

BANO QUDSIA

## Within the Circle of a Wave

WHEN MENA WOKE UP in the morning she felt as if she had drunk from a bottle of soda with sand in it. The bed sheet next to her was wrinkled. Rehan had left the room early. She rubbed her teeth with a corner of her red, gold-filigreed *dupattā*, but she couldn't get rid of the grit between her teeth. She gulped down stale water from the glass by her bedside. The sandy taste in her mouth persisted. Her entire body ached as if she were a wrestler who had been flung down at least three or four times during a match. If she clenched her hand, the tips of her fingers hurt, and if she opened her hand and tried to straighten her fingers, sharp cramps tore along the sides of her wrist and her palm. And her neck was so stiff that when she turned her head she could feel the bones cracking.

On the table next to her bed was the sparkling, glimmering necklet, the bracelets, *ṭikā*, *j'ūmar*, and the rani-necklace. How many trips she had made during the torrid summer afternoons for all this jewelry. How she had quarreled over the *kundan*, how angered she had been by the flaw in the rani-necklace, how she had wept on seeing the long white pearls missing from the *j'ūmar*. Now everything lay on the table unappreciated and neglected, like the peels of a melon. She was overwhelmed by a desire to take the jewelry in her hands and crush it, but for centuries woman has not done everything she has wanted to do. For this reason, this woman also merely turned her back, heaved a long sigh, and remained silent.

She blamed her sisters for all this. Theirs was a family where there were four older sisters and each one was more tactless and more of a blabber-mouth than the other; how could Mena get married without knowing anything? When Bari Apa came back after her wedding, Mena was still quite young. But as is customary, children always gather around brides, and so Mena too happened to be somewhere nearby when Bari Apa said to her friends between giggles:

“He's even more bashful than I am, I swear. Every night he brings me

a jasmine bracelet and a *sānčī pān*. But do you think he places them in my hand? No, he just leaves them next to my pillow, and, with his back turned, starts reading.”

Bari Apa’s friends tickled her in the ribs and said, “Yes, of course he turns his back and starts reading, he’s so simple, the poor fellow!”

Cleaning under a nail with a hairpin, Bari Apa replied, “I swear, if our eyes happen to meet, his face reddens. These are all stories you’ve heard, men are not what you think they are. By God, he gives me so much love ... he praises me so much, he’s so gracious that everything happens and you’re not even aware that it did.”

Poor Mena had no idea what that “everything” was that you weren’t aware of. But one thing was established: husbands brought you *sānčī pāns* and jasmine bracelets. And anyway, in Mena’s house everyone understood the joys of eating bountifully and living well. Mena had also learned that wearing nice clothes and eating well contributed greatly to making life heavenly.

And when Rani got married, more hot *masāla* was mixed in with the dreams.

She had been married for a year when Rani had to accompany her husband to England. Her husband was busy all day with visits to the passport office and Rani raced about with him trying to get all the shopping done. There were comfortable shoes to be bought, gifts had to be selected for their friends in England, or she would be found making lists of things different family members wanted from England. When she and her husband had time they saw film after film because they wouldn’t be able to see Pakistani films in England. Rani didn’t say much, but looking at her you could be sure that marriage wasn’t a dead letter office where all your desires were heaped like a pile of loose dirt.

And what Mena saw at Asiya Baji’s *valīma* was a blinding revelation. Asiya Baji was applying makeup and Dulha Bhai, sitting near the dressing table, was passing her pins and handing her the lipstick. Later he fastened the long zipper in the back of Asiya Baji’s shirt, and God knows what he whispered in her ear because she blushed all over and rocked like a kite. Actually Mena liked Asiya Baji’s bridegroom very much. His conversation was so luxuriant that all the family members hastened to share of its abundance. The bridegroom’s door was never locked; Asiya Baji and Dulha Bhai were never seen sitting alone. The setting was reminiscent of a wedding reception, a poetry reading, the scene at a railway platform. As soon as Dulha Bhai arrives everyone gathers round, a discussion begins while a television program is in progress, and Dulha Bhai’s and Asiya

Baji's glances send out couriers toward each other. When she encounters something she likes, she immediately looks in his direction; receiving a seal of approval at his end the idea is transformed into a general opinion. They are alone in an assembly of people; their love affair continues in a crowded gathering. Mangoes are being consumed; when a sweet mango finds its way to Baji, it is immediately rerouted to Dulha Bhai, the sweet mango that has just been spotted in Dulha Bhai's hand is seen being squeezed and sucked by Baji. Everywhere there are kisses without any kissing, there is passion everywhere and you don't see anyone touching.

