

*The Bhabhis of
Labore*

Our family is full of odd happenings, doings, and the strangest of beings. For instance, when I was young, I was told that we belonged to a cast that had been erased from the city and that we could only meet our people far off in the mountains. And so, every Eid when my friends went to the northern areas and stayed in posh hotels and resorts, we went to unknown peaks and lived amongst yellow-throated marten. If I think hard enough and close my eyes, I can feel the mountain sunlight chasing my skin, and if I keep thinking, I can taste the pale-colored, yogurt-like treat that nana jaan used to feed me. There were times when he'd forget the spoon and make balls of the sweet treat using his fingers – his fingers were salty. I yearn for it: the sweet and then the salt. I have gone to grocery stores across the globe; Chinese marts, Indian vendors, exotic milk sellers from Iceland but none can match the flavor. I have had people place their creations in my mouth and I have licked their fingers, but nothing has hit home. Magic milk I call it. I have no one to ask

about it. Ama disappeared after the death of baba jaan and chacha moved to Karachi. Bhai, the only person I live with, recalls nothing.

Bhai and I are nestled in the heart of Lahore and our old house, except my ama's room which still smells like her after a decade, has been renovated. Bhai let it be because he feels that ama still visits from time to time. 'We may not see her, but her presence can be felt – in the creaking of the wooden stairs, the breeze that escapes inside when I shut the windows, and in *you*. You look exactly like her.' I do not want to resemble the woman who fed me lies and twisted my nipples but bhai says that ama loved me and on cold nights when I have nothing happy to think about, I believe him. Bhai is a wondrous person and a rather fascinating archeologist. In the morning, when I sit by the curtains and write stories, bhai goes on adventures and brings back peculiar stones and ornaments. He then cleans them with much precision and hands them to the museum the next day. 'You act like these belongings are so valuable to you and yet you are so quick to hand them over' I often say. 'It is never good to keep something that you do not know the history of. Things have souls too,' he replies. I nod in approval but of course, we do not think alike. I wanted to grow up and look like him, be like him, but knowing how his life has unraveled, I do not wish for it anymore. For the strangers who are reading this tale, telling you that bhai spends many Sundays at the orphanage, never raises his voice, and feeds stray cats gourmet meals that he cooks for fun, speaks a lot about who he is. But, he also has six broken marriages; six women who were not happy with him and six bhabhis who I often bump into as I stroll across the Lahori streets.

Before baba jaan died, he married off bhai at the age of eighteen to our cousin Bushra. She was great at

UNO and adored watching drama serials with ama jaan. My parents loved her as much as bhai did, if not more. I would often see bhai and Bushra bhabhi playing badminton in the park where my sole duty was to fetch the shuttlecock if the wind carried it away. Sometimes bhai would purposely throw it in the bushes so that he could run to bhabhi and grab her from behind. Bhabhi would giggle and break free when she'd see me returning. Just eight months later, bhabhi jee ran away with a boy. He was someone she had met at the park and they ran away when bhai was attending a math lecture at his college. Bhai was heartbroken but ama said that he was too young to realize what love was and that his heart was perfectly intact. The family ties with phupho were cut, and ama seemed to be at peace about it. 'She was not the right one,' she told bhai. 'She thought of men like winter sweaters. If not blue then pink. But we all know how terrible the color pink is. It wears out and so will her man.' Phupho found her daughter and dragged her back. Bhai wanted to forgive her and Bushra bhabhi wanted to be forgiven, but ama did not let it happen. Years later, I saw Bushra bhabhi at Liberty market. She was pregnant, radiant, and licking a Paradise cone.

The second wedding was a grand one, perhaps the grandest and most spectacular wedding I have attended to this date. It was also the one that lasted the *longest* – two years. It took place six months after the first one and was with a jeweler's daughter. He was baba's close friend – the type we had heard fond memories about. Sehar's father, who I to this day deeply respect, showered us with immense kindness and well, gold. He purchased a house in the newly made phase 4 in DHA Lahore for the newlyweds. Bhai has always been a man who knows how to love, but with Sehar bhabhi it was as he terms it, as hard

as learning to love a rock, whatever that meant. ‘Even rocks are lovable,’ bhai said. ‘But this woman cannot be loved.’ Sehar bhabhi, a woman who had majored in mental sciences and ran a part-time clinic of her own, could not trust bhai. She spied on him, wept when she had *dreams* of bhai cheating on her, and drove the maids away thinking that they would all fall in love with her husband. It got to the extent that Sehar bhabhi’s father, uncle jee started sending groceries and paying bills because bhabhi number two would not and could not let bhai leave the house without her. ‘My Sehar was never like this,’ uncle jee told us. ‘And my son is not the man she thinks he is,’ my then critically ill baba replied. ‘It is all in her head.’ One humid night, in the midst of Ramadan when my mouth was stuffed with an omelet, we had to rush to the hospital. We knew that bhai had tripped and fallen down the stairs but when he gained consciousness, we learned that it was Sehar bhabhi who had pushed him. ‘I was going to lock the doors and then I heard Sehar accusing me of wanting to leave her for another woman and then...’ Bhai did not say anything more. The stitches on the wound dissolved but there’s still a patch of brown on bhai’s forehead from that day. Every time he notices it, he shrugs. The last time I saw bhabhi was in court, and she did not look that well.

