

Rebirth

BY SALMA HUSSAIN

You stand in your favorite party outfit. A bottle-green chiffon sari with a hand-embroidered gold-thread orange pallu that you throw over your shoulder, feet encased in attractive, matching slippers, and a neat middle part in your hair that boldly betrays your very comfortable middle-classness. The reflection in the mirror reveals who you are, both to yourself and the world. Discloses that your husband maintained a good post: in the banking sector, no less. Your teardrop pearl earrings, a ten-year anniversary gift, set you apart and above as the wife of the Head Manager of loans and financing for the National Trust of Uttar Pradesh. The residual tummy fat from three successive pregnancies informs of your motherhood and three grown children: son, Raju, and daughters, Maya and Neethu.

Your first child made you crave juicy, messy okra dishes cooked with onions, tomatoes and your naniji's masala. In your dedication to an auspicious birth, you counted six almonds every night into a cup of water. In the mornings, you peeled the skin off the almonds, saved the skin for a facial paste, and ate the six clean white seeds within. Every night before bed, you ate a palm-full of fennel seeds before you lay to sleep. You also had a constant, insatiable appetite for a mid-day snack of mango pieces swimming in a bowl of milk. Your first born, Raju also cost you worries that made you perform early-morning pujas and plead with your husband to take you on three pilgrimages to Hajji Ali's tomb where you handed out warm chappatis wrapped in clean cotton fabric to the beggars lining the entrance. In the last month of your pregnancy, you made sure to give some amount of money to every young, hungry child who crossed your path with an open palm. In the end, Raju's was an emergency Caesarean birth, forcing the doctors to slice your very skin to get at the son below. The subsequent labours of your daughters came with their own complications and traumas. You have worked hard to block out the memory of your time in the maternity wards, where either one of the mothers in your room perished, or her baby, and in one case both.

But there are other stories. Happier stories. The stretch marks on your abdomen, thighs, breasts, and the soft wrinkles around the corners of your eyes and around your supple lips tell of afternoons with sandalwood paste, "naughty" poetry, petty gossip, and laughter with your best friend since second class, Mala Sardosh.

Your delicate fingers and weak fingernails speak of trusted servants in both your husband's house, and before that, in your father's. There is a wild, unschooled intelligence in your eyes: lines from books you have read mingle freely with newspaper accounts, political events, and personal tragedies and comedies. You have survived Rajiv and Indira, and will survive Sonia too, if her party comes to a successful election. Gandhian philosophy still swells your heart with

A blood vessel in your husband's heart ruptured

pride, but you look to Bangladesh's revolutionary philanthropic experiments as inspiration and hope for your own country. Like every other Indian teenager in the seventies, you wore pants with flares and tight blouses with brightly colored flowers. In the eighties, you drank wine and brandy at company parties, and even sported a smoking habit, but like other women from your circle you returned to conservatism in the nineties. You take one last look at the mirror. Head to toe, you are what you have been brought up to become. And yes, you have heard stories and read them, and perhaps made up your own mind about women who find themselves in the position you are now in. But knowing the stories has not made a single rice grain of a difference: you have not prepared for anything, simply because women of your class don't stoop to prepare. How cheap to assume you are not worthy enough to always have your cares and concerns looked after by someone else!

A blood vessel in your husband's heart ruptured seven months ago. The first month you could not help speculating that it must have been all the ghee in the dishes he had over the years. Those dishes of food, those very ones, of which he licked the plates squeaky clean with his fingers, then proceeded to lick his fingers, methodically, starting at his pinkie and ending at his huge, hooked thumb. Licking and slurping over and over, in such overt satisfaction over such ordinary meals that the sight gave you headaches and made you snap at the children. You would storm into their bedrooms and scold them sharply: What's all this putter-shutter in this room? Enough! Sometimes they were making too much noise: laughing loudly, or the TV was turned up too high, but more times than you care to admit they were playing with each other peacefully, Maya and Neethu caught frozen cradling little dolls in their little arms, looking up at you with big, worried eyes.

The second month after your husband's death, you forget all this and accuse all the sweets shared and consumed over the years for your husband's failed artery. Your husband, the dessert aficionado, positioned sticky gulabjamuns in his mouth, without bothering to cut the brown sugary balls in half, and had no concern about the accompanying syrup rolling down the corners of his lips. He ate all the oddly-shaped jalebis without pause. At the end of the night, his sticky fingers would rise to hold out your jacket or purse, which you then had to slap away, each and every time. Three weddings you both hosted. Three glorious, happy weddings in cool nights under three separate starry skies.

