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The Florist

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Irfan's face was familiar to a many in the city, because he sold flowers at Chowgalia—the place where the four bazaars met.

Just after eating his breakfast, the twenty-two-year-old florist would cycle to the garden to buy roses and jasmine blossoms. First, he would help the chatty, hump-backed gardener pick them. Then, he would strap the basket of roses and jasmine flowers to the carrier of his bicycle and race back to his house, where he and his mother would make bracelets from the jasmine flowers and garlands from the roses. When the bracelets and garlands were ready, Irfan would hang them on his left arm and head for the Chowgalia—a mere ten minutes' walk from his house. Through doing this, he earned enough money to run his two-member household.

Every Thursday afternoon Irfan sold flowers at the shrine of PirInayat Shah, as Thursday was the day when visitors came there in droves. He would park himself by the formidable wooden gate of the shrine, and passing visitors would buy his flowers to hang over the grave of the Pir Sahib. They always sold like hot cakes. After exhausting his stock Irfan would join the pilgrims dancing dhamal in ecstasy or listening to qawwali. He also ate his evening meal in the lungar at the shrine, and most times he took rice or halwa home to his mother.

Irfan had been in fifth grade when his father married another woman without informing his wife, and moved to another city. His father had a small provision shop in the neighbourhood, and they had led a prosperous life. With his father gone, Irfan could not continue his studies. His maternal grandfather was a florist, and thus his mother knew how to make bracelets and garlands. So mother and son eked out a living by making and selling jasmine bracelet and rose garlands.

In his childhood, Irfan had no idea why and for whom the buyers bought the flowers. One day he went to the shrine of PirInayat with his mother and saw bunches of jasmine bracelets and rose garlands hanging over the white marble grave. For years he believed that this was the flowers' only purpose.

When he was fifteen, his aunt bought a colour TV. Every evening he went to her house to watch primetime soap operas. One evening he saw a dashing young man presenting a jasmine blossom bracelet to a shy and pretty woman. The picture became imprinted on Irfan's mind. Whenever he was making bracelets and garlands, the fragrance from the freshly-picked flowers would make him think of a girl who was even prettier than the one he had seen on TV. At the Chowgalia, his eyes would chase each passing girl. Every one of them was his beloved, his future wife. He was dying to give the gift of a bracelet to a potential lover.

Some days, the bracelets and garlands did not sell well. He brought the remainder to his house, wrapped in a moist rag, and asked his neighbour to put them in his refrigerator. The next day he sold the day-old flowers at a reduced price, along with fresh ones. Sometimes his neighbour refused to store them. 'Sorry,' the middle aged man would say. 'Our refrigerator is groaning with food.'

That day, Irfan gave the unsold bracelets and garlands to the children in his neighbourhood. He made the noisy bands of kids stand in a circle, and threw the flowers into the air for them to catch. The strings of roses and jasmine shot up into the air like fireworks, and the children moved to catch them. Only a few succeeded. The successful children started sprinting home with their booty, but soon they were intercepted by the ones who'd been unable to grab anything. The laughing kids tried to snatch the strings of flowers from one another until the bracelet and garland strings snapped, after which they fought over the shower of flowers. When the dust had settled, the more diligent children sought the rose and jasmine petals that lay scattered in the dust.

One day, Irfan knocked at his neighbour's door. The neighbour's daughter Dilshad craned her neck around the curtain that hung at the door, her body concealed.

Irfan pushed the small, moist bundle towards her.

‘Could you put this in your refrigerator?’ he asked.

‘Sure,’ Dilshad replied.

She had been Irfan’s classmate when he was in fifth grade. He hadn’t seen her for years because she observed purdah now, and he was taken aback by her beauty.

‘By the way,’ he said. ‘Where’s your father?’

‘He’s down with fever,’ she said, before disappearing behind the curtain.

As he headed home, Irfan thought to himself, *A few years back, she was a skinny girl whose face was covered in white patches, always buzzing with flies.*

On the second day, Dilshad answered the door again. By the third day, Irfan had mustered up enough courage to hand her a small, moist paper packet. ‘This is for you.’

‘What is it?’ Dilshad lightly pressed the bundle.

‘Open it.’

She gingerly obeyed, and saw a pair of fresh jasmine bracelets. Irfan feared that she might hurl them away contemptuously, but she accepted the gift, blushing crimson.

On the fourth day, to Irfan’s disappointment, Dilshad’s father answered the door, having recovered from his fever.

The lovers managed to rendezvous on the roof.

One evening, Irfan's mother caught them swapping gifts. She went to Dilshad's mother to beg for the girl's hand in marriage to her son, but Dilshad's family turned down the proposal on the grounds that their families were adherents of different sects, and that their daughter was educated while Irfan was not.

The next morning, when Irfan was making bracelets and garlands, he felt like the flowers were burning his hands. Their fragrance made him sick. He hung the bracelets and garlands on his arm and limped out of the house. They felt like small snakes wrapped around his arm, and he wanted to throw them away. He did not go to his usual place; instead he roamed aimlessly in the city until he feared that his legs would buckle underneath him. It was afternoon when he wandered into a park. He plunked the bundle of flowers on the unkempt lawn as if they were a bag of trash, and lay down under a sprawling pipal tree. He had not sold a single bracelet or garland. His belly growled from hunger and his pocket was empty. With a weak smile, he said to himself, *The unsold flowers are of no use. You can't eat them. It is better to sell bananas, melons, and apples. If they don't sell, at least you can eat them.*

A young couple approached Irfan. The man shyly asked to buy a pair of jasmine bracelets, but the florist shook his head morosely. The man gave his girlfriend a silly, embarrassed smile. The couple had only gone a few paces when Irfan hurled the bracelets and garlands into the air, screaming madly. The flowers flew up like a swarm of red and white butterflies. Some bracelets and garlands got caught on the branches of the pipal tree while the remainder tumbled to the ground. Irfan collected the remainder and thundered towards the park exit. He tossed the tangled bracelets and garlands into the open sewer that passed on the other side of the park. The dark, filthy water carried the flowers away in the company of leaves, plastic shoppers, banana peels, and diapers. For a while Irfan walked along the sewer, and got a grim sense of satisfaction by observing the flowers' miserable fate.

