

“What is a ‘frown’?” he asked, looking up from the book. His friend grimaced. “It has been three years and you still haven’t got Nusrat.”

Aashiq fidgeted. “Look I am trying, I have talked to her a few times, haven’t I? And I gave her that letter. She took it, but hasn’t replied. I am trying, okay?”

“Try harder,” Iqbal said, “Both with her and with your studies. You don’t want to fail again, do you?”

Aashiq felt a sudden surge of gratitude toward his friend. Without Iqbal’s help, he would certainly fail again. He still had a lot of ground to cover, but he had improved. English – that was the problem.

“What is a ‘frown’?” he asked again.

This time Iqbal frowned and pointed at his forehead. “This is a frown.”

Aashiq narrowed his eyes, wrinkled his face, but couldn’t quite frown.

“Why don’t you just forget about her?” he asked Iqbal.

Iqbal’s mood changed. “Forget it? Forget the humiliation I faced? Have you forgotten all that? Her brother—that worm. The fight started in school; he should have kept it there. Why did he have to involve our families? You know, from that day on I decided never to reform again. My father was humiliated in front of the whole *mohalla*. Remember?”

They returned to the English text. Aashiq was preparing for a second try at his matriculation. Outwardly cavalier about his failure (“Some of us have to fail, otherwise who will recognise those who pass?”), he wanted to pass this time. Part of him was still not sure why he had developed an interest in academic matters. With a secure

STORY

Love Story

○ Anwar Owais

family business and only one older brother, he didn’t see the need to acquire a degree. He didn’t need a government job. And education, he was fond of saying, is a Hindu, not a Muslim tradition.

His friend was academically a year senior to him and though only pulling along himself, he had agreed to help his friend with his studies. English, which they were grappling with now, was a major hurdle with Aashiq. He virtually spelt his way phonetically through the rest of the lesson. Then they called a halt for the day. Both of them felt tired.

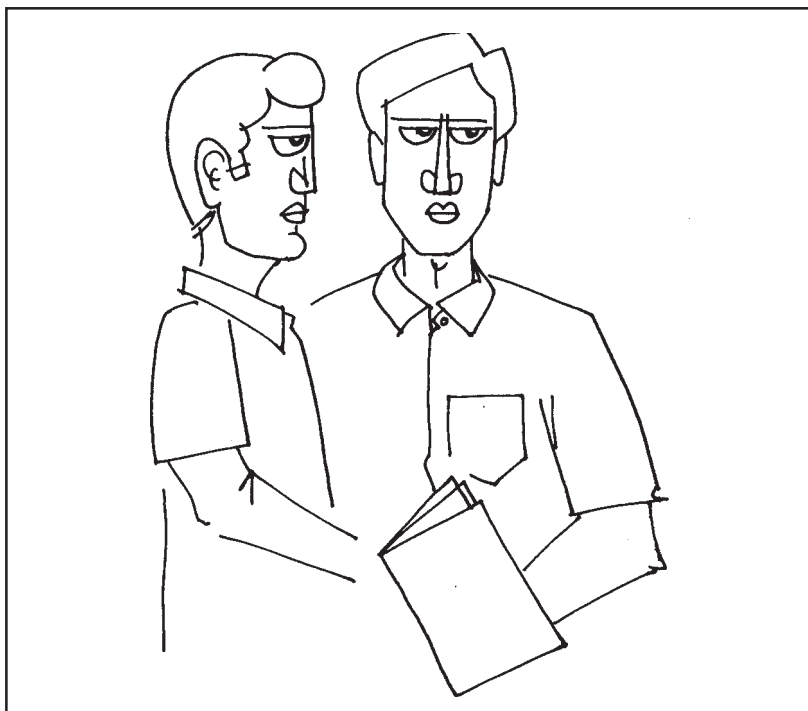
The May sun had risen. The lane outside Aashiq’s house was

beginning to buzz with activity. This was the commercial centre of Srinagar city. The sounds of heavy shutters being pushed up, autorickshaws starting to leave for the day and other street noises began to reach them.

A servant brought breakfast.

