

DEATH OF A NUMBER

(Urdu short story by SHAM KHALID
rendered into English by ASHFAQUE NAQVI)

Parting his hair neatly, his mother kissed him in a fit of love. The father adjusted his turban. “Come”, he said, “be quick”.

They were about to step out when the mother suddenly thought of something. “Hold a minute,” she said, “I’ve to ward off the evil eye.”

She ran to the kitchen, picked up seven chillies with red stalks, some onion and garlic peelings, and rushed back to circle them over his head as a votive offering. Then she went, and threw them into the fire. The father felt disgusted.

Ready to move again, the mother stopped them once more. “How stupid of me,” she said, “I completely forgot to put the black mark.”

She again rushed to the kitchen, blackened her index finger with charcoal, and came back. Gently, she made a mark behind his ear.

The father lost patience. “People have already been to the moon,” he roared, “and you’re still busy with your chillies and black marks.”

Any other time, and the mother would have retorted. But that morning, her kaka was going to school for the first time. She just ignored the remark.

Handing over a small packet, she gave her son a loving pat. “Kaka, eat this sweet bread during the break,” she said, “and, kaka...”

The boy cut in. “Don’t call me kaka, mother,” he protested, “now I’m starting school. Call me by my name, otherwise all the boys will tease me by calling me kaka. My name is Sardar Muhammad Iqbal Khan.”

Hearing that from his son, the father was elated. His chest swelled. “Great, my dear little Sardar, great,” he said proudly. “You’re, a wonder. Now on, you’ll be addressed by your original name.”

The mother’s mind floated several years back. She remembered the day her husband had remarked, “Oh, kaka has consumed two feeders today!” That day on, kaka became allergic to milk. It was only after she procured a charm, and mixed charcoal in the milk that he started taking it again.

As the father and son got into the tonga, the mother said loudly, “Kaka, I mean Sardar Muhammad Iqbal Khan, look after yourself.” Hearing his actual name from the lips of his mother for the first time he felt so proud, so grown-up. As the tonga moved, he felt that the rattle was also in confirmation of his importance.

After admission, he was very happy when he entered the classroom. As he took his seat, the teacher picked up the attendance register, and started calling out the roll numbers. That was the first shock. How did he suddenly become Roll No. 36? Converted from Sardar Muhammad Iqbal Khan to Roll No. 36, he felt so morose. The entire happiness of joining school faded away. When he got back home, he had a long face. The mother was perturbed. “What happened, kaka.. I mean..?”

The son interrupted. “Call me kaka, mother,” he said.

The mother was overjoyed. She thought of the day her kaka was born, and all the stages he had passed through up to that age. The word ‘kaka’ had a special meaning for her, it was a compound of so many feelings.

“You can call me kaka, mother, he went on, “at least, it doesn’t sound artificial. But when the teacher called me Roll No. 36, it was horrifying. After all, I’m not a number in any way.”

The mother gave him a tight hug. She knew of no other way of consoling him.

As time passed, Sardar Muhammad Iqbal Khan kept on transforming into a number. At college, both in the classroom and on the playfield, he found himself tagged to a number. He didn’t like it at all. He vowed to preserve his identity. One day, he said to himself, I’ll make people know me by my name.

During his studies, he read about the importance of words, and the part they could play in life. He discovered that words could help one satisfy his ego and develop his character, but they could also so entwine a person that his entire personality would melt away without his realising it. That way, he would gradually be reduced to a cold, frozen number.

But Sardar Muhammad Iqbal Khan refused to give in. He kept up the struggle of preserving his identity. He shone both at studies and in games, and went on to earn a commission in the Army. But even there, the inevitable number did not leave him. He was now recognized by his personal number, and the number of his regiment. It was as if he had no identity of his own. Day in and day out, it was the same uniform, and the same routine. Was he nothing but a number? Had the human being in him ceased to exist? The questions repeatedly came to his mind.

After the fall of Dhaka, he was converted into another number. Now he was POW No. 310. He had no rank, no status, only a number. He endured everything, even the tortures that followed, but held his ground. In the bargain, he earned a few scars, and developed some permanent ailments.

After repatriation, he couldn’t believe for a long time that he was Sardar Muhammad Iqbal Khan and not POW No. 310. His personality was split into two distinct parts. At times he was the normal Sardar Muhammad Iqbal Khan, and at times he was merely a POW No. 310.

After release from Service, he got a civil appointment. That way, he became a Grade-17 Officer. His mother lost no time in finding him a pretty bride, and very soon he became the father of two lovely children. Now his priorities underwent a change. He thought less about himself, and more about the children. He knew it was he who had to afford them protection, and look after them till they came of age. He also felt that the day was not far when human beings would be working with robots, and their personality would be reduced to a mere number. The very thought sent shivers down his spine.

In course of time, he moved up the ladder, and reached the top. A metal nameplate adorned his door. As he entered, he was invigorated by its shine. However, for all others in the office, he was nothing more than M.D. Grade 20. How unfortunate! He was still ensnared in the web of numbers. He persistently tried to convince himself that it was he who was prime, and everything else was subsidiary. The number beside his name did not mean that his own personality had been obliterated. At that stage, it seemed Sardar Muhammad Iqbal Khan had accepted defeat.

As days went by, his comforts kept increasing. The old car gave way to a new one, and then followed a deluxe model. He was happy his sons were getting the best education, and their future was assured.

One day he felt slightly giddy, and went to his doctor. He diagnosed high blood pressure, and advised complete rest. He was taken aback. And when his wife and children made sure that he stuck to the prescribed diet, he was more upset. They only served him saltless vegetables and sugarless tea. He just couldn't bear that. One always wants to eat what is prohibited, and so did Sardar Muhammad Iqbal Khan. He revolted against the doctor and the family, with the result that he landed in hospital. On there, he was no longer an M.D., nor a Grade-20 Officer, but only a patient of Bed No. 16.

One evening, his condition worsened. He was removed for emergency surgery, the last words he heard on the operation table were: "Doctor, No. 16 is under."

The hospital was bustling with activity. Through with their rounds, the doctors and nurses were discussing the new pay-scales over a cup of tea. There were smiles and laughter. At that moment, a stretcher was pulled out of the operation theatre, and a body transferred to a waiting ambulance. The laughters sub-sided. The doctors looked at each other with questioning eyes. A nurse provided the answer: "Bed 16 died on the operation table."

For a while, there was silence. Soon, laughters erupted again. After all, who mourns the death of a number!