‘The next time I bring a woman into this house, it will be on my terms,’ bhai said. ‘Of course, it will be on *your* terms,’ ama jaan snapped. ‘Your baba is now dead. The last two choices were his. Pink and rotten.’ For the next two years, bhai focused on his career – he was fixated on making something of himself, *till* he saw her. Majhbeen. ‘God molded her to perfection. She is like a fair maiden. Her skin is the color of milk, her eyes the shape of almonds and she blinks too often – it is like

seeing a butterfly flap its wings, it is like she cuts short what she wants to see, *blink, blink*, snippets, and holds onto them. Little snippets of me.' I knew that bhai had blindly fallen in love because Majhbeen bhabhi looked nothing like a maiden – she was a woman twice bhai's age and she could barely keep her eyes open. I wanted to sit her down, make her look up, and take out whatever was stuck in her eyes. Before bhai could make her meet ama, ama jee disappeared. Ama jee had started acting out weeks before, and we thought that it was because of baba's death, but when husbands die, wives do not act like ama did. For instance, she would ask bhai if he could pretend that he was baba and sleep next to her. 'I can sleep next to you as your son too,' bhai said. 'If you need company that is.' But ama was adamant about pretending that bhai was baba. This turned the once homely atmosphere into a rather uncomfortable one. Ama hardly talked to me unless it was regarding bhai and even then she would fantasize about him being baba. 'Go Sarfraz, get baba jaan some water,' she would say and point towards bhai.

One morning we woke up to not find her in the house. We looked for weeks. The entire neighborhood searched for her. During this time, Majhbeen *aunty*, who was bhai's friend, became his lover. Ama's disappearance brought them closer. Aunty jee had only one sister she considered family so the marriage ceremony was done in our society's mosque with a few of bhai's friends and aunty jee's sister. The morning after bhai's marriage, which was rather similar to the morning of ama's disappearance, with foggy, unclear skies, no electricity, and an awful stomach ache, Majhbeen aunty woke up screaming. At first, she asked bhai why all the lights were turned off and when bhai pulled back the curtains and turned on all lights, Majhbeen aunty could still not see a thing. It was also the

first time she wasn't blinking like a mad woman – bhai's butterflies were asleep. For some moments aunty jee was quiet, but then she started screaming when she realized that she had lost her eyesight. Horrible, horrible screams. Bhai was upset of course, for he loved her and so he took it upon himself to take care of her when we were told that she would never be able to see. We had caretakers, but bhai did most of her work as any loving husband would. Eventually, the doctors had her shifted to Sialkot and bhai landed his first proper job after losing his football factory startup because of Sehar bhabhi. Things became slow and irksome but bhai still made the effort to be there for her and *then*, after nine months of togetherness and blindness, she made a *request*. She asked bhai to divorce her and marry her sister instead because she was all Majhbeen aunty worried about. Bhai was reluctant at first, but he was tired and after some time (a rather short time), he accepted. Of course, he would not stop caring for Majhbeen aunty – if not as her husband, then as her brother-in-law.

When the fourth woman came into bhai's life, I became an introvert. The three former bhabhis, ama's phantom act, and the search for a non-existent milk treat made me want to shun everyone out and so I did. Mano bhabhi, who was the first to realize that I no longer was what I used to be when her sister was around, started to act worried. Of course, she did not know me and so it was all a show; English breakfasts for me – round pancakes and fancy eggs, movie tickets to Khan films, and staying up at night to help me with intermediate exams, she did it all. Bhai liked it. I did not but because of him, I *let* it happen. I *let* it happen. I let Mano bhabhi come close to me, so much so that she fell in love with me and the three strands of hair I called a beard. Bhai heard it from

his own ears and saw it from his own eyes – an overly excited Mano bhabhi talking on the phone with a saheli and going on and on about how she would love to make love to me and how she imagined it when she was doing *it* with bhai. Bhai divorced her the month after. I see her a lot. Perhaps it is because she lives nearby or that the entire Lahore gathers at Mall 1 for entertainment and there she usually is; exposing her yellow teeth in a grin that is as revolting as it gets.

