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The Man Who Liked His Wife Too Much

by Carol Rose

It was one of those hot rainy days when the subcontinent is shrouded in steam. I was staying in the Pakistani village of Hangu at the invitation of a British woman who helps Afghan refugees sell handicrafts to the outside world.

A morning tour was enough to suggest Hangu was like many other towns in the Northwest Frontier Province: poor, dirty and exhausted by the decade-old influx of refugees from across the nearby Afghan border. I dutifully toured the local refugee assistance projects: a medical clinic besieged by women holding unwashed and malnourished babies; an empty carpentry training workshop where all the employees were "at lunch" by mid-morning; a foul-smelling chicken farm where a man who spoke no English methodically took me on a tour of cages filled with rank fowl of various sizes.

It was with great eagerness that I returned to the local guest house, anticipating an afternoon of reading and watching the rain from a sofa set in a screened porch overlooking a garden of banana trees, bougainvillea and sun flowers.

"Are you sure you will be okay there alone?" asked my friend. "If you get lonely, you should talk to Abdul Ahad, the cook. He has interesting stories."

No sooner had I settled into the first page of my book than a man wearing an Afghan pajama-style outfit appeared beside the sofa. I declined his offer of tea, whereupon he sat down in the rattan chair opposite and focused his gaze upon me. Being stared at is common custom in this part of the world. In fact, I've been told it is a form of politeness. What made the man's scrutiny so disconcerting were his eyes; one was brown, the other a cloudy blue that wept continually.

"You must be Abdul Ahad," I said, laying the book

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face-down on my lap. "You are the cook."

"Now I am a cook," he said in lightly accented English. "I was a mujahideen for four years. Then I got my leg shot up by a helicopter gun-ship and I could not run anymore. Now I cook food for western people. Are you American?"

I nodded yes.

"God bless the C.I.A.," said Abdul Ahad.

His front teeth were small but his canine teeth large, giving him the appearance of having fangs. His face was thin; its length exaggerated by a black beard that poured down his chest.

"We mujahideen fight for ideology and religion," he said. "We are not afraid because if we die we go to heaven. God sees us as good soldiers and he is happy."

He handed me a passport-size photograph of a clean-shaven man with heavy square plastic glasses, short-cropped hair, and a western suit and tie.

"That is me in Kabul, before the war," he said, scanning my face for a reaction. "I was an educated person. I studied up to the 12th class. I read philosophy -- Plato and Securities, do you know them?"

"Socrates?" I asked.

Ignoring my query, Abdul Ahad grabbed a water glass sitting on the table between us. "Tell me, madam, is this glass beautiful because I like it, or do I like it because it is beautiful?"

"In the eye of the beholder," I said.

"That is a riddle of Securities," said Abdul Ahad. "He is my favorite philosopher."

I smiled and closed my book, setting it on the table. "So, Abdul Ahad," I asked. "Why did a philosophical man such as yourself decide to leave Kabul on a certain day? Why not a day earlier, or a day later?"

"You ask a very good question," he said, wiping the perennial tear from his bleary blue eye. "Because of your good question, I will tell you."

Abdul Ahad said that after the Communist take-over in Afghanistan he worked during the day in a government warehouse in Kabul, distributing wheat, oil, seeds and other foodstuffs to the citizenry.

"I could quote from Marx, Lenin, Mao, all of the Communists," he said. "I was considered a great Communist."

By night, however, Abdul Ahad attended meetings of the anti-Communist underground, plotting ways to overthrow the government. One day, a friend came to him for advice on where to plant a bomb.

"I knew exactly what to do," said Abdul Ahad. "Do you know the little three-wheeled carts that sell fruit on the street? They have a little door on the side where you can put things. I told my friend to put his bomb inside one of those carts, cover it with fruit, and leave it at the bus stop near my office. At 8 o'clock each morning all the Russians wait there to take the bus."

A few days later, Abdul Ahad noticed a fruit cart parked near the bus stop. He tried to get in touch with his friend to find out when the bomb was supposed to go off, but the man had disappeared.

"All day long my hands were shaking and my eyes were on that cart," he said. "I knew the bomb had a timer in it, but I didn't know when it would go off. It was very close to where I was distributing food to the people, so I was afraid it would go off while I was there. But by the end of the day, nothing had happened.

"I walked home very slowly that night, waiting to hear the sound of the bomb, but there was only silence. At home, I sat by the window waiting until late in the night to hear the bomb. Still, only silence. Finally I decided to sleep, but I told my wife to listen by the window and wake me if she heard anything. She asked me, 'What have you done now?', but I told her, 'It was not me. My friend planted a bomb'."

