

## MY GOD IS A WOMAN

### ONE

It was a long and arduous journey. A journey from the scorching Thar Desert to the lush greenery of the Gangetic Plains. Safia had not been able to sleep the whole night. Who could, wearing 11 *seers* of brocades and jewellery? The first class carriage was adorned with flowers and shimmers, inviting curious glances at every station. Safia was considered born with a silver spoon, getting married in a family that boasted of two Knights, five Khan Bahadurs and nine Barristers. Her own husband was a barrister and his father was a judge in the Oudh High Court. He had been recently knighted by the British Government. This combination was enough to raise many eyebrows as her father was a mere inspector of schools. The excitement and joy the proposal brought with it had been infectious, so that even Safia, who should have been downcast, went around correcting everyone who cared to listen that it was 'bar-ris-ter' and not 'ballishter' as the rural Muslims pronounced it.

Her father, Syed Murtuza Mehdi, had been discussing the proposal with Mirza Ashfaque Barni, his long time friend and confidante. Mirza Sahib was treated as one of the family and Safia was allowed to serve him tea. Carrying a loaded tray, Safia heard Mirza Sahib's loud exclamation at the mention of Abbas Jafri's name. She quickly stepped behind a curtain to hear the rest.

“You are planning to give our daughter to Abbas Jafri? That infidel, that heathen! The man who has written *Fireworks*! Don’t you know that book is not allowed in any respectable Muslim household? The *Dar-ululum* is appealing to the Crown that it should be banned.” Safia gripped the tray tightly so that the crockery does not tinkle. With her body taut, she waited for her father’s reply, which took rather long in coming.

“You don’t know my Safia. She is mature and sensible. More than that, her knowledge and understanding of the holy scriptures is perfect. She shall bring him back to God’s true faith.” Safia’s eyes misted at the confidence shown by her father. “After all, the Holy Book says that it is the duty of every good Muslim to reclaim the lost souls and bring them back to the true faith, Islam. I am sure my daughter will be able to do just that.”

The argument was solid; it quoted the Holy Book and reminded one of their Islamic duties. Mirza Sahib kept quiet. Safia heaved a sigh and stepped out. Putting down the tray, she addressed a low salaam to Mirza Sahib and poured the tea, reminding herself to put four spoons of sugar in his cup. Gathering his blessings and catching her father’s eye, she turned to leave just as Mirza Sahib began his advice, “It would still be a good idea to fix a high *meher*, say around 50,000 *asharfis*. Just in case.”

Syed Murtuza Mehdi apparently agreed with this and when the groom’s family came to finalize the contract of marriage, and he was politely asked to name the amount for the *meher*, as was the custom, he put forward his request. All hell broke loose in the

*Deewankhana* of the Islamia College guesthouse, where the guests were staying. Without saying it in so many words, the elder brother of the groom and the leader of the delegation reminded him that he was asking for something which was far beyond his own status. Not to be cowed down, Syed Mehdi got up saying that the boy's family was at a liberty to give it some thought, but there would be no bargaining or settlement regarding the same from his side.

"Please sit down Syed Sahib. Sons in our family do not divorce their wives. Women are respected and honoured in clans like ours. However, since you have expressed a doubt, it is only honourable that we set your apprehensions to rest. Your proposal for the *meher* is accepted and will be formally agreed upon at the time of *nikaah* and to be paid at the time of *talaaq*."

The cold metallic voice sent a chill down Mehdi Sahib's spine. "Our mother, Lady Zeenat Jafri," said the bridegroom's brother. Mehdi Sahib stood up to salaam the green satin curtain. "I am sorry. I did not know that you too had come all the way from Lucknow."

"You didn't think that I would leave such an important settlement to a mere boy?" The voice held a studied sneer and the boy it referred to was a strapping 35. The chill in Mehdi Sahib's spine dropped to a sub-zero, and for the first time, he wondered if he was doing the right thing in marrying his only daughter into this family. A whiff of saffron and ground cardamoms brought him back from his thoughts. A beautiful hand with one *aqueek* and three diamond rings was waving a dish of choicest *kalakand* under his nose. "Now if you are satisfied and

all your fears have been allayed, please sweeten your mouth.”

The speed of events left Mehdi Sahib nonplussed. He forgot all his questions about the boy's religious inclinations. He nervously popped a piece of *kalakand* in his mouth and mumbled his thanks, blessings and begged for forgiveness in the same breath.

The train rumbled into the Sandila station and Safia peeped out lifting the heavy brocade *dupatta*, bordered with a six-inch *champakiran*. Her father often came to Sandila on inspection and would take back earthen pots full of the famed *laddoos* of this town. How she loved the small mud pots tied at the neck with a piece of red cloth, like a group of Arabs who had decided to let their hair down. The *laddoos* laden with *kewra* and the fragrance of damp earth just melted in the mouth. God! She was hungry. Last night, she had been too frightened to eat anything of the sumptuous dinner provided by her maternal uncles. She might as well have eaten because her husband stayed away from her. He did not even speak to her.

Safia watched him get up and suddenly the spacious first class coupe turned into a suffocating six by six cell. Tall, frightening and silent. Heart in mouth, she watched him step down on the platform, with visions of his being left on the station clouding her mind. What would be her fate then? She'd be left like the heroine of Asghar Memon's novel *The Lost Bride!*

The train let out a sharp whistle giving Safia such a start that she screamed. Her husband entered the coupe, balancing two cups of tea and a pot of *laddoos*.