Bhai made it clear that he was not fit for marriage. ‘You are the best man I know,’ I told him. ‘And you make the very best husband.’ It was true that things had not worked out in his favor, but bhai had never been at fault. Well – at least until his fifth marriage. We were both determined that none of us were good judges, which is why we came to the conclusion that an important decision such as choosing a life partner should be left to someone else. Someone wise, someone with an expertise in the area – and someone we could *blame* if things didn’t work out. We met with a *rishta* aunty, a matchmaker as many call her, and had her arrange potential matches for bhai. ‘He is good looking, he has money and there is no mother in the picture. Things look great. However...’

‘However?’

‘However, he has been married four times and no one will give their daughter to such a man,’ she said.

‘That is your job,’ I said. ‘To make them see that bhai was never wrong and that she will be the happiest woman alive.’

‘Hmm. I will have to charge a lot extra for this.’

‘That is not a problem.’

It took four months for the first match to arrive. She was a divorced doctor with two children. She appeared to be pretty decent and bhai had no problem with the

children but when bhai met her, he realized that she had no interest in marriage and that she was being forced into it. The second match came a week after and it was of an eighteen-year-old from a financially poor background. Bhai refused at once. The matchmaker insisted that I should meet her but shook my head. 'I am not looking for love.' Which was true, I was not. I had stopped believing in it. After that, several proposals came but bhai did not feel comfortable proceeding with any. For instance, there was one he was inclined towards but the woman mentioned that she was an atheist and that bhai had to promise her that all their children would be non-believers. After some time, the matchmaker brought home photos of a young woman and the moment I saw bhai looking at the photos, I *knew* that chum-chums were bouncing in his stomach. Her name was Riffah and she was a teacher at a convent school. When she sat across from the table at dinner for the first time, we thought we had known each other for ages. As if, she had always been there. At the end of the year, Riffah bhabhi and bhai were married. It should be noted that though the marriage did not work out, Riffah bhabhi was one of the most genuine women I had ever had the pleasure of knowing and if I ever do get married, I will want to find someone like her.

Riffah bhabhi loved bhai. She thought of him as the sun and the moon and everything in between and slowly, bhai grew very fond of her. I had never seen bhai *this* content. She was a simple woman and she knew how to run a house and make her man happy. There was nothing more to it. After some time, Riffah bhabhi requested bhai to take her to the doctor. 'Are you ill?' bhai asked. 'Is everything alright, meri jaan?' Bhabhi nodded her head. 'You know how terribly I want a child. I am already thirty. I need to go to the doctor.' And so, bhai took her

to Lahore's top clinic the very next day. The doctor ran some tests and ruled out all complications. 'Your health is perfect. Just pray to God and you'll be blessed anytime now. And oh, get the mister checked as well.' Bhai took an off and went for his tests. Bhabhi spent the day fixing the wardrobes and deciding which room the nursery would be. When she chose the color peach, we also got bhai's results. There were a lot of red, out-of-range figures on the paper. 'It is alright,' Riffah bhabhi replied, seeing the results. 'We will get them done again from another lab.' It was fine for us, but Riffah bhabhi did not sleep that night. Eventually, after a series of doctor visits, it was concluded that bhai *could never* be a father. No treatment guaranteed results. Within the next two months, Riffah bhabhi hugged bhai farewell and begged him for a divorce. 'I *need* children,' she said. 'I cannot wait.' 'I love you,' bhai replied. 'I am sure we can work it out.' They could not work it out. Riffah bhabhi now has a child – a son or daughter, I do not know but I have heard that she despises her husband. The neighbors often hear them threatening to kill each other. But yes, she has a child.

At this point, both bhai and I refrained from mentioning marriage or anything leading to marriage in the house. It was strictly work, and well, sometimes a game of badminton outside. 'I think I am cursed,' bhai once said as he swung the racket behind him. 'All this is not normal.' 'There is nothing abnormal about it,' I replied. 'But it is fine. It is not the end of the world.' A lot of men would have ended up sharing the same fate as bhai had they not given up after the first or second failed relationship. 'It is good that you allow your heart to heal and then go at it again. This is how you will find true love,' I said. Bhai scoffed. We both knew I believed little in what I was saying.

Bhai and I had given up on the quest to find bhai a woman, but the universe had other plans. I recall that it was early February and the news of a weird flu-like virus had taken the world by storm. Most of bhai's international trips were canceled and he was assigned to lead the new office in Gujrat. 'Bhai,' I said when I phoned him after a week. 'I have heard that this virus, Corona as they call it, has arrived in Pakistan. I think you should come back home.' 'I think I will stay for a bit,' came a reply. His tone was hesitant and I instantly knew that either a) there was someone in the room with him who was making him talk like this, or b) he was hiding something. It turned out that both the options were correct. Bhai was in the room with a woman, Feroza, and he was hiding the fact that she had shown interest in him and proposed that they get married.

