



fiction

# Grandmother's Wardrobe

by Aali A Rehman

Continued from last week

**S**ECRET compartments! Concealed hiding places in the wardrobe! Unknown, undiscovered for all this time! Who would have thought — Mr Osman paused and laughed at himself a little for the absurd way in which his excitement was increasing. So what if there were a couple of secret compartments in the wardrobe, he tried to tell himself soberly, they just provided more room for Marufa's use, that was all — and even then only if he could figure out how to open them. There was no reason to think that there was anything in the compartments, far less to think that there was anything valuable in them. His parents, his father at least, must have known about them but had probably simply forgotten to tell their children. And they must have forgotten because they had either never used them or had taken everything of value and interest out of them. That was the most likely explanation.

Nevertheless — a smile tugged at the corners of Mr Osman's mouth — why not enjoy this small, childlike pleasure of discovery? Amer and Amena would surely share the pleasure, perhaps even Jalal and Marufa. It would be something to talk about, for a few days at least. He leaned into the wardrobe and looked down at the locks glinting dully inside their niches. He would have to get a locksmith, perhaps even a carpenter to cut them out if the locksmith was unsuccessful. The latter thought was disturbing. No, he decided, he wouldn't be able to bear it if the wardrobe was damaged in any way. Maybe what he should do first is get all the keys in the house, especially all the old ones, and try and see if they fit. He could begin, of course, with the wardrobe keys. There were indeed, right here, a thick bunch of old keys, unused for ages, in a small wickerwork box in one of the wardrobe drawers.

But as Mr Osman poured all the keys out on his bed among the papers and documents he had been sorting, the call to afternoon prayers sounded from the neighborhood mosque and he turned in surprise to look at the clock on the wall. He hadn't realized he had spent so much time on the mystery of the locks. He would have liked to try the keys out immediately before calling Marufa to show her what he had found but, leaving them regretfully on the bed, he went to perform his ablutions in preparation for prayer. Returning to his room before leaving for the Mosque he replaced the little wooden blocks in their cavities and closed the shutters of the wardrobe.

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On his way back from the mosque in the hot, early afternoon sunshine he suddenly decided that he would not tell anyone else, for the moment, of his discovery. Later there would be time enough to tell Marufa, Jalal and the children. For the moment, he would himself make the most of it. Figuring out how to unlock the compartments — or indeed, he thought with a wry smile, finding out if there were any compartments to unlock — would be a few hours better spent than his usual routine of sleeping, eating and walking for exercise. Nevertheless, when Marufa called him for lunch as soon as he re-entered the house and while sitting at the table with her, he was several times tempted to tell her casually that he had found something interesting while cleaning out the wardrobe, something which he would like to show the children when they returned from school. In the end, he didn't, and when Marufa herself asked if he had finished sorting the papers, he answered shortly: "Not yet."

In his room after the meal, he found the floor swept and the papers and other objects that he had piled on the bed neatly put away on his writing table and the empty drawers stacked against one wall. Either Marufa or Milly must have done the tidying up so that he could, as he usually did, take a nap after his meal. Well, he thought, this afternoon there won't be any siesta for him; instead he would solve the mystery of the wardrobe so that he could talk about it at the dinner table in the evening.

He took the bunch of old keys from their wickerwork box and examined them. A number of them, made either of brass or cast iron, looked as if they would fit the locks. These he took out of their rings and put them separately by on the bed. Taking out the wooden blocks from the wardrobe once again, he began to try and fit each key into the lock on the left side of the shelf. Several of the keys went into the keyhole but, when he turned them, they either turned completely round or wouldn't turn at all. Having tried all of them, he put the latter kind, the ones that turned com-

pletely round in the keyhole, back into their box and began to try the others again, slowly and patiently this time. When none of them worked he went to the tool box in the stairwell and returned with a bottle of sewing machine oil, a few drops of which he squeezed into the keyhole. Having waited a while for the oil to spread inside the lock, he tried the keys yet again. Some thirty minutes later he had to admit himself beaten, for the lock resisted all his efforts. He took out the block on the right side of the shelf, oiled the lock, and tried the keys all over again on this one but with as little success.

Lying down on the bed at last to rest his aching back, Mr Osman stared at the ceiling and wondered what he should do. The easiest way to get the locks open would be, of course, to call a locksmith. He even knew one such locksmith, a man of about his own age, who had a roadside stall near the city bazaar and who would know how to go about making a key for these old cabinet locks that were once so common. But he felt reluctant to involve any workmen, outsiders who would be curious about the locks they were helping to open. He didn't



want anyone to share the secret of the wardrobe with himself, not just now at any rate. Another option was to seek Jalal and Marufa's help, but he felt equally reluctant to involve them just now. Yet another was to go out and buy as many likely-looking old keys as he could find at locksmiths' shops in the bazaar. Yes, he decided, this was a better idea. He should try and get the locks open by himself. If he failed and found himself at wit's end, that would be the time to ask for other people's help. He would walk down to the bazaar that evening and look at the keys in roadside locksmiths' stalls; he would probably be able to buy a big bunch at very little expense.

