

# Bardaasht

by

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## SUMMER

It is September – the sitamgar month, we call it – and I’m at that point where if I continue to stand over this steaming daig for one more minute, I will get a headache from the heat and get properly sick. I know this just like I knew my Saaim was going to be a boy before I gave birth, or like I know the exact moment I have to remove the dry roasting masala from the stove before it browns irreversibly.

I’d turn on the split AC, the one Saaim showed up with one day in August, complete with the kaarigar to install it (bless my chaand sa beta), but it’s in the bedroom and that would be a waste. I wipe my forehead on my sleeve, careful not to let it drip into the daig. These are some things I promised myself when I started my home cooking business: I will provide hygienic, quality food to the people of Karachi, I will do it at fair prices and I will do this until I am rich.

All those things people say – and by people I mean Kamal – about sabr in the face of poverty – is well and good up to a certain moment. After 40 years living in this trash-strewn, pothole-lined scorching city, a woman can get tired of being poor. Especially when her husband isn’t even stupid, or a painkillers addict like some poor women have been allotted by the fates. My husband is a CA, and I may not have much education but as far as I knew that meant good money. That’s what his mother bragged from the day she came to my house to see me, till the day the woman died in her bed last month. Allah bless her soul.

How is it, I wonder, that I can tell that Kamal is worth more than he’s making at the plastics factory he has been working for since before Saaim was born, but Kamal refuses to believe it? He treats me like I don’t understand even simple things,

sighing all dramatically when I ask him to explain how on earth it is possible that the Wi-Fi on my phone will work if I took out the SIM card with my own two hands. Life is full of strange things, and believe me I've seen my share.

Saaim never makes me feel stupid, I have to say, even though my chaand is even more intelligent than his father, I think. But there is the intelligent who reads books, and the intelligent who knows when to say what in a khandaan ki dawat when people are taunting in hidden, covered words. My Saaim is both kinds of intelligent. His intelligence was tested however, I am sad to say, when Mehek came. I went to see the girl myself, choosing her for my Saaim after making sure they matched – she is a little bit but not too much shorter than my son. I had been watching her since she came up to my waist, running up to my door and asking for water when she was playing with the other girls in the building.

But that was before Mehek got an education and turned my son against me. Boys can be silly when it comes to beautiful girls. And Mehek is so fair, like milk. But now Saaim buys me things, like the AC, and is paying the instalment on a shiny silver Vitz for us, even when Kamal says No, iski koi zaroorat nahi hai, Saaim still does what he wants. He even refuses to take my money, even though I told him my cooking business is going very well these days, and we didn't have to tell Kamal the AC was bought with my money.

I always wanted a son, and it shut up my saas for some time after she saw my first-born was male. I had the two girls after that, but what did it matter? My first was a son: I had my future sorted. I would have a strong support when he grew up. That's what my mother told me every time I complained about my nand and my saas. Farhana, she would say, you have been blessed with a boy. Wait just a few years and

see how you are the one with all the power. And I have been waiting, I tell you, but so far nothing.

Anyway, Saaim did listen to Mehek and sometimes even opened his mouth in front of me, his mother, and that was a very tough time for me. He told me not to say anything to Mehek when she burnt Kamal's shirt while ironing it, or when I wanted her to wear something I had picked out for a shaadi walima. I felt like someone had hit me hard in the stomach the day Saaim left the house with Mehek. This happened shortly after the stupid girl swallowed an entire patta of Xanax, God knows why. I don't know if she was trying to kill herself, but we told all the khandaan that it was an accident. Anyway, when Saaim left it hurt even more than when Kamal refused to say anything to his mother when she would bang on our bedroom door at seven in the morning (only a few days after our wedding), or taunt me if I lay in bed in the middle of the day for even one second.

Saaim had always been the gentlest of my children, the most sensitive, even though he was a boy. He would lie in bed next to me, when Kamal would be traveling, him and the girls and me all in one room with the blessed AC on. This is why I missed him so much after he left with that girl. After all I have done for you, I thought, you left me. And everyone who came to the house, my sisters or Kamal's sisters or my neighbors would all ask, "Where is Saaim? So you live alone now?" and the salt in my wounds would make me want to scream.

