

O Captain, my Careem

7 September 2016

2.30 p.m.

I sink my elbow into a sofa cushion, heave a long sigh and ransack my bag in a frantic search for my cell phone. My hand scoops up a slim eye pencil and an empty bottle of lip gloss. I plunge them back into the bag – it’s one of those cavernous carpet ones from Khaadi – and continue rummaging, unwilling to accept defeat.

After a seemingly endless struggle, I find my phone tucked under crumpled receipts, a lipstick, a compact mirror and a deodorant. I pluck it out and hurriedly attempt to book a Careem cab. As I lean back on the sofa and sip a steaming cup of tea, a small circle spins on the phone’s screen. It’s moving slowly, as if my phone considers booking a cab a trivial command that it would rather ignore.

‘Ugh,’ I murmur. ‘I’ll be late for work again today.’

I can see Mummy ambling down the staircase. Her hips jiggle and bounce from one side to the other and her heels click against the marble floor. She looks like a belly dancer who is out of practice. As she descends the last few steps, she tosses her head back, flips her hennaed hair over her shoulder and ties them into a messy fishtail braid. I rise to my feet and hook my bag onto my arm to create the illusion of composure. I don't want Mummy thinking that I'm dawdling at home, or getting worked up at the slightest provocation. After all, I'm nothing like her.

'Tanya, are you going to work?' Mummy asks as she plops herself on the sofa.

'No, I'm playing *chupan chupayee* with the Careem Captain,' I say, looking at my phone, hoping for a miracle. 'You can never trust these Careem chauffeurs to show up anywhere on time.'

'Are you sure it's safe to travel in a Careem, *beta*?' Mummy tucks a stray strand of hair behind her ear. 'Why don't you take my car? Saira has told me so many horror stories about Careem drivers. They've become a nightmare for passengers! Nighat was complaining about some Pathan driver who abandoned her and a bunch of her friends on Shahrah-e-Faisal at night. They were near PAF Museum and had to walk all the way to Lal Qila restaurant until they could find a ride home. *Uff*, just thinking about it gives me goosebumps.'

'Mummy, please!' Annoyance creeps into my voice. 'It's completely safe.'

She waves a hand in the air, averts her gaze and shrugs.

‘And to be honest,’ I say through clenched teeth, ‘Nighat is known to be a bit vicious. She probably made a snarky comment about how the driver’s kameez didn’t match his shalwar. That probably pissed him off.’

‘Don’t say that about poor Niggi,’ Mummy clicks her tongue and glares at me as if I’d insulted her own child. ‘Saira says her baby is an innocent victim everyone keeps picking on these days. *Bechari*.’

‘Maybe if she didn’t flaunt her daddy’s money, I’d respect her more,’ I quip as I make another attempt to book a Careem.

‘*Khair*,’ Mummy says. ‘All I’m saying is that you should be careful when travelling with these drivers.’

Although Mummy’s anxieties often irritate me, I’ve learnt, for obviously selfish reasons, not to ignore all of them. Getting into a car with a stranger is a dangerous prospect in these hapless times. And I certainly wouldn’t go to the extent of saying that peace has been restored in Karachi, though Operation Lyari of 2013, to quell gang violence and the Nine Zero raid, carried out to clip the Muttahida Qaumi Movement’s (MQM) wings were attempts to ensure this. The authorities may have done a good job in making some deluded citizens believe that the city has become safer, now that the MQM years are behind us, but Mummy and I are not that easy to convince. As long as Mummy’s solitaires continue to be stolen at gunpoint when she travels to a *shaadi* and Altaf Bhai continues to make hate speeches, there’s no point in the Pakistan Rangers extending their powers to purge the city of troublemakers.

‘You’re probably right, Mummy,’ I say as I place my phone on the coffee table and smile at her. ‘I’m sick of using my phone to book cabs that take me from Defence to Burns Road just because I can afford to do so. If you ask me, I prefer travelling in a rickshaw, with the breeze and dust flying into my hair and the sun warming my skin.’

Mummy’s eyes widen with disbelief. I know that a new fear has sprung in her heart.

‘If I ever see you getting into a rickshaw, I’ll scream till my lungs burst,’ she wags her finger at me. ‘Your skin will turn dark and your hair will lose its shine!’

I nod, even though I find her reasons quite absurd. If I don’t agree with Mummy, she will continue arguing in an increasingly shrill, piercing voice, and I’m already sleep-deprived. I don’t have the stamina for a screaming match.

