

## Love in the Cantonment

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Hameed uncle's son's wedding kept us up all night. He had laid out the tent in the shared community garden, and the Bollywood bangers played till 2 am at which point the bride and groom walked across the lawn to the adjacent apartment building and the revelry died down. We weren't invited for some reason, or perhaps we were, and my parents had declined the invitation because it was a school night (although fat lot of good that did). Either way, my brothers and I spent the evening watching flickering disco lights shine from under the diaphanous fabric of the tent, guests trickling in and out, dressed in sheer chiffon with matching jewelry, their breath materializing in the cold air. We felt left out, but at the same time quite glad, at not being subjected to a dull wedding and being embraced and kissed by Hameed uncle himself against our will. He was a man of a medium build, and laughed readily, giving the sign that he was quite happy and well-adjusted, when in fact he was neither of these things. He looked more like a caricature than a real person, his giant head was shaped like a dented tuber, he had a round nose, big, hairy ears, and an enormous mole on his cheek. He smelled like cooking oil, and his skin glistened in a vile way, something we knew for he hugged us every chance he got. We secretly believed him to be a repellant pedophile and were convinced that he made his family massage him with oil every day so he could maintain his slimy appearance.

The next day, there was the debris of loose invitation cards, and paper napkins in the grass. For a week it was the talk of the cantonment. Mrs. Inayatullah from 11-A thought that it had been very disruptive to have had a full-fledged wedding in the middle of the week. Mrs. Tasneem was sour over not being invited but having had a view of the festivities, and Mrs. Nooruddin wondered how they had possibly secured permission to have a private event in the community garden. Imran uncle, who had been invited to the baraat, reported that Hameed uncle had been the life of the party, he had danced the night away, and done thumkas, and jhatkas, hip thrusts, that would make Saima Noor, the Lollywood heroine of yesteryear, blush. In fact, Waseem bhai had been embarrassed by his behavior and had very gently told him to vacate the dance floor. In a country of teetotalers and closet alcoholics, Hameed uncle's behavior could not be blamed on having had one too many drinks, or inebriation of any sort, but was blamed solely on his total lack of self-control. Tense words had been exchanged between father and son.

These secrets were usually shared in the parking lot under the neem trees, and often, under a whisper, so as not to have anyone, especially not the cantankerous retired army men, catch wind of these exchanges. It was difficult, however, to keep matters under wraps. We kept close watch over each other from the windows, knew each other's lives, secret girlfriends, and schedules, very well, and borrowed old fabric, schoolbooks and grocery items from one another, and these economies kept our homes running. In addition to this, the rumor mill also churned at full pace, taking the tragedy and the heartbreak of each home, and making it tauter, tangier, spicier, until narratives meshed and interwove to create new stories which were re-circulated within Bridge Colony again, such that the subject of the rumor would soon become the recipient, and would hear about their lives through many hundreds of inflections and distortions, and see themselves as yet another iteration of these stories.

After the wedding, Hameed uncle's son, Waseem, left the parental home. Some said he went to Canada for a Master's degree. Others said that he had a nasty falling out with his father; eventually the matter was forgotten. We saw him get in a car with his bride, who still had henna on her hands, and was dressed in clothes from her trousseau, and drive away. This scene quite captured the imagination as well – Waseem had opened his bride's door before his, which others thought was very chivalrous and romantic. They had looked beautiful, walking hand in hand from the run-down brick building. Some said their parents had not walked them to the curb, or sent them with prayers and fond wishes, which they believed to be an ominous sign and a further indication that Hameed uncle had fought with his son. There was an atrocious rumor that Waseem had kissed his wife on the cheek as she sat down next to him, and this public display of affection was especially the object of searing critique and continuous judgment. To fight with his father was acceptable, somewhat archetypal and an indication of Waseem's machismo, but to have planted a kiss on his newlywed wife's cheek caused deep disgust; they called him a *joru ka ghulam* - "a wife's servant." In short, that act had emasculated him. So, pathetic little Waseem, so obviously smitten with his wife, left the childhood home and was not seen or heard of for a long time, thus cementing the rumor that he had left after a bitter disagreement, which had left an irreconcilable rift between him and his parents.