A year passed.

Dilshad got a job as a nurse at the teaching hospital.

On the 8th of Muharram, Irfan's wares sold like hotcakes. This was because the Sunnis bought flowers for the graves of their loved ones, while the Shiites bought them to decorate the rozas they made in honour of their Imams. The florist stood at his usual spot. Today he had brought three times as many flowers as usual, and had sold them all except for three garlands and a pair of bracelets. His side pocket was bulging with one rupee bills, and he was jubilant.

Suddenly, out of nowhere there appeared two swarms of angry men chanting slogans against each other's sects. Brandishing flags, bludgeons, and guns, they charged at one another. There was a brief scuffle before the firing started—*pa-taka-pa-taka*. The shopkeepers pulled down their shutters and raced away from the trouble. Customers and passers-by fled the scene like terrified herds of sheep. The shopkeeper closest to Irfan pulled his shutter down, locking it from the inside. Then, he opened the lock and lifted the shutter just enough to tell Irfan to duck into his shop, but the florist was already bolting in the direction of home.

Sirens wailing, police vans appeared on the scene. Some rioters had absconded, and others lay dead. Sunnis and Shiites alike were collecting their dead. The air was thick with the stench of gunpowder and teargas fumes. The road had been cleared of bodies, and small pools of blood shone in the scarlet of the setting sun. Only one corpse lay unclaimed. It was Irfan the florist's, his right hand still clutching his bracelets and garlands. A stray bullet had pierced his chest. A passer-by uncoiled his white turban and spread it over him. Then, police officers hauled the flower vendor's body into a dark blue van, and it was carted off to the city's teaching hospital.

On duty in the emergency room were Dilshad, her husband Naimat, her middle-aged female colleague, and a newly-qualified doctor. A police officer pushed the stretcher towards them.

'He was killed by a stray bullet in the sectarian violence. He sold flowers at the Chowgalia, the poor boy.'

The newly-qualified doctor lifted the white sheet away from Irfan's face and issued an order for the body to be prepared for post-mortem. Dilshad gasped in horror when she saw who it was. The doctor asked Naimat to follow him, and they disappeared into the post-mortem room to attend to other cases.

The senior nurse said to Dilshad, ‘Take the bracelets and garlands from his hands while I remove his shirt.’

But Dilshad didn’t move. Instead, she slumped down at the foot of the stretcher on which Irfan’s body lay. She tried to choke back tears but couldn’t stop them rolling down her cheeks.

The senior nurse placed a hand on her shoulder. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes, I’m fine,’ Dilshad replied, gathering herself. ‘I was a bit dizzy, that’s all.’

The senior nurse brought her a glass of water.

Dilshad tried to remove the garlands and bracelets from Irfan’s tightly closed fist but his grip was too strong.

‘He won’t let go,’ she said to the senior nurse.

‘No big deal. Cut them with scissors.’

‘I can’t...’ Dilshad caressed the flowers, then brought a roll of surgical cotton and started wiping Irfan’s face.

‘Do you know him?’ the senior nurse asked.

‘Yes. His name was Irfan. He was my classmate and neighbour. He used to give me bracelets every day,’ Dilshad whispered to her colleague, who was cutting Irfan’s shirt over his chest. The senior nurse stopped and looked up. She had cut the shirt up to his navel.

Just then, the doctor stormed out of the post-mortem room, with Naimat at his heels.

‘Is he ready for the autopsy yet?’ the doctor snapped, glaring at them. ‘Why are you gossiping? Take off his shirt and the other things. Have him ready within the next minute.’ He hurried away, Naimat trying to keep up with him.

When the men had gone, the senior nurse turned to Dilshad, wanting to know more.

‘Well?’ she pressed.

Dilshad had managed to free the bracelets and garlands from Irfan’s grip.

‘Every evening he came to his roof and I came to mine. A yard-high wall separated our roofs. Every day he gave me a pair of jasmine bracelets.’

Her fingers were unconsciously moving the jasmine flowers as if they were the beads of a rosary. The edges of the petals of the wilted flowers had yellowed. ‘He was so cute and...and he always smelled of roses and jasmine. We were so madly in love... Once, we even planned to run away.’ Dilshad tried to stifle a tearful smile. ‘A year ago he sent his mother to my house to ask for my hand, but my father blew his top, saying *It’s an impossibility. He is not from our sect. I will not tie my educated daughter to an uneducated man.* I was crestfallen for months. After some time I started working at this hospital, and then one day I met Naimat, my husband.’

‘Yes I know.’

Dilshad couldn’t bear the sight of Irfan’s body anymore.

She asked her colleague to carry on without her. Then, barely suppressing her sobs, she placed the rose garlands on the florist’s chest, stashed the jasmine bracelets in her purse, and hurried out of the emergency room.