Any deficiency that remained was made up for by Gulabi's wedding.

After getting married Gulabi became more of a *gulāb*. Her husband was a photographer. He spent the first night of their wedding taking pictures of the bride. With her *jūmar*, with her *ṭikā*, standing against the wall, leaning against a window—he photographed her from every angle. A week hadn't gone by before Gulabi's picture appeared on the cover of a well-known magazine. Bickering like children, the two of them would disappear into the darkroom, and when they later emerged Bhaiya Ji would have lipstick marks on his forehead, and Gulabi would be buttoning her shirt front.

Partly it was a question of a difference in environment. Mena's husband's family was not large, but the few family members in the house behaved with each other as if they were ambassadors from enemy nations. Their faces wore expressions of geniality, but their hearts remained dry like withered dates. And Mena had come from a family where everyone battled in the arena of conversation, but when a problem came along, they stuck to each other like teeth. They lived in their own world, and unlike Hindus, didn't believe in the transmigration of souls. The only reason they didn't think ill of anyone was that they had neither the time nor the energy to undergo the physical exertion and mental aggravation such behavior entailed. Never having experienced loss or deprivation in their own house, they failed to comprehend that the world is filled with all kinds of people, that being able to exist with different types of human beings and to examine viewpoints that are in complete opposition to your own constitutes real living. In Mena's house the biggest tragedy was that insignificant happenings were viewed as life's greatest calamities. Arriving at a movie theater to find that the show had been sold out, getting back a shirt from the tailor with the neck cut round instead of with the collar that had been requested, or the time when her father had to have three teeth pulled and couldn't eat for a few days—these were disasters never to be forgotten. It's strange, but misfortune had touched this family only

mildly, so Mena didn't know that sometimes fate treats certain families as though they were stepchildren. The only unpropitious events were the ones reported in the newspapers, the perusal of these stories resulting in short periods of noisy discourse. But once the chat was over, everyone returned to a life that was comfortably warm like a quilt.

It was the fault of this point of view, or the lifestyle she had adopted earlier in her life, or her small book of poems, or her friends; anyway, whatever it was, the fact remained that the entire courtyard was crooked and she had been sent to dance there without being taught how.

When she was taken to the bridal chamber at night her back was aching slightly from the effort expended in the six hours of preparation. The two hours of sitting straight at the hair dresser's earlier in the morning was also taking its toll. And not accustomed to wearing heavy jewelry, she had to contend with the burden of the glittering, shimmering jewelry that weighed her down in a strangely pleasurable manner. The fragrance of her perfume along with the scent of the jasmine and *čambēli* flowers had created an unfamiliar atmosphere in the room. She had seen numerous brides shut up in rooms like this and had also seen them emerging the next morning trembling, looking coyly sheepish, avoiding looking at anyone with their honeyed eyes. And let's not forget Urdu literature and Urdu poetry which had filled her imagination with sweetness. At this moment she was like the bird that is perched not too far from a food tray, wondering what manner of sailing through the air would enable it to swoop down for a bit of sugar without getting caught. A strange kind of fear, a feeling of having made an open admission of theft for the first time, a vague sense of loss at leaving her parents' house, the warm hospitality extended by her in-laws, a hundred new associations attached to her new life, so many different kinds of handshakes with the life she had left behind—what was there that didn't climb over her like a creeping burden? Sometimes she looked anxiously at the bathroom lit by a blue, zero-watt bulb and so many times she had glanced surreptitiously and with eager eyes at the door from which her bridegroom was to enter.

Mena had already dozed off a few times during the course of her reverie by the time the bridegroom arrived in the bridal chamber. Rehan was more good-looking and handsome than he appeared in his picture. Dressed in a brocade *ačkan* and *čust* pajama, he looked somewhat roguish, but one glance was enough to make Mena realize that the bridegroom was better looking than her.

This was the first blow to her ego.

Mena was among those girls who beautify themselves, dress up nicely

and join the ranks of beautiful women as one of them; attractive clothes, jewelry and makeup enhance her looks. She wasn't the kind of girl whom you wanted to kiss when she had just woken up.

Silently Rehan took the garlands from around his neck and threw them down on a chair.

"These eastern weddings are so exhausting," he said with a big yawn. "And so stupid. Everything is so unreal and silly. Oh, you haven't changed your clothes yet?"

Whatever Rehan was saying was true, and the way he was saying it wasn't objectionable either, but the tone of detachment, weariness, and arrogance in his voice suddenly frightened Mena.

Using the same tone of voice Rehan said, "Why don't you take off this horse's gear and put on a nightsuit or something. I'll be back soon. Something comfortable."

