



I Know That Already

There was one and there was none/Except for God there was no one.

There was a young girl in Rasht called Qamar, which as you know is one of the names of the moon, and which suited her, for she was very pretty. God in his infinite wisdom endows everybody with some gift and he had given Qamar good looks but not much sense. She was slow on the uptake, tactless and intrusive; all too often she would comment on people's imperfections or ask them indiscreet questions. Her mother urged her to 'chew her words twice', as they say, before opening her mouth, but she was too feather-brained to pay attention.

Qamar's parents were afraid that she might stay on the shelf, despite her pretty face, and so they married her off to the first suitor who came along. Her husband was a young apprentice tanner, who was decent, good-looking and far from work-shy, and everyone said how lucky Qamar was to have made such a good match.

In those days daughters helped their mothers with their daily chores almost as soon as they could walk, and they learnt cooking and housekeeping in the process, but Qamar was too scatter-

brained to learn the subtleties of preparing ingredients and concocting delectable dishes, and her mother soon gave up on her. As long as Qamar helped with housekeeping and cleaning her mother was content, and she hoped that when her daughter married, her mother-in-law might have better luck with her. As it happened Qamar's husband had lost his mother and he lived with his old father, so the young bride found herself the mistress of the household; she had to cook not only for her husband but for her father-in-law as well.

In those days there were no cookery books or classes; you learnt from your elders as you went along, and if you tasted some new dish and liked it, you asked the person who had cooked it to explain how they'd made it.

The first day of her married life Qamar asked her husband what he would like for his dinner and he tactfully chose something simple.

'A tasty *Ab-gousht* (lamb soup)¹ would be welcome,' he ventured gently. 'Do you know how to make it?'

'Of course I do,' Qamar replied, and having heard that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, she added, 'As a matter of fact I'm a keen cook and I plan to make a variety of delicious meals for you.'

Her husband was pleased and left for work happy, already rubbing his tummy in anticipation of the evening meal.

Qamar of course didn't have a clue how to make *Ab-gousht* or anything else. What to do? They had a neighbour, an elderly widow who had offered to help the young bride if ever she needed anything. So, as soon as her husband left for work Qamar went to her cottage and asked her how to cook an *Ab-gousht*. The widow explained how you put the shank of mutton with an onion, some chickpeas and beans in water and let them cook slowly; how you add the seasoning, salt and pepper and dried lime, and so on. At

every step, Qamar said, 'I know that already, what next?' She did not want to admit that she was an ignoramus, and instead of thanking the old widow for her kind explanations, she pretended that she knew everything already and that she simply wanted to compare their recipes.

Now the old widow was kind and experienced, and she made allowances for the arrogance of youth. Instead of saying to Qamar, 'If you are such a know-all why ask me?', she explained every detail patiently and clearly to make sure that the result would be a successful *Ab-gousht* — not as easy as it seems, I might add — and endear Qamar even more to her husband and her father-in-law. Sure enough Qamar managed to make a reasonable *Ab-gousht* and honour was saved.

For the next couple of days Qamar managed with the rest of the mashed chickpeas and beans, but the third day was Thursday (the eve of the Sabbath) and her husband asked if they could have some saffron rice with *fessenjan* (stew).² Qamar agreed with alacrity, saying that it was one of her specialities.

As soon as her husband left the house she dashed to her neighbour's cottage and asked her how to cook the rice and the stew, and again the old widow explained to her every step and went over it several times to make sure that Qamar understood. Yet after every sentence, Qamar said, 'Oh I know that already. What next?'

This went on for a long time. Every day Qamar asked her husband what he wanted for dinner and he suggested some favourite dish, and as soon as he had gone she knocked on the old widow's door to ask how to make it. But everybody knows that it is not so much the recipe that makes food delicious as the *hand* of the cook; the same dish made by two separate cooks can taste completely different — in one case delectable, in the other bland. Then there is what we call the 'breath of the glass-blower',³ that subtle extra something which cannot be explained. Two glass-makers can set

out to make identical vases and the result will be slightly different. So the dishes that Qamar made were not as good as the old widow's concoctions, far from it, but they were adequate and her husband was content.

Her good neighbour knew about human nature and its twists, and she did not expect gratitude from Qamar, but some acknowledgement of her unstinting helpfulness was surely in order. Also if she did not mind Qamar's thoughtlessness, others would, and sooner or later she would come a cropper. So she decided to teach her young neighbour a lesson.

It was early summer and the season of cherries. Qamar's husband expressed a desire for a sour-cherry pilau, and Qamar went to see the old widow and ask her how to make it. The widow explained how you pitted the sour cherries and cooked them with sugar, mixed the concoction with rice, added the tiny meatballs and steamed the pilau, and after every step Qamar said, 'Oh I know that already. What next?'

At the end the old widow said, 'The last and most important thing, "the glass-blower's breath", is to put a large cow-pat on the rice, cover the pot and let it steam.'

'Oh I know that already,' Qamar replied and without further ado ran to the fields where the cattle grazed, picked a large cow-pat and took it home. She prepared the rice and cherries and before putting the mixture to steam into a pilau, she pressed the cow-pat on top of the rice.

In the evening her husband came home, hungry and looking forward to the cherry pilau. Qamar told him that he would find that she had excelled herself, for she had added a special detail which nobody else knew and which would make the pilau exceptionally tasty.

When she brought the pot in and lifted the cover to serve, a pungent smell of cow-dung rose from the pot: the cow-pat had

melted and seeped through the pot. The rice looked as disgusting as it smelt.

Qamar's husband could not believe his eyes, or his nose, wondering whether his wife had taken leave of her senses. Qamar was forced to explain what had happened and the two of them went to see the old widow.

'Why did you do this to me?' asked the mortified Qamar.

The widow explained that she had been forced to take such a step in order to make Qamar understand the hard way. Otherwise she would go through life being tactless, and the next person who did her a favour without receiving an acknowledgement might hit her much harder than she ever would.

Husband and wife apologized profusely and Qamar promised to mend her ways. The old widow forgave her and promised to be always patient and available to help her.

And so gradually Qamar became a good cook, making her husband and her children content.

You see, it costs nothing to say 'Thank you', but it makes life sweeter.