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The Street Dog's Dowry

Karissa Wehri

Winner of the 2022 John Little Fiction Scholarship

The Creative Writing Scholarship Committee had this to say on Karissa Wehri's "The Street Dog's Dowry": *"In the opening sentence, Karissa Wehri's 'The Street Dog's Dowry' invites the reader into a meditation on generosity, compassion, and the ties that bind us. Her story is an object lesson in patience, consideration, and kindness—and she crafts it in a timeless and wise narrative voice."*

There was a man who lived as a date farmer and goat herder on the coast of the Euphrates, and his name was Omkar. He lived in a small village where the people were neither rich nor poor, but lived comfortably by their modest earnings. The only needful creature was a starving, wretched street dog, but no one really cared for that. No, all the people were happy with their standings, and this was all that mattered to them. Omkar himself had little worries about anything, but spent his days tending the date palms and caring for the goats alongside his father.

Every morning the two would rise early to ensure that their goats were well, and Omkar would bring them down to the Euphrates for their morning drink. When they returned for their breakfast, his grandmother would be waiting with coffee and *khubz*, a traditional flatbread, served with dateberry jam on a large plate. There Omkar and his father would eat quietly, listening to Grandmother as she waved her arms and told

another tale of her run-ins with the local street dog. It often made excursions into the open doors of people's homes and had stolen many a *khubz* from unassuming grannies. Each of her stories would end with a dramatic kick to the poor dog and her happily stroking her silver bracelet; it had been given to her by Grandfather, many years before.

"But at least the *djinn* shall never steal my bracelet!" Grandmother would always say with contentment; "His love shall be kept here forever, *Inshallah*, if that dog never gets an eye for worthwhile things!"

Omkar's day would continue with his inspecting the date palms and herding the goats this way and that and various little tasks in between. He was often sent to fetch water, a task usually reserved for the women, but his grandmother had grown too old for travel and he did not feel ashamed at the responsibility. He only needed to fetch two pails of water for his family: one for drink, and the other for boiling and cleaning.

One day Omkar was fetching water at the well in the middle of town, and when he arrived, he encountered the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was hefting four water pails with a pole slung across her shoulders, and he was so smitten that he at once took and lifted the pole himself. She thanked him profusely, and as soon as Omkar had brought the water to her home, he promised her that every day he would meet her at the well, if only to share a walk with her. Indeed, he was faithful with his promise: even on the hottest and windiest of days, he would be waiting at the well for Aasma, and on his shoulders he would heft the forbidding load of four water pails. Yet he hardly noticed the weight; all he could think of during these walks was the beauty of the woman and the many lovely things she said. After many weeks of this, Omkar finally asked if he could be shown to Aasma's father. She was elated to oblige and could not help but to laugh with joy when he asked her for her hand.

Her father thanked him for helping his daughter fetch the water, then asked if he could speak with her in private. Her father, a Mullah, was a progressive man for his time; he asked his daughter if she would like to marry the man, whereas most fathers would immediately ask

about the suitor's trade and wealth. She said yes, she would very much like to marry him, and she looked so happy that the Mullah's heart glowed. He called Omkar in and told him the good news. Omkar could have danced for joy, but he restrained himself and asked in earnest, "How much shall the dowry be?"

The father took his daughter's hand and looked at her with a smile, and answered, "No dowry at all is needed. I only wish to see you make my Aasma happy, and you have already accomplished this!"

Omkar thanked the old man for such generosity but insisted that a dowry be made. The Mullah persisted in refusing a price until, after such dramatic offers as a hundred silver dinars, Omkar finally sputtered, "I shall give you a dowry of a thousand gold dinars, for a woman so lovely deserves nothing less!"

Aasma gasped and looked at her father, who merely gazed at Omkar while stroking his long beard, as all wise men are supposed to do. After a thoughtful pause, he answered, "If this is what shall make you feel deserved, then I accept the dowry-arrangement. You shall not have my daughter's hand until it is paid."

