

Short Story: Yaqoot

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Abstract:

Yaqoot, the narrator, recalls the story of her life when in her youth she gave up her love for Rahim, a young mujahid because her father wanted to marry her off to the son of a communist friend of his. During the civil war with the Taliban, she lost her husband. When we meet her in the story, Yaqoot has a son who is engaged to be married. On a hot summer day, Yaqoot accidentally runs into Rahim who has survived the civil strife. Rahim, too, has lost his wife. Together they go visit a shrine. Yaqoot gradually comes to honor her once abandoned and now rekindled love after the long hiatus and decides to marry Rahim. This time, Yaqoot's son stands in the way. Her son can't believe that his middle-aged mother is considering remarrying—a taboo in Afghan culture.

Yaqoot gathered the curtain and threw it over the window frame. She stretched her legs in the autumn morning sun and let the fading seasonal warmth reach her bones.

After her morning prayer, she informed Timor of her decision. She then folded her prayer rug quietly and went to her room. By the time Timor sensed the situation, his mother had closed the door behind her.

'If I were in your place, I would also be hiding in the room out of shame, mother!'

'You must think I will bring such dishonor upon my family that I would let a man claim my mother ... God forbid.'

Timor banged the door with his fist so hard that he did not mind it if the door and the walls collapsed over his mother. Yaqoot knew in advance that her son would not be able to stand hearing what she had told him. He had grown up in a home with love and affection, but the street narrative of the city was misogynistic. From the day she decided to spend the rest of her life by Timor she was certain that sooner or later she would lose him to the strange and familiar streets of Kabul. The streets of Kabul devoured



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kind teenage boys and threw them up as violent men instead. Yaqoot had often shown kindness to the children and teenage boys of her neighborhood streets. She had filled their pockets with fistfuls of sweets. But when the same boys hit puberty, they no longer greeted Yaqoot in strict compliance with the etiquette of not addressing strange women. She knew the customs of the men of the city, yet when she put street gossip and Timor's concerns on one side of the scale, and her own desires on the other side, she realized that her side weighed more.

A year has passed since the day when Yaqoot accidentally saw the man of her distant past in the shrunken shade of the long wall of the Kabul University campus. She was heartbroken to see him. Distress and embarrassment, sorrow and humiliation mingled in her eyes. A mist of good and bad memories settled on her face. It was too late to change her path or pretend not to have seen him. Abdu-Rahim's gaze was fixed on her face. He had also recognized her. Yaqoot froze in place.

'I heard you'd left, Abdu-Rahim?'

While staring at Yaqoot, Abdu-Rahim did not say a word. It was as if he was there and then not there. Thunder roared in the distant sky with a flash of lightning—as if the chest of heaven was branded with a sizzling hot iron.

'Greetings Yaqoot. Wherever a person goes, one doesn't get rid of oneself. Nor of the shadow that follows one.'

Abdu-Rahim's voice came as if from inside a well, deep, depressing, tired, and still seared with pain.

Yaqoot glanced along the wall.

'I am on my way to the Ashiqan-o-Arifan shrine.'

'What a coincidence, Timor's mother. I am also headed to the shrine.'

There was a sense of irony and sarcasm in addressing her as 'Timor's mother.'

Yaqoot didn't have much to say. Or did she? But in the depths of the dark past, there was no room for change. She didn't want to stir up anything from a time when his father was a communist and Abdu-Rahim was a *mujahid*.

Love and party affiliation did not blend. Love failed them. The ants carried away her crushed heart to their underground and Yaqoot remained on the ground.

Some thirty years later, what could she say when one could no longer change the fate of those days, not even by the width of a needle's head.

She said, 'I am lonely in a house where all these years the walls have not moved back even an inch.'

He said, 'When one gives up on one's heart, one cannot get along with any wall.'

Yaqoot smiled. Not that she didn't understand the words and remarks of Abdu-Rahim. Not really. She didn't want to start an argument. The time she should have fought, she had given in. Abdu-Rahim was right.