I thought it was a relief to have him gone. He had escaped the colony, something we all had hopes of doing. I had no idea how he, his three sisters, and his parents could even fit into that small three-bedroom apartment, which looked as if it would collapse in a pile of cement, plaster, and paint any day. Devil's ivy was growing all over the building, further weakening its structure. It had once been white and red, but now looked a strange, ill shade of yellow; the building did not have an elevator,

and the stairwell was chipped in places causing people to stumble and sustain dangerous falls. There were cobwebs and birds had laid eggs and abandoned their nests in the filigreed windows. The wooden banisters had scratches on them, and teenage lovers had carved into them their initials inside hearts with arrows going through them. Over time, people would also carve their phone numbers into the banisters in the hope that a romantic in the building would dial these digits and connect with them. The floor too was dirty and chipped in places, and if one stayed long enough in the vestibule, they could taste the dust in their breath, and feel it, crumbly and sonorous between their teeth.

Waseem's sisters would often sit together on the rooftop of the building, staring at onlookers. Perhaps they were just bored, stuck at home with Hameed uncle, trapped inside their parents' tepid marriage. They seemed to show a special interest in the boys on motorcycles who passed by, catcalling them or throwing paper chits with their number on them. It was considered improper behavior, a sure indication that they hadn't been raised properly. I thought they were wonderful for sexually harassing everyone they could get their hands on, and although I didn't have the language at that time to describe the full extent of their radical acts of rebellion, I now understand how they were breaking the rules of the patriarchy by being so publicly horny. Good Pakistani girls were not meant to have any lascivious desires of their own, let alone display them in this unabashed way and that to me was brave. It seemed that Waseem's departure had awakened something in them, that the seeds of it had been sown, and we were watching the slow harvest.

Colonel Azfar, Hameed uncle's archnemesis who had been a batchmate at Lawrence College, and retired at a higher position than his contemporary, initiated a petition that the wedding remnants, the broken chairs, the loose pieces of food, the wilted petals, the dried dates, and the plastic crockery, be removed from the community garden as soon as possible. One day, there was a yelling contest between them in front of the Society Office, right next to the giant electricity pylon which ran dangerously close to the houses. Colonel Azfar called Major Hameed a "lowly peon," a "half-wit" and "not much better than a batman." Batmen, in army households, were servants and as far as possible from Marvel superheroes. They were underpaid serfs, the lowest rung of the army establishment, who were paid by the army in return for working within army families and doing everything that they might require: they were chauffeurs, private secretaries, chefs, babysitters, therapists, counselors, and gardeners, and were paid a pittance for playing these myriad roles. They did not have days off or vacation days and were loyal to a particular family, staying with them till either the man of the house retired or died, or they retired or died. It was a contest of wills to see as to who would die or

retire first, and draw this abusive, back-breaking, one-sided relationship to a final close.