Omkar thanked him many times and ran back home. He was breathless when he ran into the room where his father and grandmother sat cross-legged, discussing a recent occurrence.

"Father, Grandmother," Omkar happily cried, "I have been arranged to marry the beautiful daughter of a village Mullah!"

"Hah!" Grandmother cried and fell backward.

"What is to be the dowry, then?" asked Father, who always made up for Grandma's drama with unwavering calm. Omkar paused, folded his arms, and began to blush.

"I," he began, but then found he couldn't say it, he felt so foolish. Only at the insistent urging of Grandmother did he finally state the price of a thousand gold dinars. The poor woman shrieked and gripped a protective hand over her silver bracelet, and even his father looked dumbfounded.

"You foolish, foolish boy!" Grandmother scolded. "All this, and after my finest chop of lamb-meat has been stolen by that dog! Your

poor father has to deal with that dog, and now with *this*, also. And where is the water? You have left your pails behind? Ah, Merciful Allah, have mercy! I shall never make my soup.”

Omkar received quite the scolding, and his father and grandmother were angry for a time; but when he brought Aasma along for a family visit, they took well to the kind woman and became forgiving of the high dowry-cost. Without much more than a sigh, Grandmother decided that the dates were ripe for drying and took to the daunting task of the dozens of date palms. Omkar and his father harvested while Grandmother dried and canned them. It took several months for the dates to be prepared for the market, and there was such a large supply that Omkar decided to sell at the neighboring villages as well. While he traveled about the country, Father remained home with Grandmother to sell his own stock. He was gone for over a month, and they both worried for him all the while.

When Omkar returned with five hundred gold dinars, his family was ecstatic and had a large dinner prepared of one of their finest goats. They celebrated and enjoyed one another's company for the rest of the night, not thinking of the dowry at all for the first time in many days. It was only when the morning came that Omkar finally asked Father as to how many dinars he had earned. It was with a sigh that he answered four-hundred. He knew that this would fall them yet short of their goal. Omkar could not help but feel depressed at this gap as well, but he only had it in his heart to thank his father for all the help he had been. That day he chose to be left alone and wandered about the date palms, gazing forlornly at their barrenness. He did not know what he was to do to achieve the final one hundred dinars. He could not sell the goats, he knew, for they were his father's most coveted possession and were only kept to sustain the family. He also missed Aasma very dearly, but could not stand to face her, knowing he would have to tell her that he had failed to earn the dowry money. How foolish he had been, to name such an impossible price! But Aasma was such a wonderful woman, and her father was so wise and generous. How could he have named anything less?

Father and Grandmother watched as he sulked amongst the barren date palms, and they felt terrible for him. Perhaps he had been foolish, but he had certainly tried his hardest and worked the most of them both. He deserved more, they decided together. And so, while Omkar pondered his situation with a sad heart, his father and grandmother plotted a way to earn the last of the dowry.

At nightfall Omkar returned to his home, and he was surprised to find both his father and grandmother missing. He searched the sitting-room, the two sleeping-rooms, and the cooking area, but they were nowhere to be seen. In a panic he ran on the beaten road toward the village and was much relieved to find the missing persons on the return journey. He hugged his grandmother and breathlessly scolded, "Now, what are you doing so far from home? You know that you are too old for these long walks."

"I was collecting the last of the dowry," Grandmother answered, and with the biggest smile she presented the satchel of a hundred dinars.

"What?" Omkar lost his balance, but his father steadied him with a strong hand and explained how Grandmother had sold her silver bracelet for fifty dinars, and how he had sold two of their finest billy goats for twenty-five dinars each. Omkar was speechless, overcome with both happiness and dismay.

"The finest goats?" he managed to stammer, and, "But, Grandfather gave you that bracelet!"

"His love is still with me, even without the bracelet," Grandmother smiled ruefully. "And now that we have the dowry, you may have your life-partner yourself. That is all your grandfather would have wanted."