The books were pushed aside for the tray. They started sipping the salted tea and munching the tandoor-baked *lawasa*.

“I think we have studied enough for today,” Iqbal said, looking at his watch. “It is eight-thirty now. I want you to go and meet her at the school gate today. Persuade her to meet you on the bund. You are a



ANOOP KAMATH

rich man, why should she keep playing hard to get?"

Aashiq nodded his head absently and said, "Yes, I will see her today."

He was more occupied with thoughts about his meeting with his regular teacher in the evening, who would give him lessons in the other subjects. He was working hard.

They finished breakfast and Iqbal left for his comparatively humbler home in the same locality. It was time for him to go and open his hardware shop in another part of the city. Srinagar began its day.

Aashiq changed into a shirt and pants. First, there was this rendezvous with Nusrat and then some loitering around (since he had failed, he didn't attend school any longer, but was studying privately). After meeting various friends and pulling a few pranks, he would have to put in a few hours of study. A busy schedule indeed.

Having met Nusrat a few times, he felt bad about the whole business, sorry about playing such a trick on her, but his commitment was to his friend. It all started about three years back, when a fight started in the school between Iqbal and Nusrat's brother Yakub. Aashiq had seen Yakub only once before that, and that incident had probably been a curtain-raiser for what was to follow. Yakub, his father, and some others from their locality had come to complain to Iqbal's father about Iqbal's increasingly rowdy behaviour. That was the first time Aashiq had seen Yakub. The second time was when the fight broke out during the football match. Aashiq didn't remember many details of the fight, but the scene in their *mohalla* that evening was still vivid in his memory.

He remembered Yakub's bandaged head and the whispers that there were six stitches

underneath. Quite a few people had gathered outside Iqbal's house, sagely nodding or shaking their heads. Iqbal's father was apologetic. He looked dismayed and humiliated and kept throwing angry glances at his son. Iqbal stood there, his head bowed, only raising it occasionally to look angrily at Yakub and to cast glances at Aashiq's beak-nosed, owl-like face at the periphery of the scene.

The idea of involving Yakub's sister came to him at the precise moment his father's slap landed on his face. Two weeks later, with Aashiq's parents' still frowning their disapproval at their association, the two friends sat resting against the big cylindrical pillows in Aashiq's room. There was tension in the room as Iqbal spoke.

"Look, you are my only real friend," he said.

Aashiq nodded his head.

"You know I never let anyone bully me," Iqbal continued.

Again Aashiq nodded his head. The two had known each other since childhood. True, Iqbal was errant at times and often got into trouble. But their friendship always made Aashiq take his side.

"You say what happened," Iqbal continued his soliloquy. "It started on the football field, he should have kept it there."

Aashiq listened carefully and bit his lip. He decided not to ask him what the first complaint to his father had been about.

"I have never been shamed like this before. The whole *mohalla* was watching. Did you see how the *Dar's* daughters were peeping through the windows?"

Aashiq hadn't noticed, but he continued nodding his head, his round eyes sombre. He suddenly turned his glance at the window and noted to his satisfaction that it was open. He liked proper ventilation.

"We must get even," Iqbal was saying.

Aashiq kept nodding his head, safe in the knowledge that his friend knew that violence was not his forte.

"But I can't challenge him to a fight – that sissy."

Aashiq looked at his friend, more alert now. Was Iqbal coming up with one of his "schemes" again?

"He has a sister," Iqbal said. "Her name is Nusrat."

"So?"

"I want you to *patao* her," Iqbal said, heaving a sigh.

"What?" His eyes, which had narrowed, suddenly widened to large circles.

"Listen, I have thought about it carefully. If you care about me and our friendship, you will help me. Have you forgotten how many times and in how many ways I have helped you?"

"I am sorry," Aashiq said, "but I can't do it."

"Then our friendship is over."

The friendship won. The plot was hatched; Aashiq was to win the girl's love. They would ensure that people knew about their association and then he would dump her. Iqbal's estimate was that the damage could range from a major upheaval in their household to the girl not being able to find a match, depending upon how well Aashiq did.

