

SACRED DUTY
Ismat Chughtai
Trans. M. Asaduddin

The tiny bit of paper fluttered away from Siddiqi Sahib's hand and fell on his lap like a half-dead moth. He brushed it off as though its poisonous fangs would get stuck to his very being.

His wife was supervising the hanging of chandeliers and coloured lanterns outside. Sitting on a heap of rugs, she was reading congratulatory telegrams and letters from faraway lands and from Delhi and other places inside the country on the occasion of their daughter's marriage. Samina was very dear to her parents and had passed BSc that year with the highest honours.

The groom worked in Dubai on a monthly salary of twelve thousand, had free board and lodgings and was allowed a free vacation every year. Developments in the Arab world had opened up fortunes for many a nubile girl. The sudden spurt of wealth had brought prosperity to many a family. The boy was from a decent household and without much family encumbrances. The match had been settled over the phone. He was not very handsome and was a bit short as well. But the girl was not going to put her husband up for auction. One shouldn't bother about a man's physical features; it is his qualities that matter. Twelve thousand mattered a lot and ensured total comfort.

The daughter was delicate as a flower. She wanted to go in for higher studies, but an opportunity like this did not come every day. So she was silenced with a sharp reprimand. What benefit was to be had by doing an MSc or becoming a doctor?

Samina didn't demur. On the contrary, she became absolutely quiet. These girls throw such tantrums, reflected the mother, as she put aside the letter she was reading. Well, she would go to see her daughter in Dubai in the month of Khali and, God willing, would perform hajj on her way back.

Siddiqi Sahib, in a dazed state at the moment, was staring in disbelief at the wretched bit of paper that had pulled his world from great heights into a bottomless abyss.

Papa, Mummy—I regret that I can't agree to this match. I'm going to Allahabad with Tushar Trivedi to his parents' home. We've been married in court. I'll consider myself fortunate if you can forgive me.

Your daughter,
Samina Trivedi.

May God help us! Siddiqi Sahib was a progressive, a supporter of education for girls and their freedom of choice in marriage. He also attended Id prayers, though he had not yet been called upon to participate in a crusade over Islamic principles or make any sacrifices for religion. Free from prejudices he lived a life of respectability among liberal-minded people. But that didn't mean that his blood wouldn't boil if his daughter went astray.

When Begum, his wife, heard this, she almost passed out.

There was just one thing to do—go to Allahabad and shoot them both. But Begum panicked at the mention of the word 'gun'. Ah! Her darling, her only daughter! God's curse on the worthless fellow! How innocent he looked when he came on Sundays and had tiffs with Samina as they both raised a racket! When did this blasted love intrude? How ungrateful the children had become to get married on the sly in this way, giving no one the slightest inkling! How he would hug her and call her 'Mummy'—indeed the rogue had ended up making her his mummy. A generation of such deceitful youths!

No, we had nothing against the Hindus. No one ever bothered about who was Hindu or Christian at Paplu's Sunday parties. Women had fancy nicknames. Pammy Deshmukh, for instance—was she Razzaq Deshmukh's wife or Chander Deshmukh's? Begum always thought Lily to be a Christian till she discovered one day that she was Laila Razdan. The Razdans made it all the more confusing. Tirmila Razdan—who called herself Nikki, swore in English at the slightest provocation and sprinkled her conversation liberally with invectives like 'shut up' and 'hell' (she was hell-bound, for sure)—was from a highly respected Shia family. As for Razdan Sahib—Mohammad Ismail Razdan—he had performed

hajj thrice already. Nikki, too, was a haji. What beautiful saris and cosmetics she had brought back from Mecca this time! She brought us a gift of the holy water zamzam and rosaries along with an inch-long snippet of the sheet that covered the Kaaba. She had used the nail scissors expertly to rip off that swatch, and the folds fell so neatly that no one suspected it.

They sat late into the night, calling people on the phone and sending telegrams to all invitees to tell them that Samina was down with pneumonia. That she was in intensive care. The wedding had been postponed for the time being. If she survived, they would be informed about the future programme.