Omkar was so excited that he nearly left right then for Aasma's, but his father laughed and restrained him, saying that such a thing was best left for the morning. So the three of them returned home, content but especially relieved that the whole ordeal was done with. 'Tomorrow, I shall be married to Aasma!' Omkar could not stop thinking, and he gathered all the thousand dinars into a single satchel and placed it in a basket in the kitchen. Grandmother usually stored meat in the basket,

but it was empty and seemed an adequate hiding spot for the night. And so Omkar hid away the dowry, informed Father and Grandmother of its location, and fell to a peaceful rest for the first time in months.

In the morning Omkar set immediately to Aasma's home, and he put his father and grandmother to the task of preparing a great meal of cooked goat, sauced with the last of the remaining dates, as a tribute to how they succeeded the dowry payment. When he set into the village for the first time in many weeks, he found Aasma as he had first seen her: She was at the well in the middle of town, attempting to heft the formidable load of four water pails.

"Aasma!" he cried, and she nearly tumbled the pole from her shoulders when she saw him. She ran to him with a shout of glee and they embraced in a fit of laughter and joy. 'This is my wife!' Omkar realized, and he was filled with that much more happiness. He explained to her the months of labor that he and his family had gone through, and Aasma's face lit up when she learned that the dowry was prepared.

"I shall bring you and your father home with me," he grinned; "I have a meal awaiting your arrival, and then we shall have our wedding!"

Once again he carried the water pails himself to Aasma's home, and he relayed the news to her father. The Mullah merely nodded at this, and consented to go to Omkar's home for dinner and for the collection of the dowry. Omkar had a happy heart as he brought Aasma and the Mullah to his home for the very first time, though they were not yet arrived when his poor grandmother appeared on the road, struggling towards them at a most hurried pace.

"Grandmother!" Omkar scolded. "Why are you moving at such a pace, and all by yourself? Where is Father?"

But she could hardly breathe, and he had to support her for several minutes before she managed to stutter, "The... the *street dog* got the dowry! Your father has left in search of it. Oh, Omkar!" and she broke down in tears.

Omkar knew that he was insensitive to question her further, but his heart began to race and his face flushed up with anger.

"How did that wretched thing find it?!" he cried.

"It could smell the cooking goat," Grandmother sniffled; "It ran into the kitchen and took what was in the basket, and it was the dowry-satchel!"

All the while the Mullah listened to the story with a stoic face, though Aasma searched wildly for a solution, she wanted so much to marry the man.

"The dog! I know where it often lingers!" she gasped, and the Mullah gave her a grim look but said nothing.

"Take me to the place, once I have brought my grandmother safely home," Omkar demanded, and sometime later they were back in the village.

Aasma led Omkar and the Mullah into a narrow passageway between a slaughterhouse and a small mosque, which ended at the back-entrance of somebody's home. Just outside the entrance lay the street dog, its head resting solemnly on its paws. Omkar couldn't help but flinch at the sight of it; the ridges of its spine were plainly visible, and its ribs looked as if they would heave through the skin. It was horribly skinny, but he managed to adjust to the sight when he thought of the dowry it had taken.

"You, pathetic mongrel!" Omkar cried at the creature, wielding a baton used to discipline his goats. "What have you done with my dowry?"

Aasma gasped and tried to reach out to him, but the Mullah laid a restraining hand on her shoulder. They watched as Omkar cornered the shivering dog.

"Hah!" he shouted with impatience; "It is not here! What have you done with the dinars, wretched thing!" and he began swiping the baton toward the starving animal with a terrible shout.

The frightened dog took past the man, disappearing around the corner of the mosque. Omkar began to pursue it but stopped at the sight of the Mullah. Fury shone from the old man's face, and Omkar begged forgiveness for losing the long-sought dowry. However, the Mullah turned his back and walked stiffly down the alley before he could speak. Aasma wordlessly followed her father, and they both disappeared

into the back-entrance door. It was then that Omkar realized that this passageway led to their home. He thought of following but decided against it, the anger of the Mullah had seemed so great. Omkar felt terribly ashamed at having lost so much hard work and so much gold to a loathsome *street dog*, but suffered himself to return home. He would return the next day to Aasma's father, he decided, and would do his best to create another arrangement to earn his daughter's hand.

