

A TIME TO MEND

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Grandmother didn't give Mubina even a minute to change out of her school uniform.

'There's not a moment to lose,' she said breathlessly, pressing a little purse into Mubina's hands. 'We need three more spools of gold thread. Immediately!'

'Can't someone else go to the market, Ammi? I have a Physics test ...'

Ammi dismissed these protests by leading Mubina to the large workroom which took up the entire ground floor of their house. Long wooden frames on which bright silks had been stretched tight filled the room. Craftsmen squatted around the frames and as their fingers flew, shimmering patterns emerged on the fabric.

'Every pair of hands in our home—and in our shop—is busy finishing the order for Nargis Bi's granddaughter's wedding. Three more saris have to be embroidered with gold and sequins by next Thursday. This Anwar ...' an exasperated shrug here showed what she thought of her son, Mubina's father, '... decides to change the silk threadwork to gold embroidery and now we're about to run out of gold thread! There's no one but you who can

go to the bazaar. I can't possibly ask Jawad . . . Where is that boy? Jawad!' she walked towards the staircase yelling out for her grandson.

Ammi didn't like Mubina going alone to the market and always sent one of the younger boys from their huge joint family along with her. It was to be Jawad this time. Jawad could never visit any shop without annoying the shopkeeper in one way or another. He would either say something impolite or knock something over or spill something by fidgeting with it

That day, fortunately, Mubina finished her errand so quickly that Jawad didn't have the time to do anything worse than suggest loudly, 'Check the bill. Ammi says this shopkeeper's totals are always wrong.'

Their problem started only on their journey back home. The driver of the autorickshaw they took looked positively villainous. He had a beard, greasy long hair and his bare feet were caked with dirt. A black shirt and black lungi completed his sinister appearance. To make matters worse, they were on an absolutely deserted stretch of road when the auto started making ominous hiccupping sounds and then jerked abruptly to a halt.

'Will take me half an hour to repair!' the driver glared at them accusingly, almost as if Mubina and Jawad were to blame.

The road they were stranded on ran behind the church. It was one of Bangalore's oldest churches and its huge grounds sprawled over several acres.

'If we take a shortcut across the church compound, we can walk home in fifteen minutes,' Jawad suggested, showing Mubina a small section of the old church wall that had crumbled to a height of barely two feet. The broken bit was hidden by bushes growing near it, and judging from

the expert way Jawad held the branches aside and hopped over, Mubina guessed that he'd used the same route before.

They walked through an unkept stretch of shrubbery before they reached the driveway that ran all the way round the church. They were heading for the front gate when they noticed a crowd blocking the entrance. There were men in the group carrying sticks and speaking in raised voices.

Then suddenly, without any warning, the crowd rushed into the church, shouting and brandishing their sticks.

Mubina stood rooted to the ground in shock, but Jawad dragged her hastily behind a stone slab supporting the garden water tap. They crouched there, faces buried in their knees. From the sounds they heard, it appeared that the angry mob had run into the church. There was yelling, the smashing of glass and the splintering of wood.

Within minutes the sounds retreated and there was an uneasy silence. The silence was broken by someone crashing through the shrubs. Suddenly, a pair of bare feet stopped in front of them. It was their auto driver.

'Thank god you are fine. I didn't realize there was trouble in the church till I saw men running past me as I was repairing the auto. I heard them say . . .' he broke off, paused worriedly, thought for a second, and then looked wild-eyed at the church.

He did not complete his sentence. He did not tell them that he had heard one of the men say, 'Did you see how that skinny one snapped like a twig when we hit him?'

The driver had thought they were referring to Jawad. But here was Jawad, and he was unharmed. If the boy was fine, was there someone else who was injured?

‘That mob is still hanging around the church gate. Go back and wait for me near the auto. I’ve repaired it and will take you home.’ He shouted over his shoulder as he ran into the church.

The children stumbled back outside and climbed into the auto. Just as they dialled Mubina’s father from their mobile, they heard an urgent cry for help. It came from inside the church.

