

M e h e r

Syed Saleem

I have never seen Karimun laugh. She turned nineteen the other day, soon after Moharrum. Yet she looks like a fourteen-year-old, spare and weak. I know that people in the neighborhood think 'Peer Sahib has no plans for getting her married. He doesn't even appear to feed her.'

Karimun is my eldest daughter. Seven more progeny after her, six of them girls. To fulfill my fancy for a son, my wife Fatima gave birth to the seventh male child, and in that happiness, gifted me another boy in a difficult delivery, and merged with the dust.

When I was a boy, my father used to ply a *jutka*. I waited eagerly for the day I could wield the whip and drive the horse. When I was ten years old, I told my father, '*Ba, mai bhi gaadi chalaatu.*' He was enraged. '*Bewakoof*, don't you know that the rickshaws have come and taken away the crumbs in our daily gruel. Our town will get a bus one of these days. Then even this gruel will become scarce, *beta*. Your life shouldn't become wretched, like mine, with not enough to feed even a few crumbs to your children,' he said.

Within a week, he sent me to work in Mastan Wali's welding shop. It was fun in the beginning. I was delighted each time the welding rod disgorged crackling sounds and luminous sparks, like the crackers at Deepavali time. Gradually the sights and sounds became stale. After Mastan Wali's death, I bought his shop with my savings. I clung to welding, much as I hated it.

It is this shop which, like the mother who gives birth, nurtures us in its womb. What little we earned at the shop somehow saw us through after Karimun was born. But now ... it is a task just to fill the stomachs of eight children. How is it possible for Karimun to appear nice and pretty like the other girls her age, and not a weakling? I was walking the carpet of burning coals shouting Yah Allah when the boy next door informed of the birth of my first child, Karimun. In a state of joy, I did an extra two rounds of the *karbala*.

When I rushed home and saw her, she was snuggling like a mouse at the emaciated side of her mother. I consoled myself that children born in impoverished homes can't be cute and chubby. It was grief all the way after that. Her mother did not have enough milk. How could she, without any nourishment? She suffered from some ailment or the other. There was never a trace of gaiety in her face.

When Karimun was five, she had four younger sisters. She took care of the two older children. She behaved like an adult. Like her mother, she quietly managed household chores, consoled the crying children and ate whatever little was leftover. Her mother left us, reassured that Karimun was there in her absence to take care of the children.

Karimun is always brooding, never taking anyone into her confidence. She just goes about her business with resignation and weariness.

May be she is worried that I am not thinking of arranging her marriage. How could I be indifferent? Had her mother been alive, I would have discussed all the matches that I have been pursuing. But how can I talk about them with Karimun directly?

Recently, Rashid who works in my shop, suggested a match. Mastan, the grocer near his house, is looking for a suitable girl for his son. I asked Rashid about the boy's family. Mastan values tradition and does *namaz* five times a day. He made two Haj trips. He molded his son into a good *namaazi*. The home is run strictly according to Koranic edicts. Mastan does not tolerate any deviation. Since theirs is a family that strictly observes Muslim injunctions, rules and regulations, the family desires *nikah* with a girl from a similar background.

I felt that Mastan Sahib would have no objections to accepting Karimun as his daughter-in-law. Karimun has been very pious since her childhood. She knows Urdu and Arabic, recites Koran with devotion, and says namaz five times a day. She does not begin any chore without revoking bismillah, nor does she step out without a *chaddar*, no matter that it is torn or soiled. She fasts the whole month of Ramzan. Besides her devotion to Allah, she inherited from her mother the idea of fasting so that she may feed her siblings better.

The only problem could be money. According to Rashid, they are not particular about it. Like any fond father, I nurse the hope that this match will be settled, and that my daughter will be happy. Mastan's son is the fourth child born after three daughters. He will inherit the grocery business. All his sisters are married, so he has no responsibilities. The grocery will take care of their minimum needs.

After that Friday's western namaz, I called at Mastan sahib's grocery. The assistant was packing some provisions. I greeted the *paan*-chewing Mastan Sahib with an *aadaab*.

After I introduced myself, he said, 'Rashid has mentioned you. We are looking for a match exactly like your daughter's.'

I thanked Rashid with all my heart.

I thought it better to be candid at the very beginning, so I rubbed my palms together tentatively and began, 'I don't know if Rashid has told you but we can't match you financially.'

At that, Mastan Sahib burst into laughter as though he had heard a big joke. 'Rashid told me everything. We'll worry about that later. Let us first meet the girl. I've heard that you value tradition. That is more important to me than anything. He is my only son. It's the desire of my *begum* that the girl be good-looking. She, along with my eldest daughter, will visit you to see your daughter. Let me know when it is convenient'

'I think it'll be okay between ten and eleven on Sunday,' he offered.

'It is definitely convenient for us,' I said overwhelmed with joy.

I needed a female relative to host the visitors who observed strict *purdah*. I called on a distant relative Khatijabi and requested her to come on Sunday and take care of the proceedings.

On hearing the news, Karimun's face didn't light up the way I thought it would.

'Who will take care of the children after my nikah?' she asked.

'Your sister will look after them. How long can you postpone your life for the sake of the other children?'

Karimun sat silently, leaning against the wall.

'It will be too expensive, we can't afford it. Please forget it,' she said with her head bent, so that I could not see her face.

'It is a good match, a good family, *beti*. How can we not spend on something so important? Rashid said that Mastan Sahib is not money-minded. They may not demand too much money, I think.'

She sat for a while, and then with a deep sigh, went off to do her chores.

On Sunday morning Mastan Sahib's wife and daughter arrived. Even with the modest make-up, Karimun shone like golden lightning.

'Our boy is slim. We are looking for a delicate slender girl like your daughter. We like her. The men can settle the remaining matters,' the boy's mother said.