The light of the blue bulb disappeared with the closing of the bathroom door.

With mixed feelings of anger, disappointment, and a strange kind of sadness, Mena took off all her jewelry and heaped it on the bedside table. Her friends had secured the *tīkā* with bobby pins so that when she tore it off she almost ruined her hairdo. In the dark she pulled off her artificial eyelashes and removed the cluster of bubbles sitting on the nape of her neck, and taking out her nightsuit from the suitcase she put it on as if it were some medicine her father had instructed her to take.

When the door of the bathroom opened she saw that Rehan was dressed in his pajama bottoms only. The hair on his chest seemed to have commingled with the hair on his neck. Everything was strange like a dream, but none of it was all that beautiful.

"That's better," Rehan said on seeing her illuminated by the blue light of the zero-watt bulb, sitting before him like a geisha girl.

"God knows why brides get dressed up in this idiotic fashion. Do you want the fan on or should I shut it off?"

But before Mena could open her mouth Rehan turned off the switch. In the blue light Mena saw her room as the underworld.

After this whatever took place didn't take more than fifteen minutes.

All night, while drifting through sleep and wakefulness, she remained suspended in strange places. Sometimes she felt as if she would get up soon and her mother would be calling her to breakfast. Sometimes she felt as if she were dead, or that she was in a cave barred by a steel gate. The hairdresser's Chinese face with long pins held between tight lips keeps pressing down over her and she retreats, saying, "No, no."

Now she is being bathed in hot water and bath salts, an aroma of *ubtan* emanates from her body, the towel is soaked in cologne, her friends are applying henna to her hands, if there's even the tiniest smudge of nail polish on her fingers a cotton swab soaked in remover is immediately used to wipe it off, just a few dabs of powder on her face draws gasps of admiration from her friends. How important she feels surrounded by her friends. Everyone's gaze is riveted to her face. "How pretty Mena looks—she's ahead of all her sisters."

On the bed next to hers, sleeping on his stomach, was Rehan. The hair spread over his chest reminded her of physical features on a map—evenly spaced, like a caterpillar, extending from north to south.

Mena wafted between slumber and wakefulness. Whenever she opened her eyes she found a gleaming, white face bent over her. In the light of the zero-watt bulb this beautiful face was like the face of Dracula pressing down on her to suck blood from her neck.

Frightened, she shut her eyes and dug her nails into the down-filled pillow. She kept wounding the pillow because she was afraid that if her hands were free she might scratch this gleaming face. The room felt airless, like a waiting room. This feeling of being stifled stayed with her until daybreak. The bridegroom's intimate advances had left bruises on many parts of her body, but there wasn't any sign of a kiss on her face.

Mena drank water repeatedly, but each time it seemed to her as if someone had given her soda mixed with sand, and she felt grit between her teeth.

That night Mena felt as if she had dwindled. She thought she should go home and tell her mother everything, then asked herself what there was to tell really. What will people think? And anyway, she wasn't such a dumb, naïve girl, was she? Didn't she know that in the end this was all there would be?

But then her heart tormented her. Was there nothing before the end ... before that ... before the end, there was nothing? Sometimes the memory of *sānčī pāns* raced through her head, sometimes the fragrance of flowery bracelets overwhelmed her senses, roaming on the pages of the passport were images of Asiya Baji in her high-heeled shoes, circling round and round before her eyes was Gulabi as she had appeared in the picture in the magazine. What should she complain of to her family?

What was there she should tell her mother after she was home and was clinging to her?

How will Ma understand ... how will the sisters understand that Mena is like the needle that children leave on the tracks which is crushed

as a heavy train goes chugging over the tracks and disappears into the distance.

There weren't any specific complaints she had about life in her husband's house that she could count on her fingers ... one, two, three ... Everything reminded her of a cinema screen. Beautiful pictures formed and faded out, but there were no imprints left on the screen, which, like unwashed cotton, absorbed nothing. Her *susrāl* was like the uncomfortable shoe that, when worn, causes a vague discomfort that one can't pinpoint, but when you take it off the foot swells painfully.

Then, suddenly, some months after her marriage, Mena stopped wearing fancy clothes and jewelry. This made her husband very happy, but her mother-in-law was incensed. Mena had brought over her pre-wedding clothes from her mother's house and now, dressed in a starched white cotton *shalvār* and crinkled *čančal dupaṭṭā* she looked like a plain, harmless girl, a nice girl. She wasn't one of those who kicked. Awkward, wearing a *dupaṭṭā* that was worn and full of holes, she developed the appearance of a highly-placed servant, but one who had been bought.