How to kill the daughter and the son-in-law? There wasn't even a sharp knife in the house! They had to forget about the gun. A licence was hard to get. How were they to know? Otherwise they could've procured one beforehand. They had good connections. Now by the time the licence would come through, the couple might even have a child born to them. The very thought of a child made their blood curdle.

Well, God had blessed them with two hands, which were enough to wring the daughter's neck. They would have to lie in ambush behind some shrubbery near the house of her in-laws. No one knew if there was any in the vicinity where the villains lived. This was like demanding the river to be full before one jumped into it to drown. If their luck had not run out, their daughter wouldn't have run off, bringing them disrepute.

But it would be sheer injustice to let that scoundrel Tushar, who had seduced their daughter, escape without severe punishment. The screwdriver, properly sharpened, would do. The sharpening man used to sit in front of the gate every day. He was threatened with police action and ordered to sit elsewhere. What a horrible grating noise the grinding stone made! As though one's teeth were cutting through a handful of sand.

Such a delicate matter could not be shared even with friends. But Jawwad was like a member of the family. He had a thriving practice in Allahabad. They called him on the phone and sought his advice. He promised to come at teatime the following day.

Meanwhile a bomb exploded.

A newspaper was sent to them from Allahabad that had splashed the wedding photographs of Samina and Tushar. A civil marriage was not considered enough by Seth Sahib, Tushar's father. He had arranged a ceremony according to Arya Samaj rituals, complete with a havan and a pandit.

Snapshots were taken showing the rituals, the girl changing her faith, taking a dip in the Ganges at Allahabad where she had been flown. The girl was so shameless that even after all this she was smiling and looking demurely at Tushar.

Siddiqi Sahib got himself into such a rage that he very nearly had a heart attack. Had Jawwad Sahib not arrived at the right moment, something disastrous might have happened. Tushar's father had taken such an unfair advantage of the situation. He was a rabid Mahasabhai. By getting those photographs printed with such gusto, he had added to Siddiqi Sahib's abject humiliation.

Now, the entire family deserved to be blown up with a bomb. But where could one get a bomb? Siddiqi Sahib who used to get upset even by the fireworks at Diwali and Shab-e-baraat was totally shattered by this explosion. This was a nation of Hindus, no doubt about that!

What lucrative jobs were offered to him in Pakistan! He had rejected all those because of his progressive leanings—sheer stupidity! 'I can't leave my own country. I'll be buried in the land I was born,' he had asserted using the Hindi word janam for birth. What a shame! Janam was not to be uttered by someone from a respectable Muslim family with pronounced religious feelings.

Jawwad Sahib had a hard time pacifying him. Both of them had a prolonged tête-à-tête behind closed doors. Then the scheme was revealed to Begum who was simply thrilled. What a crafty man this Jawwad Sahib was! Although a Shia, he had been Siddiqi Sahib's friend for years. A Siddiqi-Jafri alliance may seem improbable, but there never appeared any chink in their friendship in spite of the traditional Shia-Sunni conflict. Often a man's faith comes in the way of his friendship, but it is mostly love and friendship that triumph. Life is full of contradictions that can make it tragic. But principles easily fall victim to love and friendship.

Siddiqi Sahib asked the driver to wait and rang the doorbell. After a few moments, his dear daughter was clinging to him, smiling through her tears. A daughter is deeply anguished when she acts against

the will of her parents and doesn't find peace until she is forgiven. It was at her parents' home that Samina had discovered Tushar's love, which gradually overwhelmed her. Had her parents been not enlightened, would they have allowed Tushar to pay court to her under their own roof?

