

Malik and Khadija Wait

by

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His name is Malik.

Malik has one taxi, five children, one fridge, and two hooks for borrowing electricity.

One of those hooks killed his wife. He has now covered it with tape and written DANGER in very big and unhappy writing so the children would be safe. Two of them can't read yet, so it's a problem. But Malik is sure that the memory of their mother dying with electricity will be effective. Death is a very good educator for good students.

Malik had always wanted five children because it is a good number. The eldest will take over the taxi because it needs to be passed on, the second one will become an accountant because those are necessary, the third one will be a loafer and will bring heartache and therefore heaven to the parents, the fourth will be sent from Allah and will look after the parents in old age, and the fifth one is in case one of the others dies.

Malik's wife was called Mina and she had wanted two children because she had been one of three. Malik explained things to her very carefully and she agreed on the condition that they move to a bigger house. She said that if many people are raised in a small house, they would all become loafers like Malik's cousins.

Mina used to pray for Malik and the children all the time and this was a good thing. Malik was not supposed to know, but he had good ears and he heard her one day. He did not pray for her or the children because one praying person in the house is good enough and if you have too many, maybe the prayers cancel each other out or make more administration in heaven.

Sometimes he wonders if Mina would be alive if he had prayed for her. This is one of those moments. It's a private moment, even though he has a customer. But the customer is very focused on themselves and doesn't seem to be the kind who would mind him having a private moment. It's good she's not one of those who wants to discuss how expensive petrol is or how Peshawar Zalmi performed in this series.

Her name is Khadija.

Khadija has one dead husband, two dead parents, two siblings who may as well be one, and three friends who were once very good friends.

Actually, Khadija wouldn't have minded discussing Peshawar Zalmi's performance. Or about how expensive petrol is, or how bananas cost nearly 500 rupees. She would like to talk about anything that will distract her from things. It was really because of finding a seed-packet from Jehan that she had missed somehow and a very specific memory about arch-shaped tan-lines left by school shoes on her feet through the world's most uncomfortable socks.

It was a butterfly weed seed-packet.

He'd loved them not because butterflies and bees liked them but because the flowers looked a bit upset about things. He thought it was hilarious.

Jehan had been Khadija's husband. Unlike Malik and Mina, they had never gotten around to talking about how many children they wanted. Jehan had loved plants and plants had loved him. Jehan also loved Khadija and she'd never been quite sure why.

Khadija's mother used to pray for all her children. But only on Eid days because she did not pray otherwise. Her father prayed for something, she is sure. He prayed all the prayers, even did the extra ones so he could have many houses in heaven. He also went to Hajj three times. He disapproved of his wife but loved her anyway and knew that this was Allah's gift and test for him and he was thankful.

Her siblings are Jaweria and Kaleem. They are good children because they all emigrated to Canada in the good days. They didn't come for the funerals because what is the point when the people are dead and someone has taken care of the administration of the dying. Khadija is also a good child but not really because she didn't do the things that are expected, but was there at the end through all the difficulty and that is what really matters. She really wants to be home when it happens

because anything else will be stressful for bystanders and a whole thing for people in the medical and protective services.

But now she is going to be late, because this taxi driver kept missing the right exit on the highway and trapped them in a forever loop of slow moving traffic.

There is no point in asking, because hearing ‘Baji, traffic is very bad at this time’ for the sixth time is not going to change anything. The car next to them in the jam is so close, she can count the woman’s pores between the frame of her glasses and the niqab. She wonders if she should comment on how the driver must surely have missed the turn on the third time deliberately. It can’t be for increasing the fare because she will pay a flat rate to the company and they forbid the customers from tipping. But surely, *surely* he is making her late on purpose.

Malik *is* making her late on purpose.

Part of his new job in this amoral side of his life after Mina’s death is to make certain customers late for their flights. Mina was the anchor of his morality. When she was alive, he would never have accepted this new job. He was too afraid of cancelling Mina's good prayers because of his bad actions. But then Mina died. He was unmoored. He was so sad that his skin felt loose and his eyes felt hot. What was he supposed to do now?