Like a chameleon she would have remained unnoticed because of her dull and drab exterior, but she had no control over her eyes. There was a time when her heavy-lidded, honeyed eyes were shiny and sharp-edged. Now, because of her extreme sensitivity she cried constantly and her eyes sank into their sockets. Wasn't she from a family where everyone was determined to remain alive at all costs? But here she was going out of her mind with the thought that she should exercise patience. "Be patient, Mena," she kept telling herself, "better days will come, they will definitely come." Sometimes she was terrified that God would punish her for spurning his blessings. But when she felt a knife jab at her heart, when during the day she remembered the loneliness she suffered at night, her heart burst and scattered about in little pieces.

In the beginning Mena broke into tears once or twice in her husband's presence. Each time Rehan said the same thing in his detached voice: "You're very touchy. What is the matter anyway?"

Rehan was one of those men who regard women as dumb creatures, and who, for this reason, attribute a woman's tears to her weakness and stupidity and subsequently don't bother to find out what the problem is.

There was only one ploy Rehan had at his disposal to appease Mena. That is, he placed a hand on her shoulder, took her to the bedroom, and locked the door from inside. His manhood was an army that was accustomed to crashing down every door on every rampart, every temple and every castle gate merely with the force of his strength. It was Rehan's

conviction that no woman could remain distressed with him or the world after having slept with him. A woman's health, happiness, and satisfaction depended on this one act. He had got to know Mena only through their physical relationship and after this coming together they could sit next to each other like strangers for hours in the same room. When he had appeased her in this fashion he always said: "There now, you won't cry for at least four days." The fact of the matter was that this caused Mena's tears to flow with greater intensity.

For a while Mena had no control over her tears, but when she saw that she had to submit to the same thing each time, she became cautious. She still roamed around in Rehan's presence with eyes puffy from crying, but she avoided arousing his sympathy.

Never before had Mena's mother-in-law seen such a simple-looking, simple-minded daughter-in-law. The existence of such an obedient, dutiful, hard-working wife in these modern times was indeed surprising. She was worried that if Rehan and Mena had a falling out their family would lose a good worker. She suspected something was afoot, but the daughter-in-law didn't open her mouth and the mother-in-law didn't have the generosity of spirit to clasp her to her breast.

Seeing Mena's downcast eyes she would sometimes say to Rehan, "Why don't you take her to the cinema, take her out—the whole day she's up to her neck in housework."

Going out produced the same result as crying and complaining, so Mena stopped going out with Rehan.

When Rehan hurled slime at her the first time she felt as if a hit intended to result in a sixer had ended in a catch. She had just come out of the bathroom after a long session of weeping when she ran into Rehan and her mother-in-law in the gallery. Both were chewing *pān* with the same speed.

"Rehan," her mother-in-law said pityingly, "why don't you take her somewhere. Look how sad she looks."

Rehan, who for some reason had been bursting at the seams, exploded. "It's not in my power to get rid of her sadness. God knows what lovers she thinks about all day long. Her heart hasn't been with me from the very first day Amma Ji—she loves her cursed book of poems more than me. She's constantly tucking it away in the suitcase, in the drawer, trying to take care of it all the time and pays no attention to me, she doesn't care if I'm alive or dead."

Rehan said his piece and left, but to suffer this, this was her reward; the memory of Rehan's accusation plunged into her heart like a spear at



every step. The words of her college friends echoed in her heart and flowed from her eyes.

“She’s our nightingale. He’ll go crazy, just crazy.”

“Our Mena is Scheherazade, she’ll tell Rehan such wondrous stories.”

“Her conversation is like sweet candy—our Mena is like a piece of *barfi*, a piece of *barfi*, she is.”

She came to Rehan after a struggle. Fireworks exploded between them and then total darkness prevailed. Barring any approach to Rehan’s mind were such heavy curtains, such severe guards, such obstacles that each time Mena advanced a few steps and then froze. Like two people who don’t know each other’s language and begin a long journey together, these two also continued to walk together.

Following this incident the mother-in-law opened her copy of *Bahishtī Zēvar*.

All of her other daughters-in-law thought her as insignificant as a discarded nail clipping. When the time came to reason with Mena and advise her, she was baffled by her own sense of importance. Beginning with the philosophy of the husband’s place as the earthly god and the validation of the funeral rites, to the use of such philosophy as a credit card in heaven and as a visa in society, she explained every aspect in detail. At the end of every remark Mena said, “But Amma Ji, I have no complaints, why are you explaining all this to me?”

