

# The Date



If you had peeked in through the dusty, grey windows only a few minutes earlier, you would have seen a middle-aged man and a young woman struggling with each other. You would not be wrong in thinking the man was trying to climb on to the wriggling girl. But no, it wasn't what you think it was. He wasn't particularly forceful and she not really shy. What was taking place was actually in custom with what tradition demanded. A girl should not give her body away too easily and a man should show a bit of force. And so they went back and forth, tussling and tossing, each knowing in their heart of hearts that this was a mere formality. Like any other transaction in this part of the world, sex outside of marriage too had its norms which had to be observed.

But now the two bodies lay still in the shadowy Karachi flat. One pale as ivory, the other like melting dark chocolate, both breathing heavily. Every now and then, the noise of a motorcycle roaring past or the sound of a rickshaw spluttering along the lane outside punctuated

the silence, but it did nothing to stir the immobile bodies that lay still, like scattered pieces of a broken earthen pitcher. Each lost in their own thoughts, each reflecting on the terms of the transaction.

The transaction, or 'the date', as the girl liked to think of it, had begun with a question. A question that the girl now thought was more of an assumption, for it really could not be answered any other way but with a yes. If you were to ask her how it happened, she would have said it all began with a new scarf. You see, it had been only a few months since she had joined the man's workforce and, that day, he had called her into his glass cabin. She knew she had been punctual and hard-working and had no reason to fear, yet felt a rising panic grip her throat as she pushed open the glass door.

Smoothing her dupatta over her head and holding it close to her skin, she stood waiting. When he pretended not to see her, she cleared her throat. 'Yes, sir?' she asked with some trepidation in her voice.

The man leaned back in his chair, the creaking of the faux leather under his bulk reminding her of a series of small farts.

'Come in, please.'

She looked up, surprised to hear his voice which was strangely seductive and husky, unlike his looks which she had found repulsive and reptilian.

'The manager was saying your mother is unwell?'

'Sir ...' she began, but lost her words to a wave of embarrassment. She felt herself blush, for the sick mother had been an excuse to leave early the past few days.

Perhaps he mistook her silence for grief or maybe he knew her kind only too well. But whatever the reason, he asked her if she would like an advance on her salary.

The girl had left his glass cubicle with immense relief and just a little spark of excitement.

In the coming days, he called her in many times. Mostly to ask about her mother and then about her own life. Was she married, where did she live, did she like working here ... The girl was only too happy to get away from the blank glare of the computer and the oppressive heat of the overhead fan into his air-conditioned office. Till one day, he asked her if she would like to meet him outside of work.

And then the man had, as if to answer his own question, pushed a small square box – wrapped in shiny silver paper and adorned with an elaborate bow – across his expansive chipboard-and-formica desk, towards her. He did not look at her. And she did not look away from the present. There were very few occasions in her life when she had received gifts, and this overly shiny, glitzy wrapped box appealed to her. Without accepting it outright, she began a guessing game in her head.

*A perfume, some chocolate, jewellery?*

The man leaned back in his chair, finally glancing up at her. He seemed to be guessing her reaction. Given her non-designer cotton shalwar-kameez with the white chiffon dupatta wound loosely around her hennaed hair and patchy bleached skin, whitened unevenly by local fairness creams, he seemed confident that she would accept his proposition. This was despite the fact that in the past there had been one or two young women, of the

same class and background, who had chosen to take the moral high ground. He recalled now how most of the receptionists who came to work for him had some sort of a sixth sense as to what was required, but there had been a few who had pretended not to understand him and left without notice.

He narrowed his eyes, watching her watch the gift. No, she was not their kind. There was something about the way this woman stared for hours at the blank screen of her computer, stirring only when the phones rang. A break-up or an unrequited love or perhaps some trouble at home, he mused. But whatever it was, if she was searching for something to fulfil her dreams, he would help her.

He sat up suddenly and she stepped back instinctively. Gingerly, he placed his hand on the shiny silver square. Her eyes travelled all the way from the box to the hair covering the back of his hand to the gold of the watch peeking out from beneath his stiff white cuffs, up the length of his short arm, narrow shoulders, thick neck, and to the round, almost football-like head that sat stiffly on his shoulders.

He smiled crookedly.

She looked away, a dizzying wave overcoming her. What surprised her was not guilt, but the lack of it. Why wasn't she revolted? Where was the disgust? Instead, she felt the prick of excitement, as if she was about to embark on a thrilling adventure.

He lifted the lid of the box and pulled out a beautiful silk scarf. 'For you,' he said.

The fabric was embellished with faux gems and she was enthralled. But at the same time, her brow furrowed. It was a headscarf.

‘A beautiful girl like you should be hidden from prying eyes.’

