

Ajrak and Ashes

by

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When I buried my husband, I buried a stranger.

I didn't know that then. At the time, I wept the way good wives are meant to — quietly, with a white *dupatta* pulled over my head, the corner pressed to my cheek, as though the cloth might absorb what my skin could not hold. I performed the rituals: kissed his forehead, accepted murmurs of condolence, ate nothing for two days, and prayed until the tasbeeh blurred between my fingers.

He died on a Tuesday. Cardiac arrest. No final words, no bedside confession. Just silence. The kind of silence that makes you feel orphaned even as a grown woman. It wasn't romantic, just abrupt. I had imagined something else — tears, confessions, some grand gesture. But death, as it turned out, was both less and more than I imagined. It was paperwork and administrative duties; sweat and consolatory touching; and the clinking of teaspoons in unfamiliar hands.

Three weeks later, while sorting through his books and old journals, I found the letters.

They were kept in an emerald green tin box, the kind used to store sewing supplies or old passports. Each envelope was addressed in faded black ink. *To Rafia*. The handwriting was his, with curved R's, and the way he always dotted his i's too low. Some were dated before our marriage, but others were more recent. As recent as last Muharram.

My hands trembled. Not with rage — with a kind of eerie stillness, like the air just before a monsoon. I didn't read all of them. Just one.

Rafia, I saw a woman wearing your maroon shawl today. She walked like you, left foot dragging slightly like she had a secret. I wanted to stop her and tell her I still taste the motia oil on your neck when I wake up at night...

That was all I needed.

I didn't scream. I didn't throw the letters into a fire like the women in dramas. I just folded them, ironed the crease, and put them back in the box exactly as they were.

Then I took the *Daewoo* to Lahore.

We had buried him there, next to his parents and older brother, under an old peepal tree in Miani Sahib. Jahanzeb had always said he wanted to be buried where his bloodline ended. It had felt like a heavy decision at the time, coordinating the *janaazah*, informing relatives scattered across cities. But now it felt inevitable. He had always belonged more to Lahore than to me.

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The city smells of dust, decay, and diesel — like something ancient refusing to die. Lahore is a city that never grieves properly, it just mutates.

Rafia lived in a modest flat in Ichhra Bazaar, near the old book stalls. The neighbourhood was older, its buildings leaning into one another like they were telling secrets. When I rang the bell, a young girl — maybe twelve — opened the door.

“Yes?”

“Is Rafia here?” I asked.

“She’s in the kitchen.”

The girl disappeared, and then she appeared.

She.

Not beautiful. Not loud. Just... present. She wore a black *kurta* with an *ajrak dupatta*, bare face, hair tied back with a rubber band that had lost its stretch. When she saw me, her mouth didn’t drop. She knew.

“You’re her,” I said. “The other wife.”

She exhaled, like someone resurfacing after being underwater too long. “You should come in.”

We sat in a small lounge. The walls were lined with books, reminiscent of Jahanzeb’s study at home. There was a painting of a single chair facing a window. Everything felt liminal, or even unoccupied.

“How long?” I asked.

“Twelve years,” she said. “On and off.”

“He never mentioned you.”

“He mentioned you all the time.”

That stung more than I’d expected.

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We didn’t cry. We drank chai. She made it with *elaichi*. I hated cardamom. I drank it anyway.

“He married me when he was twenty-six.”

She cleared her throat, eyes lowered, as if on trial.

“It wasn’t legal, just a *nikkah* at the *masjid* that was never registered. There was no *rukhsati*, no public acknowledgement. His family didn’t approve. I was too working-class, too raw for their polished airs. I was simply too different, perhaps even too alive.”

Her voice began to show a tint of rage underneath it, a fire that had likely been simmering for over a decade.

“His mother said I’d never understand their ways, as if love needed translation. She called me a distraction. Said marrying me was no different than marrying the *maasi*. As if desire was a caste system. As if love should stay within class boundaries, like a garden hedge.”

I said nothing.

“He loved me,” she continued. “I knew it in how he looked at me. He would recite Faiz to me when I couldn’t sleep. He once walked five kilometres just to bring me my favorite chicken patties from Liberty Market. But love wasn’t enough for them. They said I didn’t belong in their home. And he... he didn’t know how to fight them.”

There was something about her stillness, the way she held her chai like a talisman, as if she were someone learning how to vanish slowly, and all at once.

“But he kept coming back,” she added. “Letters. Phone calls. A few nights here and there. He sent money when he could.”

“You never remarried? Why didn’t you leave him?”

She looked at me. Not with pity. With something quieter.

“Why didn’t you?”