And Tushar was standing there grinning shamefacedly. He hadn't liked the newspaper stunt his father had pulled off. But he was the only brother of four sisters, and one day he would have to perform the funeral rites of his father. Sethji would remind him of this duty time and again. His sisters, all older to him, were well settled with families of their own. Nirmal, the youngest, had fallen for a dark-complexioned Christian professor. Sethji had manoeuvred to get him sent to England on a government scholarship. The fellow had left the arena of love without protest. Sethji was known to have made the career of many politicians. Although he had never accepted any position himself, many of his protégés were members of various state assemblies and committees. He was a successful 'kingmaker'. He didn't align himself with any particular political group and would be seen supporting the party in power. He played his part in the rise and fall of these parties. His was a multifaceted personality.

Jawwad Sahib's advice acted like magic and transformed Siddiqi Sahib. He was a new person, his heart beating within his chest in a new rhythm. In high-flown and chaste Hindi, studded like diamonds with Sanskrit words, Siddiqi Sahib conveyed to Sethji how grateful he was to him for relieving him of a great burden, that of an unwed daughter, and was thus obliged to him for generations. All faiths are sacred, he said, and the greatest one consists of the love and affection that an enlightened father-in-law bestows on his daughter-in-law. To be able to give one's faith to one's daughter-in-law and one's son was a noble act. And Ganga was everyone's mother, be he a Hindu, a Muslim or a Christian. Her holy waters made no distinction between a Brahmin and an untouchable but quenched everyone's thirst.

Addressing Sethji as 'Sayyid Sahib', he said, 'I'm a human being. I've inherited the religion I profess and gathered knowledge from books. Your Bhagwan and my Allah are two names for the same power.' He quoted profusely from the Bible and the Gita besides the Quran. Sethji was highly impressed. His wife got her neighbour, Miss Rosa, to make a sumptuous murg musallam for the guest. Everyone was very excited. Sethji's samdhi, a great scholar and of scrupulous principles, came to bless his daughter and son-in-law. How liberally he doled out those fifty-rupee bills to the servants!

Siddiqi Sahib was invited to lunches and dinners, where he refused to eat chicken. 'Meat is not conducive to knowledge and austerity,' he proclaimed.

'You have fulfilled your wishes,' he said to Sethji, 'now you must allow me to do the duty I owe to my friends and relatives. The girl's mother has been crying her heart out though the photographs provided her some relief.' (Actually Begum wanted the photographs to be torn to shreds and thrown into the fire.)

Sethji's wife didn't want to hand over the diamond necklace to the daughter-in-law at the time of her departure. Sethji admonished her, 'Don't be mean. Our samdhi is a wise and generous person. See how gracefully he has overlooked all our unfair acts. And here you are, crying over a few pieces of glass!'

Siddiqi Sahib brought his daughter and son-in-law to Delhi with great fanfare. He had phoned up friends and relatives, who were present at the station with bouquets and garlands. For good luck, Jawwad Sahib had accompanied the party from Allahabad.

Begum was boiling with rage. 'Kill him. His body will make good compost for the garden,' she said about the son-in-law.

'Are you crazy? Just wait and see what drama unfolds. Tushar is Samina's husband now. Proposal and acceptance—whatever the language and whoever the persons present—has already made them man and wife. And both are dear to us.'

The marquee was set up in the afternoon, and guests in the city were invited with utmost haste over the telephone or by visiting them in person.

Tushar was unnerved for a few moments when he was asked to convert to Islam. He looked fearfully at Jawwad Sahib and Siddiqi Sahib and was probably planning to jump out of the window.

'Abbaji, what's this nonsense? First it was Papa who forced me to become a Hindu, got me to take a dip in the Ganga and compelled me to chant mantras that sounded like gibberish. And now you want us to

go through this farce. We won't submit to your petty politicking. When we return to Allahabad, we'll be required to take dips again, and photographs will be taken and . . .'

Begum started crying. Siddiqi Sahib was confounded.

'There's just one way out,' he said, clasping his wife's hand. 'Let's go and drown ourselves in the Jamuna.'

'How can you drown, Papa?' asked their daughter. 'You know how to swim. You'll drown Mummy and come out of the river safe and sound. Good for your girlfriend Miss Farzana.'

'Shut up, Sami,' Tushar admonished her. 'Papa, I mean Siddiqi Sahib, I'm ready to become a Muslim.'

