Heart Lamp

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Selected Stories

Banu Mushtaq

Translated by
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STONE SLABS FOR SHAISTA MAHAL

From the concrete jungle, from the flamboyant apartment buildings stacked like matchboxes to the sky, from the smoke-spewing, horn-blaring vehicles that were always moving, day and night, as if constant movement was the only goal in life, then from people, people, people – people with no love for one another, no mutual trust, no harmony, no smiles of recognition even – I had desperately wanted to be free from such a suffocating environment. So, when Mujahid came with news of his transfer, I was very happy, truly.

Arey, I forgot. I should tell you all about Mujahid, no? Mujahid is my home person. Oh. That sounds odd. A wife is usually the one who stays at home, so that makes her the home person. Perhaps then Mujahid is my office person. Che! I have made a mistake again. The office is not mine, after all. How else can I say this? If I use the term yajamana and call him owner, then I will have to be a servant, as if I am an animal or a dog. I am a little educated. I have earned a degree. I do not like establishing these owner and servant roles. So then shall I say 'ganda' for husband? That also is too heavy a word, as if a gandantara, a big disaster, awaits me. But why go into all this trouble? You could suggest that I use the nice word 'pati' for husband – then again, no woman who comes to your house introduces her husband saying 'This is my pati' – right? This word is not very popular colloquially. It is a very bookish word. If

one uses the word pati, there comes an urge to add devaru to it, a common practice, equating one's husband with God. I am not willing to give Mujahid such elevated status.

Come to think of it, for us, that is, for us Muslims, it is said that, other than Allah above, our pati is God on earth. Suppose there comes a situation where the husband's body is full of sores, with pus and blood oozing out from them, it is said that even if the wife uses her tongue to lick these wounds clean, she will still not be able to completely repay the debt she owes him. If he is a drunkard, or a womaniser, or if he harasses her for dowry every day – even if all these 'ifs' are true, he is still the husband. No matter which religion one belongs to, it is accepted that the wife is the husband's most obedient servant, his bonded labourer.

By now you must have understood what my relationship with Mujahid is. At the same time, you must have understood what I think about all this. It is not my mistake; when Mujahid, that is, my life companion, got transferred, we moved into beautiful quarters at the Krishnaraja Sagara dam project. He then left me with the jackfruit and lemon trees, the dahlia, jasmine, chrysanthemum and rose plants in the front yard, and the curry leaves, bean plants and bitter gourd creepers growing in the back. He, on the other hand, was occupied for twenty-eight out of twenty-four hours every day, either working at the office or doing research at the Karnataka Engineering Research Station.

It is the same now too. A cool breeze is tickling my body and mind. Since I don't have anyone to talk to, I am sitting here in the middle of the garden and ranting about this so-called husband to you all. But . . . arey! What is this? Mujahid's scooter, that too at this time of the day! I looked at the clock. It was only five o'clock. I raised my eyebrows; I did not move from my seat. Mujahid flashed his teeth. I imprisoned mine tightly behind my lips. He bowed

down, placed the helmet on my head, pulled me up by the hand and said, 'Hmm, quickly! I will give you eight minutes. You have to get ready by then and come out. If you don't . . .'

Hold on a minute. Let me tell you the whole story. We are newlyweds. If I have to be specific, we have been married for ten months and thirteen days. Mujahid has tried a few gimmicks before this. One day, he tried very hard and braided my hair, sticking a hundred and eighteen pins into my head to hold it up. Satisfied that it looked very good, he even took a photo. I looked like a monkey. Another day, he tried to get me to wear trousers, but even his loosest pair burst out of their seams and he had to give up trying. Then he tried to encourage me to smoke so that people would think of him as a very social, liberal person. I get very irritated when other people smoke, so instead of blowing out the smoke, I held it in and acted like I couldn't stop coughing and that I was finding it hard to breathe. Poor thing. He was so upset. But all these disasters passed within three months of our wedding, and we are a very 'normal' couple now.

'Can I ask where we are going?'

'Yes, you can ask. There is a man called Iftikhar Ahmed at the Belagola factory. I met him only eight days ago. He has invited us to his house today, to Belagola,' Mujahid replied.

It did not take me even eight minutes to come out. Cheluva rushed behind me and stood near the gate. He was happy when I told him, 'Don't cook anything for dinner. I will come back and cook myself.'