The very next day, a Monday, I repaired to Mastan sahib's house.

'We know that you will give the *jahej* that befits you. But let us discuss the dowry,' Mastan said.

A fishbone seems to have suddenly appeared and jammed itself in my throat. I could not get any words to come out of my throat.

The fear of irritating the father of the boy and the worry that silence may bury me beyond my means fought with each other briefly.

'I've already described my financial position,' I said in a voice that my own ears could barely hear.

'I'm not asking for *lakhs* like everyone. I've asked for what befits my status. I am fair and just. You should not talk like a pauper. You're not that poor, are you? You have a welding shop in the center of the town. You have a house of your own, however small.'

'True. But I also have eight children, sir. Six of them are girls. The second daughter has to be married a year after Karimun. I have heard that you are kind-hearted. Have mercy on me,' I said and looked at him piteously.

'The very fact that I have agreed to be your daughter's father-in-law is evidence of our compassion. What more do you want? Do you suggest that we should meet the entire bill for the marriage?'

'No, no, no, why would I say that? I'll perform the wedding according to my means. I'll give *jahej*.'

'You say you can't afford dowry. Is that so? Alright. The boy has studied up to the sixth grade. He is handsome, heir to my grocery shop. People are ready to give a lakh in dowry,' he said.

'Yet I'm not demanding so much from you. Fifty thousand is sufficient because my wife and daughter liked the girl, and because of your devotion to tradition. Otherwise, we will look for another match.'

Worried that the match would slip through my hands if I plead inability to pay dowry, I said, 'You know that such a big sum is more than I can afford. Even if I sell my mud house built on 150 square yards it won't meet half of what you demand.'

'Please take pity on this poor man and reconsider,' I said tears swirling in my eyes.

'Okay, since you're pleading so much let's settle on thirty thousand. Do not utter a word more if it is one rupee less than this. You may go now,'

'I'll be indebted to you all my life for taking pity on me. The unlimited benefaction of Allah will certainly be on you. My daughter, who is going to be your daughter-in-law, is a fortunate girl. But, my *malik*, I can't afford even thirty thousand. Please understand my plight without anger,' I pleaded.

When he heard this, Mastan Sahib got up haughtily and said, 'A *salaam* to you and your match. Please leave.'

At once I clutched his feet. Tears dripped involuntarily from my eyes, I said, 'I'll give a dowry of twenty thousand even if I have to mortgage my head. Please don't say no.'

Mastan Sahib's heart melted, I think. 'Okay,' he said reluctantly. 'Give the money before the nikah. No credit. The wedding happens only after the money comes into my hands. There shouldn't be any problem about this again. I won't come down even if you hold my feet,' Mastan Sahib said caressing his beard pompously.

I was beset by happiness and worry simultaneously ... the match is settled but how will I raise the money...

Karimun looked intently at my face after I returned home. I looked away and said, 'I've finalized the match.' Her lack of enthusiasm at this announcement left me disappointed.

'What jahej did they demand?'

'Nothing much. A canopied bed, bed linen, vessels and utensils for cooking, cutlery etc. are a must for jahej, my child.'

'What will all this cost us?'

'Maybe ten to fifteen thousand.'

She turned towards my averted face and asked, 'They did demand dowry, did they not?'

'No. There was no mention of dowry at all,' I said hurriedly.

'Ba, please don't lie to me. Tell me, how much?'

It was not possible to hide the truth anymore, I replied, 'Twenty thousand.'

Karimun didn't say anything immediately. Before she could speak, I added quickly, 'It's our good fortune to find such a good match for twenty thousand, darling. Mastan Sahib is a large-hearted man to agree to such little dowry.'

'Ba, you're demeaning and hurting yourself unnecessarily. We have a house of our own and a welding shop. They have a grocery. Everything is even. The difference is that you've eight children, six girls to be married. They don't have this burden. How do you plan to raise the money?'

'I want to sell this house.'

'If you do such a thing, I won't get married.'

'Okay, I won't sell the house. We will raise the money somehow.... You don't worry about these things.'

Karimun's eyes filled with sadness.

I didn't sell the house but mortgaged it, and borrowed from every other source available. The day of the nikah finally arrived.

Despite her beautiful bride's attire, Karimun radiated resignation. Her eye lashes were moist with grief.

When the *vakil* came with witnesses and asked Karimun, 'Is this nikah with five thousand kabool hai kya,' she said 'kabool hai' in a weak voice that seemed to emanate from the depths of an ocean of despair.

After they left, I told Karimun quietly, 'See, what Mastan has done. They fixed *meher* at two thousand. But I argued and got them to agree to five thousand.'

When she heard this she burst into laughter for the first time. She laughed in spasms, uncontrollably. Unbecoming behavior for a bride.

I was concerned. The normally melancholy Karimun laughing unchecked! I was frightened.

'What is this crazy behavior?? Stop it! It won't look good if someone sees you,' I said looking around.

'I'm not mad. You are, Ba. I laughed at how gullible you are.'

'What do you mean?' I snapped.

'Tell me, why do we need meher?'

'Meher is protection for women offered by our religion. In one sense it is dowry that a man gives his wife. If the bride becomes single for any reason, the money she gets in the form of meher will see her through difficult times. The woman has all rights over meher. No other religion has such a noble convention,' I said.

'True. I agree. If meher is the gift my husband gives me what would you call the twenty thousand we gave as dowry? What religious edict compelled my father-in-law, who proclaims that he strictly observes the injunctions of our religion, to demand twenty thousand from us? Why was there no mention of it in the *nikahnama*? Please go and find answers to these questions,' she said.

Her words set my head reeling.

'How can I ask anything? I'm the father of a girl. Father of a girl,' I mumbled quietly, ashamed at my own helplessness.