I wanted to tell her everything, how on our wedding night, he undid my bangles with the detachment of a man unpacking groceries. I wanted to retell how we lay side by side, not touching, like strangers in a train compartment. I ached to tell her how he hated the smell of ginger, about his obsession with keeping the sink dry, about the time he made me feel like I was too much; too loud, too emotional, too demanding and not grateful enough. But I didn't.

Instead, for once, I kept quiet and said nothing. The words sat on my tongue like ash.

After a long pause, I admitted, "He was distant. I think he married me because it was expected of him. I was the right kind of daughter-in-law, not the right kind of love."

She nodded. "To me, he was everything and nothing. He never stayed long enough to become real."

Later, she showed me a photo I'd never seen. He looked younger, less guarded. He was holding a cigarette in one hand and a kitten in the other. I felt my stomach burn with envy. I had only ever seen him hold things with purpose. This version of him looked... tender.

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I took the *Daewoo* bus back to Islamabad two days later. The house was unbearably quiet. I couldn't bring myself to sleep on our bed. I began sleeping in the guest room, on the floral sheets no one liked. I made tea in a different mug. I stopped playing the news at breakfast.

I dreamt of Rafia. Not him. Her. In the dream, we were both sitting on opposite sides of a wedding stage. She was fixing her dupatta while I was unpinning mine. Our bangles clinked in rhythm, like sisters at a shrine.

When I woke, I realized I hadn't mourned him at all. I had mourned an idea, the version of him that existed in our home: in the photo frames, and the memories I had polished until they gleamed. But that man was a hologram. The real one had always been split.

At the funeral, I remember how still he looked, like a man who had gotten away with something. The betrayal didn't feel like a stab. It felt like fog lifting, like the dizziness of standing up too fast, or walking into light after hours in the dark. It felt like a nausea that was clarifying.

Sometimes I stood in front of the mirror, mouthing his name as if it might still belong to me. *Jahanzeb*. He had once said I looked most beautiful when I was silent. I had believed him.

I no longer did.

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A month later, I was back in Lahore. Not at her door this time, I waited at the graveyard.

She arrived just after *Asr*.

We didn't speak at first. Just stood by the grave, both of us holding *surahs* we didn't recite. Then, finally, she said:

"I sometimes imagine what it would've been like if he'd chosen either of us fully."

I looked down at the grave. The earth hadn't fully settled. Ants crawled in the crevices.

She glanced at me, then said quietly, "He loved me more, you know."

I didn't flinch. I didn't argue. What would have been the point?

"But he didn't know how to leave you. Maybe he was too afraid. Maybe he thought love wasn't enough."

I nodded, slowly. "Maybe it wasn't."

We stood there until Maghrib, until the sky turned the color of rust. The *aḏān* felt heavier than usual. Maybe because for once, it wasn't calling us to someone else's idea of worship.

Before she left, she turned to me. "You know, I don't hate you."

"I don't hate you either."

Then we hugged. Not tightly. Not tearfully. Just enough.

When she let go, she said, "We were both his wives. But only now, we are each other's witnesses."

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That night, I opened the green tin box again, but this time, I took out every letter and burned them slowly — not to forget him, but to unburden us both. The ashes floated gently out the window.

I didn't cry. I just slept. And this time, I dreamt of nothing.

In the morning, I turned an old pearl necklace given to me by my mother-in-law into a new *tasbeeh*. I whispered names into each bead. Not his, but ours. *Shireen*. *Rafia*. The versions of ourselves we might have become had he not split us into shadow and wife. I tied the thread tight. It didn't need to be sanctified. It just needed to be real.

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Two weeks later, I went back to Lahore to visit Jahanzeb's grave and give her the *tasbeeh* as a symbol of closure, but this time, it was her brother who came to the door.

Rafia was found in her bedroom the week before. Peaceful, no sign of struggle. Just her, in her black *kurta* and *ajrak dupatta*, face turned toward the window — as though waiting for someone who never came.

There was a note beside her bed. It was addressed to me:

Shireen,

Yes, he loved me more. But I was never allowed to be his life.

Only you were. I was only a memory. Only a myth.

The paper trembled in my hands. It felt like a second burial. And this time, I wept.

Not just for her. For the girl who believed love would be enough, for the woman who waited. And for the woman I might have become, had I not been the one chosen to endure.

At the graveyard, I placed the tasbeeh and a single chicken patty — from the Liberty bakery she loved — beside his headstone. Not for him, but for her. For Rafia, the one who loved with her whole name, her whole soul.

For the woman who bore the silence with me, who witnessed what I could not name.

And this time, when I walked away, I didn't look back.

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