'Shut up, you idiot. I'm not prepared to be reconverted. Don't you remember how lovingly Mataji had put the mangalsutra around my neck? These are diamonds, you know. How beautiful they are!'

'You can wear the mangalsutra as a Muslim, too!' Tushar admonished her once again.

'Kill the two, and that's the end of it. God's curse on them!' Begum said. 'What an ungrateful daughter! He's ready to become a Muslim, but she's spoiling the case.'

'Will you shut up, you chatterbox?' Tushar snubbed Samina. 'When I had refused to obey Pitaji, you opposed me tooth and nail and threatened to jump out of the window. Did you know that there was a mouse burrow under the window where a fat mouse lives? If it had been surprised out of its hole, you would've got a heart attack!'

'Look, Maulvi Sahib has been waiting a long time. He hasn't even taken a cup of tea, says he'll have breakfast after performing the sacred duty of conversion. He's a glutton, for sure,' said someone.

'I'm ready. Two slaps across her face, and she'll agree. Darling, did you lose anything by becoming a Hindu? Why are you being so obstinate?'

'Oh . . . and what about the aarti I performed and the nice mangalsutra you gave me? But what stinking socks you wear! Your feet smelled awfully when I bent down to touch them.'

'What's this nonsense!' Siddiqi Sahib roared. 'Everything is a big joke to you. Tushar, are you ready to embrace Islam and thus become Musharraf?'

'Musharraf? You mean Musharraf Hamidullah who is a crook and a mean pilferer? He always cheated in the exams to get through. Do you remember, Samina, how when Sir caught him cheating, he pulled out a knife?'

'You're the pampered son of a seth. He's the son of a poor orderly. What injustice! Have you ever cared to know how he manages to survive, you bloody capitalist bloodsucker?'

'Look Mummy, she's calling me names. I'll hit her.'

'They've perished, those hitters. Hunh!'

'How long will this farce continue?' Begum asked. 'Good God, I forgot the pudding in the oven.' She leapt towards the kitchen.

'Oh dear, these kids are driving me mad. Brother Jawwad . . . ' Siddiqi Sahib sounded desperate.

'What is it?' asked Jawwad who had been listening to the exchanges quietly all this while and smiling to himself.

'I'm acting according to your instructions. Now tell me what to do.'

'Convert me to Islam and hurry, please. We've booked seats for the matinee and must reach the cinema hall by three.'

'And here the maulvi is starving and cursing us. Skip the matinee. We've arranged for an "at-home" in the evening.'

'But that's at eight.'

Siddiqi Sahib's plans were going awry.

'Look here, children . . . ' Jawwad Sahib cleared his throat.

'Yes, uncle,' Tushar responded promptly.

'Did you have a civil marriage?'

'Yes. The certificate has been put in a safe by Mataji at Allahabad.'

'Did you read the forms carefully before signing them?'

'Yes, I did. But Samina was too nervous to read them. I asked her to sign quickly and be done with them.'

'How could I sign quickly with your terrible pen? You can buy dozens of shoes, can't you buy a decent pen?'

'Just see her manners! . . . We've been married twice—first the civil marriage and then a Hindu one. I had refused it straightaway, but she found it romantic to be led around the sacred fire. She opposed all my moves just so she could please my parents.'

'Yes, it was romantic like the marriage of fishermen. The pandit was chanting mantras, "shutram, shutram", and Papaji was pouring spoonfuls of pure ghee into the fire. It was as though someone was frying carrot halwa. Wonderful!'

'Baby, have you ever smelt pure ghee burning in a funeral pyre?'

'You bloody sadist! Just shut your trap.' Samina folded the newspaper and pounded Tushar's head.

'Oh God, it's crazy!' Siddiqi Sahib was losing his bearings.

'What a calamity! How long will this farce go on?' Begum asked as she entered the room.

