

The Reluctant Bride

With a near-full moon rising to its zenith, his mother's warnings flit through his head:

"Don't relieve yourself under a tree at night – you might disturb a jinn."

"Never bathe after sunset – who knows what spirits you'll attract."

And, his favourite: *"Watch out for women whose feet point backwards."*

The high heels favoured by most of his female passengers hobble them enough without the deformed anatomy of a *churail*.

Driving past the *haveli* always brings up long-held superstitions. The dilapidated, burnt-out mansion has lain empty for years: unloved by buyers and shunned by the locals, who cross the road as soon as the building comes into view. The crumbling towers and minarets loom like pitchforks in the dark. Bats wheel in and out of the shutterless windows. He fancies movement behind the rusting ornamental gates but, when he looks again, the night remains motionless.

Jinn, bhooth, preth, churail, shaitan, pari, qutrub ... He reels off the different types of ghosts. Some good, some bad. But all eventually unlucky for those who encounter them.

His hand makes to clutch the *taweez* around his neck, before remembering he lost it many years ago. Devoid of its protection, he quickly touches his earlobes, accidentally nudging the horn with his elbow. It echoes loudly. Not that it matters, since the rickshaw is alone on the road. His only companion is a ghostly barn owl, hunting for prey. He hums a song by Naushad, one of the old-time Bollywood composers.

Turning a corner, he heads along the main road in the opposite direction. Compared to the monster highways of Karachi or Lahore, it is a country lane. Having plied his trade at night for so long, he would struggle with the madness of the day. Even in these small hours he finds passengers: a broken-down car; a partygoer who has missed the last bus; an

urgent dash to the hospital. The money may not be much, but he lives simply. The peace from driving in the dark is a price worth paying.

Another of his mother's expressions comes into his head: "*The fatter a hen grows, the tighter its backside becomes.*" He chuckles.

As he revs the throttle several times, the amplified phut-phut-phut of the engine ricochets off the adobe houses. Winding his way through narrow alleyways, he launches into a third verse of the song, his nasal tones cutting through the rumble of the rickshaw. He drums the dashboard with his left hand, tapping out a haphazard rhythm.

Something darts across his path.

"What the –"

He swerves hard to the right, mounting the pavement with teeth-rattling abandon. Straight for a pair of large wrought-iron gates. The *haveli*. He slams the brake and releases the handlebars. The steering column jabs painfully into his chest. His head bangs first into the rear-view mirror and then the windscreen. Smoking *agarbatti* and various ornaments shower the interior.

He is unable to move. He can't hear his breathing, just a high-pitched ringing in his ears. His eyes remain shut, the stars now on the inside of his eyelids.

Then – with a rush – he is back in the land of the living. Dazed and sore but conscious. As the crickets resume their chirping, he tentatively unfurls himself. The horn stops blaring. He focuses on the ticking of the engine as it cools.

Before he can check himself over, he is arrested by a sound that chills his skin in the humid air. It takes a few moments to work out what it is: a woman crying, sobbing. He shakily swings his legs out of the driver's seat. The acrid smell of petrol and scorched rubber fills his nostrils. As he peers across the road for the source of the tears, all he can

make out are endless fields of corn, rippling as though children are playing catch-chase in them.

The field nearest to him is dominated by a peepal tree, its size rivalling that of the old *haveli*. A rogue breeze shakes the heart-shaped leaves. Or was that a flutter of fabric from behind the trunk? It is hard to tell with so few streetlamps on this stretch of road.

There, again! And that sound – of someone in distress.

“Hello? *Kaun hai? Aap theek ho?*”

The crying stops. From a distance, the lowing of an ox carries through the air like the plea of a dying man. Then silence. As he prepares to shout out again, a figure emerges from behind the broad trunk and into a shaft of pale moonlight. For the second time that night, he stops breathing.

Standing beneath the tree is a woman in full bridal dress. A highly decorated red *dupatta* cowls her head. Her face and throat are bedecked with gold: a *tikka* sunburst pendant over her forehead; a nose chain that swings across her left cheek; swathes of necklaces. In the bleached light, her bright red gown is the colour of dried blood. The *lehenga* flows down in a bell shape, gathering in a flared circle on the ground.