“Why did you scream? In any case, it was too mild a sound to get you anywhere. If you have to draw attention scream like this—yaaaaaaaaa. Safia jumped out of her skin. “Eat. In another half an hour, we will be in Lucknow and you shall have to put on the act of the shy bride. Isn’t all that too heavy?” He pointed at the heavy dress and jewels.

“Eleven *seers*,” Safia mumbled. She restrained from adding that the weight had fallen short of half a seer, creating a hullabaloo amongst the women. Luckily, her paternal aunt had arrived in time to add a silver *jhanjhar* of the right weight. Each piece was weighed and handed over to one of the happily married women, the *suhagan*, especially pressed into service for dressing the bride, while a woman good at addition jotted down the weight in a register and kept adding up. All this could very well have been done the day before the wedding. But then what would happen to the chaos, yelling and screaming, the accusations and the vulgar jokes that constituted such an important part of the Indian wedding?

Safia’s *mamujan*, who was a rich zamindar, had ordered a Swiss alarm clock for his favourite niece. This alarm clock had become the centre of attention, drawing reactions of wonder and surprise from everyone. All hell broke loose when the clock went missing. Safia’s mother promptly squatted herself on the floor and started howling—something which she was accustomed of in such situations of crisis. Feverish search began, overturning all the neatly packed trousseau trunks, even rolling up the white sheets and carpet, but it yielded no result. The volume of the howling increased as more contributors decided to join in, when suddenly the

sharp whirring of the alarm was heard above all the brouhaha. The howling stopped in mid-blast and alleyes of the gathering roved to focus on the seat of a middle-aged aunt. She too had been howling and had the quick wit to turn it into a giggle. “Now how could this havegot inside my pyjamas? I must have sat on it.”

Remembering the incident, Safia smiled to herself.

“Good. I was beginning to think you were one of the moron kinds.” Abbas smiled, his serious and determined face lighting up.

Safia jerked up as if she had been hit. She,a moron? She was the joke store of the family. “What do you mean? I am a matric with a second division and no moron can achieve that!”

“God! A matriculate with spunk! This is getting better and better.” He was laughing ather. Safia subsided, marvelling at the way his light brown eyes threw green sparks before vanishing into slits as his smile progressed to laughter. “Eat, you didn’t have dinner.”

So he had noticed. Safia glanced at him gratefully, gobbling four *laddoos* one after another.Poor child! He was still angry with his elder sister and brother-in-law for leaving themalone in the coupe, smirking on the joys of the first night. With any luck, this girl would not understand any of their vulgar jokes. Did they think that he would want to perform in the train with a girl 12 years his junior? Disgusting! He shook open the morning papers he had bought at the station. “Good God!” His exclamation was superimposed with “*Hai Allah*”. Abbas

jerked his head up and caught Safia staring at the headlines. 'Ali brothers under house arrest,' screamed the black print.

“So you are aware of the Ali brothers and the Khilafat Movement?” Safia’s heart turned cold. She should not be talking about the freedom struggle. After all, he had been educated in England and who wants a Miss Know-It-All for a wife.

“No, just heard about the Ali brothers,” she stammered.

“Then you should catch up. The Nationalist Movements are not something that we can just hear about anymore. They are a part of our lives. Why are you so nervous? Awareness is not punishable, it is ignorance which is a crime.” Then, as if it suddenly dawned on him, “You read English?”

“Well, I am a matric...”

“With a second division, how could I forget.” Seeing her face, he burst out laughing and she joined him in the sheer joy of having made him laugh.

“Our first laugh together,” he murmured. “Look, you can see the minarets of the Charbagh Station from here. They are laid out like a chessboard. It took six years to build and cost 22 lakh. It covers an area of more than 40 acres.” He said all this with pride for Lucknow, its living culture, its grand buildings, its musical alleys and homogeneity of Hindu-Shia culture. This Lucknow was to be Safia’s home from today.

A high court judge's daughter-in-law had to be welcomed in proper style. A uniformed band struck the notes of 'Here comes the bride' as the train crawled into the platform. By a special contraption of planks and bamboo poles, the family Dodge that had replaced the traditional *palki* was standing near the door of the railway carriage. Hidden inside the safety of three red sheets, Safia was bundled into the rear seat of the car. She was gathering her extra 11 *seers* when her ears caught a whispered altercation.

"But you can't do this? You cannot stop here and leave her alone. This is preposterous." It was her elder sister-in-law Sajida, who was 10 years older than Abbas and the second in command in the family.

Abbas' reply was mild but firm. "So many people have come to receive us, is it polite to leave without saying a word of thanks? I will speak to Safia." The door opened. "Safia, I am sorry, I have to meet all my friends who have come to receive us. Would you like to go ahead or would you rather wait?" he asked her.

"I'll wait," she mumbled from behind the heavy red and gold veil. Abbas returned after an hour amidst calls of "See you at Safdar Manzil!"

"As if this was not enough, you had to invite everyone home," Sajida grumbled.

As the car wove its way through the crowded station area, Safia yearned to get a glimpse of Lucknow, but the heavy velvet curtains



of the window were tightly drawn and Safia was left to her own imagination to interpret the sounds and allocate them to the venues. The car gave a loud honk and swerved, its wheels crunching on rough gravel.

“We have just entered the main gate of SafdarManzil. From here, it is another half a mile to the house,” Sajida’s proud voice was recounting the years it had taken to build SafdarManzil, the money spent on laying the gardens, the fountains and the five-foot high seat of the main building restricting the damp from the nearby Gomti River from seeping into the walls. If she had intended to make Safia nervous, she had succeeded.

“You will manage,” whispered Abbas and Safia smiled as the car came to a stop.

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