'Let me handle this,' Jawwad Sahib came forward and said in a gentle voice, 'Listen to me, children, and don't interrupt while I'm talking. It's bad manners. I'm asking you a very important question. Before the civil marriage, did you read the clause in the form which states that neither of you professes any religion?'

'I don't think so, but that doesn't matter. I have always acted according to my parents' instructions. As a matter of fact, I've never pondered much over questions of faith. Religion is for the elderly. In the convent we were Christ's lambs. In Mathura, Krishnaji reigned supreme. Once Musharraf took me to a dargah where, imitating him, I cupped my hands in prayer and moved my lips.'

'Does that mean that you've never thought seriously about Ishwar or Allah?'

'Hmm . . . Have you ever thought about Dilip Kumar?'

'Well, Mataji was his fan at one time. As for me, I prefer Amit, Mithun and . . . '

'That's enough! Now this means that no other ceremony has any validity unless your civil marriage is dissolved first.'

'So the circumambulations were no good?' Tushar asked excitedly.

'Nonsense! Tushi, it won't help you harping about them. You can divorce me if you want, but I'll never return the mangalsutra.'

'Ugh, what a mean girl you are! We're discussing serious matters and you're obsessed with the mangalsutra. Tell me the truth—if Mataji hadn't shown you the mangalsutra and the rest of the jewellery, would you have agreed to go around the fire?'

'You're so mean, Tushi! You think I'm so greedy, you scoundrel? Papa, marry me off to any dumb fool. I took this idiot as my protector, touched his feet covered in stinking socks . . . this . . . this . . . oh my God!' Samina clenched her fists and leaped towards Tushar. It would have led to a serious scuffle had Begum not threatened them with an attack of hysteria.

'Jawwad, I don't agree with you at all on this new point.'

'But perhaps the law . . . '

'To hell with the law! I've to give an appropriate answer to Sethji's superciliousness. We must have the nikah even if I've to go to jail or be hanged for it. He made me appear a fool before the whole world, and I'm not going to let him get away with it.'

'Will someone tell me what's the problem now when both are ready to become Muslims?' Begum asked impatiently.

'My wife's right. After all she's the daughter of a maulvi.'

'And she beats everyone at rummy, too,' Samina piped in.

'Shut up, wicked girl! Don't interfere in everything.'

Qazi Sahib arrived. Samina stopped grinning and covered her head. The photographer offered Tushar his karakul cap recently brought from Pakistan. Samina's eyes lit up when she saw Tushar so handsomely turned out.

Both received the honour of embracing Islam. Both had difficulty reciting verses from the Quran. Tushar was in a cold sweat. Maulvi Sahib was very gentle, the atmosphere was just right. Jawwad Sahib was ready to act as both counsellor and witness. One more witness was required.

'Let Ammi be the witness,' Samina suggested.

'Then one more woman will be required.'

'Why?'

'One man's testimony is equal to that of two women. Why not use Shakura, the boy servant?'

'Ammi is better than ten Shakuras put together,' asserted Samina stubbornly.

'Just be quiet, girl. Don't keep butting in. Ah, here's your father.'

'Can I be a witness?' asked Siddiqi Sahib suddenly.

'Undoubtedly.'

Qazi Sahib was feeling annoyed. Residents of mansions and bungalows were so unpredictable. This man, a university professor, didn't know a thing about his religion!

The nikah was over. Dry dates were distributed. The photographer was clicking away at every stage of the ceremony. If a close-up shot of the couple affixing the signature on the wedding documents could have been taken, it would have been enough to devastate Sethji. But there was no time for all this.

The photos were splashed prominently in the newspaper the next morning along with the information that the couple had left for Bombay by air. From there they would depart for England. God willing, they would perform hajj before they returned home.

The couple was put up at the Ashoka Hotel for the night. All their belongings were taken there. The bride's family returned home from the hotel at about two, and everyone hit the bed immediately. Siddiqi Sahib realized, for the first time, that the marriage of a daughter was not an easy job. Parents await this day with trepidation. However, a sense of victory made him feel light-hearted the next morning. Jawwad Sahib had given a nice twist to the whole affair. The papers would be in Sethji's hands by now. He must be in the habit of rising early for his ritual bath and prayers.