In return, Hameed uncle, who did not know British slurs, used the local lexicon of insults, called Colonel Azfar a “world-class chutiya” and a “sisterfucker.” They did not come to blows however, because both were tubby and middle-aged, with their bellies acting as a fleshy barrier preventing one from even reaching the other for a proper punch. After the screaming and accusations had stopped and the rest of the neighbors and their families had moved away from the windows and gone back to their lives, Hameed uncle spent the evening gathering the napkins, piling the chairs high one on top of the other, and removing the dried rose petals from the grass. He continued for many hours without any help from his wife or the rest of his children. He cut quite a lonely figure. At some point, he had found a dried-up garland and sat down with it, like a child. He smelled it for some time and then, after feeling unwatched, and by himself, he had placed it around his neck. The stage had been half dismantled by the waiters at the end of the wedding party, but the bride and groom’s gold-beige sofa was still there, sprinkled with roses. He went and sat there by himself. It was dusk, and I doubt anyone could see him. Mrs. Inayatullah was in the kitchen at a familiar spot by the stove, twisting rotis on the tawa, most likely. Mrs. Tasneem had gone to her usual kitty party and was not expected to return before nightfall and Mrs. Nooruddin could be heard shouting at her house helper in the backyard while scattering grain to her chickens who clucked and flapped wildly. Moments such as these were rare, and Hameed uncle knew it. Save for me, who liked sitting at my window sill writing poetry and spying on the neighbors, often taking refuge from my father’s anger and the silent chaos in the home, there was no one else in the audience that day. In the distance, I could see the sun setting and the brilliant pink shards of light scattering in the sky. Hameed uncle was finally done clearing most of the detritus, he folded the main tablecloth and picked up every soiled napkin from the ground.

Many months passed and there seemed to be a long line of suitors coming to Hameed uncle’s house, probably for his eldest daughter. I don’t remember her name, but let’s call her Maimoona for the sake of the story. It seemed another wedding was in the works, and the colony was buzzing again. Nobody else had children of “marriageable age” yet so they were all vicariously living through Hameed uncle’s progeny. Maimoona stopped sitting on the rooftop, abandoning her vantage point for spotting premier talent. Her sisters continued, without her help. They needed to scout the talent, even if that meant going on without the assistance of their eldest sister. It seemed that Maimoona was heavily invested in the goings-on that had been unleashed quite unexpectedly. She started dressing very

modestly in a white shalwar kameez, with white, net dupattas flung loosely on her shoulders. A gold pin flared in her nose. She started to apply lipstick on her lips, her mustache had been threaded and removed and her unibrow separated into two separate albeit thick brows, which looked surprised at this sudden disconnection. The colony wallahs kept close watch over the families who came for Maimoona's hand, looking at the boys who were brought in: some were too fat, others much too thin, some lived abroad, which was frowned upon, and others still lived with their parents, which too was considered sub-par. One went to light a fag and was labeled a smoker and an addict, one was too bald, another too hairy. He had back hair, everyone whispered, who has back hair? He was a goreela, the Urdu bastardization of "gorilla." The colony wallahs felt very protective of Maimoona. She was "everyone's beti," and needed to be wedded to the best man, and so they pooled their collective resources of soul-crushing critique and made sure they knocked down to size any man who was brave enough to be invited to the Hameeds' apartment.

Meanwhile, Hameed uncle seemed seized by some kind of violent agitation. He was hugging the children of the colony even tighter. We would run the moment we saw him, afraid of his iron grip, and so he got the younger and slower amongst us. My younger brother was always a target. He also started doing more miswak and would often be found doing the rounds of the colony, chewing roughly on a stick till his gums looked raw. He started to have more fights with Colonel Azfar over everything from parking spots to recycling. At some point, it seemed one of them would surely kill the other. Their fights were becoming increasingly physical. One day, Colonel Azfar tore Hameed uncle's shirt. It ripped with a horrid sound, followed by a sprinkling of buttons on the paved road, at which point his sad, brown nipples, matted chest hair, and shapeless, round belly popped out for everyone to see. Starved for entertainment, we waited for these fights. There was really nothing to watch on television. We would wait days to watch *Ninja Turtle* dubbed in Urdu, on Monday evenings. The rest of the day there was only the news and some rather tiresome Pakistani drama serials focused on the relentless conflict between conniving mothers-in-law and innocent daughters-in-law. The fights between these two men were a welcome addition to our sad repertoire of content. Of the two, the children much preferred Hameed uncle, who wasn't a meanspirited asshole like Colonel Azfar, but it seemed something new was coursing through Hameed uncle's veins. He was picking fights with anyone he could get his hands on, and it became very difficult to defend his actions. The last straw came when Hameed uncle, filled with blind, nameless rage, had kidnapped Colonel Azfar's prize rooster, and taken it home, where he skinned, seasoned, and ate the bird.

