes of racism he now wore like a medal. "The thing is," he would begin solemnly, pausing just long enough for silence to kneel before his expertise, "the problem with Pakistan is...everything."

He had been back for a grand total of four days, but spoke with the weary authority of someone personally tasked with managing the fall of the Mughal Empire. His analysis was sweeping: corrupt systems, unwashed fruit, traffic lights treated as mood lighting. "*Bas wahan ka system hai, janab*," he'd sigh, sipping his chai solemnly, shaking his head at a country that refused to gentrify itself upon his command.

The trains in London, he claimed, were so efficient they could detect your mood and adjust the temperature accordingly. Their pigeons, unlike our provincial ones, respected pedestrian crossings and flew in organized formations, "None of this aimless fluttering." The air was cleaner. The people were civil. The silence of strangers, he insisted, was not indifference but etiquette, an advanced form of social evolution we had yet to learn.

His stories, equal parts self-congratulation and colonial hangover, hung in the air like uninvited incense making everyone mildly dizzy, no one bold enough to cough.

“You know, back in London, we’ve stopped using plastic entirely. Even the bin liners are organic,” he announced while accepting a glass of *Pakola* and placing it on a plastic coaster.

His children, British to the bone but temporarily *desi* in designer *kurtas*, lingered nearby with the glazed, amused expressions of kids forced into cultural cosplay. One of them, a girl barely thirteen, asked if the *biryani* was vegan, loudly enough for three aunties to stop mid-chew. An uncomfortable pause followed, the kind usually reserved for death announcements and cricket match losses.

Sometimes she wondered if the British ever truly left, or if they’d simply shapeshifted into expat uncles who spoke of Pakistan like it was a stubborn stain on their Oxford shirts. Every year, they arrived with their accents like expired visas, preaching the gospel of better pavements and punctual trains. Colonialism hadn’t ended — it had just found new mouthpieces with thinning hair and Heathrow loyalty cards. What empire couldn’t conquer through violence, it achieved through aspiration. And she, her people — still politely applauding their anecdotes about civilised pigeons — were the most obedient subjects of all.

She sat awkwardly in the corner, trying to appear both involved and invisible. A cat wandered into the room. Lucky creature, able to weave through this chaos unnoticed.

Dinner was announced by a high-pitched chorus of aunties calling out to no one in particular.

“Aajao sab, khana lag gaya!”

She followed the herd into the dining room where the table groaned under the weight of familial expectations, performative generosity, exaggerated hospitality and forty-nine food items. Deep-brown *qorma* (still suspiciously matte), golden *pulao* freckled with raisins and almonds, kebabs in perfect cylindrical alignment, *raita* adorned with mint like a crown, salad carved into a floral tragedy, three types of *rotis* (one of them made from quinoa for the dieting diabetic), and a side dish no one could identify but everyone wanted to try.

People began filling plates with the speed of obligation. Compliments floated around the table, thick with passive competition. She found her seat with quiet efficiency, noting how even the seating was its own subtle performance. Elders at the head, middle-aged men adjacent to air conditioners, and girls like her toward

the edges — close enough to serve, far enough to avoid being asked anything serious.

Someone to her left discussed wedding venues. Someone to her right asked about a third cousin's thyroid.

She could almost chart the script. The conversation arced seamlessly from food to degrees, then career prospects, and finally marriage, like a terrible trilogy remade every Eid.

The inevitable question came, wrapped in polite curiosity.

“So what are you studying?”

She answered.

A pause. Then the familiar nod. That slow, long, tragic nod.

“Literature? *Mashallah*. Very... refined.”

Refined. Like sugar. Or embroidery. Something to be admired but not invested in.

A cousin leaned over, decked in chiffon, highlighter, and generational confidence. “My friend’s daughter majored in Literature too. Then she got married to a CSP officer. *Mashallah*, now she gives tuitions from home.”

Mashallah, indeed.

She thought of Woolf. Not the Pinterest quotes and collages but the essays about women being spoken over and folded into invisibility. She imagined Woolf at this table, spooning *qorma* into a china bowl, while being summoned to verify an uncle’s half-told anecdote, because naturally, “women remember details better” and were therefore best suited to footnote the male monologue.

Conversation circled. Politics. Petrol. Parenting failures. The falling rupee. The rising hemlines. The moral decline of television dramas. A distant family friend who married a foreigner. The usual suspects. Opinions arrived dressed as facts, loud, uninvited, and utterly convinced of their own brilliance. She listened, archiving facts and fabrications alike in a quiet corner of her mind, occasionally looking up to nod at an argument that seemed particularly imaginative.

An uncle wiped his hands and said, “Kids, please help clear the table.”

He didn’t look up; he didn’t need to. It wasn’t a command. It was a cue.

The girls rose almost simultaneously, as if moved by some ancestral wind. She stood, too, out of instinct more than willingness. Plates were gathered. Serving spoons scraped. Napkins folded. No one needed to tell the boys to stay seated. Their exemption was in their posture.

