

Blood, Body and Stain

*Ahmad Qais Munhazim**

The last shirt my mom made me was on my 11th birthday. Every shirt she sewed for me became my favorite until the next time she saved tiny little pieces of fabric here and there from her customers and made me a new one. Whenever Khala Fazila and her daughters-in-law brought their fabrics for my mom to make them dresses, I would roll in the fabric pile, wrap some of my favorites around me and throw in a live fashion show for my three bored sisters, who would laugh if in a good mood. Otherwise, they would scold me for acting feminine. The probability of my success at making them laugh was low, but worth the chance.

I did not enjoy the frequent fashion shows I was throwing across our tiny room in a crowded apartment building that was rented for Afghan refugee families in Islamabad. The four-story building in the middle of a crowded bazar carried 32 apartments but housed more than 50 families. Each apartment had two tiny rooms, with separate entrance doors from the main hallway, a bathroom, and a kitchen that were separated with a balcony. The 2000 (\$40) rupee monthly rent for each apartment was too expensive for the families to afford the entire apartment on their own. They said that as soon as Sakhi, the old man everyone in the building called the self-proclaimed caretaker, rented out his second room in order to cut on the rent, everyone in the building followed Sakhi's theory of economic sustainability. The landlord wouldn't allow more than one family in the apartment but Sakhi had found a solution for that too. "Just tell the landlord the rest of your family have joined you from Afghanistan," Sakhi had advised everyone. We had rented the room from Khala Fazila, a widow who shared the room with her two married sons, their wives and five kids.

The walk across the room was so short that it did not give me the feeling of a runway. I would either trip on the piles of shoes at the doorstep or step on my 18-year-old brother's still body, who would lie down in the same spot where he slept at night. He was paralyzed a year after we escaped the war in Afghanistan. I don't know if I hated the fashion show walk for stepping on his body or because he would poke me with his cane if I stepped on him. But for sure, I hated the fashion show because it made me feel like a clown. Sometimes I would get Khala Fazila's daughters-in-law in my audience as well. I hated it but I did it anyhow. My sisters' laugh was enough of a reason for me to accept tripping on the shoes, the cane pokes and the scolding. When my second eldest sister, Tuba laughed, I felt like I owned all those colorful fabrics scattered around the room. She was only 22 but she prepared two meals for us every day, gave my brother

* Ahmad Qais Munhazim is a PhD student in the department of Political Science, University of Minnesota. His research interests include political Islam, international security, political violence and politics of sexuality. He can be contacted at munha009@umn.edu

his pills and checked on my dad's heartbeats to make sure he was alive. She would put her head on my dad's left chest with her curly black hair covering her entire face and shout, 'Baba is alive. He is just sleeping.' Then with a sense of victory, she would brush away her hair with her fingers and say, 'the medicines are working. Baba takes some short naps here and there these days.' Tuba displayed so much courage that I always lost my fear in her words. I would feel light when I saw her energy. It required too much courage and power for a young girl hit by the war, displacement, family responsibilities and above all, her unknown destiny. Sometimes it felt like she was just acting brave. Tuba and I shared one pillow at night. We would sleep on the opposite direction from each other, our heads sometimes touching. I felt safe and protected unless the pillow moved or she would get up for morning prayers. One night neither the pillow moved nor did she get up for morning prayers. But still I felt unsafe, just as when rockets would hit the neighborhood in the middle of the night and we would run trying to find each other in the dark. I heard her breathing heavily and her head moving. I stayed silent and moved my hand closer to her face. I touched her eyes. I felt her cry. I had never seen Tuba's tears but I touched them. I felt them. I felt like my heart exploded as if that midnight rocket landed on our house and splashed the blood, flesh, and bones of the seven individuals who had rented our annex.

Just like Tuba would check on my dad every night, I started checking on her, sheepishly reaching to her side of the pillow and placing my palm right under her face. I would make a thousand prayers and a thousand promises to Allah for not dropping any of her tears into my hand. Some nights I would get lucky but other nights she would be weeping until she would fall asleep and, there, I would shed a thousand tears in silence until sleep pulled me away.