Besides, her fears have a measure of truth to them. Why shouldn’t I be scared of a rickshaw-wallah or even a strange Careem chauffeur? I wouldn’t want to be bludgeoned with an axe by an average desi Joe, if not by a war-mongering militant as most people would expect. If I’m lucky enough to survive, I’d probably have to spend a fortune on reconstructive surgery. Even though Mummy knows a world-class plastic surgeon at South City Hospital, he isn’t in the business of giving discounts like a stall owner at the bustling Juma Bazar on Johar Mor. It is difficult to fritter away your hard-earned money on such extravagances.

And anyway, after exhausting all my rather limited options, I’d have to borrow from Mummy – and that would only open the floodgates to an entire bucketful

of complaints. Quite frankly, even World Bank loans to exploit cash-strapped nations come with fewer conditions than a handout from Mummy to me.

‘Mummy,’ I sit next to her on the sofa and hold her in a warm, purposeful embrace. ‘May I borrow a thousand rupees? My salary is late again this month. I’ll pay you back as soon as I get paid...’

Mummy nods and reaches for her purse. I close my eyes and pray that she takes out the right amount from her wallet. Ever since she spotted the first grey hair on her scalp, Mummy started losing her memory. Her eyesight is also getting weaker and this supposed folly of old age has not been working to my advantage.

The last time I asked her for a thousand rupees, she’d handed me five crumpled twenty-rupee notes and promptly walked away, depriving me of the opportunity to tell her about the error. If she repeats this mistake, I’ll have to start carrying a begging bowl and badger her for money. If that doesn’t work, I’ll send her to Edhi Home where she can spend her twilight years in a comfortable place that is many, many miles away from me.

‘There you go, *beta*,’ she says, closing her purse with a sense of finality and holding out a crisp note. ‘Thousand rupees for my *gareeb*, starving daughter. Enjoy.’

My mother knows how to do favours for people and then embarrass them by bringing it up in bizarre ways. Fortunately, Mummy’s eyesight hasn’t failed her this time, so I don’t complain. As I happily place the note in my wallet, I contemplate the possibility of ordering a roast beef burger from Hanifia on Boat Basin and drinking kahwa from Dera. It’s always the small needs

that matter the most when your salary has been delayed and there isn't even a paisa that you can call your own.

3 p.m.

The muggy air thickens in the living room. The ceiling fan clicks and hums above my head as it draws away the heat. A few seconds later, it stops spinning and silence fills the air.

'Not again,' I groan.

As I say these words, the whirr of our generator rips through the stillness. Haji, Mummy's loyal man Friday – whom I call Lurch because he has lousy housekeeping skills like the servant in *The Addams Family* and an unalloyed loyalty to my mother – is the only one in the house who knows how to switch the generator on. But in other matters of housework, Mummy's training has given him zero skills. What more can I expect from my mother? Mummy, who has returned to her room to shower for the sixth time today, probably hasn't noticed that the electricity has gone. She won't realize it until the chill of the air-conditioning dissipates from her room.

By the time the fan turns on again and I've messaged K-Electric on 8119 about the power breakdown, I've made myself a chilled glass of lime juice. But the app is still struggling to find me a 'Captain'. In half an hour, I've found and lost three drivers already. Two of those drivers accepted my ride request and refused to turn up when they couldn't find the place. God, I have never had this much bad luck with an app. I didn't even swipe left as many times as this when I was briefly on Tinder.

I recline against a backrest pillow and try once again. My mind shifts towards the fear of being axed to death by a stranger. I guess I have some insecurities about travelling in a Careem. It's mostly to do with the fact that I am one of those sheltered journalists. You know, the ones who hide behind their desks editing stories – cleaning and polishing them like they're a pair of mud-stained boots – instead of venturing out on hardcore assignments like their colleagues. It's a difficult position to be in when you dream about being on the other side, hunting for stories rather than inserting commas and full-stops in the right places to make a messy sentence glimmer with purpose.

The hum of my ringtone disrupts my thoughts. It's Topsy – my thirty-something lawyer friend Tabassum. I plug in my headphones and answer the phone.

'Hey babe, are you at work?'

'Umm, I'm trying to get there,' I say, sounding defeated. 'The bloody Careem app is acting up. Oh well, what's been up?'

'I have to tell you something,' Topsy says, with a throb of impatience in her voice. 'Bilal flew down from Lahore yesterday. And last night, he tried something ... well ... something I've never really done before.'

'*Aha*, give me the juicy details,' I say, feigning interest while returning to the Careem app.