Omkar rose very early the next morning, he was so eager to speak with the Mullah. He washed his face and wore his best frocks and headed straight away to the village before his father or grandmother had awakened. When he walked into the Mullah's home, the Mullah was just finishing his morning prayer on a rug facing the far-off Mecca. Omkar waited impatiently for him to finish, then proceeded to beg the Mullah to be merciful, and allow another arrangement to be made. The Mullah silently listened as Omkar explained that he had nothing with which to earn more dinars, and that he would perform any service as to take the lovely Aasma in marriage. For a long while the Mullah did not speak. Omkar began to lose hope for any future, and wished that he had dealt with the street dog long before he had fallen in love. But just as he sighed to himself and began to leave, the Mullah spoke, "Help my daughter to fetch water, and I shall consider your proposal."

Though surprised at being assigned with such a simple task, Omkar was thrilled at the renewed possibility of marrying Aasma. That morning he accompanied Aasma to the well, for she much enjoyed the walk, and he easily carried the four pales on his strong shoulders. On returning he asked the Mullah for his daughter's hand, but the Mullah waved him off and stated, "Help her fetch water this afternoon, and I shall consider your proposal."

And so Omkar returned again in the afternoon and carried the four pales to the well and back. His proposal, however, received the same answer: he should fetch water for the Mullah's daughter the next morning, and his proposal would be considered. This continued on for many days, with Omkar fetching pails and pails of water only for his proposal to be reconsidered and reconsidered. Several weeks had

passed before he finally had enough of the nonsense. He was walking alongside Aasma with the four pails of water slung across his shoulders, and they felt heavier than they ever had to his dreary heart. Aasma often gave him looks of pity but never said anything. When the Mullah's home came in sight, Omkar thought of how many times he had repeated this process to no avail, and he knew with certainty that he would only be turned away once more. With such thoughts in his head, Omkar gave a morose cry and fell to his knees. The pole fell from his shoulders and the water spilled forth onto the pathway. Aasma shouted with fright and ran to fetch her father, and the Mullah came onto the scene with an unhurried step. Omkar laid collapsed on the ground, and could not find it in himself to stand. He was defeated.

The Mullah gazed calmly at the water soaking into the dirt and kneeled himself down. He slid the buckets to their proper places on the carrying-pole and lifted it onto his own feeble shoulders. He stood tall and stared down on Omkar.

"Stand up," the Mullah commanded.

There was such power in the old man's voice, Omkar forced himself to his feet despite his heavy heart. He looked sheepishly into the Mullah's eyes, feeling quite pathetic. He tried to take the heavy buckets from the man's shoulders, but the Mullah refused his reach.

"No," he said, "You shall only follow me." And the old man started back toward the well, with Aasma and poor Omkar following behind.

He filled the four buckets to the brim with water, and Omkar insisted earnestly that he be allowed to carry such a load, but the Mullah swiped away his hand. He turned to Omkar with a surprising rigour, and scolded him with religious passion, "You foolish, foolish boy! Repeatedly I have sent you to fetch four pails of water, and you have never once felt compelled to question as to *why* I send you to fetch such an amount! Look at me and look at my daughter-- tell me *why*, exactly, we would need more than two pails; why would we need more than drinking water, more than water for boiling and cleaning!"

Omkar stared helplessly at the man, for the question had indeed never struck him, and he had no answer at all for it. After a pause, the

angry Mullah continued, "No wonder you have given up like this; after all that extraordinary work to earn a thousand gold dinars, and it has taken but four pails of water to defeat you! It is because you do not understand the deeper purpose, the truer meaning of it all. Come with me, and I shall show you the great balancing-act of the world."

