



FEZ, the Grandma

It was my wont to leave office at four in the evening, but today I left rather late. To be exact, it was not quite late, because the order of my promotion was to be handed over to me; wherein they had also increased my salary by Rupees ten. In the meantime, till the order was being signed, I was waiting for my friends and colleagues to come and greet me; it was about five in the evening. Finally, the order was handed over to me with proper signatures, and then I left happily and joyously.

I walked on the road with long steps so I could reach home as early as possible. The times would free us of all our pain and sorrows. After keeping huff, when I show her the order, I would ask her to see it with open eyes and make her realize that she was wrongly proud of her parental kin; Mohammad Ismail too, is no less important, even if she did not acknowledge the same.

I kept thinking about many other things while walking home: 'She might be looking out through the gable to see why her husband was so late. She might be watching, and as soon as I reached the entrance of the alley, I would look at her with a smile. The moment I enter the house, I would go up running and stop in the gables. All my kith and kin shall throng around me.'

While my mind was busy with such thoughts, I hardly knew when I crossed the bridge and reached near my house. I stopped at the entry of the alley, raised my eyes up towards the gable and found the window was shut. I walked a couple of steps further and heard loud shrieks coming from the house on our right. All my verve petered out, my legs slowed as if they were out of joints and, with slow steps, I entered my house.

'I wish your limbs get hamstrung! You dare to slap me?' I heard Fez cursing the son of her daughter. She had raised a lot of din. 'I wish you get blind! You make me suffer. Oh my God!'

I understood there was a new kind of broil; the shut window of the gable made my guess stronger. I was finally convinced that Fez was a vampire who would devour all her kindred one by one and yet remain hungry. How cruelly she treats that little five year old child - inflicting all manner of pain on him! Doing so, she deprives all in the neighbourhood of their peace and pleasure. With white hair, a long nose on her elongated face, a maze of furrows on her forehead she is senseless like a wall. She possesses

a tongue that pulverizes even iron, not to speak of humans - whosoever she meets. A dirty wretch!

I calmly entered my house and felt all my senses were out of gear. Holding my knees with my hands, I somehow climbed up the stairs and reached the gable room. I opened the door of my room and stepped in. Not even a dog met me. And how could anyone? They had hid themselves in holes from the fright of the roaring monster.

‘Do you think that you or your father are the only ones who hate me? All others in the world hate me. Even the neighbours detest me...’

On hearing this, I shuddered. I felt there was a fire in the vicinity that was spreading towards our house, ready to engulf it. Thus, I called in a rather low voice,

‘Haleema!’

Haleema appeared before me like a frightened cat. Her face evinced me, ‘Do you hear what rubbish she utters?’

‘What is the issue, my daughter?’

‘We did not say anything to provoke her. Boba says that we have kept the windows shut. Subhana made her bleed through the nose. Then she started pulling her own hair. He was insisting for something from her.’

And soon my wife also appeared there. While quivering she heaved a deep sigh. ‘Thank God she forgave us and now she has calmed down. Haleema, will you please keep water for boiling to make tea? The Earthen oven has already some wood splinters in it. But take care

that you do not open the window for now.’ Holding her face in her hands she sat grouchy in a corner. I thought of breaking the good news to her so she felt cheerful, but Fez was struck almost deaf. In the meantime, my eagerness to tell her the good word had somewhat faded and thus I asked her,

‘Did you open that window? She was frenzied against us only.’

She moved her head to show ‘no’.

‘Do you remember how vengeful she was against us when she held her son Subhana by his ears and pushed him to tumble down the stairs and I watched it and gave a shriek? I had dared to say to her, “Fez, do not be so cruel to him. Don’t you feel any pity for him?” Hearing my words she was angered and pounced on me like an angry she-monkey. Since that day whenever she thrashes him, we shut our window.’

And it was true. Not only we, but all the folks in our neighbourhood shut their windows. ‘Has her son-in-law not returned from his work-place?’ I asked my wife.

‘Not yet. But I am sure, she will wear an altogether different mood until he returns.’ My wife said to me.

Kareem Khan, a simple and naive guy, was Fez’s son-in-law. He was a mason and left his house early in the morning and returned late in the evening with his emptied tiffin box. When Kareem Khan’s wife died, Subhana was just a breastfed child. She was the only daughter of Fez who Kareem Khan got to his own home after her death; he hoped that she would at least take care

of the toddler. But since the day we shifted to this house we observed her inflicting all kinds of physical torture on him. From dawn to dusk, she was stubborn and would beat the boy.