Siddiqi Sahib was pleased with himself.

'I say, Sethji's samdhi, can we have some breakfast?' Jawwad Sahib bellowed from the doorway.

'Why, it seems you've grown taller by six inches—you're looking great!'

'Not just six inches, at least a yard. By God, I've beaten the rogue. He must be writhing! How about breakfast at the Ashoka?'

'Wonderful idea.'

'What do you say, Begum?'

'I'll be ready in a moment.'

The three of them reached the hotel.

'Sir, they've checked out,' the clerk at the reception informed them.

'What? Where have they gone? When?'

'The moment you left, they called a taxi. I told them repeatedly that they could stay here till tomorrow night, but as soon as they finished talking on the phone ...'

'Talking on the phone? To whom?'

'To someone at Allahabad. I got the call through. Seth ...'

'Seth!' They were stunned. 'So they've pulled a fast one on us.'

'Did they say they were going to Allahabad?'

'No, sir, they didn't say any such thing.'

'He'll raise a storm again, the rogue. Did Tushar make the call?'

'Yes sir, I mean both did, sir. Baby was with him in the telephone booth, and they talked for about twenty-five minutes. Oh, they've left a letter to be sent to you, sir.'

The envelope was quite heavy, or maybe Siddiqi Sahib's hands were trembling too much to grip it. The letter was in English, written in two hands. Samina and Tushar had taken turns in writing every alternate sentence:

Dear Papa, Mummy, Uncle Jawwad:

The only decent option before us is to leave. No, not for Allahabad, for there, too, a stubborn father and a sobbing mother await us. Like good human beings, we've known each other for four years and fallen in love. We opted for civil marriage after a good deal of thought. I'm not very brave, but Sami is a great coward. No, that's not really true. I had suggested to her in the beginning that we elope and get away from here to some far-off place. With this in mind, I had phoned up my father at Allahabad. He invited us lovingly to Allahabad, said that my mother was crying her heart out and that I must console her. When we reached there, he arranged this marriage around the holy fire. We thought, what's the harm? But then he played other tricks. We put up with all that. Then, Papa, you appeared on the scene. You're such a good actor! How you won over Papaji with your sweet talk! I was so touched that my eyes became moist. My father's so broad-minded, I thought. Papaji played a dirty trick on us and managed to take us to Benaras with the help of his cronies. On top of it Sami makes things difficult for me. First it was Papa who waved the magic wand at us, and then you showed your generosity by forgiving us. But when you brought us to Delhi you revealed yourself as someone petty and mean. You made us do the monkey dance before you. We took all this as a big joke, this farce too. Don't worry, we haven't exposed you to Papa. He will explode when he gets to read the newspaper tomorrow. We've just said goodbye to them from here. We bid goodbye to all of you.

No, don't bother about where we're going. Papa, Tushar is indulging in sweet talk, but he's calling you names. He also calls himself 'medieval' i.e., a crazy buffalo. We beg forgiveness if we've hurt you. No, we haven't hurt you. Rather, you should ask us for forgiveness because you've made us look ridiculous. Good parents you are, to have made us dance like monkeys to any tune you like.

I've told Papaji and now I'm telling you that we don't have any religion. All religions are gifts from that Supreme Being who is called Bhagwan or God. You know him only as Khuda, but we know of his thousand other names—

He who is powerful and compassionate (the Quran)

Who is within and without

Who is above and below

Who exists in darkness and in light

In presence as in absences

In negation as in affirmation (Bhagwad Gita).

The letter ended with their signatures.

Begum began to cry spasmodically. Siddiqi Sahib proceeded to make wry remarks on women's tears. Jawwad Sahib was scraping his pipe intently as though he were trying to escape into it. This is because he was the maker of this prescription à la Galen. No one knew which ingredient had proved uncongenial so that the prescription had lost its potency and rendered the world of two pairs of parents desolate.