Three years later, Aashiq had made some progress with her, while Iqbal's anger remained alive.

One day, as Iqbal was leaving after one of their morning English sessions, Aashiq said to him, "I heard some boys have gone across for training. Is it true?"

"Rumours, pure rumours," his friend replied.

They are like a poultry farm, Aashiq decided, as he looked at the crowd of white-clad girls moving towards the school. He

wondered if he had ever seen one alone. All of them were wearing white kurta-pajamas, with the dupattas rendering their chests only big or small mounds. He spotted Nusrat engrossed in conversation with the girl walking next to her. Aashiq had already decided that groups of girls are all the same. But only this one made his pulse quicken. He had talked to her a few times in the last few years. The first time it had been exclusively for his friend's sake, a diabolic interest lurking underneath his nervous exterior. But he felt different about the whole affair with each passing day. Her strange corner-of-the-mouth smile, her charming feminine demeanor affected him. He started to realise that Iqbal's interests were clashing with his. He had once talked to *pir* sahib about his situation in veiled terms, but the old man seemed interested only in *Allah-ish-ke-haqiqi*, as he called it.

Aashiq walked up to the duo, the other girls somehow managing to detach themselves from them.

"Please convey my *salaam* to your father," Aashiq said to Nusrat.

"What are you doing here?" Nusrat asked him and laughed. "Don't you know there has been a bomb blast in Khurram cinema's bathroom?"

As usual, Aashiq felt confused and nervous. "These are just rumours," he blurted out.

"Why do you keep bothering me?" she asked and she and her friend giggled.

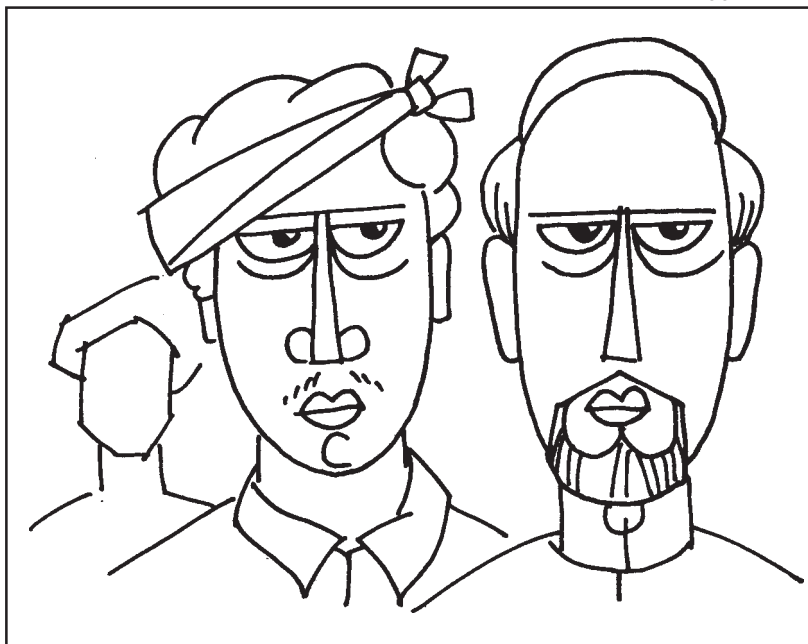
"Why aren't you replying?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" the girl asked, and Aashiq could have sworn her surprise was real.

"The letter—," Aashiq began.

Both the girls laughed.

"Why aren't you studying?"



Nusrat asked him. "We are in the same class now. Do you want to fail again?"

"I am trying—," Aashiq tried again, but the last batch of girls had gone inside and the Gurkha guard closed the gate. Aashiq and Nusrat looked at each other. From the corner of his eye, Aashiq caught sight of the policeman coming towards them. He waved at the guard, looked again at the gate and, kicking pebbles on the road, started to walk home.

Months passed. Aashiq's friendship with Nusrat progressed. He followed the general pattern adopted by others of his ilk in the city he had once called a nostril: accosting her on the road when she was generally accompanied by a friend, she steadfastly pushed back his attempts at more closeness.

"Don't you see films?" he asked her one day.