She followed the others into the kitchen where the temperature had climbed. The AC remained a mythical creature spoken of but never turned on in the kitchen. Naturally. Patriarchy thrives best in sweat. The *qorma* pot had been moved but its presence lingered, ghostly. A stack of plates grew near the sink. A girl began rinsing them despite being told the maid would come in the morning.

They moved like part of a system, performing roles inherited through generations, each step echoing the hundreds taken before by nameless women in rooms just like this. She wondered if her presence here was more ghost than guest. Whether she would be remembered not for what she said, but how politely she passed the chutney at the right time.

What astonished her wasn't the labour, but the expectation of beauty alongside it. Women who had been sweating over stoves, slicing onions, chopping tomatoes, massaging dough and managing the tantrums of their toddlers since the early hours of the day were now also expected to be camera-ready — lipstick un-smudged,

jewellery symmetrical, *dupattas* draped perfectly. It was a quiet tragedy, this impossible duality: to serve without faltering, to glow without melting, to smile without resting. Exhaustion was never an excuse. After all, society detested a sad or lethargic woman. Anything less than flawless was a fatal flaw. And so, these women complied, even in this scorching furnace of expectation and domesticity. She watched them — wrists adorned with gold, deep in soapy water, simultaneously alert to the volume of laughter from the drawing room (lest any command from the living room went unheard) — and marvelled at the quiet tyranny of it all.

As she moved across the house, it struck her how every corner hosted a different performance, a parallel act in the same exhausting play. She wandered toward the hallway and passed the spare room where another kind of familial theatre had taken centre stage. The younger cousins had set up camp. One stood theatrically aghast, clutching her designer *dupatta* like it had been mortally wounded. Someone had spilled a drink on it, and the dramatics were nothing short of a Shakespearean tragedy. Nearby, another was stationed before the mirror like a general at war, frantically blotting the foundation on her face where the humidity had staged its betrayal. “This humidity is classist,” she muttered, dabbing at her forehead as though defending the last sacred vestige of her highlighter. The room smelled faintly of rosewater and quiet despair. An open compact lay on the dresser like a wounded artefact, its puff smeared and trembling. She lingered by the door,

observing with muted reverence the resilience of vanity — how even under duress, beauty was not abandoned, only reapplied. In this house, as she had deduced earlier, perfection was a duty, and every woman bore the residue of this battle along her T-zone.

Just a few feet away, a teenage cousin held court with an uncle. Barely twelve, he rattled off borrowed TikTok wisdom about how if just two percent of Pakistanis adopted solar panels, the economy would experience a miraculous rebirth. The uncle, positively glowing, called him “future minded” and “a sharp young man.” The girl, meanwhile, mourned the ruined fabric. Both were performing. The girl’s meltdown was melodrama; the boy’s nonsense, visionary. Some roles, it seemed, were never up for casting.

Back in the lounge, dessert had arrived. *Kheer* in glass bowls, trifle that looked like a rainbow funeral, and *gulab jamuns* that glistened with ghee and accomplishment.

The men resumed their thrones and passed judgment on the sweets with the same analytical precision they had applied earlier to fiscal policy. The women returned with smiles freshly reapplied.

Compliments passed between them, feathered and sharp.

“You’ve lost so much weight!”

“Oh my God, you’re glowing.”

“That lipstick suits your complexion perfectly.”

Each comment wrapped in satin, each one subtly dissecting the recipient. It was choreography. It was blood sport. A chiffon war with no declared victors.

She watched it all from a corner in the balcony, nursing a cup of chai like it might wake her from this immersive theatre. The steam rose, obscuring nothing. Somewhere near the *verandah*, the uncles had slipped outside for their post-meal smoke. The small orange tips of cigarettes glowed like fireflies in the thick summer night. She stood there, half-listening, half-floating. The light from the chandelier flickered slightly, casting warped reflections on the glossy table. For a moment, everything looked theatrical, as if the evening was being staged and she had missed the rehearsal. The room spun on without her. Voices drifted in: low, measured, occasionally spiked with sudden laughter. The patio lights twinkled above them. To an outsider the view might look almost magical.

The conversation steered towards schooling options, what kind of girls boys should marry, whether the west was stealing our values. Someone praised Dubai.

Someone else called it overdone. Smoke curled in from the verandah: a thick scent of masculinity, freedom and arrogance.

As she turned to leave the balcony, her eyes caught a glimpse of the same cat she'd seen earlier. It was now curled across the street, belly softly protruding, limbs flung in that rare posture of complete trust in the world. It lay there undisturbed, unbothered, asleep in a kind of ease no woman she knew could afford. She stared for a moment, heart aching in a quiet, nameless way. The cat, with its soft defiance and unapologetic comfort, felt like a symbol she couldn't quite decipher — freedom, perhaps, or something even rarer: peace without performance.

The buzz of her phone pulled her back from the reverie. The screen lit up with the familiar name of a friend from back home.

How's Lahore?

She stared at the screen. Then typed:

Loud. Perfumed. Drenched in *qorma* and existential dread.

She hit send.

Copyright © Sumayya Arshed 2025. All rights reserved.