A Boy and His Cat

By ANJUM NAIM

Asghar, my youngest son, is the most precious stone in the treasure trove of my memories. He was quite handsome, well-behaved and studious. One day, when he was in the fifth standard, he brought home a feeble, black kitten with two white stripes on her neck.

Though I reserved my opinion, the whole household gave a red-carpet welcome to Asghar's cat. My wife named her Muezza, after Prophet Muhammad's beloved cat. She used to narrate a story about how the Prophet's cat once went to sleep on part of his robe. It was time to go for prayer. But he did not want to disturb the sleeping cat. So he cut off his sleeve, took the rest of the robe and went out without waking her.

To Asghar, Muezza was his sweetheart, and neither could bear each other's absence. She watched for Asghar to return from school and rolled around purring at his feet when he arrived. Asghar would take her to his room and tell her about his day. We would hear either Asghar's laugh or Muezza's mewing.

1999 was the most horrible year of my life. Asghar started experiencing pain in his knees in July, which worsened quickly before doctors could diagnose the disease. By August, he had lost his voice and ability to swallow food. However, he kept trying to smile, so that we did not lose hope.

Muezza remained with him day in and day out as he cried and sobbed in his bed. Her presence, in fact, helped him bear the agony. After a long and painful round of medical tests, doctors declared he had Wilson Disease, storage of too much copper in the body tissues, which is curable only at the initial stage.

We were shattered. Our son was inching toward his end. My wife, Shahnaz, nursed him the whole day and it was my turn at night. We had fixed duty hours. Muezza, however, never left Asghar except for a few minutes at a time during the heart-rending four months. She would sit silently, gazing at Asghar's face. She understood, perhaps, that her presence consoled him.

In the month of holy Ramadan, on December 17, 1999, when we were about to break our fast, Asghar left for the heavenly abode. During the funeral rites, Muezza remained beside his body. Whenever we looked at each other, she mewed once or twice. Her voice seemed to be full of melancholy. I saw her moving with the funeral procession up to a distance. The night of the burial was the most horrible for me. It was similar to all the nights during the previous months—except that, though Shahnaz, I and Muezza were there as usual, Muezza's friend was no longer in his bed.