‘Don’t go back, Jawad. You will get hurt!’ Mubina tried to stop her fourteen-year-old cousin, but he shrugged off her restraining hand and ran back into the church.

To Mubina’s relief, Jawad returned safe after a few minutes. He and the auto driver were supporting an injured man between them. The man staggered unsteadily, and his face was partly hidden by a green cloth that was dripping water on to his blood-stained kurta.

‘I think he’s the priest of this church,’ the auto driver panted as he heaved the wounded man into the auto. ‘He had collapsed right in front—near the altar. Some of the cushions, on which the worshippers kneel, were smouldering. I think those men tried to start a fire inside. The smoke that foam lets out when it burns is deadly. The priest was suffocating from the smoke.’

The driver unwound a damp towel that he had wrapped over his own mouth. ‘There was water on the floor next to the altar. Probably from the flower vases that those hooligans emptied before they stole them. I wet the cloth with that water.’ He eased the length of green silk gently off the priest’s face and gave it to Mubina. They decided that the auto would take the priest to hospital while the children would wait for Mubina’s father, Anwar Sharif.

By the time they got back home, the attack on the church was being shown on the TV news channels. They

watched the news late into the night and learnt that the fire in the church had not been serious and that the injured priest's condition was now stable. But this was little consolation to Mubina and Jawad who were still in shock from the horror they had witnessed.

When Mubina woke the next day, her face still puffed with crying, it was too late to go to school. Jawad, she heard, had got up and left without saying a word to anyone; without even eating his breakfast.

Mubina went searching for her father and found both Anwar and her grandmother in the workroom. The green cloth that Mubina had carried away from the church was on the table before them.

'You most certainly cannot wash and mend this cloth, Ammi,' Anwar was saying hotly. 'It's the holy cloth of the church! The altar cloth! Judging from the type of gold thread and the fine embroidery, I would say this cloth is almost a hundred years old. You may damage it if you try to wash it.'

But Ammi took the cloth off the table and glared at Anwar. 'If Allah in his infinite wisdom delivered this holy cloth to the one person in the entire city who can make it look new again, then I must fulfil his trust in me. I will not take it back to church in this condition! Look! It's torn! It is stained with soot and . . .' she inspected a dried brown stain. Surely that was blood.

They stopped speaking when they noticed Mubina.

'Come Mubina, you can help me. I'll teach you the proper way to wash old silks. I have my own secret techniques.'

'Yes, go ahead beta,' her father held her close for a moment before tousling her hair. It upset him to see how distraught Mubina still looked.

Mubina found that helping her grandmother soothed her troubled mind. ‘Why do people do such dreadful things? Why did they attack the church and nearly kill that poor priest?’ The question had been tormenting Mubina all night.

Ammi concentrated on squeezing the milky liquid from some gram she had soaked and ground. ‘I’m not sure, beta. Maybe it’s because sometimes people feel uneasy with those who are different from them. They feel threatened. And instead of stopping a minute to think about why they are feeling insecure, they just lash out at those who make them uneasy. I’m not explaining this very well, am I?’

‘You mean we can never stop all this?’

‘We can try. There will be moments when we feel unsettled by someone who is different from us. We just need to remember that being different is not a bad thing. It’s not something that should frighten us.’ Ammi patted Mubina’s kurta gently as she went on. ‘See this embroidery on your kurta. So many colours. Look at the different stitches, the varied lines and curves. Just notice how they all work together to make a beautiful design. It is the contrast and variety that makes this embroidery beautiful.’

Mubina was not sure she understood what Ammi was trying to say, but as she helped wash the cloth, she felt so much better.

A couple of days passed before they could take the altar cloth back to the church. After it had been washed, they couldn’t find the right shade of green thread to mend it with. Ammi had to get thread specially dyed for it. Then they took it to Ammi’s cousin, Riyaz Chachu. Riyaz was an expert darning and he mended the cloth with tiny invisible stitches.

