

# Khazina

by

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No matter how tired my body is, my mind can't put itself to rest. All I do is think about this other woman, his new wife. I wonder if she is tall or short, fat or slim, whether her hair is long like mine, which is what Tariq always said he preferred, or if it's short, cut below the ear like one of those mod women. I want so badly to know everything about her, and then, in the next breath, I resolve to never find out anything about her. What else do I need to know apart from the fact that she's a homewrecking cheapri?

The problem is that I do know something else about her. I know she also teaches at the university. I know that she can't be in the philosophy department, because I have met Tariq's colleagues in the philosophy department and they're all frumpy men who sit around and talk to each other about things I can never understand. At kitty parties, the women who live in our building tease me, saying my professor husband must only discuss intellectual matters with me, and I always smile and play along, waiting for them to move on to talking about someone else's husband.

So, she cannot be in the philosophy department but maybe she is in one of the other social sciences. She probably wears kurtas and pants to work. Not sleeveless, that's a step too far for Tariq. She must be young though. Maybe that's why he's married her, so they can start a family. He'll finally have a son to read all

those books to. The one thing I couldn't give him, though I tried every few weeks as any good wife does.

If I manage to go to sleep then I can wake up and realise this was all just a bad dream, that Tariq is still here sleeping right next to me. I'll tell him about this dream tomorrow over breakfast, so he can shake his head at me over the newspaper and say his typical line, "You've been watching too many TV dramas."

The little clock next to the TV tells me it's five in the morning on the tenth of May, which means I've spent two whole days lying in bed and calling my husband. He hasn't picked up once. I'll never forget how he refused to meet my gaze when he came home to break the news. For a moment I couldn't register what he was saying to me. Instead, I looked past his guilty expression and saw for the first time how white the walls were. All these years we'd spent in an asylum without even noticing. Once I peeled my eyes away from the walls to ask him why, he replied, "All you know is the kitchen, the price of groceries, what drama is playing at 8pm on Wednesdays. A man needs more to come home to."

When we first moved into this Bahadurabad flat, I wanted to paint the walls a bright wash of yellow, in Home Economics college they called it a Tuscan yellow, but Tariq disapproved, saying it was too loud and distracting. I agreed to white and we put up lots of bookshelves so that his books weren't always scattered

everywhere. The week after Tariq got the job at the university, we bought a three-piece sofa set, some rugs from Zainab market, and the breakfast table to celebrate. The spare room became his study, even though sometimes I wish we'd made it into a room I could use too. I brought it up once but he responded snappishly, saying he needed space to do his work. Chalo, I did mention it at a bad time, right when he'd been in the middle of marking final essays, and later on didn't he come and bury his face into the back of my neck?

Whenever I host a kitty party and the women compliment our flat, I always tell them, "Tariq calls this the advantage of marrying a woman with a Home Economics degree," and we all titter the way we do about our husbands before the room becomes silent once again.

The next time I look at the little clock, both hands are pointing at eleven. One week there, one week here. "It's only fair," Tariq said to me. "I'll tell the guard to look out for you, and you'll have Meena for company." Except I told Meena to take the week off and when the guard knocked on my door I never answered. Now, looking out onto the balcony, I feel a manic desire to see the world outside. Without pausing to think, I tie my hair up in a bun, look around for a dupatta and go into the washroom to splash water on my face. It's only when I make my way downstairs that I remember the car has gone to the shop.

The nearest commercial area is a two-minute drive from here, I calculate that this must mean a ten-minute walk. For a second, I hesitate because I've never walked to the market, but the thought of going back inside is enough to propel me forwards. I begin to walk on the side of the road, rearranging my dupatta so that it fully covers my chest. At this time there's not much traffic because schools won't be off for another few hours. I walk past the park with the rusty swings, the local masjid, rows and rows of apartment buildings. A couple of no good boys on motorcycles slow down to snigger at me as I try my best to take confident strides.

By the time I get to Shehzad 24/7 DVD store, I'm sweating from the heat and decide to go inside to cool off for a bit. The shopkeeper's son looks away from the television and asks me how I am. I nod at him. He holds up a new Bollywood movie for me. I tell him I'll take it without glancing at the cover. Suddenly, my gaze falls on a pile of boxes to the left of the counter.

"Are those music players?" I ask him, even though I already know the answer.