For a long time I would stay awake at night thinking how ungrateful of Mehek to take away my son after everything I had done for her: I wouldn't wake her up until ten am, make the breakfast myself and let her and Saaim go out for dinner whenever they wanted. Let her have a son, I would think. Then she will understand. But then

time passed and I moved on. I admit, it isn't bad to have a spare room when you are running a cooking business. You can stock all the food containers for a big order in the empty room so that at least Kamal is not complaining about stepping over food every time he comes home.

What can I say, I'm a patient woman. It's what my mother taught me when she married me off to a man I had never seen at 16 years of age, and the lesson has stuck.

## MONSOON

My daughter-in-law Mehek's father's side of the family used to live in Iran. Although Mehek herself does not speak Irani, I mean Farsi, she accidentally taught me a bit of Farsi while we were fighting. This is what happened: we were fighting about the shape of the roti, which she was making hurriedly because she was feeling hot, and I decided to tell her (for the first time, and very nicely) how she should try and increase her bardaasht. And she told me that bardaasht doesn't mean what I think it meant. It is originally a Farsi word, she said, and in Farsi, bardaasht means 'take'. So 'take' my advice na, I told her, but then she explained that it's the kind of take that means somebody's impression or perspective of a certain thing. I told her to stop saying big words, everyone knows I don't understand such ilmi topics and that I am a simple woman.

But some time after she left I thought about bardaasht, and how sacrifice and compromise and adjusting are all bardaasht, and what if they lied to us about what bardaasht means? It is exactly the kind of thing men would do, lie to keep women in their limits. Thinking about how the meaning of bardaasht could be something other than what I was told all my life made my head hurt. I was never very good at school

and books and when Kamal starts to say philosophical things I doze off to be honest, but somehow I am still nodding so he thinks I am listening. My beta also once told me that language was created by men. I did not really believe him, and also told him to be careful otherwise people would start thinking he was the f word. Feminist, feminist is what I mean. But he is very intelligent after all, mera chaand, and maybe he was right.

## WINTER

I had a proper fight with Kamal today. That never happens, because Kamal hates fighting of any kind. His chest starts to hurt when people start fighting, and even in his own khandaan when people start fighting (at least once a year after the Bakra Eid dawats), he goes into a room while I stand there and defend myself. Anyway, what happened today is that Saaim had come over for Sunday lunch, without his wife of course, and he was telling me about the beautiful forests in Malaysia, where he had gone to study. And I asked him how much it cost to visit, and when he told me I said excitedly that I could save up that much until summer, and should we all go to Malaysia? I have never been outside of Pakistan, probably because Kamal does not care much for travel. And Saaim said why not, and it was at that moment that Kamal came out of his room. I knew he had heard, so I asked him if we could go to Malaysia.

“Oh no,” he said. “I cannot take holidays this summer.”

“Then maybe I could go,” I asked him with my loving-wife smile.

It didn't work. Kamal frowned, then scratched his head and looked into the distance when he is faced with the burden of being disagreed with.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” he asked.

His mouth was curved up, but there was no smile in his eyes. I knew this conversation would have gone a lot differently if Saaim hadn't been there.

“Asking you, of course,” I said with as much sincerity as I could.

“Okay,” he said. “Then I'll think about it and tell you.”

I paid for my boldness later that night after Saaim had eaten my beef pulao and gone. Kamal never fights outright. There is no screaming or throwing things, and he has never raised a hand on me. But then he has never needed to; the few sentences he says to me are usually enough. That night I slept in Saaim and Mehek's old room, the pillow case wet under my face. Kamal was already asleep; I could hear him snoring. For some reason I was thinking about my second eldest Sadia, who told me she was going to get a divorce even if it killed her. I had told her no beta, you can't do that, surely you can bardaasht it, and what about the kids? But she wouldn't back down. And I had to admit, despite my and Kamal's advice, Sadia was very likely going to be divorced, if not this year then the next.

Why couldn't I live alone? I was independent. My cooking was well-loved and my customers referred me in their khandaans. In fact I often had to turn orders away. Perhaps my income wasn't enough to run a two-person household, but getting a small apartment for myself - surely that could be managed? It was proof of how hurt I was that night that I was even thinking about this. What would people say? I would still be in Karachi, after all - I could never live anywhere else. Would Saaim let me live with

him? Would Mehek? But then even if they did, what was so bad about a woman living alone?

