

# Jameela

The idea formed somewhere during my *Fajr*, my morning prayer. As I lay on my prayer mat with the tassels softly tickling my nose, the idea came upon me, like softly falling snow. This was part of the reason why I loved prayers- in that peaceful state where nothing could intrude, ideas could blossom like flower buds in spring.

My father was already at work. He worked on the roads, digging and flattening and fixing, for long hours at a time. He always came back with dirt under his nails and little money.

My mother was asleep, of course. She had always slept a lot since the accident. She would get up, do some housework, have some muted conversation and welcome my father back home, then go to bed.

I did not have a *mehrem* with me, and without that male chaperone, I had to stay inconspicuous. I drew my *porani*, my shawl, close around me, and stepped quietly outside the house, my bare feet barely making a sound as I walked briskly across the dusty ground, keeping to the shadows.

At Rashida's door, I paused briefly. How would Rashida take this unexpected visit? I didn't even know her that well. What if she shut the door in my face? What if she shouted, shouted about a disobedient girl without a *mehrem*, walking around the village?

But no. I had to do this. I had to talk to her. To somebody. I hoped she would understand.

A little knock. Footsteps. The familiar rustle of fabric as she put on her burqa, and then the door opened.

I could barely make out her eyes under the mesh screen, let alone tell what expression she had on her face. Was it surprised or welcoming or angry? Somehow it was better this way. Somehow it was better not to know.

"*Assalamu alaikum*" I said, in the universal Islamic greeting. '*Peace be upon You*'.

"*Wa alaikum assalam*" said a muffled but unmistakable voice from under the cloth. '*And upon you*'.

Silence. An expectant silence. She seemed to be waiting for me to say something.

"*Khalaa*, could I talk to you, please?" I said in my most respectful voice. Rashida isn't really my Aunt, but she is my elder and very wise, so I call her by her honorary name.

"Come in, child" she beckoned, and I followed her into the hallway and into a room where traditional Afghan *corbacha* lay, cushions stuffed fat and soft. They looked very inviting.

As soon as I took one, I started talking, explaining, but Rashida held up a hand and I stopped in confusion. A moment later she was back with a plate, *halwa* and *baklava* and all manner of things, all delicious-looking.

“Bitter things are best discussed over plates of sweet things, don’t you find?” she said, and since it was just the two of us girls she took off her burqa.

Her face was a maze of wrinkles, and they somehow seemed to tell a story. Rashida was the oldest in the village, she had seen more than anyone and knew more than anyone, despite the fact that she could not write or read. I admired her for it, her hardiness, her perseverance; she had kept on going, watching those she knew die around her, her husband, her brothers, her sisters, her friends, not letting her disability get in the way.

For Rashida only had one arm. The other was little more than a stump. That was simply the way she had been born.

“You are Jameela” she said. It was not a question; rather a statement which she expected to be answered.

“Yes, I am Jameela. I have come to seek your help, if you wish to give it” I said hesitantly, looking at her. She merely motioned for me to go on.

“I...” I didn’t know what to say. It had all made sense in my head beforehand, but now that I was here, I didn’t know how to start. There was so much to tell her.

“Your face” she said, “that would be a good place to start”.

And as I looked into her kindly brown eyes, it all came back, an overwhelming mass of emotion and memories and thoughts all mashed together and cascading into my mind.

I told her everything. From the beginning. She probably knew much of it anyway, from the village talk, but I told her anyway. I needed to get it out. How my own mother could not even look at me without grief on her face, me, the living reminder of that terrible, terrible day. How my father kissed me and hugged me, but not like he had before the accident. Empty. Meaninglessly. I knew he still loved me, but his eyes could not help drifting to the ruined side of my face, a testimony that told of death and mourning and war. How the girls in the street always tried to be nice, but how under the subdued conversation they always remained distant, and fingers pointed. *Jameela threw the ball*, they said, *Jameela threw it*. I hid my face under my *porani*, but they knew, and they stared. Sleepless nights. Tossing and turning. Finally drifting off to flashes and loud bangs. The doctor’s diagnosis, I could see him walking out the door, *it will never heal*, he had said, *the wound will be with her always*.