His words seemed to thaw whatever ice had formed at seeing the piece of cloth, instead of the perfume or jewellery she had imagined. She saw herself through his eyes. A little voice in her head kept repeating, ‘beautiful girl’. She saw herself as she imagined he did – attractive, fair-skinned, delicate, decent. At this, her thoughts halted momentarily as she wondered what her favourite heroine in the TV dramas she watched regularly, would do. The tune of *Humsafer* played in her mind and she was reminded of the drama’s overly pious and sacrificial heroine, but she dismissed the thought as she remembered the actress Mahira’s smoking habit – something she was unapologetic about despite public outrage. *Mahira would do the same*, the woman told herself as she picked up the box. She hid the box in the folds of her dupatta wordlessly.

The man’s smile widened. ‘You’re welcome,’ he whispered to her, retreating back.

It began innocently enough, with drop-offs near home and coffees at the mall. The only change that people around her noticed was that she had started wearing the headscarf he had given her in a tightly wound hijab, and complimented it with a long abaya that she took off only when she was inside the office. Perhaps some part of

her wanted to be hidden from the rest of the world, like the secret inside her. But to her family, she said it was because people harassed her on public transport. The family, in turn, was only too glad that she had embraced the right path.

The right path had many deviations, mostly in the form of dimly lit restaurants and secluded parks. The day came when they met at a Chinese restaurant off Tariq Road, where they ate greasy chowmein in the eerie red light of a dimly lit corner. After that, they walked quietly to his small car and got in. She noticed he didn't turn on the AC. To outsiders, they seemed like any other married couple.

That day, he invited her to a friend's flat. She was smart enough to know what it meant, naïve enough to know what it didn't.

In the partly furnished flat, he offered her a bracelet. It was nothing valuable, yet she felt a wave of gratitude wash over her. 'He cares,' she heard a voice repeat over and over in her head. She knew he was married. She knew he knew she wasn't. And she knew what it meant. But still, she was willing to risk it. She did not know why. She dared not ask herself why. Perhaps she had never learnt to question in the first place.

He managed to get her to lie down on the narrow slated bed. And as she looked with feigned interest at the frayed frame of the rusty glass window, he peeled away her clothes. She lay limp, like a newborn, stifling all desire and displaying only a bored disinterest to what

was happening to her body. Once he was inside her, she seemed to relax and he thrust hard.

‘No,’ she cried, struggling against him, and he looked up at her in surprise.

With great effort, as he slowed to a stop, he asked, ‘Do you really want me to stop?’

She looked at his sweaty face, his eyes half-moons, and shook her head. He buried his face in her breast and thrust twice more before collapsing on her like a dead crab. From below, she watched his small body splattered over her. She prodded him gently.

‘Shall I turn over?’ she asked, slightly annoyed at how abruptly the greatly anticipated adventure was over.

If he was surprised at her words, he didn’t show it. With an almost Herculean effort, he raised himself up on his elbows and she turned over, her hips staring up at him like two brown mole hills. He was not aroused. Like a ticker at the bottom of a news channel, a thought kept running through his mind: *This is not her first time.*

‘What happened?’ the girl’s muffled voice broke into his thoughts.

He looked down at her face pressed into the pillow, her hips thrusting up at him invitingly, and willed himself to feel something. But all he could see now was the creeping cellulite, the stark contrast of dark against light on her dimply skin, rough at some places and scaly at others. He gently turned her over. What stared up at him put him off even more. He peered closely and noticed what he had missed in his excitement earlier.

'I'm sorry,' he heaved.

The girl stared at him. He looked to her like an injured wolf.

Embarrassed, he grabbed his thigh and began to massage it vigorously. 'Think I've pulled a muscle,' he groaned in fake pain that did little to convince her. Both knew that the moment had passed.

Annoyed, she pushed him aside. *She* didn't expect it to be his first time, she thought bitterly, realizing exactly what it was that was hurting her much-married boss. She sat up and grabbed her clothes from where he had tossed them on the floor. She watched him stare at her as she wriggled into them as discreetly as she could. She knew what he was looking at.

Finally, the man could not contain himself any longer and said, 'You have hair.'

She looked down at the thatch between her legs and stood stickily with her feet apart.

'Yes,' she said matter-of-factly.

He looked at her headscarf, tossed ruthlessly on to the floor when they first began kissing, then back at her pubic hair.

'But ... but it is not pious.'

For a second, she was stunned at this assumption of her piety. Had he really forgotten that the scarf was *his* gift, she thought with a rising annoyance. She thought she heard him mutter something about making an honest woman out of her and, suddenly, the absurdity of the whole situation struck her.



She threw back her head and laughed so loudly that for a moment he felt frightened of this little creature that had let out a laugh as ferocious as a lion's roar. He was reminded of the time when, once, he had taken his kids to the zoo and they had seen a lioness open her mouth and yawn. It had seemed to him like some sort of soundless laugh and he had felt in that moment as if he were being mocked. He felt it again now, with her uproarious laughter ringing in the tiny room.