'So ... he's got whips lying around in his closet,' Topsy giggles. 'He told me if I am a good girl, he won't use them on me. That gave me an incentive to be bad. Very bad. So we basically whipped each other all through the night and made wild, lustful love.'

As she narrates her tale of bondage and sadomasochism, Topsy giggles softly like a teenager.

‘Easy there, tigress,’ I place my phone on the table, thrilled at having found a Careem driver mere minutes into the call. ‘You never know when that whip turns into an axe.’

She cackles loudly and the image of the simpering teenager dissipates from my mind.

‘But it’s good that you’re taking a walk on the dark side,’ I say. ‘How did that tame, lovesick divorcee I met all those years ago turn into this relentless nymphomaniac?’

‘What can I say, darling?’ Topsy says, though not without pride. ‘Men take to me with ease.’

‘It’s another thing altogether that they eventually find themselves in a pool of Absolut Vodka and a bed with crumpled sheets.’

‘Ha-ha-ha. But to answer your question, it’s all because of Bilal. He has brought my darkest fantasies and fetishes out in the open. At times, his eagerness to do strange things surprises me.’

‘That’s okay,’ I reassure her. ‘Sometimes you need someone who can broaden your perspective. You know, so you can make space for all the *new* fetishes that you pick up along the way.’

Topsy has never needed an excuse to tell me about how much action she’s been getting. After going through an acrimonious divorce two years ago, she had trapped herself in a shell of self-pity and shame. During that period, her apartment in Clifton was a museum to the memories she shared with her ex-husband, Khalid, who had walked out on her for a younger, kinkier woman.

From the Gulgee paintings that hung on the walls to the china that was stored in her kitchen cabinets, everything reminded her of Khalid. Back then, Topsy was docile and reserved. She reminded me, in many ways, of a younger version of Mummy after Daddy had left her. The only difference was that Topsy had a string of secret affairs to fill the vacuum and prevent loneliness from becoming her sole companion.

Since meeting Bilal, Topsy has become more open about the men she is passionate about. Her stories are met with raised eyebrows, stunned silences and backbiting from the *fundoo* brigade. But I doubt she cares about people's reactions.

'Waise, if you think about it, I've been with all sorts of men who derive pleasure from being my muse and passion,' she says, fishing for compliments and a little attention.

'Certainly,' I reply, taking a sip of lime juice. 'My favourites among your men are the ones who end up marrying women who lurk through the moonlit streets of Saddar Bazaar in shuttlecock burqas.'

'Please, I've done better than that,' Topsy laughs.

'Yes, of course. How can I forget the other variety? You know, the ones who are destined to tie the knot with "modren" women with lacquered faces who are seen window-shopping at Dolmen Mall.'

'What can I say?' she giggles. 'The Clifton Bridge doesn't stop me from meeting men from the other side.'

'I must admit, Topsy, this Lahori hunk you share a bed with these days is quite unlike the lousy Romeos and sex-deprived *aashiqs* you've attracted in the past.'

‘What can I say, Punjabi men have a wild streak,’ she whispers.

‘Sadly, the only men who come to see me are Careem Captains. Which reminds me, I should go see where my Captain is. I’m already running late.’

As I hang up, I notice the Captain’s name on the app – Bakhtullah Khan. I’ll call him Bakhtu Bhai, just in case he gets any ideas.

My GPS tells me he’s near Abdullah Shah Ghazi’s Mausoleum. It’s only a few minutes away from our sprawling, dust-infested house on E Street. Bakhtu Bhai should be able to find it easily. It’s close to Nabila’s salon, Ensemble and the pricey restaurants where the rich, famous and the pointless regularly dine. I guess that’s why Mummy is so reluctant to move to another neighbourhood.

3.12 p.m.

I rummage through my bag, pluck out a ballpoint pen and a notepad and scribble out a list of story ideas I want to work on at the *Daily Image* that Hassan – my cranky, overbearing city editor with a weakness for eye candy – probably won’t let me work on. As the seconds tick away into minutes, I tear out the page and toss it into the bin. What’s the point? The app shows me that my Captain is outside the wrought-iron gates of the house. I’m glad that Bakhtu Bhai has arrived at his destination without the usual *nakhre* of his colleagues. Will Tanya Shaukat give her Captain a five-star rating today?

Lurch comes into the room to inform me about a white Corolla parked outside.

His brisk, ungainly sprint from the kitchen to the living room makes my heart pound like a sledgehammer. Why do Mummy's hired help have to be so needlessly hyper in their quest to prove how efficient they can be?

'*Gaadi aayi hai, baby,*' he says, gasping for breath.