"No," she replied and Aashiq felt glad his friend wasn't around this time.

"And anyway," she was saying, "films are unIslamic. That is what people are saying."

He looked at her to see if she was serious and she laughed.

"Why do you laugh so much?" he asked her.

"I don't know," she said in reply. "You know, someone came up to me the other day and told me I should wear the *abaaya*."

"Who was he?" Aashiq wanted to know.

"Forget about that," she replied. "Are you studying for the exams?"

"Yes," he replied. "A friend of mine is helping me."

Sobriety touched his face as he thought about Iqbal. He was still angry at Yakub though they didn't discuss him much these days.

Then Nusrat's school came in sight and they bid goodbye to each other. Aashiq turned to go back, then turned around again, walked up to the guard, shook hands with him and was off to join his friends on a fishing trip.

A week later, the cinema houses were closed. Bunkers were erected at every street corner. The "rumours" proved to be frighteningly real. There were killings every day. The violence was

spreading to the villages. Cries of *azaadi* were everywhere. This shouldn't involve me yet, he thought to himself. Then he remembered that he was a year too old for his class.

One day when the family was having lunch, there was a loud bang in the street outside. Their hands stopped in their eating bowls or midway to their mouths.

"By the prophet of God!" Aashiq exclaimed.

A whack on his head resulted.

"You take the prophet's name in vain?" his father asked.

The blast in the street was followed by rat-a-tat sounds and the scurrying of people running for safety. The front door, normally open most of the time, had to be latched these days. They heard urgent knocking. Aashiq's father went to open the door after pushing his sons into a room and latching it from outside.

Three civilians came in. None of them were hurt. They were a little dazed and the clothes of one were spoiled. The family knew one of them. It was Yakub. Outside, the gun-battle continued. Their father forbade the boys to look out of the windows. The family and their three guests sat in the same room, the lunch still spread on the *dastarkhan*. No one felt hungry. Yakub and Aashiq avoided looking at each other. The gunshots became sporadic.

"How is your family?" Aashiq's father said to Yakub.

"They are fine," Yakub replied.

"How is your sister?"

"She is okay," he replied, and concern touched his face.

"Aren't your exams soon?" Aashiq's father asked.

"Yes, in a couple of months."

Aashiq's father looked at Yakub's clothes and told his younger son to give him one of his

Khan-suits to wear. Yakub protested a little and then relented. Together he and Aashiq went to the room where the conspiracy against him, his family and his sister had been hatched. Aashiq felt uneasy and in his nervousness he went near the window and peeped out into the street. The firing had stopped. He saw two bodies lying on the road, a civilian and a soldier. He couldn't make out if they were dead or only injured.

He moved away from the window and they heard the distant sound of an ambulance siren. He walked towards the cupboard and started to take out clothes for Yakub.

"What is this I hear?" Yakub asked him.

"What?" Aashiq tensed up, though this was not totally unexpected.

"That you are giving letters to my sister?" Yakub's tone was hard to label.

Aashiq became nervous.

"Let's go fishing," he told Yakub. "We will talk there."

"No," Yakub replied, "We will talk here, today."

Aashiq handed over the clothes to him. Yakub took them and put them on the bed he was sitting on.

"My intentions are noble," Aashiq said.

"You should know we are decent people," Yakub said.

"Yes, I know," Aashiq replied. "I have talked to her a few times. My parents know everything. It is in the hands of the elders now."

Yakub nodded his head.

"Normally I wouldn't have allowed this," he said, "but I know you. Let the elders talk about the matter."

Then his mood changed and he asked Aashiq, "But what about your friend Iqbal? My sister will have nothing to do with a man who is friendly with a character like that."

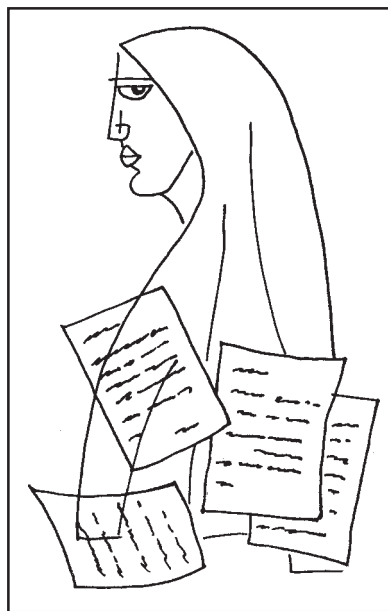
Aashiq stared at the floor.