She had heard his story, which had reached every household. They said he held a gun in one hand and a flute in the other. When the rockets were not raining, when the mortars weren't fired, he sat on the roof and played his flute—much like a shepherd lost in the desert and valleys who couldn't find his way back to the village. Yaqoot had never heard the sound of his flute, but the passion of his story had reached her neighborhood, a tale that was colder than winter chill.

Yaqoot removed the remnants of her humble and helpless smile from her lips.

'I've aged—deep up to my knees. It has hit my eyesight as well, and the roots of my hair. You see, affliction is catching up with me!'

Abdu-Rahim stared at the horizon.

'I was heartbroken at the peak of my youth. Being heartbroken is worse than being afflicted.'

Abdu-Rahim bit his lips and remained quiet.

Years of their lives had been spent in war. They had seen each other in the midst of the war and flight, but that was no time for complaining. And then each had followed their destiny in marriage and had their families.

Now the words were boiling at the bottom of Abdu-Rahim's throat.

'I ran up from one hill to the next and from one rock to another. I had legs to run, but not the heart. The night your father was celebrating your wedding with music, I sat on a hilltop like a mountain goat. I dropped my gun under my feet. Bullets were flying around me, but not even one brave communist tried to shoot me in the chest so that the news of my death could ruin your matrimony with another man.

Yaqoot closed her eyes and built a small house behind her eyelids—just her size. That's where she takes refuge when she hears about the wedding night. She stayed quiet—in absolute silence. Hush. She was afraid she would be found in her refuge. She didn't say, 'The wedding pained my heart.'

Abdu-Rahim chuckled, bringing life to his raspy voice.

‘So, you are older. Aging takes a while. It doesn’t happen in a day or two. Look at me. When I put down the gun, I took over my father’s job. Dozens of carpet sellers in the market came and went by my shop every day. Now, with no plans and alone, with this faded beard, it’s not worth it.

Abdu-Rahim walked a bit faster. He wanted to say, ‘Let bygones be bygones.’ He wanted to say, ‘You left me in those days and I forgot about you. Now, you don’t say anything, and I can live with that.’

Except that indifference and carelessness didn’t take away from the joy Abdu-Rahim felt in seeing Yaqoot again. The joy of this meeting by chance became a breeze that wrapped itself around them.

In the middle of the road, Abdu-Rahim pointed to a collapsed building and said,

‘Mother of Timor, this is my cousin’s house. Do you remember Reshad? He once came with us to the Ashiqan-o-Arifan shrine. Remember that? The Khalqis took him away in the middle of the night. He just vanished. He left behind two daughters. They are both in France.’

‘Abdu-Rahim, my name is Yaqoot, lest you haven’t forgotten.’

Abdu-Rahim stopped and turned back toward Yaqoot, who was a step behind him.

‘Yaqoot.’

In saying her name, his eyes teared up and clouded like patches of autumnal clouds. He paused for a moment, to let his pride return to the tone of his voice. He breathed in and out, and pushed his chest forward,

‘I wish I had forgotten. Your name was bread and water to me. May God not forgive your communist father who took away my bread and water and handed it to one of his ilk.’

Soon after, their chance encounter led to a date, an unspoken and unwritten promise. An arrangement that no longer needed a mullah or matrimony.

The first few days Abdu-Rahim’s words had the taste of sarcasm and pain. Yaqoot did not argue with him. Her father had done enough of that in those days, even though she had sent him a message saying, ‘Keep my account separate from my father. My heart is with you, but the shackles around my ankles are in my father’s hand.’

When she had told her father that Abdu-Rahim, son of Haji Qudus, was her suitor, the blood veins in her father’s eyes swelled. He rose up halfway and

screamed, 'That stupid *mujahid*? I will break the fingers of anyone of that ignorant type who dare knock on my door to ask for my daughter's hand. Sooner or later, they will be gone. How dare these microbes want to form blood ties with me?'

When Yaqoot mixed love and politics in her response to her father, her father slapped her on the face. It was the first time he had done so. Yaqoot resisted. She argued with her father, but there was no way out.