I still don't understand why he insists on calling me 'baby'. I guess it's a term of endearment, suffused with the warmth and respect he feels towards my mother. After all, Mummy's servants wouldn't care about me had it not been for their twisted, pseudo-umbilical connection with her.

'The app has already told me, you silly man,' I roll my eyes and whisper to myself as I clutch my bag and run to the door. I smile politely at Lurch so he doesn't think I'm being rude.

3.25 p.m.

I hop into the Corolla and don my Ray-Bans. A mid-afternoon Karachi sun stalks me as I shut the door, its punishing rays licking the skin on my hands. I click my tongue. Bakhtu Bhai turns around, nods and whispers a polite salaam.

'*Garmi hai na, Madam?*' he says, stating the obvious with a saber-toothed smile that fills me with unease. Ignoring his comment, I wave my hand in the air and point towards the AC vent. He flicks the button on the dashboard and starts the engine.

For the first few minutes, the whiff of coconut oil merges with the mildewed stench of the AC. Between the blazing heat and the malodorous smell, I don't know which to blame more for my discomfort.

My friends have often told me stories of meaningful conversations they have struck up with Careem chauffeurs. I wonder if Bakhtu Bhai will open new doors and windows for me to advance my career prospects. My friend Sonia, a health reporter at the *Daily Image*, once based a story on the brother of one of her Careem Captains. His gall bladder surgery was botched up by doctors at a local hospital and he had scars to prove that a kidney racket was operating at the facility.

But Sonia isn't a topnotch reporter and her story lacked research and insight. After the story was published, her Careem driver's brother professed that he had lied to the media. A few days later, the unfortunate patient held a press conference where he revealed that he was an absconding member of Uzair Baloch's gang from Lyari. He had fallen out of the gangster's favour and been roughed up by his old cronies. He wanted to use the story published in the *Daily Image* as a means of approaching the media without eliciting suspicion so he could expose his old friends.

The newspaper ran a corrigendum to put an end to this fiasco and prevent the hospital from suing the reporter who published the story. On her part, Sonia didn't bother to explain her position. What more can one expect from a self-styled, Armani-clad journalist with no real interest in the grassroots?

At least we sub-editors are good at what we do, even though we don't get to go to an MQM rally near Water Pump or smoke smelly bidis with a bus driver from Bajaur Agency. Such possibilities have anyway always made Mummy anxious. She thinks I'll get smashed to

smithereens in a bomb blast. Either way, I'm beginning to enjoy the stress, ambiguities and challenges that come with being a sub. There's always the chance of a silent explosion triggered by an unwanted error on the pages or a cluttered news report that finds its way to my inbox. Who needs to be in the field when the drama can crawl into the newsroom and make itself comfortable on the dusty revolving chairs of our workstations?

3.35 p.m.

Ten minutes into the cab ride, I realize that unlike his colleagues, the bearded and burly Bakhtu Bhai will not be able to give me any insights. And we haven't even reached Sunset Boulevard yet. I wonder how I will make it through the rest of the journey. I'm not saying this because I'm afraid. The truth is, all he seems keen on is picking his nose and burping. 'Where are you from?' I ask him, interrupting a particularly intense dig and cringing at how pretentious my Urdu accent sounds.

'Bannu,' he says, rather hesitantly. '*Bohat achi jaga haiwoh.*'

'Yes, of course,' I reply, my voice dripping with unintended sarcasm. 'Bannu is amazing.'

Bakhtu Bhai senses my scepticism and decides to remain quiet for the rest of the ride. I wonder if he's carrying an axe in the boot. The Rangers may have managed to sideline some of those dubious elements that lurked the streets of my city, but what if Bakhtu Bhai is actually one of those gangsters like in those Bollywood movies Mummy loves? Worse, what if he's a militant who escaped the tribal areas after the Operation?

At this point, Bakhtu Bhai pulls over outside my office – he seems to have taken a shortcut because I always get stuck near Kala Pul for twenty minutes every day. I hand him a bundle of paan-stained notes and smile.

‘Shukriya, beti,’ he says.

I wonder what he’s thanking me for? I did take a swipe at his hometown. I watch silently as my Captain’s Corolla turns towards the main road. As it moves past the office building, I hear something rattling in the boot.

Maybe he did want to bludgeon me to death after all. God bless these stereotypes about war-mongering Pukhtuns from the tribal belt who carry arms like they’re umbrellas or car keys. If not for these convenient notions, I wouldn’t have a scapegoat in Bakhtu Bhai.

I wouldn’t blame him for wanting to kill me. Many people want to see Tanya Shaukat on the guillotine.