He gulps, remembering his mother’s warnings about *churails* resting under peepal trees. How they lure the unsuspecting by hiding their ghastly features, black tongues and wild long hair in the guise of an attractive woman, sometimes a man. Her face is in shadow. He glances down, but her legs and feet are not visible. He keeps hold of the handlebars.

She approaches him, abandoning the shelter of the tree. Her jewellery chimes like enchanted bells. Is she a *pari*, he wonders, thinking of the benevolent fairy spirits who sometimes marry menfolk? Reaching out to him, she stumbles, setting gold bangles

clattering down her arm. Her hands appear to be withered and burned, making him flinch. She draws back and resumes her crying, burying her face in the crook of her elbow.

Whoever – or whatever – she is, he can't leave her here. These semi-rural streets are known for harbouring jackals and lawless dacoits. He pardons himself with a muttered "*thauba, thauba*" before entreating her to join him.

To reassure the woman he is no threat, he returns to the driver's side. "Please, sister. Come. It is not safe for you to be out."

She glances once more at the *haveli*, then to him, and back again. A heavy chain binds the two gates, but there is gap enough to allow a determined person through. She opens her hands to show they are empty. What he thought were burns are in fact elaborate patterns drawn in henna.

He gathers her meaning. "No, no, no. I wouldn't dream of it."

She looks around, scanning the road in both directions. He reassures her they are the only ones abroad at this hour. He understands it isn't proper for a lone woman to be in a vehicle with a strange man – at any time, let alone at night.

"My mother – may Allah bless her soul – would never forgive me if I left you here. Please, come."

With the *lehenga* concealing her feet, she seems to glide across the road. Abruptly, she stops. She presses the back of her hand to her mouth, her sniffs replaced by a gasp. Instinctively, his own hand goes up to his face. It has been many years since he has made use of a looking glass – but he knows what she sees. He turns away but calls over his shoulder.

"Sister, please, the witching hours are not safe. You don't know who you might meet." He swallows an urge to add "or what".

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The rickshaw is now at the edge of town, a hinterland where the dusty streets, vast countryside and spirit worlds collide. It has few people out at any time of the day, and fewer still after sunset.

He asks the woman if there's somewhere he can drop her off. He reasons that conversation, even a one-sided one, will help put her at ease. Greeted by silence, he leaves it a few moments before asking again.

There are whines and protests from the rickshaw as it trundles over the bumpy roads. But none from the back seat. There is still no answer, just occasional sniffs and sighs. He raises his eyes slowly to the rear-view mirror. Normally he can make out a silhouette even in the darkest of nights, but tonight only blackness pervades.

“Beware the person who casts no shadow or reflection.”

Adjusting the mirror, his fear gives way to relief as the woman shifts back into view. Her head is dipped, her painted hands resting on each other, upturned on her lap as though in prayer. She remains motionless, impervious to the jolting motion of the vehicle.

Steering away from an open drain that emerges by the side of the road, he points to the water tank on the other side.

“This one has been left to rust. But they say the one in town can meet the needs of everyone.” He pauses. “But what happens when there's a fire to put out? The monsoon is late already.” An image slides into his head, of men with buckets forming a relay, throwing water at a wall of flames. He shudders. “Allah be willing, we will get through it.”

Ploughing their way deeper into the countryside, the miles clock up. The petrol gauge is now at midpoint. He needs to keep an eye on it – in these long, remote stretches there are few places at which to refuel.

In the mirror, he sees the woman turn her gaze towards the windowless opening to her side. She gives her hand to the night. The *dupatta* rides back over her head. As

moonlight flickers into the cab through the gaps in the trees, her face is illuminated – she is exquisite. She reminds him of a girl he once knew, though he can't quite place her.

Furtively, his eyes flit to and from the mirror. The woman is immaculately made-up: her eyebrows appear to have glass beads in them; her lips the colour of ripe figs; her complexion pale, otherworldly, with rosy blushes in her cheeks. Henna stains her hands in intricate swirls, while her nails are long and shellacked.