He was about to drift off into his belated nap when he suddenly remembered that he had not tried the wardrobe keys themselves on the locks. He got up and fetched them from his desk-drawer. They were in a small bunch and there were only two among them, the two keys to the lock on the wardrobe shutters, that looked as if they might fit. They were of the right length too, and the first one slid easily into the lock on the left. Breathing a prayer and turning it, he felt, to his surprise for he had not expected success, the levers turn smoothly inside the local and spring back with a faint click. The lock on the right clicked open just as easily. Withdrawing the key, he stepped back from the wardrobe and looked expectantly at the panel on the base. Nothing had happened; nothing had changed.

Fool, he berated himself, did you expect it to slide smoothly open for your benefit like a magic door in an Arabian Night? Something else needed to be done, obviously. But what? He tried gripping the edges of the panel with the tips of his fingers and pulling. But it remained immovable. He inspected the other panels on the sides of the wardrobe. They looked just as firmly set as the one on the front.

Slowly, he sat down on his haunches between the open shutters, elbows on his thighs and both hands on his cheeks, and frowned long and hard into the wardrobe. Was it possible that there was no secret compartment, that the locks were just locks set into the base of the wardrobe? Or were there other locks, levers, handles, somewhere else in the interior that needed to be pulled, pushed or otherwise operated? He had emptied the wardrobe that morning but had seen nothing that could serve the purpose. There was the brass rail at the top left half meant for hangers, but it

was simply a rail, a removable one that rested on wooden brackets that were screwed to the sides of the wardrobe. Apart from the rail, there were the brass handles on the drawers; but they too were just handles attached to the drawers, which were themselves removable. There were also the small deadbolts set into the shutters as well as the glass knob on the front of one shutter. But again, neither appeared to be anything else than what it was.

At length, failing to think of what to look for, he took the key once more and, inserting it into each lock successively, turned it clockwise and counter clockwise several times. As far as he could tell by the feel, the locks were certainly locking and unlocking. But that was all; the panel didn't budge, nothing in the interior or the exterior moved or made a sound. Mr Osman removed the key, looked at it and at each of the locks in turn. He was feeling exasperated and a bad word he had not used since his youth rose involuntarily to his lips, controlling with difficulty the temptation to spit it out loud, he replaced the blocks of wood in their cavities, closed and locked the wardrobe shutters and

replaced the keys in his desk-drawer. Then he lay down on the bed with his arm resting on his forehead and stared at the slowly revolving ceiling-fan above him. In less than a couple of minutes he was asleep.

### IV

He woke with a start to Milly's loud voice in his ear asking him if he wouldn't like his tea now. The wretched child, in spite of repeated admonition, never spoke quietly, and especially not when she was waking someone up from sleep. She had the habit of coming up close and shouting "Grandfather!" as if he was hard of hearing. She seemed to believe that a man of his age and appearance should by rights be stone deaf. Marufa had probably sent her into his room to see whether he had woken up from his nap.

"No, no," he said testily, blinking at her and waving her away, "when do I have tea before prayers? Tell Marufa I'll ask for it when I come back from the mosque."

The girl looked at him for a moment. "But it's almost dark now," she said. And so indeed it was, as a glance through the windows showed him. He must have overslept somehow. And missed his late-afternoon prayers too.

"Well, all right," he told Milly as he sat up on the bed. "Tell Marufa I'll have my tea now." It was almost dark but there was time still to catch the sunset prayers at the mosque.

Mr Osman sat for a while on the bed after Milly had left the room. Strangely, he didn't feel rested though his sleep had been unusually long and deep. His head was aching a little and, as he moved his limbs, the joints felt stiff. Must be the result, he decided, of this morning's activity. Or perhaps simply of oversleeping in the afternoon, something he rarely did. Letting out a sigh for the lost vigour of his earlier years he got off the bed and walked heavy-footed to the bathroom.

That evening he returned from his walk rather earlier than was his custom. He had forgone his planned trip to the bazaar to buy keys since he didn't need them any more, but after his return he had sat for a longer period than usual on the front porch, watching the traffic pass and listening to the talk in the street. The excitement of the afternoon seemed to have drained out of him and he felt listless and more than a little fatigued.

Later, at the dinner table, he debated with himself once again whether he

should tell Jalal, Marufa and the children about the wardrobe. He had almost decided to ease the subject into the dinner-table talk when, emerging from his thoughts, he realized that the meal was being taken in unusual quiet. Amer and Amena, tired perhaps from a long school day, were speaking in monosyllables; Jalal appeared preoccupied and was eating quickly but abstractedly. Marufa was trying to make conversation but around her eyes and mouth there were what Mr Osman knew were lines of strain. Her eyes, as they flickered towards and away from her husband, were dark with concern. Mr Osman sighed inwardly. He knew what the matter was. Jalal had financial problems once again. Mr Osman finished his meal without saying anything and returned to his room.