My dad, who was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and severe depression, either sat in a corner of the room staring at us or lay down staring at the white ceiling that held a bulb and a fan. The only times he would talk were when he complained of insomnia or told my mom not to worry about my sisters. Allah would do something. Sometimes, between his silences, he would murmur, "young refugee women are like a cooked dish in a pot without a lid. Every man of the host country wants to taste them. I am sick and unable to protect my three daughters. Every time I lift my hands for prayer, I pray that we either go back to Afghanistan where I can protect my daughters or I wish that they die and not suffer humiliation and the sexual gaze of Pakistani men every time they go down the block attending Quran classes." Then he would turn his face to my mom and repeat, "don't send them to those classes anymore. From the moment they leave this room until they come back, I feel like I am hanging from the edge of a cliff. I get worried when they are outside."

We could not afford to have a TV nor could my sisters go outside, except for the Quran classes, because they were women. They were not just women but they were runaway women of war in a stranger's land with an ill father and paralyzed older brother. My mom's sewing skills brought us some money and served as the only source of entertainment for our family when the neighbor women daily stopped by our room for new fabric or fresh gossip.

I loved their gossip but I loved more all the fabrics for their bright colors and big flowers. I always waited for our neighbor, Tahira, to bring her fabrics. She had the best taste among all the women. Right before her wedding, Tahira brought a pile of black, golden, green, and white fabric. When Tahira's green soft and shiny silk wedding dress was stitched, I begged my mom to make me a shirt from the leftover pieces. Tahira laughed and told my mom she could make me a shirt from the leftover black and golden fabric but not the green and white since they were her wedding dresses and she wanted to keep even the tiny pieces as her wedding memory.

One late night, when I came back from work, where I cleaned and swept a Pakistani owned kids' entertainment store and prepared tea for the workers, I woke up everyone in the room with my scream. I saw a newly made shirt on my sleeping spot, which was right when you entered the room from the public hallway. During the day, the shoes rested there and at night, my mom would push them into a corner and make room for me to sleep. I hated my sleeping spot so much that sometimes I wished the shoes would turn into human beings and rebel against their displacement. But then I loved sharing my pillow with Tuba and there was no other spots left for me in that tiny room where the nine of us slept. Every night I would fall asleep whining about my sleeping spot and contemplating ways to bribe one of my siblings for a change. That night, I forgot to complain. I forgot to even check on Tuba. I put on my new shirt and fell asleep right away.

The half black, half golden shirt received lots of compliments at my school the next day. The tiny golden pocket at the upper left part of the shirt complemented the black front. The back was golden with no details. My right sleeve was golden. My left sleeve was black. The golden collar was my favorite detail in the shirt because it protected my neck from the direct sun exposure on hot summer days in Islamabad. The puffy sleeves made me feel like a free bird flying through the crowded streets of Islamabad, between fruit stalls and daily-wage workers standing on the street corners waiting for their luck to be picked or running away from the two policemen who would park their motorcycle under the trees and wait to ambush the undocumented refugees.

There was a day that I hated the puffy sleeves. As I was running away from two policemen, who spotted me on my way from school, the wind was blowing so hard that my sleeves felt heavy and were pushing my skinny body back, slowing down my running skills that I had acquired during my tea selling days in the vegetable markets of Islamabad. I was already running late for work but the chasing police officers made me so late that this time even Rafi, my boss and owner of the shop who was known for his kindness among all the workers, yelled at me. I was blaming my sleeves for not cooperating with the wind but the reality was that this time Tariq, the 29-year-old Pakistani guy who owned the corner jewelry shop was not outside his shop to hide me from the police. Because I had to find a different hiding spot, I was late for work. In the last community meeting of Afghan refugees, Sakhi warned everyone of increased police brutality and house raiding due to newly arrived refugees in the camps and cities. He told everyone to dress like Pakistanis and change their daily commute routes in order to avoid police harassment. I cared less because I was not only a good runner but I also had Tariq who hid me behind the giant black safe where he kept all the jewelry at night. I called him Tariq Lala, Tariq big brother. He was a strong, confident young man that I always wished to have as my brother. My eldest brother was ill and my second eldest brother was only four years older than me. I knew Tariq since my very first days as tea seller. He liked my tea and I liked his thirst for my tea. All the other shopkeepers would buy one cup but he would buy three cups. As he sipped on his three cups of tea, I would tell him stories from Kabul, from the giant mulberry trees in front of our house to my first kite that I had made from an old grocery bag. As much as I enjoyed my tea selling time with Tariq, he would ruin it every time he tried to tip me. He would give me a 10-rupee note for three cups of tea that cost six rupees in total and tell me to keep the change. I would refuse his tip and throw his change on the ground and run away. The very first day I started selling tea with my brother, my dad told us not to accept any tips from customers. He said, 'tips make you greedy. Customers tip you because they pity refugees. We are proud Afghans. We don't need their tips.'