He asks where he can drop her off when daylight returns, but she shakes her head and rests her hand on the ledge. "I have nowhere. I have made my bed ...". She doesn't complete her sentence.

"No problem. I will keep driving." His nasal delivery compares poorly against her rounded tones. He tries to soften it. "Forgive me, sister, but ... why are you running away?"

The whistling air plays with her *dupatta*. "My education, my dreams, my hopes – they all counted for nothing in the end."

He remains quiet, not wanting to interrupt her. The headlamps light up a semi-circle of barely three yards. The sides of the road remain in darkness. Another mile ticks down before she speaks again. "It was meant to be the happiest day of my life. I was betrothed to him since I was a little girl. Everyone kept saying how lucky I was."

In his mind, he sees two school-aged children, holding hands, flying kites and playing *itti danda* together. She swiftly disabuses him of this notion. "He is twenty years older than me."

He imagines what that must have been like: knowing from an early age the name and face of the man she would marry. Each year seeing photographs of someone old enough to be her father, who would always remain two decades her senior.

"Today was the first time I met him," she says in a forlorn voice.

He tries to stir her from her melancholy. “Come, it is not so unusual,” he says cheerily, wagging his head. “My own sisters saw their husbands only three or four times before they were wed. This is quite-quite normal.”

She shoots back: “And that makes it right?”

He shrugs and his grip tightens on the handlebars. He has never thought about the question of right. It’s just the way things have always been done.

“He comes from an old family,” she continues. “He is handsome. Fair of skin. Well-respected.”

“*Wah, wah*, sister, these are fine-fine things!” he exclaims, his hands temporarily raised in the air as though weighing her good fortune. “My mother – may Allah be merciful – she would say he is a first-class match.”

She retorts: “But I do not love him.”

Love. The word ignites memories: fragments of a girl’s face; the smell of coconut oil; a bright laugh, before the ghost slips away and he is left with just the road ahead. He traces his hand over the contours of his face, as though he might find answers there.

The woman laughs – but it is a sound without mirth. “Love!” She spits out the word like it was a bitter gourd. “What is its worth in this godforsaken country? All they care about are rupees and dowries and how many gold bangles their daughters will get.”

“Come, sister, that cannot be true? Our parents just want the best for their –”

“And what would you know about it?”

He is taken aback at her abruptness. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to –”

“You’re a man – you’re protected from all of this!” she interrupts again, a hard edge to her voice. He glances up at the mirror and sees her sweep her hands over her bridal gown. “Little *shezadas*, the apples of your mothers’ eyes. You can do no wrong, but it is the fate of women to be seen as chattel.”

Without warning she smashes an arm onto the ledge. Once. Twice. Three times. The vibration enters the metalwork and throbs through the springs in his seat. She lets out a violent scream, followed by another, each punctuated by the sound of heavy bangles crashing into the side of the rickshaw.

He slams on the brake. The vehicle judders to a halt, momentarily obscured by clouds of dust. As he rushes out to make sure she hasn't hurt herself, she cowers in the seat, her head turned away, sobbing into the peeling plastic interior. Blood drips down her forearms. Blinking rapidly, he realises it is just tendrils of henna. He is torn between wanting to comfort her and keeping his distance. She seems so vulnerable, her body twisted at an unnatural angle, her chest heaving, the ornate necklaces rising and falling with each sob.

Her tears are accompanied by another sound, equally chilling: the banshee-like howls of wild dogs. With hurried, staccato movements, he surveys their surroundings, but only makes out indeterminate dark forms in the inky night. As the hunting calls build, he knows the dogs are on the move, heading in their direction.

Someone – or something – whispers in his ear. He yells and spins on the spot, flapping his hands by his head. There is no-one next to him. He checks the rickshaw, but the woman is still curled up on the seat, still weeping. His fingers once more reach for his long-lost *taweez*. Despite a flood of adrenaline inside him, he refuses to give in to his fears. He convinces himself it was a gecko slithering across the road.

Sliding into the cab, he grabs the handlebars and twists the throttle to its maximum, quickly putting distance between themselves and the dogs. The normal sounds of night encroach once more.