It seemed like Mujahid was also in a good mood that day. He rode the scooter very slowly. Listening to him whistle a Hindi song, I wondered if I should tickle him. But by then we had reached the Belagola circle.

When our scooter approached a house, the man standing outside smiled and opened the gate wide for us. I got down and walked

up the path. The compound alone was bigger than our quarters. When I saw all the amenities there, I wondered whether we were in a garden or a park. On each side of the footpath stood a guava tree with iron ropes tying a swing to its thick branches. Jasmine creepers and varieties of rose plants bloomed around them. I was dumbstruck.

I guessed that the man standing outside must be Iftikhar. Just then, the lady of the house came out, greeted us with a polite salaam and welcomed us to her home. Within just half an hour, Iftikhar Bhai and Shaista Bhabhi were getting along with us so well – I was so surprised! Seeing Mujahid mostly talking to Shaista Bhabhi, I thought I would tease him about it when we were alone. But when I realised that she was not only much older than Mujahid, but also seemed pure-hearted and without any ulterior motives, I did not feel like making jokes about her. She was a very simple and open-hearted soul, and paraded all six of their children before us within a few moments. Three daughters, three sons. Apart from the eldest, Asifa, the rest were all like monkeys without tails. As if she had read my mind, Shaista said, 'What to do, Zeenat, I did not do any planning. Before I even turned round to see what happened, I had had six children. And your Bhai Saheb came in the way,' she said, cocking her head at Iftikhar, 'when I thought of getting an operation done. Now I will certainly get it done after number seven.'

'There is no need, Shaista. I am the one raising them. Why are you worried? Thanks to God's grace, I earn enough to look after all of them well,' Iftikhar interjected.

'Oh! Is it enough to have sufficient earnings? My sweet Asifa has had to say goodbye to her studies because of me. Do you know how much that pains me?'

'It is not like that. I made her stop studying because girls do not need much education. A high school certificate is enough. There

is no need for her to roam around in Mysuru for college. We can get her married off next year,' replied Iftikhar.

'Absolutely not. I got married when I was twenty years old. I have become a mother of six children over the last seventeen years. If you get my daughter married off this early . . .' Shaista trailed off.

Mujahid and I listened to all this quietly. Asifa, the topic of this discussion, was standing by the window, holding her brother. It agitated me to look at her youthful beauty and listen to decisions being made about her future. Come to think of it, Shaista was more attractive than me. Iftikhar got up as if he had just thought of something and said 'Oh, Shaista, you and Zeenat Bhabhi come out and sit here. I will pluck some flowers . . .'

Shaista and I went out. Asifa had given her brother a bottle of milk and was patting him gently. Shaista sat on one swing, while I sat on the other. I liked the swing very much and began to push it higher and faster. The joy of going up, and kicking the ground again while coming down! Just then I saw Iftikhar Bhai begin to pluck tiny jasmine buds with a plastic basket tied around his waist. Mujahid was playing with the kids in the front yard. A short while later, Iftikhar came and placed that plastic basket in his wife's hands and climbed up the guava tree. Shaista sat on the swing and began to string the flowers together.

Iftikhar brought guavas for me and Shaista, nudged his wife along so he might sit next to her on the swing, and called out, 'Asifa, bring us some tea, dear.' Asifa had just then put her brother to sleep and come out, standing by, quiet and hesitant since Mujahid was there too. She went in to make tea the moment she heard her father call. It was Iftikhar's tenth cup of tea in the hour we had been there.

Shaista divided the jasmine buds she had strung into two equal pieces and gave me one. She left the other hanging down from the

crown of her head like a rope. It suited her thick, long braid. Asifa came and handed Iftikhar the cup of tea. It did not seem right to me that Shaista was ignoring her grown-up daughter and adorning herself with so many flowers.

'Come here, Asifa.' I called her and tried to give her my share of the flowers. She did not accept them, but I forced her to sit next to me and tied them in her hair. The girl's eyes filled with tears, and she disappeared inside the house, Iftikhar's empty teacup and saucer in hand.

It was getting dark. Just as I was thinking of leaving, Iftikhar said, 'Zeenat Bhabhi, look here, I planted this guava tree for Shaista. Every plant and flower here is a favourite of hers. I grew this Anab-e-Shahi grapes creeper for her. These swings . . . she likes them very much.'

'Iftikhar Bhai, I feel very happy to see you both together. You seem to pay a lot of attention to Bhabhi's likes and dislikes.'