Jawad refused to accompany them to the church at first. He had been very moody and silent since the day of the

attack and Mubina found herself actually pleading with him to come with them. He didn't make any sign that he had heard her, but when they walked to the bus stop, she found him walking behind them sullenly.

At the church, they located the priest supervising a carpenter who was replacing the smashed windowpanes. When he opened the folds of white muslin that Ammi had used to wrap the altar cloth, the priest was overcome with emotion.

His eyes were glistening as he lifted the cloth reverently to his face. 'How beautiful it looks! In fact,' he sounded puzzled as he turned the cloth lovingly over, 'I think the altar cloth actually looks better than ever before. There was one place where it had frayed and there was another small tear somewhere here. I can't see those now. It's a miracle! Oh—aah—I see,' he concluded knowingly as he noticed Ammi and Mubina beaming with pride and nodding happily. 'A miracle wrought by these two ladies!'

'Yes, Father. Now Allah has a choice of two people in the entire city to work miracles on your church linen,' Anwar chuckled at his own joke, ignoring Ammi's indignant look.

The priest smiled. He insisted on giving all four of them tea in his tiny cottage in the church compound. Over tea and a plate heaped high with slices of his mother's home-made cake, the priest said, 'I wondered why the altar cloth was missing. It didn't have the same value as the other items the men stole like the silver candlesticks, the silver chalice and the communion plate. Or the brass vases. Or the gold cross I used to wear around my neck. That cross was so precious to me because it had belonged to my grandfather. You say that an auto driver rescued me. I don't remember that part. How did I reach the hospital?'

Mubina told him about the entire rescue. She flushed with shame as she recalled the moment. ‘When I first saw the driver running into the church, I thought he was going in to loot it. He looked like such a thug himself with his grizzly beard and black clothes. I thought that he wanted to steal something.’

‘You don’t remember his name or the number of his auto, do you?’ the priest asked eagerly. ‘I would like to thank him.’

Neither of them had noticed the driver’s name which had been displayed inside the auto, or even the auto number.

An hour passed pleasantly as they chatted. Finally, as they were getting up to leave Jawad looked out of the window and exclaimed, ‘Oh my gosh! I can’t believe this! It’s him! He’s here! The driver!’ His voice was cracked and dry as if the words were coming from a throat gone rusty with disuse. They rushed out to see.

‘No, that’s not him,’ Mubina corrected him, seeing a clean-shaven man walking towards them. ‘Our auto driver had a beard!’

‘It *is* him!’ Jawad started running down the drive with a trace of his usual energy. ‘Look! His hand is bandaged! Our driver burnt his hand when he brought the Father out of the church.’

As the man came closer, Mubina realized that it was indeed the man who had rescued the priest. He looked awkward and hesitant as he made his way towards them. But when he noticed the children, he started walking faster, his stern countenance brightening with a huge grin. When he reached them, he put one hand into his pocket and took out something that made all five of them gasp with amazement. It was a thin, gold chain with a cross!

‘When I took you to the hospital emergency room, they wanted all ornaments removed before they wheeled you in for an X-ray, Father. I kept your cross and chain and your watch safely with me. But in no time, people from the church arrived and took charge of you. I was halfway home before I remembered that your cross and watch were still in my pocket. I was leaving the same night on my pilgrimage to Sabarimala. So I decided to return your things when I got back.’

The priest was too astonished to even reach out and reclaim his cross. It was left to Jawad, who was by now jumping around excitedly, to grab the cross and the watch and hand them over to the priest.

Then Jawad turned to the auto driver and said, ‘Good thing you didn’t wear your black clothes today. Or else my cousin would have thought you were coming to rob us! Like you did that day, eh Mubi?’ he wagged one finger at Mubina.

The driver surprised them by laughing good-naturedly at this remark. Mubina coloured guiltily, but she did not get annoyed with Jawad this time. After all, it was not unusual for him to make these embarrassing comments. And it was wonderful to have Jawad back to normal again.