"Portable speakers. The latest version!" he says, immediately, "You can play music straight from your phone."

"How?"

“Bluetooth technology.”

“Oh,” I say.

“Don’t take any tension, Aunty. I can show you how it works, it’s very easy.” he adds hastily.

I look at the one speaker that’s sitting out of the box, meant for display. I always thought music gadgets came only in that depressing matte black, but this one is silver and glossy. The shopkeeper turns it on and connects it to his phone. Within seconds the latest Hindi song floods the shop, the sound loud enough to make the countertop shake a little. I don’t know the song, but still I feel something move inside me.

“How much is it?”

“Ten thousand rupees.”

“I’ll take one.”

He makes sure the box is sealed and puts it in a plastic shopper before handing it to me. I walk home with my palms sweating against the plastic, pausing every few minutes to take a breath. The weight of the shopper has killed the adrenaline rush I felt while counting out the notes and handing them over. It's a stupid purchase, I tell myself. Ten thousand rupees could buy two weeks' grocery, a new outfit for my niece's wedding. Total waste of money. They play music on every third TV channel these days. Besides, I haven't even listened to music in years.

Tariq's phone is still off when I get back home. Maybe it's dead. Or maybe he's switched it off to punish me for screaming at him once I finally understood what was going on. Yes, that's it. He's trying to get over the humiliation of telling Khalid Mahmood from next door that yes, everything's just fine, nothing to worry about and sorry Khalid sahib for all the disturbance. He's probably told her all about how I screamed at him like a wild animal. Did her eyes widen with horror? Or did she say, "Haan, and what else can you expect from a housewife?"

The breeze coming in from the front door rustles the shopper and I turn to take the speaker out of the box. Where to put it? There's no space in our bedroom, every surface is covered with lace doilies, make up, various medications, Tariq's notes on his bedside table. I place the speaker on the breakfast table in the lounge and switch it on. It takes me a while to figure out how to work the Bluetooth on

my phone and then connect it to the speaker. Once it's connected it makes a sound and the light flashes green. For a minute I just stare blankly first at my phone, then at the speaker because I don't know what to play. I finally search for a song that's been on the radio a lot recently. When it plays, I lean back in amazement at the clear, crisp sound coming from the speaker.

I wonder if my sister knows about these new gadgets in the market. Growing up, we listened to so much music on our cassette player. We'd listen to the same song ten times over and then she'd make me sing it, correcting me whenever I forgot the lyrics. In college my friends would ask me to sing all the latest music to pass the time in between classes. One time they showed me an advertisement in the newspaper for a singing competition and begged me to send in a recording. According to the advertisement, the winner's tape would be played on the radio.

Tariq and I had just gotten engaged around that time and I shyly mentioned the competition to him right after I sent the tape in. I thought he'd find it amusing, but his back stiffened the moment the words left my mouth. He didn't speak much for the rest of the afternoon until I pleaded with him to please say what was on his mind. He threw me a look filled with hurt and said I should have thought about him before indulging my silly friends. If I won and they played my tape on the radio for everyone to hear, then what would he say to his family?



I didn't end up winning the competition, but they did announce my name in the runner up list.

Now I'm remembering the song I sang in my audition tape. Ankhein Milane Walay, by my favourite Nazia. I search her name on Youtube, and there she is! It's like she's sitting right opposite me at the breakfast table, singing in her satin pink puffy dress. The song ends and the next one begins. I lie down on the rug, put my feet up on the chair and listen to the whole album, like I used to do after coming back home from college, always locking the door so Ammi wouldn't storm in and yell at me to make myself useful. Evening comes, but I don't want to get up even to turn a light on. I listen to Nahid Akhtar, to Mehnaz, to Benjamin Sisters and Runa Laila.

It's two in the morning when my stomach rumbles and I pick myself up from the rug, the music still drumming through my veins. I open the fridge before remembering that I haven't bought any groceries. Rolling out the atta for a couple of parathas, I think to myself that maybe I've become too boring without realising, too prim and proper type. Maybe when Tariq comes back we can listen to music in the evenings. Maybe sometimes we'll even dance together in the lounge. I hold this image close to my heart as I eat one paratha standing over the counter, then have a second one with a cup of tea.