My mother said that Hameed uncle needed to be medicated, that he was losing it. In the meantime, he turned proposal after proposal down for Maimoona, sending a long line of men packing at the door. Maimoona, rather than being disappointed by her father's conduct and frightened for her future, returned to her usual spot next to her sisters and resumed pelting boys with phone numbers. Her mustache had grown back and her brows joined together at the bridge of her nose, pleased to be reunited. She went back to wearing what looked like Waseem's pajamas and T-shirts. Perhaps she was glad the charade was over, even though it had been a tad exciting at least for a short amount of time, but she had not factored in the full reality of marriage and felt unprepared for what lay forward. It seemed so much more familiar, and infinitely more fun, to be with her sisters and laugh at hapless men, making them feel uncomfortable, and nearly causing them to have an accident, rather than be seated across from them in her living room and having them scan and assess every inch of her like she was a flawed object.

Something seemed to have quelled too in Hameed uncle, who seemed much calmer and more put together. The storm that had been brewing in his breast seemed to have passed for the time being. One day Waseem returned. His wife looked especially lovely in a pink shalwar kameez, and she was on his arm. Were they performing their relationship for everyone to watch? He walked her around the block, showing her things, not that there was much to see. He showed her the pylons he used to play cricket under, he showed her the garages on which wild bougainvillea grew in a lovely tangle, he showed her the spot under the tree where he had rescued a bird and its baby chicks. He eventually took her up the steps, to his flat. However, the meeting between Hameed uncle and Waseem did not go well. Waseem ran down the stairwell, wife in tow, a few hours later. He once again opened the door for his wife and this time I saw him planting one on her cheek before driving off. This time, the whole neighborhood had seen them canoodling, and everyone blamed him for being neglectful of his parents, for leaving, for creating a scene, for angering his father. What else could be expected from a *biwi ka ghulam*, a wife's slave? Public opinion was firmly set against him and sympathy for Hameed uncle was at an all-time high. Neighbors went over to his place and offered their condolences. They sympathized with him when he said that the girl had bewitched him, set him against his parents, and made him shirk his responsibilities. It was easy to blame a young and beautiful woman in the country for everything, from broken relationships to earthquakes.

Hameed uncle became quite vain. He started dressing in starched shalwar kurtas and it seemed he had also begun to oil not just his hair but also his mustache. The children he hugged around the neighborhood said that he smelled like he had been dunked in perfumed oil and rose water, so

strong was the scent. He preened and prettied himself and walked around like a cockatoo around the colony. He did not pick fights with Colonel Azfar anymore, probably for fear of spoiling his new hairdo. He always had a silk handkerchief in his pocket. He started to wear proper sandals and discarded his broken, rubber chappals. One day his wife took Mrs Inayatullah in confidence. "Hameed is cheating on me," she wailed, which made Mrs. Inayatullah collapse in laughter. The thought of Hameed uncle courting another woman was so distant from anyone's mind that it seemed downright repugnant and very comical. "Surely not, Neelam," Mrs. Inayatullah had comforted her. "But he has never taken such an interest in his hygiene" she wept. "He has never bathed this much ... and ...." Mrs. Inayatullah couldn't stop giggling but Neelam's obvious distress made her stop. "I mean, it's probably a mid-life thing. Lots of men change around this time." "No," Neelam continued, "there's more ... he has started to ... shave his armpits ..." Mrs. Inayatullah could not keep a straight face but she held her friend's hand. "Neelam, this does not mean anything," she said. "Think about what you are saying. Doesn't it sound a bit preposterous?" "Yes, maybe," said Neelam in a small voice. The matter was forgotten but this conversation made rounds in the neighborhood, and children tried to catch a glimpse of Hameed uncle's shaved pits and notice other physical changes in him which would signal his suspected infidelity. He really had become terribly obsessed with his looks. He was growing out his mustache which had started to curl repulsively at the edges. His mole looked like it too had been oiled so that it shone brightly in the sun. His hair was always neatly combed and parted from the middle. He looked quite ridiculous, but nobody thought anything of it.