He didn't voice any of these things because he was a man, and his mother had named him Malik and that is a powerful name worthy of a powerful man, and he must now look after his family even if he was alone. And his family needed him to have money. More money than before because Mina had looked after the expenses and how she stretched what he gave her, he will never know now. So he said yes to the job.

"Malik. Sometimes we will call you when you have a customer for the airport. You will make them miss their flight. But only *just* miss their flight." And they would give him lots of money for each one. It didn't happen a lot. He didn't know why this job even existed. He didn't know how many of the other drivers in the airport's list had a similar deal. He may be amoral now, but he wasn't shameless and therefore he wouldn't ask anyone else.

"Malik, you are feeding my children with haram?" Mina asks him in his dreams. And all he can say is, "Mina, I am feeding the children. Without this, they will die. I cannot kill your children. This is all I can do now without you." But the Mina of his dreams was never happy.

She looked like this woman does now. This woman was unhappy. Hopefully this woman has a family and children that are the coolness of her eyes. This is where

Malik knows Mina would pray for this unknown woman and her unknown but probably pleasing family because all family is pleasing because it is a gift from Allah.

Malik feels bad and does not pray for this woman. It is not right when he is making her miss her flight. Maybe she needed to go to a funeral. Or maybe her child is in a hospital. Maybe her husband had a terrible car accident. And now she will not be able to go. Because he is feeding haram to his children.

Khadija wasn't unhappy. She had a resting sad-face. She should be sad because essentially, there was nothing more left to do. There wasn't anyone waiting for her. She was one of those people who said salaam to her empty house in case there were any jinn hanging around.

Khadija was going to be late for her own death. This isn't to say that she was going to kill herself. She was not suicidal. She has just been extraordinarily certain for most of her life that she wouldn't be around past forty. Which she was going to be tomorrow. She didn't fantasise about death and she didn't plan for it. She just had a deep certainty that that was her final stop and please mind the gap when leaving the train. She had never been sad about it. She had for a long time tried to convince herself otherwise. Tried to plan for a long life, achieving normal things, and being a normal person of no particular interest to the rest of humanity.

She thought that maybe she would feel different closer to the time. But no. She felt quite envious of this taxi driver. He looked like someone who had things to do. Likely he was a profoundly actualized man getting great satisfaction from a job well done. She would pray for him for sure. His wife was a very lucky woman.

Khadija had narrowly escaped being someone's lucky woman a few times until she married Jehan. He died, so clearly she still hadn't been his lucky woman.

Even with him though. The finality of forty never left. She'd tried reasoning. Internalising the trauma of female ageing in today's society? A deep-seated fear of losing the vitality of youth? Karma from the harm she had caused thus far in life? All of those were possible. But why forty? Thirty would've addressed all of the points better. But she'd sailed through the thirties with no problems besides the death of everyone left who was important and the dawning realisation that when she did die, the first people to notice would be the plants. Plants are people too. And then her colleagues. Three months later. Welcome to remote working across continents when the only time you are checked on is for missed deadlines and the mandatory quarterly well-being sessions where the well-being facilitator stared at you through the screen and was annoyed when you didn't look relaxed enough. So, all the time.

Malik was terribly nervous. He was missing the Friday prayers. He had not realised that making this woman late today would entail this grievous situation.

Making money in a haram way, knowingly feeding the results to his children, dishonouring the memory of his Mina, persisting in the haram were all one side, but missing the one prayer that he actually (sometimes) made an effort for?

There is no coming back from this. This was the last shield he had from Mina of his dreams. That at least he still made it to Friday prayers. By himself. It had been many a month that he'd made it to the mosque. How could he enter the house of the One Most High knowing how low he had sunk? He'd been given the best gift he could've ever imagined in the form of Mina and this is how he showed gratitude? There was no way.

Khadija's earliest memory was next to her father on the prayer mat. He hadn't been praying, he had been holding her close and encouraging her to pet a cat. She remembered nothing of the cat. The memory was a bright lens of colour and light focused on his hand and her arm and the bright blue of the mat. This virtuous and productive taxi driver must be upset at missing his prayers. She should comment on it. But the suspicion that he was the orchestrator of the whole delay lingered. But why would someone who looked so kindly do something like this? She truly was a terrible person who saw the worst in people. She made a mental prayer for the man. This was her way of countering the anger she felt towards people. The anger was never countered, but rage praying became a sticky habit.