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He considers what she said earlier. She is right. *Rishtas* are found and cemented by the parents of both households – love is of little importance. The boy and girl are expected to play their parts without any dissent.

“Where will you go?” he asks, gently, so as not to disturb her further. His throat is dry and he has to repeat the question to form an unbroken sentence. She doesn’t respond. He tries again: “Can I take you to your family? They will be worried about you.”

She hauls herself upright with surprising speed. Her nails catch against the metal bar on the back of his seat and the screech makes him clench his teeth. Her hair has worn loose, with slick strands framing her face. She stares straight into the mirror. Her dark, *surma*-rimmed eyes flash into his and he is forced to look away. “Only if you want to deliver me to my death.”

A shiver goes through him, as though someone has stepped over his grave. He is reminded of dialogue from the Bollywood films he used to watch. But as dramatic as her statement is, he knows there is truth in it. By leaving her husband on his wedding night, she has put the *izzat* of both families at stake. Women have been pushed down wells for lesser “crimes”.

He doesn’t know what to say and offers a feeble: “Family is family”, not even believing it himself as he utters the words.

After another minute of silence, he pursues his line of enquiry. “Do you have sisters? Brothers? Please, I don’t mind how far they are.” He squints at the needle on the gauge – it has gone down a quarter since he last checked.

With his questions remaining unanswered, he steals a peep in the mirror. The woman is like a bridal shop mannequin, her *dupatta* casting an eerie shadow over her face. Moonlight illuminates just her nose, mouth and chin. She sits bolt upright, staring directly into his eyes. Her own eyes, two black cardamoms, no longer glinting. She doesn’t appear

to blink. Her lips are parted, revealing the edges of her teeth. He sends up a silent prayer as his mother's warnings once more creep into his head.

To calm himself, he begins to whistle – another melody by his beloved Naushad. It takes a few attempts to get the tune right. He keeps his eyes fixed upon the empty road.

From the back seat, unbroken silence.

#

Jacaranda trees line their passage, their purple-blue flowers vibrating in the early glow of dawn. Their honeyed scent fills the cab and he takes several lungfuls of the sweet air. The sky is changing from tar to aubergine to cobalt. He is making for one of the bigger towns, where help will be more readily available.

Simple, square-shaped houses spring up here and there. Carts rest in overgrown driveways alongside squatting oxen. Piles of bricks, lumber and rope stake their places at the crossroads, ready for the labourers in the cool of morning.

The woman remains motionless in the back. He can't hear anything over the drone of the engine – no breathing, no sounds of sleep, not even a subtle shifting of position. Still he doesn't trust himself to look in the mirror.

He cannot begin to imagine what stresses and strains she has lived through, all culminating in her tragic wedding day. Despite his unease at her erratic behaviour, he is committed to looking after her. Kindness and empathy cost nothing.

"The true friend appears in hard times, not at big dinners."

He sends a prayer up to heaven for his mother, and under his breath recites each of the six *kalimah* for his own protection.

#

"Men can be victims, too, you know." She sits forward, her hand grabbing his shoulder, making him jump.

He had been lost in his own thoughts, haunted by splinters of a female face that flickered onto his windscreen before disappearing into the night.

With her breath on the nape of his neck, he struggles to concentrate. “Please, it is safer for you to sit back.”

She remains leaning forward. “The *haveli*: the town’s great tragedy. Even more so than Laila and Majnu.” She is referring to the ill-fated lovers of legend.

“Sister, forgive me. I am not familiar with the story of the *haveli*.” He wonders how this can be, given he finds himself there every night despite the scant footfall.

The woman pushes backwards, landing more heavily than he would have expected. “That poor boy. His sweetheart. Trapped inside,” she intones, as though reading from a headstone.

He shivers and immediately chastises himself. Women unnerve him in general, and this woman in particular, with her sad stories and unpredictable behaviour. More comfortable with his male passengers, he makes friendships with some of them, even if they are pursued more from his side than theirs.

“All because they dared to fall in love,” she says. “A prejudice borne out of Partition.”