"Yes, he is my friend," he said, "and has helped me in many ways, I know he has done many wrong things. But I have noticed a lot of change in him. He is more mature now. Anyway, I haven't met him for a few weeks now."

They heard the ambulance siren drawing nearer till it reached the street outside. The siren grew dimmer and almost stopped. Then, it picked up again and as the ambulance began to rush back, it gradually receded and finally silence fell. The three guests who had come in with the storm also left.

"I might come to see your father sometime," Aashiq's father said to Yakub as he was leaving.

Indeed, Aashiq had not seen Iqbal for a long time. He no longer needed special lessons in English, but he missed his friend. Iqbal's parents had come a few times to Aashiq's place, hoping that he might have some knowledge of where their son was. But they knew that such a 'disappearance' could mean anything. Their son might be



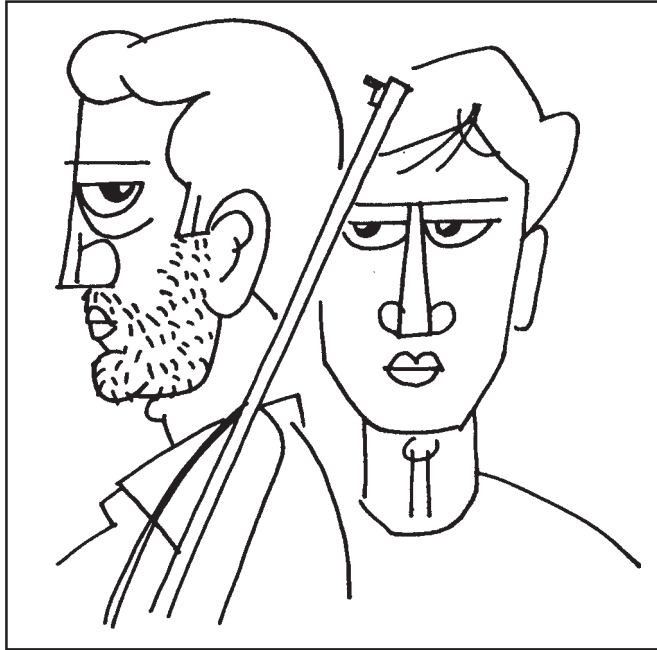
ANOOP KAMATH

in the hands of the Security Forces or might have crossed over to Pakistan to get training in handling arms.

A few days after the Yakub incident, Aashiq was aroused from his sleep by the sound of scratches on his window. It is a *jinn*, he decided immediately. No animal can scratch the window panes on the second story – and that too before sunrise. Since even switching on the table lamp was dangerous at this time of the day, he sat there,

in the darkness expectant and scared. Then the sound came again and Aashiq realised that someone was throwing pebbles at the window. He became wide awake: this was no *jinn*. He stopped muttering the few *aayats* he remembered. Instinct told him not to call out or go near the window. He started to tip-toe downstairs to the door. No one else in the family stirred. Could they really not have been awakened, Aashiq wondered? His misstep on the stairs caused quite a noise in the still darkness. But his was not a midnight knock and people preferred discretion on such occasions.

He let in his friend. Iqbal came in hurriedly and pressed Aashiq's arm. He whispered in Aashiq's ear that there was nothing to worry about. In the darkness, Aashiq held his friend's hand and guided him up the stairs and into his room. Iqbal switched on the table-lamp, brushing away his friend's protests. Making sure the curtains were securely drawn, they sat on the floor, leaning against the heavy pillows. It was much like old times, except now there were no books



between them. Iqbal looked much older now. He had grown a beard and his skin looked bruised and sun-burnt.

A dog barked in the darkness outside. Suppose it had bit Iqbal, Aashiq thought.