'Not just this. If I were an emperor, I would have built a palace to put even the Taj Mahal to shame, and call it Shaista Mahal—'

Mujahid had by then stopped playing with the children. He came near us and halted him mid-sentence. 'Oh ho ho! Stop, Iftikhar, you don't know what blunder you are committing. The emperor built the Taj Mahal as a grave for his dead wife. May Allah give Bhabhi a long life. She is sitting right in front of you, and you are talking about constructing a Shaista Mahal!'

It seemed like Iftikhar faltered for a minute. 'But no one thinks of the Taj Mahal as a grave. They consider it a mohabbat ki nishani, a symbol of love. I said it in that sense.'

Mujahid did not let the matter go and retorted: 'Yes, yes, a symbol of dead love.'

'But love does not die, Mujahid.'

'Hmm . . . it doesn't. But this is all very filmy, Bhai. If your mother dies, it is the death of your mother's love too. You will not get that kind of love from anyone else. Huh. But if the wife dies, it is a different matter, because one can get another wife.'

I was shocked at what Mujahid was saying.

A tiny smile flashed across Shaista's face. She sprang up and said 'Yes, my grandmother used to say that when a wife dies, it's like an elbow injury for the husband. Do you know, Zeenat, if the elbow gets injured, the pain is extreme for one instant – it is intolerable. But it lasts only a few seconds, and after that one does not feel anything. There is no wound, no blood, no scar, no pain . . .'

I did not like where this conversation was going. But all of a sudden, Iftikhar got up, greatly agitated. He held Shaista's hands and said, 'Shaista, what are you saying? Every cell in my body is alive because of the strength of your name. Every heartbeat of mine is because of your energy and vigour. You – what you said – did those words come from your heart? Is that what you believe?'

I controlled my laughter with great difficulty. I remembered Shaista mentioning that Iftikhar was ten years older than her. This sight of a man near fifty trying to declare the immortality of his love like a teenager, and her, sitting like a queen and looking at him benevolently, as if she would forgive every transgression, was not one I was likely to see again. Mujahid finally broke into a wide smile. Shaista giggled, overcome by shyness.

We soon left.

Since we had eaten a lot at Shaista's house, Mujahid said that he did not want dinner and just had a glass of milk. I felt the same and there was no need to think about cooking. He sat down with a book to read, and although I was also flipping through an issue of *Femina* magazine, my thoughts were all about Shaista's family.

'I know. . . you're only pretending to read that magazine . . .'

'Then tell me, what am I thinking about?'

'Shall I tell you? You are thinking about Shaista's youngest child, the one with black eyes and plump cheeks,' replied Mujahid.

'Maybe. But more than that, I am thinking about what you said back there.'

'I knew it. I knew you would worry too much about that. To be frank with you, Zeenat, you must understand: the emperor who built the world-famous memorial for love did not die with his wife. There were innumerable women in his zenana.'

'It is not about the emperor.'

'OK. I will let the subject of Shah Jahan go. Shall I talk about our modern badshah of love? Fundamentally, Iftikhar needs the company of women. He has a special place for Shaista because they have been getting along very well for many years. Whether it is Shaista or Nargis or Mehrun'

'Enough. Stop it. Even in ten lifetimes you will not be able to love me as much as Iftikhar loves Shaista.'

'First of all, there is no concept of reincarnation for us; I don't believe in these things. Secondly, I am ready to show you a hundred times the love Iftikhar showers on Shaista, this very instant . . . no matter how much you protest . . .'

Before I had a chance to appreciate how cleverly he had changed the topic, Mujahid hugged me tightly and showered me with crazy love – the animal!

It was nine in the morning that Sunday, and Mujahid was still in bed when Iftikhar came to our house with Shaista. I told them that Mujahid was still sleeping, and they sat down, chatting with me. I brought hot-hot samosas for them, but Iftikhar did not eat even one. He piled his share on Shaista's plate, drank only a cup of tea, and went to the market to buy vegetables.

Shaista, wearing a peacock-coloured sari and few pieces of jewellery, was looking especially beautiful. I placed our wedding album in her hands and went indoors. When I returned, she was looking at one of the photos pensively. It was my graduation photo where I was wearing a gown. When I sat beside her she said, 'Zeenat, it is my wish to see Asifa also wear such a gown and get a photo taken like this. She passed her tenth exams in the first attempt. We did not allow her to study further because there was no one else to look after the house and the children.'