'You have known her for seven days. *Seven days!* And out of the blue, she has asked for you to marry her. It is rather odd,' I said. 'For all we know she could be a man,' I snapped.

'I assure you that she is not a man.'

'But *who* is she?'

'I-I don't know much. All I know is that for seven days we have worked together and that she has liked me and I have liked her. She is the first woman who *actually* wants me to marry her.'

'She wants you to jump to such a big commitment without knowing her?'

'I knew all the others,' bhai replied. 'Look where that got me. I have told her about it.'

'About your other wives?'

'That too... But about my sperm count.'

'Oh, alright.'

'Listen...' I continued. 'I am happy if you're happy.'

‘I am happy.’

Feroza had been married before but of course just once, not as many times as bhai had. She was a chirpy woman, who spoke too soon and too much. She belonged to a family of some famous bakers in Multan, and she believed that unicorns were real. She was a child at heart and perhaps that is what bhai had wanted all along. ‘I knew that he was the one when I saw him!’ she exclaimed with joy. ‘When you know, you just know!’ *If only we ever did know.*

Feroza’s family was overjoyed because they had not thought that they would ever find someone to like Feroza. ‘She’s a ball of energy,’ her sister said. ‘And there is only so much energy you can stand.’ I was suspicious about why the parents had agreed so fast but then I got to spend time with Feroza *bhabhi* and I had a terrible headache – the kind no Panadol can cure. She was too much. The thought of living in the same house as her annoyed me – she was a woman with children aged from three to fifteen, all inside of her, swinging between a hyper childhood and troubling puberty. But in the end, bhai was happy so that was all that mattered. Even if it meant becoming a blood pressure patient in my thirties.

The nikkah was done and all the travel documents procured a month before all the functions because bhai had some conferences to attend right after the events and he had made the most glorious decision of tagging his wife along with him. Sandwiched between the nikkah and the main events was a dua function that the bride’s family had kept. A mufti sahab had to come and give his blessings and then there were some other family traditions that the elders wanted to do. I remember the day clearly. The hall was small and there were a lot of people. Clusters of aunties were gathered in each corner whispering

among themselves and a rather frantic team of waiters with sweaty foreheads was running around handing out pineapple juice. Bhai and bhabhi were seated under the only AC, and when the mufti sahab arrived, he was given that place. In between the recitation, mufti sahab got up and started roaming across the hall. We assumed that he was feeling hot but shortly after he stopped talking and asked the bride's family to accompany him behind the stage. Every few seconds someone from Feroza bhabhi's family would go behind the gigantic flower vase and join the others. I sipped my pineapple juice. 'Now this is unusual,' I said under my breath. The food was served and the guests were then asked to leave. Bhai and I were still clueless. After most of the families left, mufti sahab called for us. 'This wedding does not have my blessing,' he said. 'This gentleman right here,' he said pointing to bhai. 'Is already married and the wife has not given permission for another marriage. Now, Islam permits four marriages but, in this case, marriage to daughter Feroza can be life-threatening for her.' I kept sipping my juice. I could have spoken, but I chose not to. I let bhai handle it. Bhai told them about all the marriages and how he was not in contact with any of them and he also brought forward a now weeping Feroza who said that whatever had been said was true.

'When I was reciting, I felt darkness in the room. I followed it. It was *his* wife. He has been married off as a child to a goat-jinn in the mountains. He has not returned to her and thus she is not letting any of his marriages work,' the mufti spoke.

'What nonsense!' Bhai cut in. 'Married to a what?'

'A goat jinn.'

Feroza bhabhi started weeping again.

'Come on, Feroza! You don't believe him, do you?'

Feroza bhabhi started crying harder.

‘Get away from my daughter. Mufti sahab does not lie!’ Bhabhi’s khala yelled and pushed bhai to the side.

‘With you around, she may never lead a promising life!’

‘Easy there aunty,’ I said. ‘Let us sit and talk.’

Bhai pulled mufti sahab to the side. ‘What is it that you want? Money? I will give you as much as you want!’

‘Listen beta. I am telling you the truth. You need to know the problem to solve it. Return to the mountains and solve it.’

Feroza bhabhi and bhai stayed in contact for several weeks before she left for the US to pursue a degree. After that, she asked for a divorce. All the gifts we had sent were sent back to us with a Quran and some tasbeehs. It has been two years to this and bhai has not brought up the topic of marriage. We have also not visited the mountains. However, we did visit a religious scholar who said that phupho jaan, Bushra bhabhi’s ama had done an *amal* that had led to ama losing her sanity and bhai’s marriages ending in nuisance. Black magic, the magic milk, a goat-jinn or just fate, we do not know and we are not willing to find out. Unless... unless bhai falls in love again.