“Partition? How do you mean, sister?”

“No boy of his was going to marry an Indian girl, and even less so for love. Some say he lit the match himself ...”

As she relates the tale, his ears resound with the whoosh of ignited kerosene. He pictures tongues of fire licking up the building. His nose fills with the soot from the billowing smoke. He feels the desperation of the doomed lovers as burning timbers and searing heat block their escape. Has he heard this story before?

The woman continues. “Money can evade even the noose in this country. What kind of people are we, where we condemn love but turn a blind eye to murder?”

She stares out of the window. Her fingers spread fan-like over her mouth, the nails black and curved, like talons ... As he shakes his head, the nails are dark red once more and of normal shape and length. He tilts the mirror down, but her feet remain covered by her *lehenga*.

She turns sharply. “Men.” She spits the word with such contempt it lands with the heaviness of lead. “Why do they always harm that which is most precious to them?”

He drops his eyes. “Not all men, sister,” he says quietly. For some reason, he is filled with sadness. Her comment stirs up memories deep inside but he is unable to bring them to the surface.

The woman talks about the man from whom she has fled – her husband of one night. A powerful landowner, his family has lived in the *khandaan* for many decades. With her own family’s fortune from cotton, the match was deemed auspicious by the soothsayer all those years ago.

“The thought of *him* has filled my head with nightmares since I was a little girl,” she says, kneading the seat, exposing more of the foam padding. “Growing up knowing *he* was my future. Can you imagine what that was like?”

She had spent her marriage day submitting to various rituals from an army of sisters-in-law. They bathed and anointed her, combed her hair until it shone and caparisoned her with flowers and jewellery. Turned her into a living doll.

“The only thing they couldn’t give me was love for my husband-to-be.”

He reflects on what it is to be in love. The brush of lips upon another’s. A heartbeat shared as you hold each other close. The desire to spend every waking moment with one person. He struggles to recall the last time he experienced this.

The woman continues with her sorry tale. As the evening wore on and the crowds departed, she was allowed to retire. She avoided looking at the marital bed strewn with red rose petals. Pacing the room, she made up her mind. While her husband bade goodbye to the last of the guests, she escaped by climbing out of the window, evading servants and the ever-vigilant sisters-in-law by scaling the banyan tree that grew outside.

He raises an eyebrow, his lips turned up at the corners.

She hid in doorways, under the canopies of trees and in the shadows of buildings, grateful for their darkness. Fleeing through increasingly quiet streets, the sound of sobs and tainted jewellery leaving an echo of sorrow behind her.

Exhausted, she had ended up at the derelict mansion.

“That’s when you found me.”

He studies her face in the mirror. There is a smudge across her cheek – a violent gash from where she must have rubbed her make-up when she was crying.

#

The humidity of the night air concentrates the scents inside the cab. He easily makes out the spiciness of the marigolds threaded in the woman’s hair. Beneath that, sweeter tones of jasmine flowers. Less strong, varying layers of lavender, coconut oil and rosewater.

Deeper still, sandalwood and the mustardy tang of turmeric, a mixture that would have been rubbed on her skin to cleanse and brighten it.

He needs to get some air. As he stops the cab and staggers out, his passenger stirs in her slumber. He stretches his arms overhead, reaching heavenwards, breathing life into stiff limbs. His spine throws out a series of rat-a-tats, like a burst of firecrackers.

The sun is hauling itself over the horizon and the bloodshot sky is slashed with streaks of orange and pink. A cockerel scratches the earth with its claws. They are on the outskirts of a town. A brooding of houses fills the road ahead. Their windows reflect the

fiery sunrise like the ruby-red eyes of very many devils. In the distance, the hills have been replaced by dense settlements.

He spots a movement off to the right. It is the woman, though it doesn't seem possible she could have got out of the cab so quickly or quietly.

He calls out to her. "We should get going, sister." Aware of his voice slicing through the early morning quiet, he closes the distance between them. "We are almost there and the sun will soon be up."

She searches the horizon, her arms wrapped around herself. From behind the gates of one of the houses, a dog barks. A heron beats its mighty wings overhead.