“Yes, daughter, I can see from your face you’re not happy. My dear, making your husband happy once procures you seventy rewards in heaven.”

In view of this ratio Mena had already earned innumerable rewards.

“You’re just imagining things, I’m like this by nature.”

The mother-in-law assumed a more loving and friendly tone. “Women have a hundred desires. When it’s time for a husband to return from work, they dress up, there’s a storm of emotion in the heart, there’s a longing!”

“It’s just that I’ve never cared much for all this from the very beginning.”

When the mother-in-law was convinced that her daughter-in-law didn’t care for all this she began to feel genuinely sorry for her son. If the wretched wife is a block of ice what’s the poor healthy boy to do? Now when she was in the company of others she said, “We have an angel, by God, so unworldly, but what can you do? Men don’t want to live with angels now, do they? Her conduct is not like that of women. She has not thought of whether her husband is swallowing dirt outside or not, she

won't say a word....”

When a few years passed and there were no children, and instead of swallowing dirt at home Rehan began swallowing dirt outside on a permanent basis, the mother-in-law one day placed a hand on Mena's shoulder.

“By God, if you are offended by what I'm saying please tell me so frankly. You are a saint, not an ordinary human being, and I don't want to break your heart. I've heard too many stories about Rehan. If you give me your permission I will find another wife for him. At least that way he'll come home regularly. Only your kindness can save Rehan.”

Mena didn't make a fuss, she didn't shed any tears, she didn't threaten to return to her parents' house, nor did she feel sorry for herself; she quietly agreed to give permission for a second marriage.

The night of the wedding was a strange time for Mena.

Sometimes, tormented by jealousy, she would say, “Come dear girl, you come too and get a taste of this fire, see what the fire in this furnace is like.”

Then, feeling bereft, she would think, “Tomorrow I'll go home. One month with each sister and that's four months taken care of right there....”

Then she wondered if she should congratulate Rehan the next morning or not.

Every now and then the memory of her own wedding night flitted before her eyes. How fair and rosy-complected Rehan was, how tall, the hair on his back like the markings of the Ural mountains on a map. She wavered between one memory and the next. When the confines of her thought touched the boundaries of midnight, she got up and walked over to the rear of the bride's room.

The window was shut but everything was clearly visible through a chink between the curtains.

The light was on.

Wearing all her jewelry and bedecked in her shiny clothes, the new bride was propped against the back of the bed like a flamingo, her elbow resting on the *gā'ō takīya* as she breathed slowly.

Three-fourths of Rehan's body was hidden from Mena, but she could see a part of his face and clearly hear his voice. “How beautiful your hands are ... who put on this henna with such loving care? Oh, I wish I could devour these hands.”

“I'm not too fond of all this stuff, *jī*, my friends forced me to put it on. Let me take off this *tīkā*.”

Rehan quickly grasped the new bride's hand and said, "Leave it on. How nice it looks on your forehead!"

"I swear by God, my neck is stiff. Let me at least take off this necklace."

"For my sake stay as you are tonight. I want to preserve the image of my bride in my mind so that when I'm an old man and gray appears in your hair, I can close my eyes and see my bride as she is today ... bedecked like a doll."

The flamingo glided on the waters of fanciful desires, love, and admiration, while Rehan continued taking the garlands from his neck one by one and placing them in her lap.

The light in the bride's room was not extinguished even once and the blue light of the zero-watt bulb in the bathroom didn't once cross over the threshold to come inside. All night the bride sat up with her clothes and jewelry on and all night Rehan continued to talk lovingly to her.

Early in the morning when sickly yellow sunlight crept over the parapet wall and a mynah silently alighted on the gate, Mena's mother-in-law appeared on the verandah beating her chest, moaning as she lamented in a loud voice:

"*Hai*, my innocent daughter-in-law, my simple daughter-in-law ... I thought she didn't have a woman's heart ... *hai* my Mena is dead ... *hai* the pangs of jealousy killed her, my Mena ... *hai* curse my stupidity. I thought she didn't care about such things ... *hai* my Mena ... *hai* my simple daughter-in-law ... *hai* I thought she ran from a man's shadow."

The Mena who had gone to sleep by taking just sleeping pills was lying on her bed with her eyes open, as if she were still dreaming, as if she were lost in a dream of *sānĉī pāns* and flowery bracelets, a dream in which there was not a single touch, just kisses, all around her, everywhere. God knows how news of this dream traveled to the gate because the mynah perching on the gate lifted up its head, screamed loudly once and then, fluttering its wings, flew away into the air. □

—Translated by Tabira Naqvi