Eventually, she stopped arguing. Her love had humiliated her. Her father's kindness had morphed into a slap on her face. She collected her shattered heart and tied it up in the corner of her scarf. Her father then married her off to Ahmad Shah, son of Sadiq Khan.

When Yaqoot and Abdu-Rahim saw each other the next time, she had brought two small apples from home.

Abdu-Rahim asked, 'Do you still write your name on raw apples on trees?' Without much hesitation, he added, 'What did you do with my carved name?'

'I wiped off your name from the door, the wall, the booklets, and the apples. Obviously, I didn't write Ahmad Shah's name in its place. God bless his soul. He got killed without being a *mujahid* or a communist. Ahmad Shah was neither interested in war, nor did he believe in political parties and party games. His happiness was the child we had on the way. He did not want him to grow up without a father.

'He was neither like his father nor like mine. My father was naively happy that he had married off his daughter to someone who was like him. Ahmad Shah neither took a gun and ran to the mountains, nor did he sit behind a desk. He opened a small shop. During the civil war, his shop was hit by rockets, but he survived. On one of the days when the Taliban ruled, he took his bicycle to exchange it for flour, but he never returned. It was late, I thought to myself it must be because he is walking home. It became dark, midnight. One and then two days passed. God knows whether he was hit by a bullet or a rocket'

Abdu-Rahim sprinkled a fistful of millet on the ground. A playful little boy ran among the doves. The doves fluttered, cooed, and rose up to the sky.

Yaqoot said, 'Timor was nine years old.'

Some of the doves had now returned and were pecking at the millet.

Timor said, 'You are fifty-five, sixty years old, mother. How am I to cover my shame in front of my in-laws? Wouldn't they be gossiping that my mother is yearning for hugs and kisses at this old age?'

Yaqoot looked at herself in the alcove mirror.

Timor continued, 'Did you even consider my situation for a second? What if the word gets around among my colleagues and they sarcastically say, "Congratulations on your mother getting married!"'

She smiled at herself in the mirror. She felt calm hearing the words 'getting married.' Ever since she and Abdu-Rahim had been buying stuff for their new house, she felt different—as if the forty pieces of her shattered heart were being mended with small and big stitches.

Her heart no longer fluttered aimlessly in the wind, and cloud, and rain. She also took long walks these days. She looked out the window more often. The big yard of the house no longer looked like an endless desert to her. It now had flowers, it had flowerpots. The food she cooked was tastier. She had ground cumin seeds. She added cardamom to her green tea. Abdu-Rahim brought some almond oil for her hair. She poured a few drops in the palm of her hand and rubbed them into her hair.

Abdu-Rahim told her a story.

'My mother took both my flute and my gun and said, "This same gun robbed you of your Yaqoot." She was right, I lost you when I picked up my father's gun. My brother was also martyred around the same time. I did not want to break my mother's heart anymore. She arranged my marriage to my cousin Rabia.

'Rabia knew the story of you and me very well. She was good and kind. She became my bedfellow but not my wife. I made a family for myself, but I didn't create happiness. In those last years of the Taliban rule, Rabia contracted breast cancer. There was no medicine or doctor in Kabul. We explored every possible remedy but to no avail. The cancer spread to her lungs that took water. The poor woman didn't last more than five months. She wilted before my eyes and passed away. After my wife's death, my daughter got married and went to Austria. Now she visits me once every two years. My two sons worked with the Americans and are now in the United States. They wanted me to join them there. I went and stayed there for a while, but I got homesick. I was stuck between choosing my homeland and my children. It was like having to pick between your two arms. It's painful regardless of whichever arm you lose. There is no difference between a broken right arm and a broken left arm. I missed the neighborhood streets and the house of my homeland. I returned.'

On Monday and Wednesday afternoons, when the sunlight reflected off of the walls and became dimmer, they would meet. Over time, Abdu-Rahim's sarcasm and irony lessened. At the foot of a tree near the Ashuqan-wa-

Arfan shrine, they would sit next to a tree they had often leaned on when they were young. Abdu-Rahim had asked, 'Are we making up?'

Yaqoot cried. Her voice was mixed with the echo of the evening call to prayer. Abdu-Rahim placed her wrinkled hand on his lips and kissed it. The era of the *mujahideen* and communists was over.