I could sleep now, but a mosquito begins to buzz around my ear. I know Tariq usually keeps a mosquito coil in his study. He hasn't taken anything with him, I can tell as soon as I turn on the lights. His briefcase is next to the door, every book he owns is sitting on the shelf, and there are piles of unmarked papers on his desk. Suddenly it occurs to me that I could place the speaker right here on the desk. I start to organise the papers and then decide to just put them away in a drawer. Then I put all the scattered pens in an old mug on one of the shelves. The desk is completely empty now and for some reason this makes me feel good. I can picture the speaker and a vase of flowers sitting right on top. I sink into the study chair and swivel around. I can't even remember the last time I came in here. What else could this room be? I imagine new curtains to replace the dusty office blinds, huge floor cushions to sit on and lean against, a harmonium and tabla right in the centre of the room. I could find an ustad. Someone who will teach me how to sing like Noor Jehan. My voice is rusty now, but with some practice, who knows? I could sing again like I used to, better even. If I accept this new wife, won't Tariq also compromise a little for me? Isn't that what marriage is all about? The mantra my mother repeated up till her dying day, a promise we murmur to each other all day long; sisters, cousins, wives huddled in a corner while our husbands map out the world beneath their fingertips. All this must be for something after all, for something. My thoughts soothe me, I lean my head onto my shoulder and fall asleep sitting in the study chair.

A few hours later, the doorbell rings and jolts me out of my stupor. My heart wells up with hope as I rush towards the front door. When I unlock it, a delivery man is standing on the other side.

“Salaam ma’am, package for Dr Tariq,” he says, holding up a parcel, “He’ll have to sign for it.”

I realise way too late that I’m standing face to face with a total stranger with no dupatta on.

“He’s not here right now. Can’t I just sign for it?” I say irritably.

“Sorry ma’am, only he can sign. Any idea when he’ll be back?”

“How should I know?” I slam the door in his face.

The man curses loudly enough for me to hear and then leaves. Heart beating against my chest, I grab my phone and call Tariq once again. His phone is switched back on. I hear it ring once, twice, three times before he rejects my call.

Anger grips my entire body, the force of it enough to make me feel faint. I throw the phone against the wall, sink onto my haunches and start to cry. I sound like a wounded animal. Tariq's face floats up in front of mine. He sees me, hair wild, body unwashed, dirty dishes in the sink. He sees the speaker in the corner. All his papers put away, the harmonium and tabla right in the middle of the study. His face wears the same hardness I saw for the first time all those years ago when I told him about my tape. I remember the panic bubbling in my stomach, how I promised to never embarrass him again in a bid to bring back the softness. What a stupid little fool I was!

Now, I look the hardness straight in the eye and hold my ground, repeating the mantra to myself. I wait for the softness to come, for a gleam of recognition in his eye, but his expression stays the same, not one single crack around the edges. If I've been living a lie all this time, why waste another minute? I get up, wipe my face with the back of my hand, wedge the house key into my bra and walk out the door. Half an hour later, I am back with a locksmith. When he hands me my new house key, he asks if I want a copy and I shake my head no.

Once the locksmith leaves, I thread the key through my necklace, lay on my bed and fall asleep as soon as my head touches the pillow. I sleep all day and wake up only when the azaan sounds and the sun begins to set. The last rays disappear into the night sky as the grogginess fades from my body. I pick up the speaker and

open the door to the little balcony. The lights of the city twinkle at me as Noor Jehan's voice rises above the noise of the traffic below.

"Mrs Zafar," a voice interrupts me, "I didn't know you were a Noor Jehan lover."

I look up to see the woman who lives right above me leaning against the railing of her balcony, straining to hear the music. I wave at her and turn the volume up.

"When I was young," she continued, "I would steal my mother's makeup to try and copy her eyeliner."

We sit like this for some time as the music plays, talking about what parts we like and repeating the lines back to each other, until her husband shouts for her and she reluctantly gets up.

"You've brought me some lightness on a dull day, Mrs Zafar. We should listen to music at our next kitty party."

"It's my pleasure," I say to her, "and please, call me Khazina."

She leaves and I am alone again. I close my eyes and take it all in. A smile tugs at the corner of my lips. Tomorrow morning, I will ask around for a lawyer's number, and then go to the bazaar to buy buckets of beautiful yellow paint.

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