The Mullah hefted the pole across his little shoulders, two pails of water on each side, and began his way home. Omkar followed, perplexed. The Mullah walked all the way to his sitting-room before placing his heavy load to the floor. He commanded Omkar to seat himself. Omkar did so without hesitation. The old man then took the carrying-pole and slid it from the bucket handles, placing it against a nearby wall. He stood so that two buckets flanked each of his feet and spread his hands above them. Omkar watched the Mullah with fascination and listened to his words with awe. And what he said was this:

"There are four pails here: All hold water, though each of their purposes differs completely from the others. These," and he waved his left palm over a pair, "are meant for the matters of this Earth. One is for drinking, and the other is for cleaning the house and boiling the eggs. But these," and he gestured with his right palm, "are collected for matters of the Spiritual Realm. One is meant for my daily ablutions in worship of Allah. And may you guess, now, what the other is for?"

Again Omkar could find no answer, but said, "I do not know. You have water for drinking, water for cleaning and boiling, and water for worship. What is the fourth pail for?"

"I shall show you," the Mullah replied. He took and set the three pails on a table, leaving the last alone on the floor. He left to the back-entrance of his home, opened the door, and gave a shrill whistle into the empty passageway between the mosque and slaughterhouse. Omkar was stumped. What was this about?

And then the street dog appeared from around the corner, its scrawny tail waving happily as it answered the Mullah's call. It ran past the man into the home. Omkar was angered at this and began to rise, to chase off the troublesome creature. Aasma, who sat next to him, laid a

firm hand on his shoulder and gave a meaningful look, and so he forced himself to sit. But what was a lowly mongrel doing in the house of a Mullah?

The dog cantered into the sitting-room and froze when it saw Omkar. Its body went stiff, and it tensed to flee when the Mullah gently stroked its cowering head. Thus comforted, the creature slunk slowly toward the pail, eyeing Omkar all the while. He merely watched the dog, willing himself not to move at all. After a tense minute, the dog finally began its morning drink. It happily lapped up the water, wagging its tail as the Mullah stroked it.

"The fourth pail," gently whispered the Mullah, "is for charity."

When the dog finished its drink, it licked the Mullah's hand and cantered out the backdoor, its tail wagging behind an emaciated body. Omkar closely watched the old man and the sadness that came over his face. He shook his head and whistled a solemn tune.

"I wish there was more that I could do. We have such little meat for ourselves."

Omkar pondered this while the downcast Mullah took the remaining water of the pail and dumped it outside. Without waiting for another proposal, the old man spoke, "Help my daughter fetch water this afternoon, and I shall consider your proposal." With that, the man disappeared into an adjacent room, and Aasma showed Omkar to the door.

For hours Omkar pondered what the Mullah had said, and he thought regretfully of the poor dog he had nearly abused. When afternoon came, Omkar arrived as faithfully as ever to Aasma's assistance. He took the four pails and slung their weight across his shoulders and fetched the water with more efficiency than ever before. Aasma's father looked surprised by the speed with which he returned with the water, and stroked his beard thoughtfully, as the first time they had met.

"And I assume, now, you shall ask for my daughter's hand?" the Mullah spoke, his voice slow and contemplating. Omkar set the pails before the man's feet, stood tall, and shook his head. For the first time,

he had not come to make the marriage proposal.

"I come for the dog," he stated, and met the man's gaze with a stern look. The Mullah regarded him carefully, then walked to his backdoor. He whistled, and the skinny dog came running.

Again the animal was frightened to see Omkar. Omkar smiled softly at the creature and knelt himself to his knees.

"Come," he whispered softly, "I have a gift for you," and from his cloak he pulled a leg of goat meat. Aasma glanced at her father with joy, and a smile lifted the old man's beard.