He decided to say his last prayers of the day at home instead of in congregation at the mosque. An hour later, when Marufa came in, he had just finished but was still seated on the prayer rug that he had spread on the floor in the middle of the room. Marufa did her round of the room quickly and was about to leave when he motioned to her

where in the house, indicating that Marufa was locking up for the night, broke Mr Osman's reverie. He heaved himself up from his chair, lifted the mosquito net, fluffed up his pillow and lay down on the bed before using his bed-switch to turn off the single bulb in his room. Remembering his wife briefly had crowded his mind with memories of her. Resolutely, he tried to shut them out and to relax his body and breathe regularly in an effort to go quickly to sleep.

### V

It must have been some two or three hours later that he woke up. Traffic on the street outside appeared to have ceased, leaving a relative silence in which the chhik-chhik-chhik of the ceiling fan above him sounded quite loud. Moonlight was streaming through the two windows of the room that opened into the inner courtyard of the house. As he turned over on the bed, the shadowed outline of the wardrobe seemed to loom above him. He stared at it for a few seconds through the mosquito net and then, suddenly sleepless, sat up and climbed out of the bed.

What else did the drawer contain? he wondered. Was this cotton there simply as some kind of insulation or packing material or was it, seeing that it was saturated with aromatic substances, supposed to be only a deodorant? He sat down on his haunches, took a pinch of the wool and tugged at it. When only a few shreds of the cotton came away in his fingers, he took a handful and lifted it. The whole mass of the cotton wool came up like a mattress, two or three inches thick. Holding up one end of it at a height of about a foot or so and peering beneath it into the drawer, Mr Osman could not at first comprehend what he was looking at. The drawer appeared to be lined with velvet of a dark colour, with round brass buttons of varying sizes attached to it in straight rows. He pulled the whole mass of the cotton out and, laying it carefully flat on the floor near him, turned back to examine the drawer. Bending over it, he ran the tip of his forefinger along the velvet lining to feel its texture. Then he tried to grip one of the brass buttons. As he did so, the breath caught in his throat and shock ran through his body — buttons? — brass buttons? These weren't buttons! They were gold coins.

There were several rows of them and each coin appeared to be nesting in a round, velvet-lined groove of exactly its own size. Mr Osman sat looking into the drawer in astonishment for a few moments, with his hand inside the drawer and his forefinger resting on one of the coins. Then, using his thumbnail, he eased the coin out of its groove. It came away with some difficulty, so tightly was it wedged into place, and as he picked it up he could see that beneath it in the groove there was another. Apparently, the grooves were deep and there was more than one coin in each.

With the coin he had brought out in the palm of his hand, Mr Osman went to his desk, put on his reading glasses, and examined it under his table lamp. It was a coin all right, and it was gold. It was, in fact, judging from the head engraved on it, a British sovereign of the time of Edward VII. Turning it over in his palm, he made out the words "Sydney Mint" and the date "1903". An Australian sovereign, then, but a sovereign without any doubt. A real, solid gold coin worth — worth what? He had no idea what the current rates for "guinea gold" were.

Returning to the wardrobe, he worked a few more coins out of their grooves and, sitting down at his desk, examined them closely under the lamp. Darker in colour than the first one, these were of different sizes and obviously not sovereigns. The largest was a little less than an inch in diameter, neither as round nor as finely engraved as the sovereign. In the light of the table lamp he could make out Arabic script — or was it Persian? — on the coin's somewhat worn surface. This must be really old, he marvelled. Could these be Mughal coins, what used to be called *ashrafis* in the old days? Possibly. He turned them over and over between his fingers, trying to read the inscriptions and looking for a date, but although he could recognize individual letters, entire words or dates were too difficult for him.

Having pulled the whole drawer out

as much as he dared. Mr Osman grasped the lid-like wooden sheet's beveled outer edge with finger and thumb and lifted it. The whole sheet came free, revealing, underneath it, a tightly packed mass of what looked like purple coloured cotton wool. As he removed the lid and leaned it carefully against the wall, his nostrils prickled to a smell, an exceedingly strong fragrance, that suddenly made his head swim — it was a fragrance with which he was familiar, a fragrance the vestiges of which had, some twelve or sixteen hours earlier, sent memories of all those long past years chasing each other in his mind. He turned and gazed in wonder and a sudden realization at the purple cotton wool — it was cotton wool — that was packed into the drawer. Here was the origin of the odour that he had for so long associated with Mother's wardrobe, the smell of *attar*, and *brocade* and *neem* leaves... and something more... yes, of course, sandalwood. The smell that rose up from the drawer was of old Amber *attar*, overlaid with sandalwood. But there were other smells mixed in it too... camphor? — perhaps, though it was difficult to think of camphor lasting such a long time. The smell rapidly filled the room and was blown about by the ceiling fan. Mr Osman passed his hand over the bluish-purple, coarse cotton wool. So this is why, he thought, the old wardrobe had never ceased to give off this ancient odour; although the cotton wool that was permeated with it was packed tightly into this drawer, almost sealed into it, the smell had constantly escaped into the interior of the wardrobe and had refused to be expelled.

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To be continued