The next time they saw each other, Abdu-Rahim smelled of fresh house paint and said, 'I painted the guest room blue, and I painted the living room gray.'

He lowered his head, adding, 'And I painted the bedroom pink.'

Yaqoot pretended not to have heard him, but a smile spread over her lips. Abdu-Rahim had brought her a pink velvet piece. He said, 'We must return to the colors of our days. At this time last year, my house seemed as empty as my soul.'

They bought the curtains together. They replaced the brown seat cushions of the living room with a set of light cream sofas.

Timor cursed himself for not having found out about his mother sooner. 'Curse on this dishonored person I've become. Stupid me.'

Yaqoot pulled out a Vicks topical ointment jar from under the bed mattress and took out a little bit with her fingers. She pushed her hand under her dress and spread it on her chest, to calm her coughing and wheezing. All these years she had taken care of her dry chest with Vaseline. Whenever she was short of breath, whenever she wanted to ease the anger and sadness in her chest, she applied Vaseline.

She decided to give the house to Timor. This way Timor could sell the house and pay off the mortgage on his newly built apartment. There was nothing of value to her in this house. Every brick of this house reminded her of the regrets of her youth and the miseries of the days when she became a widow. This house was the graveyard of her laughter and joys. Ahmad Shah was not a bad person, Yaqoot's father loved him. But living with him was devoid of emotion. He filled her bosom, but never her heart. Yaqoot felt like a resuscitated corpse. 'People build a house and then go to the grave. I am moving from a grave to a house,' she told herself.

Timor knew nothing about the past. The past was like a house that had been demolished over Yaqoot's head. She never uttered a word about her feelings to Timor, neither from the days of her youth nor from her married life. She did not want to bury him under the rubble of her life.

The gentle sun gave a pleasant feeling to her soul and body. On the bright screen of her cell phone, she saw Abdu-Rahim's message. 'Yaqoot dear, did you talk with Timor?'

Timor was now out of breath behind the front door.

'As long as I live, you won't get married!'

In response to Abdu-Rahim, Yaqoot texted back, "I saw a white porcelain china set with roses on it, I'd like us to buy that as well."

Her breathing had softened. Her feet felt warm. The chirping of birds entered the room through the open window. The breeze on the other side of the window was neither cold nor warm.

Yaqoot reached her hand out and touched the soil of the only flower pot in the house.

'I have to change its soil,' she said.

Timor went on 'I will not let you, mother. I will not let you.'

She untied the knot at the corner of her scarf and the bird of her little heart flew off and perched on a tree branch.

Homeira Qaderi is an Afghan writer, activist, and educator. She has written seven books, including a collection of short stories, and an acclaimed novel entitled *Noqra: The Daughter of Kabul River* (Tehran: Rozgar Publishers, 2009). Qaderi received her PhD in Persian literature from Jawaharlal Nehru University, in India. As a lifelong activist and a staunch defender of women's rights, she was awarded the Malalai Medal—Afghanistan's highest civilian honor—for exceptional bravery by the president of Afghanistan. She was a writer in residence at the University of Iowa in 2015. Her first book in English translation, *Dancing in the Mosque: An Afghan Mother's Letter to Her Son* (Harper, 2020), was excerpted by the *New York Times* and chosen by Kirkus Reviews as one of the best nonfiction books of 2020. Before leaving Afghanistan, Qaderi taught at Gharjistan University, in Kabul. Earlier, she worked in two different Afghan government administrations as senior advisor to the Minister of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs, and the Disabled, and before 2021 as senior advisor to the Minister of Education. While at Radcliffe, Qaderi is writing a novel, inspired largely by her own experiences, with a working title *Tell Me Everything*. The novel follows a girl from the Kabul suburbs who is kidnapped during the Soviet-Afghan war and taken to St. Petersburg. After the fall of the Soviet Union, she returns to her hometown, which is under Taliban rule. The novel follows her experiences living under the Taliban rule and through the American invasion and her eventual immigration to Smyrna, Delaware, USA.

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