Scrutinising her, he sees no sign of pregnancy – *churails* often being ghosts of women who die in childbirth. Her feet remain out of sight. As the sun travels up her scarlet and gold outfit, she is turned into a living ember. Even in profile, her beauty and bearing have the power to arrest his progress. He exclaims in wonder.

She turns around, her face fully lit for the first time. His mouth drops open. The heat of the morning sun warms his back. Like a moon orbiting a planet, the woman circles him and he is compelled to track her. Without meaning to, he steps out of the shadows – and instantly bows his head, unable to meet her gaze.

With a jewelled hand, she lifts his face. She caresses the grooves and folds she finds there, as though to make the pain go away. Seeing her eyes full of compassion, he can't stop his tears. She leans forward. With the delicacy of a butterfly landing on a flower, she presses her lips upon his wretched cheek.

He is back in the burning *haveli*. His ears fill with the roar of the raging fire. Closer, the cries of a woman huddled into him: his beloved Rekha. So, this is how it comes to pass: crouched behind an armoire, arms entwined, heads nestled, throats sore and lungs bursting. Resigned to the deathly embrace of the grey-black smoke and merciless flames.

The woman's voice rescues him. "Thank you. For everything." She slips off a bangle.

He steps away, dazed by his memories. "N-n-n-no, my mother would never allow it."

"Please, let me repay my debt."

He shakes his head.

As she eases the bracelet back, her eyes fall to the ground and suddenly widen. She begins to put distance between them.

"Sister, what is the matter? Come, the sun will soon be up and then I must leave."

As she retreats further, her gaze locked on to his, she stumbles. He reaches out to catch her. Although she is several metres away by now, his right arm stretches out like a rubber band, bridging the gap with ease.

The screams that follow reverberate around the street. Lights appear in some of the windows.

In his rush to calm her, he forgets about his feet. Is that what she had seen when she looked down? Normally hidden in the footwell of the cab, they now prove his undoing. He finds himself walking backwards, while facing her.

She shrieks even louder and takes to her heels. Her skirt drags over the ground, raking stones and throwing up a train of dust. Her terrified screams follow her down the winding road, along with his pleadings.

A truck appears from around the bend: a thundering, malevolent *jinn* unleashed without a magic word. He commands it to stop but it is too late: the red figure is swallowed up under the wheels of the juggernaut amid an explosion of hydraulic brakes

Doors and gates clang open. Dogs race out. Cries of "*Ya Allah!*" and similar exhortations fill the air.

Above the commotion, a child's voice shouts: "Jinn! It's a jinn!"

Many heads swivel in the man's direction. The dogs bark louder, teeth bared, but even the bravest among them keep their distance.

The man shuffle-skips as fast as he can to the rickshaw, throwing himself into the cab, twisting the key, wrenching the starting bar. But it won't catch. The townsfolk run towards him with raised fists and voices. Stones bounce off the metalwork. Several fly in through the open spaces, striking him but not drawing blood.

With a final frantic effort, he yanks the vehicle into life and hurtles down the road. In the rear-view mirror, he glimpses the truck driver behind the villagers. He is out of the cab, crying, beating his chest, swearing the woman appeared like a *bhooth* from nowhere.

#

He doesn't ease up on the throttle until the sun breaks free of its moorings and disperses the last of the shadows. Abandoning the rickshaw by the roadside, he seeks sanctuary in the rustling embrace of a nearby peepal tree. Somehow – always – he is back at the *haveli*.

For now, he must rest. There will be time enough in the weeks ahead to ponder what happened. Could things have gone differently? Could he have saved her?

But the bride in red-and-gold is already turning to sepia and fading. That isn't unusual, except today something is different. While his limbs are heavy, his head is light, despite the traumatic events of the night. Even more remarkably, from deep inside his chest he feels the unmistakable pulse of a heartbeat. After all these years! Although there can be no blood inside his veins, a life force courses through his body. As he rubs his cheek, the sense of burden he has been carrying for as long as he can remember melts into the morning sun.

He laughs, the boy he once was – joyful and free.