The street dog studied the meat for a minute, then looked at Omkar. He waited patiently, and finally the dog accepted the gift of goat meat and loped happily from the house. A strange sense of contentment filled the young man's heart, and he smiled as he watched the creature leave. A profound moment of silence filled the household.

"And when you go home tonight," the Mullah finally spoke, "what shall you find there?"

Omkar thought for a moment, then looked at the Mullah with a smile. "I shall find my father, who has lost the best of his goats for such a fool as I, and who nonetheless teaches me important lessons with his constant companionship. I shall find my grandmother, who lost her dearest silver bracelet that was given to her by her husband, just that I may have a love of my own. These things are what I shall find."

The Mullah nodded, and said, "You see, every day you are given charities and until now you have failed to realize them. That is what happens when one hefts four pails of water every day, without ever considering what they *mean*. They mean religion and charity outside of one's own desires."

"I now know what they mean," Omkar smiled, "and I shall continue to fetch the water for you, if just that the dog may have sustenance!"

And with a shout of joy, the Mullah embraced the surprised Omkar and clapped him on the back. "You have done it," he cried with glee; "You have finally done it!"

"What?" asked Omkar, quite shaken. "What have I done?"

"You have finally given the proper dowry, the goat meat to the

street dog, and you shall marry my daughter! For that single act of compassion is worth more than a thousand gold dinars.”

And so Omkar was married to Aasma, and for many years they lived together in peace and prosperity. But, one year, their fortune would change: A drought gripped the land, and it was so great that all the date palms shriveled and refused to bear fruit, and every single one of the goats died of thirst. The Euphrates itself began to dry up. Water became so rare that the cruel representatives of the village began to charge for every pail of water that was taken from the well, though Omkar and his family now had little at all to give. They were forced to move to town, and with their date palms shriveled and their goats all dead, they had nothing with which to purchase much water. Omkar had to sell many of his finest clothes for just a few dinars-- enough to purchase a single pail of water. And this was the last of their money. Omkar, his father, his grandmother, Aasma, and the Mullah decided that they would all share the last of the drinking water and pray for divine mercy.

Omkar, as the young man, was the last to receive the pail. There was not much water left, and a feeling of self-pity took hold of him. Then he remembered the street dog, who lived just as hungry and thirsty day-to-day as Omkar himself now lived. ‘And to think that I had been so cruel as to resent it, poor creature!’ he thought scornfully. His self-pity became sadness for the dog, which he had not seen since the drought began. For several months they had been unable to give any water to the creature, they were so thirsty themselves. Now, as Omkar stared at the remaining pool of water that was meant for himself, he came to a decision. While everyone else was busy, he crept out the backdoor of his father-in-law's house and set the pail outside. Though his lips were dry and his throat was sore, Omkar gave his longest, shrillest whistle. He awaited the appearance of the dog for a long while, but it never came. His heart became heavy, and a horrible feeling overtook him. ‘The dog has died of thirst, for I have only quenched my own throat!’ Omkar thought to himself, and he would have cried had he not been the man of his household. He went back inside and spent the rest of the day

comforting his poor grandmother, who was convinced that they would die of thirst. Omkar said his best words, yet even the Mullah looked forlorn. The night came, and Omkar forced himself to fall asleep while holding Aasma in his arms. She cried to herself, though no tears ever left her eyes.

The next morning, Omkar remembered that he had left the water pail outside. Though it was of little use anymore, he went to retrieve it anyway. When he stepped out the backdoor, however, he found the pail had disappeared: and, in its place, a satchel of a thousand gold dinars was left.

From the Editors: *"The Street Dog's Dowry" was first published in Floodwall volume 2, issue 4 (fall 2021). The editors are grateful to Karissa for permission to reprint the story in recognition of her selection as this year's John Little Fiction Scholarship recipient.*

Karissa Wehri was born and raised in Grand Forks, North Dakota. She has always been interested in other cultures and moral viewpoints, and she uses her writing to explore these themes. She plans to use UND's Study Abroad program to expand her knowledge for even more stories!