'It is,' she said in between mouthfuls of suffocating laughter. Feeling the weight of his gaze on her, she willed herself to stop. She turned away, a clownish smile still plastered on her face, as she struggled to tie her bra. With a sacrificial sigh, he got up to help her and she instinctively pulled away. She wasn't sure why she did that, but knew that this scrutiny of his had sprung up some sort of distance between them.

In a softer tone, she said, 'I can do it myself.'

He remained silent but she thought she saw a hint of a smirk.

'But,' she said as she pushed her hands through the sleeves of her long kurta, 'you shouldn't make assumptions, you know.'

'I wasn't,' he said as he handed her the scarf.

She paused before taking it in. She found herself wondering if he agreed with her or if he really believed her to be someone she had never claimed to be.

She opened her mouth to say something, but he looked away. Like a fish trying to breathe, she opened

and closed her mouth, wondering if he wanted her to leave. As if to quietly send the message across, he glanced purposefully at his watch.

She wanted at that moment to hit him. But she couldn't. He was her boss.

To keep her hands busy, she started buttoning her abaya, the long string of buttons demanding her focus.

'So tell me,' he said, leaning back against a pillow and lighting a cigarette. 'You wear an abaya, a hijab, you probably pray five times a day, but you don't remove your pubic hair? I mean ...' He let out a long slow exhale and continued, 'Isn't that impure? Napak? Against Sunnah? What is that Hadith? Hair should not be longer than a grain of rice ...' He paused and then suddenly, realizing the irony of the situation, began to laugh. Watching his sheepish laughter, she too was reminded of an animal. Except to her, the shrill pitch of his laugh was reminiscent of a hyena.

She smoothed the folds of her abaya and stepped in front of the floor-length mirror. Slowly, she raised her waist-length hair to the top of her head in a topknot, then began to tie her hijab around it. Then came the sunglasses. And in a moment, she had transformed into just about any other woman on the streets of Karachi, making her way home after a hard day's work, plodding away at a mundane, office job.

Addressing him through the mirror, she said, 'It's uncomfortable.'

But the man had moved on. He was going through his phone, his thumb furiously texting, messaging, his eyes scrolling up and down the screen.

'I said—' she began, then stopped mid-sentence. Instead, she looked at him through the mirror. In that moment, as the man on the bed scrolled through his phone, he seemed no different from any other man. She tore her eyes away from him and stared at her own reflection. It seemed to be mocking her.

'Why am I doing this?' she whispered to herself. Looking at him again, she took in his sunken chest, his protruding stomach. The thick reading glasses resting on his even thicker nose, and the deep brown of his skin almost merging with the mahogany of the eyeglasses. But it wasn't his looks that repelled her. It was his indifference that bothered her.

And in that moment, she knew why.

He made her feel wanted. Even if only for a few minutes.

And now, as she tugged her hijab into place and picked up her bag, she thought with affectionate pity that it was sweet of him. It was sweet of him to think she dressed modestly and probably prayed five times. It was sweet of him to think ... to think that she was pious. Pure.

She pulled up the folds of the hijab across her mouth and nostrils and thought how in this aspect he was like her family. They too had been pleasantly surprised when she started wearing the hijab and the abaya. They too had thought her pious.

'Let them,' she whispered to herself as she crossed the distance across the rug, from the mirror to the bed.

She sat down at the edge and gently pulled his phone away.

'I'm leaving now.'

He nodded indulgently and pulled out his wallet.

'For the taxi,' he said.

She hesitated before taking it. It was almost as if he were putting a price on it. *Better a price than a name*, she thought firmly as she took in the money five times the cost of a taxi ride back.

'He cares about me,' she told herself as she shut the door behind her. 'He cares a lot.' She counted the money and stuffed it quickly into her purse before boarding the bus, a part of her knowing that her services were no longer needed.

On the bus, she camouflaged herself amidst the other veiled women, all shrinking into themselves, willing their bodies to become invisible and unfeeling to the pinching and groping that no number of hijabs and burkhas seemed to deter.

Ten minutes before her stop, she texted her younger brother to meet her at the bus stop. And he was there, probably nagged by her mother, blackmailed into helping his sister who, crippled by her gender, was helpless in walking home alone.

She stepped off the bus behind three other abaya-clad ladies, and almost burst into raucous laughter again as her brother approached the woman in front of her and called her 'Api'.

The woman ignored him and her brother seemed embarrassed.

'You all look the same,' he grumbled. 'In this sea of black burkhas, I can't tell who is who.'

She frowned as she mounted the motorbike her fifteen-year-old brother was allowed to ride but was off limits to her. As they sped through the narrow lanes and dug-up roads towards the airless cement cage they called home, she looked in the bike's side mirrors and watched the road behind them disappear in a haze of grey exhaust smoke. She smiled. The sunglasses were the first to go, then the headscarf, which she tugged at till it came loose. She spent the rest of the bumpy ride feeling the breeze on her face and scalp, and thinking about how she would spend the money.