"I have joined the *Jihad*," Iqbal announced suddenly.

"How long was the training?" Aashiq asked.

"A few weeks," his friend replied.

"I see," Aashiq said and there was a long pause.

Iqbal looked at Aashiq and said, "Tell my parents I am fine. I may not be able to come home for a few months."

"Okay," Aashiq replied. Then he added, "What about me?"

"Your English is far better now—you worked really hard."

Aashiq's eyes fell on the bulge under his friend's shirt.

"Have you used that yet?" he asked.

Iqbal laughed and said instead, "Stay away from Nusrat. She is a fine girl."

It was Aashiq's turn to smile.

"Of course. You were so stupid."

There was another pause and a coughing sound came from Aashiq's parent's room. Iqbal looked at the curtained window. A nascent redness was beginning to form in the sky outside.

"What about the *Pandits*?" Aashiq said.

"But you can't blame the movement for that."

"I will become a Hindu," Aashiq said simply.

His friend paused and then smiled, "If you want to... Yes, go ahead, do that."

Both got up together and embraced. Aashiq weighed the heaviness of the gun in his hand and they smiled at each other. At the door, Aashiq bid goodbye to his friend and watched him disappear into the clutter of houses right across the street. None of the family commented on Aashiq's red eyes when they gathered for breakfast. Aashiq never saw his friend again.

A few months later the exams came and the results were posted. Both Aashiq and Nusrat passed, she with substantially higher marks than him. This bothered Aashiq, but only a little. ("Our marks added together amount to more than a first position"). Aashiq's parents paid a visit to Nusrat's home and the families became closer. There was talk of their getting engaged soon. The two were now college students, though Nusrat's parents were concerned about her going out every day in the prevailing violence.

The two managed to arrange their first date. The girl wore a blue

kurta-pajama and had a black *dupatta* wrapped around her head and chest. Her face was fair and chiseled. He wore his favourite parrot-green shirt and, at the last moment, had decided against red trousers. Instead, he wore blue jeans.

They were sitting in a not too sophisticated restaurant, where Aashiq and his friends often gathered. At a table near theirs, sat a man smoking a cigarette who kept glancing at them. Aashiq smiled at him the first few times and then began to feel uncomfortable, as did Nusrat.

On their table was the *rogan-josh* and tandoor baked bread Aashiq had ordered.

"We eat this at home," she said.

"Yes, I like it very much," Aashiq said. "Don't you?"

An Urdu paper was lying on the table. Aashiq's eyes fell on an item

in the newspaper. It was the handout of some organisation, asking women to wear the *abaaya*.

"*Phir aaya abaaya*," remarked Aashiq.

But Nusrat's mood had become more serious and she asked him, "What is this people are telling me – that this was some kind of a bet you had with some friend of yours?"

Aashiq showed a rare glimpse of anger and irritation.

"Don't listen to what people tell you." They started to eat.

"Why is your family called 'Apollo'?" Nusrat asked him and took a bite of the bread.

The beloved *rogan josh* in his mouth lost its taste and Aashiq stopped chewing. There was a pause and she waited for an answer.

"That is because of the shape of our old house," he said carefully.

"I see," she said,

They resumed eating. On the

transistor a Kashmiri song was playing:

"Listen, *ishq*, to your own flute
Your music makes me burn

You, *ishq*, are above, you below
You Mansoor, said, 'I am the

Truth.'

And you hurled stones at him.

Listen, *ishq*, to your own flute."

From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a young boy reach the end of the lane and hurl a grenade at the bunker across the road. He grabbed her hand at the same instant the grenade burst.

Nusrat and Aashiq were at a safe distance from the scene before the exchange of fire started. They were holding hands and running. The sounds of gunfire assaulted her ears. Her *dupatta* was awry. He saw her breasts jiggling. "Maybe you *should* wear the *abaaya*," he remarked, as they continued to run. □

Women Bhakt Poets



*"No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.
Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head.
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.
Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,
Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,
Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermilion in my hair parting,
The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.
Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.
Rana, you go to your house - you and I cannot pull together.
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy."*

Mirabai

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