The more I thought about it, the more sense it made. After all, I didn't need Kamal. That was not how women were supposed to think, they were supposed to be happy with what their husbands earned, but hadn't times changed? Both Mehek and Sadia had jobs. I had a job, even if Kamal wouldn't admit it. I didn't have to put up with his criticisms of my body, or his bad breath when we closed our bedroom door once a month. Did I? My last thought that night when I finally fell asleep in the heat was what would Ammi have said if she had been alive?

## SPRING

About a year after my mother-in-law died and I finally got the house expenses in my hand to spend as I wished, I got sick. This Covid-19 sent by Allah, I am sure it was a punishment for all our sins. Never in my life had I seen anything like it. It came and took away babies, young people, completely healthy adults all fading away within days. Of course we Karachiites never stopped our weddings or wore masks. Everyone drank juice from the gannay wala on the street corner all through Covid, re-using unwashed glasses. It drove Kamal crazy. He would never let the kids eat food from street vendors, and now that things were so scary, with the news telling us how many people were dying every day, Kamal had gone almost bald from the jihaalat of our awam.

I had been coming home from the murghi wala, after making him not only give me a discount and give me his freshest chickens, but cutting and cleaning the chickens as well. I was after all the 'order waali baaji'. I had felt a little headache in the morning



which I had ignored. Kamal had not been home. I had especially waited for him to leave before I went shopping, to avoid his questions and suggestions. On the way, my hands weighed down, I suddenly felt dizzy.

Now I am not a weak woman; I can stand in the kitchen for hours in the heat. And I have had viral and even dengue before, but I had never felt this way. I felt like I would collapse, murghi and all, on the street right there and then. Somehow I managed to reach home. I quickly turned on the AC and lay down in bed still wearing my abaya. A few hours later I still had not managed to get up. My first foolish thought was that I was pregnant, but that didn't seem likely after I looked at the calendar. Kamal was a regular person, even in his desires. I called Saaim, who came. I do not have much memory of the rest. I know I felt that crippling weakness for about 2 weeks. That a few days into the Covid I could not taste anything but the children made me eat anyway.

Yes, children. Sometimes I would open my eyes to see Mehek working on her laptop, giving me water. I would think maybe I was dreaming, but she was really there. I remember not seeing Kamal at all; later I was told he had moved to his sister's house so he wouldn't get sick. Through my days of pain, my children were there, sometimes massaging my hands and feet for hours until I could fall asleep. They took care of me like you take care of children, and I wanted to go to Kamal's sisters and say "Hah! Your daughters-in-law may live with you, but do they ever take care of you like this when you are sick?"

When I finally got better two weeks later (it felt like two months), I have to say I changed a lot. I started seeing Mehek and Saaim differently. They were good children. Maybe it was okay to not be like a proper bahu and live with your in-laws

and cook and iron for them. If only someone had had this groundbreaking realization when I was the one getting married! Kamal, too, was extra nice to me after he came home. He would make his own breakfast, sometimes making it for me also, and I have to say that was a very nice change. But then I got better, and the dawats and the cold wars started again, and Kamal became his usual self, and life went back to normal.

I did not get the divorce after all. I am over 40 years (don't tell anyone). It was silly to think that at my age I could still have a life to live. A divorce was all very well for Sadia, in her twenties still, her life ahead of her. Someone might yet marry her again, even with her three kids, who she took with her when she finally got a divorce three years later. Vapid as Kamal's sisters might be, I have actually gotten used to my bhabhis. We gossip in dawats, about Maaji's jewelry distribution after her death, or go shopping sometimes. I would miss that. I would lose my husband's family completely if I got a divorce, and even though less dawats would be nice, I might get lonely. Drums look pleasant only from a distance, after all. No, my time for living for myself has passed. Staying busy is the important thing, and I am very busy. And I can usually (mostly) convince Kamal to let me spend my money, or even travel (for a religious pilgrimage, anyway) and then life seems good. No, I must be grateful for everything I have and spend the rest of my days for my Saaim - and the little one that Saaim and Mehek joyfully told me they are (finally) expecting in seven months.