One day, quite without warning, the girls on the rooftop disappeared. Their usual spot on the apartment building was empty. Mrs. Inayatullah went looking for Mrs. Neelam Hameed, but nobody answered the door. She called her but no one picked up the phone. Her car – the jade-grey Margalla – was not in its usual place in the parking lot. Hameed uncle too had gone missing. The colony wallahs considered filing a report with the police. However, Hameed uncle re-appeared a week later, bedecked in finery, and with his mustache looking especially shiny. On his arm was a woman – not Neelam. She had pulled her dupatta close to her forehead, so her face could not be seen. Hameed uncle helped her out of his old army jeep – an unlikely newlywed's vehicle – and together they climbed the stairwell. For months later, no one talked about anything except Hameed uncle's new wife. They hoped she was his wife and that he had not decided to live in sin in his twilight years. Parents worried about their children being corrupted by this wanton new lifestyle that Hameed uncle had brought to a decent colony. At last, someone got word that she was indeed his wife, and they had had a nikah. After many days of being holed

up indoors, and not leaving their house, Mrs. Hameed finally emerged, looking very shy, and had drawn two peach circles on her cheeks.

Hameed uncle walked her around the block showing her things, his jeep, his parking spot which he had won after a bitter fight with Colonel Azfar, the garages with the bougainvillea climbing on it in a lovely tangle, the blue flowers, the place where he had captured and cooked the chicken, the jasmine which smelled so sweet by midnight, Mrs. Inayatullah's house, quite a staid, dull woman really, a horrid gossip, and he advised her to stay away from her, and then the flat above hers? Mrs. Tasneem, always in the kitchen, you will hardly see her much, he said. He took her to the society office where a coterie of staff said salaam to her, still trying to wrap their minds around this new situation. He showed her the spot where he had found marbles and the rooftop on which he had defeated Colonel Azfar in the ultimate Basant kite battle and brought down all his kites. Soon they were going everywhere together. They would walk down the street in the morning, and often in the evening. They had eyes only for each other. People stayed out of their way and avoided Hameed uncle as much as possible. They felt that his family had been wronged. Suddenly there was a groundswell of support for Waseem, for what he had to endure, with his father, for what kind of a man was he? People would pass him by in the street and pretend not to see him. Even Colonel Azfar felt that he was not worth fighting with, that he was a lunatic. Mrs. Inayatullah kept trying to reach Neelam but did not have a lot of luck establishing contact. They had had kids around the same time, and her daughters had been friends with Hameed uncle's girls. The loss of their visits hung in the air. She worried for her friend and missed her terribly, but as with most things, life went on in its cold, relentless way, and soon the colony wallahs forgot about her.

Hameed uncle started to fade into the background too. The preening and dressing up stopped. He was back in his rubber chappals, spitting paan on the pavement. He stopped shaving. He stopped picking fights too. His house which had once seemed like a tin of sardines where they were all stacked on each other felt big and developed an echo. Maimoona's friends would come looking for her, be disappointed and leave. After a while nobody came. The news had reached all corners of the colony and beyond and become common knowledge. He would sit on the rooftop, perched on the edge, where his three daughters had sat, and stare into the vastness, hear the trains in the distance, their horns blaring. He had never noticed any of it before. Now he was forced to really reckon with it. The vista offered no diversion, no joy, the world was entirely empty of possibility and hope. He would examine the city as it lifted before his line of sight from a plume of smoke, and the glittering lights which would appear in the evening, and he would be there for hours, just watching the traffic and



the pedestrians, and wanting to hear the laughter of three rambunctious girls in the dusty air, which he never did again for as long as he lived.