My wife stood up and said, 'Now she has calmed down.'

In the meantime, Fez was heard saying, 'Subhana! Subhana! Where are you?'

I said to my wife in a low voice, 'You know her temperament thoroughly, isn't it?'

She smiled and went to the cooking area. I thought the condition was favourable to break the good news to her.

'Listen!' I said to her.

'Wait a while.' She replied. "Let me place the rice pot on the oven.'

It was almost evening. I heard the sound of the opening window and peeped through a vent. It was Fez looking at the window of our cooking area. After a while, she called,

'Zeba! Zeba!'

'Yes. What?' My wife asked her without opening the window. She looked at me and hinted with the motion of her head and feigned to be busy by striking the grinding pot as if she was pounding spices.

'Did Subhana come to your house?' Fez asked my wife.

'No sister, he did not.' My wife replied.

'Who knows where he has gone?' Fez muttered to herself. Then there was silence for some moments.

‘Zeba!...Zeba!’ Fez called again.

‘What is it now, sister?’

‘Why are you hiding behind your closed windows? It appears you are hiding your chastity. Or is it that my foes have talked bad about me to you?’

My wife implied that Fez tried to instigate her. If she opened the window, it was difficult for them to look at each other. And if she did not do so, her snake-like words might keep her biting. She anon opened the door, pasted a false smile on her face and said to her, ‘Sister, I was busy with crushing a few red chillies.’

‘What are you cooking for today’s meals?’

She was yet to receive a reply when some noise was heard in the street.

‘What is that bevy about near the lamp-post?’ She craned half her body out to see. My wife too glimpsed something at the entrance of the street. I, too, heard some noise and opened my window to look out. Fez again espied me and withdrew from her sill.

She tidied her head-cover as she always behaved like that, and I always thought it was weird. I looked at the entrance of the street, and saw a veiled woman sitting near the lamp-post, and people standing around her. I ran down the stairs and wriggled through the crowd. I saw the veiled woman crying and shedding tears.

‘What is the matter, dear?’ I asked a spectator.

‘She has lost her son.’ He said to me. ‘She has not been able to find him since 2.00 pm. See, her eyes have turned red by shedding tears.’

‘Yes. Why not? There can be nothing more painful than losing a child.’ Another person standing there commented. The third bystander said to me, ‘Isn’t it true, Sir?’ I was at a loss of words. The onlookers were neighbours to one another and left the site by holding each other’s shoulders. They twitched one another and laughed secretly. I looked back and found Fez was worming her way through the crowd.

‘What is the issue, sister?’ She asked the veiled woman who was lachrymose. ‘Is anything wrong with you?’

‘Her son is missing since afternoon.’ A guy reported to her.

‘What is there to worry about? He will be home on his own. Do not grieve like that.’ She consoled the veiled woman.

On reaching the roadside, she called out, ‘Subhana! Subhana! Come here. Let my life be sacrificed for you! Come, come back.’

When she returned, she again said to the tearful veiled woman. ‘You need not worry. He will return on his own. If you have cattle - forget cattle, if you have... or a cockerel that too is home in the evening.’

A woman of the neighbourhood felt agitated and said indirectly to Fez, ‘Do not torment the poor woman for she alone knows what irks her. You just keep talking. Get up now, my sister, let’s report the matter to the police. You make vague suggestions! Her son is just a five-year old. My God!’

And then darkness set in. It could be that, ‘God save

him, somebody has stifled him'.

Initially Fez was about to quarrel for anger was visible in her eyes, but then she quivered. She felt her kin was chilled. She came out from the bevy and walked to the roadside. She called in her highest pitch,

‘Subhana! Subhana!!’

Subhana looked at her secretly from the entry of another alley.

‘Come Subhana! Let me sacrifice myself for you! Come, I might give my life for your well-being! I have no energy left in my body.’

Then Fez walked towards that spot, and seeing this, he started fleeing.

‘Come dear, come now.’

As soon as he ran, she ran after him like a mad woman.

‘Come, I wish death seized you! Let you be trampled under the wheels of some *tonga!* What has possessed you? Some rogue might strangle you there!’

Hearing these cries from Fez, all gazed at her.