At this point, Abdul Ahad stopped his story and eyed me suspiciously.

"I am going to tell you a secret about myself," he said, leaning forward and locking his eyes with mine. "It is something that no other person knows about me."

I stared back at him in silence.

He paused for a moment, then said: "I like my wife too much."

It wasn't the confession I had expected. But I knew that for an Afghan of the Pushtun tribe to admit that he fancies his wife is something akin to heresy. The degree to which Afghans avoid such pledges of affection is evident in the absence of any words for "I love you" in the Pushtun language. The closest they come is to say, "I like you a lot."

I was touched by Abdul Ahad's tenderness toward his wife, by his desire to declare his fondness for her, and by his shyness in so doing.

He went on: "My wife heard nothing that night, so I prepared to go to work the next day. I was still afraid of the bomb, so I went an hour late. When I arrived, dozens of people were lining up for their food, angry and asking where I had been. I told them that I was sick, that they should all go home, but they refused. Then I broke my key on purpose so that I could not open the door to the warehouse, but my supervisor had his key and opened the door. All this time, I was watching the fruit cart, certain that the bomb would explode at any moment.

"As we worked, I became more and more nervous that the bomb would kill me. I decided to ask my supervisor if we could move the distribution point across the street, where there was shade for the people to stand in while they waited in line. He said he didn't care. After we moved, I began to relax and enjoy my work," he said.

"I watched the fruit cart and saw about 40 Russians standing around it waiting for the bus. They were laughing and talking. One man was leaning on the cart, another was sitting on the edge of it," said Abdul Ahad, demonstrating on the arm of his chair the various positions of the Russians around the fruit cart.

"Suddenly, all the trees began to tremble as if there was a strong wind. Then there was a big flash, like a camera bulb, and I saw a car flying through the air," he said, throwing his hands up into the air. "All of Kabul shook in the explosion.

"I watched one of my former friends run by -- a Communist," said Abdul Ahad. "The back of his head was blown off and he was running down the street with his hand cupped under his eye. In the palm of his hand he held his eyeball.

"I walked to the place where the cart had been," he went on. "I looked up at the trees and saw the meat of those Russians hanging from the treetops."

"What did you do then?" I asked.

"I went to prison for nine months. But they never proved anything," said Abdul Ahad, sitting back in his chair. "Prison was terrible, terrible. The Afghan guards beat me every night at 11 o'clock. They wouldn't let me sleep. Sometimes they tied electrical wires around my fingers and sent shocks through my body so that I would fly into the air and all of the blood would drain from my heart. Other times they beat me with a belt, making little holes in my back where the blood would spurt out.

"Finally, after seven months, a strange thing happened," he said. "One day a Russian man called me out of the prison cell. I had not washed for weeks, my beard was long, my hair was greasy. I stunk terribly. The Russian led me into a luxurious office, with beautiful rugs and paintings, books on the walls, and a large sofa. On the sofa sat a young Russian woman wearing a mini-skirt with her legs crossed high. She motioned for me to sit next to her, but I refused.

"I hate to see this part of a woman," Abdul Ahad said, crossing one leg over the other and pointing to his outer thigh. "It was very bad. She put her hands on me and said she was my friend, that the Communists were there to help the Afghans fight the C.I.A., and all these things that I knew were not true. She spoke better Persian than me."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I lied," he said. "I told them I was a Communist, that I loved Lenin and Marx, that I loved their government. I lied and I would lie again because I didn't want to die."

"Did they release you?"

"No, but I escaped two months later," he said. "There were 10 other men in my cell and we bribed a guard to bring us explosive powder, gasoline, and some tin foil. We made a bomb and blew a hole in the prison wall. Then we killed seven guards for their guns and escaped."

Just then my British friend returned to the guest house. Abdul Ahad greeted her, then nodded toward me as he excused himself and headed toward the kitchen. An hour later, he brought us a sumptuous feast of roasted chicken, delicately curried vegetables and steaming rice.

"Your cook is an interesting guy," I said.

"Oh, did he tell you his story?" she asked in surprise.

"He told me a few stories," I said, using a piece of bread to rip chicken flesh from the bone in traditional Afghan style.

"I'm thinking of how he tied his cousin to a tree and gave him 24 hours to renounce Communism or die," she said.

"I didn't hear that one," I said.

"Well, I guess this cousin was a true believer. He refused to lie," she said.

"And?" I asked.

"Abdul Ahad shot him in the head."