We don't need their pity. Don't ever break your pride for a few rupees, my sons.' Then, he turned his head to me and continued, "Qais, I am worried about you. Try to act masculine. Be a man, just like your brother. I am worried you would step on our honor one day with your feminine gestures."

It wasn't too long before my favorite button-up shirt was ripped and all the buttons broken. Holding the front of my shirt tightly with my right hand trying to cover my body, I hastily looked through the shattered glasses on the floor for my shirt's broken buttons. My mom had bought those shiny golden colored plastic buttons with her savings. I found them all one by one except for one. I would have found that last one too if Shehzad, the tall, blonde Pashtoon guy who worked at the shoe store next door hadn't begged me to leave the store and go home.

As I was walking fast between the buildings and along the stores, I found my image on the display mirror of the fabric store that I always walked by on my way to work and back. Everyday when I walked by Khan's Imported Fabrics, the big mirror and the colorful display of fabrics grabbed my attention and brought my steps to a sudden halt. As I fixed my hair, I would stare at the piles of fabrics trying to spot the newly added ones. I spotted blood, a big stain of blood covering the upper part of my right sleeve. I panicked at first. I tried to cover the stain with my hand but it was too big for my short hand to hide. I then rubbed it and there it spread further down my sleeve. All a sudden I realized I was in public. I looked around making sure nobody was watching me. There was no one except for my scared image on the mirror and me. Other stores opened late on Thursdays but Rafi opened the store early even on Thursdays and always asked me to skip school and sweep the floors, dust the shelves, walls and the toys around the store before the workers came in. He would open the door for me and then leave to drop off his kids to school.

Rafi took off. I started with picking up the mess from the floor and the counter. Rafi's friends had partied in the store the night before. Among many empty bottles of Pepsi, I saw a half full one. I felt the cleaning would be a lot easier now. I took a sip and someone grabbed me from behind. I screamed and turned. It was Tariq. He laughed at my scare and I cursed him. He grabbed my hands twisted them on my back and locked them with his one hand. He turned me to himself and pushed his weight on me. I shivered and felt weak in my hands. I felt like the blood had stopped running down my veins. I told him to stop the joke, 'My hands are hurting.' He was breathing heavily as he was putting his weight on my body, smashing me on the counter. 'You are so soft and beautiful,' he whispered as he caressed his face on mine. My heart was about to stop. I started crying, 'Let me go, Lala. Please, let me go'. I begged him with my shaky voice when my body failed at pushing him away. He started undoing his pants with his free hand while locking me with his weight. I screamed. He slapped me hard. I cried. I begged. He ripped apart my shirt, breaking all the buttons, baring my bloodless pale skinny body. 'Drop your pants or I will slap you again.' As he was turning me around, he let my hands free. I reached the half empty bottle of Pepsi. I grabbed it and before I knew, blood splashed from Tariq's head. I ran screaming towards the door and, there, Shehzad had already walked in the store.

I was scared about what to tell my family. How would I explain the stain? I was frightened to even walk towards home. My mind was not thinking of any excuses for the blood on my sleeve and the broken buttons in my hands. I stared at my image for a few more seconds. I noticed a crack on the upper edge of the mirror. I pushed it hard with my palm shattering Khan's

display mirror into pieces. I rubbed the blood from my hand all over my favorite shirt and body. There, I had an explanation for the blood on my sleeve but the shirt remained ripped, thereafter.