'Hire someone to help, Bhabhi.'

'There was someone. She left saying she was going to visit her hometown, and then never came back. Some agent sent her off to Dammam, it seems. I have not found anyone else.'

'Asifa cannot continue her studies this year anyway. At least let her join college from next year.'

'I will do that. What is the use of torturing that poor young girl just for our convenience? Aiyo, Zeenat, I had forgotten to ask. Is it dangerous to get an operation done to avoid having children?'

'What is the danger in that, Bhabhi? On my mother's side of the family three of my sisters-in-law and two elder sisters have got themselves operated on after having two or three children each. They are all well and healthy.'

'Is that so? In that case, I will get an operation done this time. If you can come with me, even the little fear I have will go away.'

'Bhabhi, you are looking so beautiful today! Please teach this Zeenat also to dress up nicely like you,' remarked Mujahid, coming out after having just woken up, and teasingly pulled a chair to sit close to Shaista.

'Hush! You naughty man! Run away, you lazy fellow!' Shaista said, hitting him playfully on the back.

I insisted that they stay for lunch. They accepted and left for Belagola only in the evening. My days in KRS were no longer as lonely as they had once been. I went to Shaista's house whenever I felt like it. Time flew by when I played with her children. It was the same for Shaista too. She wanted to give her children a good education, especially Asifa, wanting to relieve her of household duties and let her get a degree. Aside from this she had no other wants. She looked hale and hearty; her face glowed.

The lady doctor who examined Shaista that day said that she still had some fifteen-twenty days to go before she was due. That was why I invited everyone to our house that Sunday, and insisted that they bring Asifa with them too. It was a happy day; I had a lot of work and not a moment to spare. As usual, Shaista and Mujahid were teasing each other; Iftikhar trying to convince her of his eternal love; the noisy children; Asifa's silence, and her loneliness. By the time we had had a grand feast amidst all this and said goodbye to them, it was past nine.

Although I woke when the alarm rang at five, I felt like wrapping the blanket tighter around me and sleeping some more. Then I heard the doorbell ring. Having no choice now but to get up, I came out, wrapping a shawl tightly around myself, and saw that it was Iftikhar.

'Arey, Iftikhar Bhai! Come, come, how come you are here so early?'

'I don't have time to come and sit, Bhabhi. After we left here, Shaista got labour pains in the night, at around one. I took her to Mysuru immediately in the factory jeep. She is at Shilpa Maternity Home. She gave birth at three. It is a baby boy.' I felt like Iftikhar blushed a little when he said this.

I felt very happy. Oh! It had been years since I last saw a newborn and participated in all the festivities around a birth. I left Iftikhar

right there and rushed to Mujahid, the sleeping Kumbakarna. I threw away the blanket, trying to shake Mujahid awake. 'Get up – get up quickly, please – Shaista has given birth to a baby boy. You are still asleep!' Mujahid pulled me into a tight hug and murmured, 'I promise, Zeenat, whether you have a boy or a girl, I will certainly not sleep all night. I will just sit and stare at your baby.'

'Thoo, how shameless you are. Iftikhar Bhai is outside. Get up and go talk to him.' By the time I brought a cup of tea, Iftikhar had already smoked four-five cigarettes. Handing him the cup I asked, 'Shaista Bhabhi's health is fine, I hope?'

'Hmm. It is OK. But there was some problem. The doctor had said that she might need a blood transfusion. Later there was no need for that. Shaista is very weak though. I will take your leave now,' Iftikhar said, setting the cup down and getting up even before lazy Mujahid could come out.

Mujahid and I left for Mysuru. He continued teasing me all the way, saying that if it was my baby, he would do this, he would do that, he would raise the child himself, and so on in that vein.

When we reached the nursing home, we saw that Iftikhar's entire family had gathered there. Asifa had collected all the children outside, since they had been making noise indoors. She smiled, seeing us. When I asked her, 'How come you are looking so happy?' she replied, 'The baby is very cute, Bhabhi. You will also be very happy when you see him.'

The baby was really very cute, soft and pink like a rose. He was sleeping with his eyes tightly shut. Shaista's lips had lost their colour, and she smiled weakly. I sat next to her and picked up the baby. 'Shaista Bhabhi, the baby might catch the evil eye. How have you managed to produce such beautiful children?' I teased her.

'Don't worry. If you tell Mujahid, he will place a baby much cuter than this in your hands,' she replied.