Like her childhood habit of choosing the girly sandals with the straps even though they hurt her feet and even though her mother always had to make two extra holes in the strap for grip. The shoes that always gave her arch-shaped tan lines on her feet. But it was all always worth it. Because she would come home in the summer, take off the shoes and sweaty socks, and look at her wrinkly feet. The over-tight straps would have stamped the fabric pattern into her skin. And then she'd walk across the grass to the house, shoes in hand. And be given tea and biscuits before homework time. It was the image of the slightly pale and wrinkly feet with the summery arches in the grass that she hung on to.

She hung on to it in the worst of times.

It is a powerful thing when powerful images collide when you don't mean for them to.

It happened at night a month ago. The second last night for the parents. The night had been muggy and the hospital smelled of doom and hope all at the same time. And she'd been thinking of the feet in the grass because everything was sad and the mind has a screensaver of things to tide you over in such times. And she'd needed to look in her bag for her eyedrops. And there was the seed packet. Tucked behind irrelevant things. Having hid itself for eight years. And showing up now when she was comfortable in her mind with the image of childhood when her parents worked

through their last breaths in the same room. Stupid seed packet with a bad sense of timing.

His absence felt more complete at that moment than all others before it.

She needed him then and he wasn't there and all she had were seeds and seeds were not enough.

She needs him now and all she has is a righteous taxi driver who may be making her late on purpose so she can't go home on time and die in Jehan's garden like she's supposed to.

Mina had always wanted a garden. But Malik never had the money for it, so she made up for it and made the forgotten corners of the house into little gardens. She had blessed hands and everything grew with a hunger for life that seemed unlikely given the grotty places next to the roads she used to get the soil from. He doesn't know why he's thinking of the plants now. He hasn't thought of them since the funeral. He only thought of them during the funeral because they had had to move some of the pots in the living room to make room for her body.

The plants had disappeared. He was sure of it. Mina took them with her when they took her to be buried. Her grave must have them now and they must be wondrous things living on the light and air from heaven that she was getting because she had been so good. He was going to do it. He was going to step out of the taxi

right now and wash with the bottle of water he kept for when the engine overheated and he would pray. He would pray to be good so he could go to heaven and have a garden so that he could finally give Mina a garden. Even though she would have many many palaces there with gardens stretching as far as the eyes would see. But his deeds were meagre and maybe all he could hope for is a small place with a small garden only so he could make Mina happy.

But he stayed in the taxi.

Khadija has the seed packet in her hand. It is a bit damp. Her hand was quite sweaty. She is thinking about everything. There is not a lot in everything when you've had a life like hers. She's had a good and full life. Achieved things she cares for even when others didn't. Improved herself in areas that mattered to her. Worked hard and enjoyed the results of good work done well. Had good memories in her sad-times-screensaver. Had a good life with a wonderful man who loved her for some reason and then was selfish enough to die without checking in with her first.

The best one is of him. Carefully planting yet another delicate plant that had no hope for surviving that climate.

Of course all the unlikely things Jehan had planted thrived. Because of course they did.

Malik had planted flowers on Mina's grave. The graveyard gardener had said they would survive the heat but might not give flowers until the spring. He'd said yes because he didn't know enough to give other options. The seedlings had taken root rapidly even though he only went once a month and only took one can of water for them. The flowers came even before the ink on the gravestone had dried. And the flowers stayed. He had never once seen wilting flowers. The heat of the Potohar melted roads and buckled buildings but did nothing to these flowers.

He liked going to the grave once a month in the hopes that it would make Mina of his dreams happy. But it didn't because she was a principled woman not easily swayed by little gestures where bigger gestures mattered more. But at least he still went.

Khadija wanted to go home. Khadija wanted to plant these seeds. Khadija wanted to die in Jehan's garden.

Malik wanted to go to Mina's grave. Malik wanted to apologise and become the man she had deserved. Malik wanted to die a good man.

But Malik was not a good man. And Khadija was going to miss her flight.