*Always.*

*Playing, laughing. Tossing the little ball to and fro. Smiles from ear to ear.*

*The ball soaring over his head. Into the empty field beyond. Running to get it.*

*A flash of light. Red. Pain. Agony...*

*Darkness.*

*Then waking up to white-washed walls and a comfortable bed. Whispered words all around. 'It was a mine' and 'He is dead'. Offers of condolence. The realisation washing over. Screaming. Screaming for my Jaweed. My brother, my only brother, my big, brave, gentle brother.*

"Jameela, when you feel up to it, I would like you to sit up" said a kind voice.

I raised my head and wiped my tears. I felt a little better, for some strange reason. It was like a little poison that had been in my body had finally been extracted out.

But the guilt was still there.

"Jameela. You threw the ball." She said, and I nodded. "But you did not put the mine there. Jameela, let me tell you a story. One day a lion was taking a nap after he had eaten. He was not hungry, but decided he wanted to catch something, just for the sport of it. Soon he spotted a ewe and its lamb. He decided that they would make a tasty snack, and so opened his mouth very, very wide in the hope that the sheep would walk in. After a while, the ewe said to her child 'We must find a place to rest for the night. Do you see such a place?' And the lamb said 'Yes! I see a cave that looks warm and sheltered over near that tree, do you see?' And so the ewe trotted right into the lion's open mouth, the 'cave' the naive little lamb had suggested, and the lion gobbled her up.

"Now, Jameela, who do think is at fault here? Who do think should be punished? The lamb that suggested the lion's mouth would make a good resting spot or the lion that gobbled up the ewe?"

"The lion, of course" I said, and Rashida beamed.

"Exactly, child. Now, see how this story is not so dissimilar from your story? The lamb is completely innocent, and so are you. Intent is stronger than deed, and the little lamb would never have intended for its beloved mother to die. If you took upon all the misfortunes and mistakes of this world, dear one, your shoulders would be hunched under such a heavy burden. Throw these burdens off, Jameela."

I smile at her. Maybe I'll be able to sleep tonight, after a year of being too scared to close my eyes.

Rashida munched on a piece of *helwa*, thinking.

"Do you know, child, what your brother's name means?"

I shook my head.

"Jaweed. It means timeless. Eternal. For humans are truly timeless if somebody loves them. If somebody remembers us, we will forever be immortal, for love can conquer a silly, mundane thing like death. Never forget this, child. Never forget this and your loved ones will be with you always, even if only in your mind. Maybe it is within the *Qadr of Allah*, the Plan of God, that your brother was named Jaweed. Fate, some would say. But know this, child: Allah works in mysterious ways.

"And now, about your face."

"It doesn't look very nice" I mutter.

“Jameela, what is more important, character or beauty? Do not let this scar get in the way of your dreams. It can only be seen at face level, it is all superficial. Instead, look inside and find yourself...For that is where you truly are. In here.”

She patted the left hand side of my chest.

“Do not let this scar be a reminder of death. Rather, let it be a token of survival. Go forth and let it proclaim that you survived against the odds and had the strength to fight back.”

As I looked into her eyes, eyes that had seen more than anyone in the whole village, I suddenly knew why I had decided to come. She was a mentor to me. I admired her. I wanted her to share her wisdom with me. I wanted to talk to her. I *needed* to talk to her.

“If you start believing in yourself, child, your parents will start to believe in you too. As will those girls, and soon nobody will think of you as *The Girl who Threw the Ball*. You will be changed. As long as you believe.”

“And now, child, it is nearly time for Dhuhr, the second prayer of the day. Remember everything I said.”

I stood up. I didn't know what to say. How was I to show my gratitude to this incredible woman, for all she had done? Finally, I said:

“Thank you.”

That was all that was needed. Sometimes the best way to express feelings is with one phrase, pure and simple.

As I was walking out the door, she called me back.

“Jameela! There is one more thing I'd like to tell you”.

“What is it, Khalaa?” I asked.

“I'd like you to know that in Arabic, Jameela means 'Beautiful'. Whenever someone asks 'who are you?' reply:

'I am Jameela'”