Raju rode into his marriage ceremony on a friend's horse with his friends flinging white mooti petals into the dark night while Rafi's Baharon Phool Bersao crackled loudly through the speakers. When the melodies from the shehnai burst into the night, it prompted tears from everyone old enough to know love or to lose it, and your husband fumbled for your hand, settling on grasping your wrist and you both sighed heavily, fighting back your own tears. Young children in their frilliest dresses and shiniest suits played hide and seek among the long buffet tables. Friends and relatives you had not seen in years and years and years wanted to catch up on everything, but more so desired an itinerary of your tailors, caterers, and flower suppliers. You took their questions as a personal sign of success. You were so nervous that night that large sweat stains bloomed under the armholes of your sari blouse. And so, you ended up giving away the sari blouse to a young servant girl who got married the next year. Or no, that was Neethu's wedding. All the worry and sweat in that expensive aubergine sari blouse was for Neethu's wedding, and for the foolish boy with the melancholic eyes who composed childish love verses for your daughter. Sometimes, he recited those verses over the telephone, and other times, he delicately penned them onto translucent slips of onion-skin diagramming paper that floated out of Neethu's medical textbooks when you flipped through the pages. He with the melancholic eyes who threatened to ruin everything with his presence, but nothing, nothing at all was ruined at the wedding. Only the relationship with you and Neethu. Women of a certain class do not marry for love, silly Neethu. You did not cajole or coerce her into the arranged marriage. You simply stated the facts for a good life. She lives such a comfortable life now and it was you who arranged everything so well, but you spoiled that child too much and now she can only believe herself happy when she is yearning. Nothing at all was ruined the night of Neethu's wedding.

What did eventually ruin everything was a clogged blood vessel.

Because of a clogged vessel, you moved in with Raju. Rather, Raju moved in with you: into your husband's home, that is now his. His wife, who you chose for her pretty eyes, her shiny long hair, and her reputation as a docile shy thing, desired the master bedroom right away.

As a girl whose prettiness sprang from her slimness, you watched her weighing herself like one possessed: she weighed herself four, maybe five times a day. Watched all the new Bollywood movies: tasteless, scandalous trash. This wife, that you chose... You could not help but mutter criticisms under your breath.

seven month's ago.

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He had an important post just like his father.

Raju was a good son. He had an important post just like his father. And yet.

Although he had lived the first twenty-seven years of his life with you, in your house, with you as the person, the very person to have borne him into this world, neither you nor him ever understood the other. His presence into your world—the late-night crying, the bassinet, the baby closet, the rituals, the clothes, the toys and the smelly diapers—so quickly and irretrievably dissipated the carefully crafted magic and tenderness between your husband and yourself. Raju at sixteen became privy to your husband's worries and thoughts and future plans in a way that you never were. Discussions about the economy, sporting events, and the government that no one bothered to ask you about. How jealous you had been over the years for nothing bigger than the son being the father's best friend in a way that the wife can never be. Regardless, you had always taken more than adequate care of the boy.

Because you had not prepared. Because you had not an inkling, not an inkling whatsoever where one action leads to another. Because one never knows how one is so easily led down certain paths, one day you said yes. Yes, you'll move out of the guestroom and take the room by the servant's quarters. Oh, not in the servant's quarters, just next to. On another day, you started eating less. Still on another, you gave away all your colored saris. Wore plain white saris, some of a nicer fabric, one sprinkled with faint gray-colored poppies, but never anything more scandalously joyful than that. You didn't want to be a burden, you really didn't. But you couldn't deny that you must have been: look at you, look at you! You were cantankerous. Forgetful. Never a kind word for anyone. You pinched the grandchildren when you meant to caress them. You criticized when you meant to compliment. Your smiles turned into sneers. You burped in the middle of meals. You retold familiar stories, repeated the same unfunny jokes within the same day. You pointed out your pains and fevers and complained of fatigue, arthritis, sore joints, weak knees, the quality of the food, the colors on the walls, the weight gained, the cleavage shown, the smiles withheld. You couldn't climb up stairs, didn't like the cold, had to go frequently during car rides, made inappropriate comments about the furniture in guests' homes. You call this a sofa? Chee, chee, it's so hard, it must be very old. You made everyone around you uncomfortable. You grew old.

And yet. And yet.

One day you carried the little mirror hidden within the folds of your sari from your son's washroom into your bedroom, slipped the key into the lock, and placed a chair under the handle. You went to the back of your closet and shook out the one colored sari you had kept hidden in a damp cardboard box. You coiled the vibrant fabric around your waist, let it hang luxuriantly over your lower body, and spent an hour folding and refolding with shaking hands the six pleats ever so perfectly. You brushed your hair out and arranged it stylishly, dabbing the stray ends with a little coconut oil. Slipped the ten-year anniversary earrings into your ear holes. You put on your favorite party suit and let your mind wander. No Ram Ram chants for you today. Today you will allow distractions and tangential thoughts of your future.

Today you will take a bus to your daughter's house. It will not be easy, this trip across the city, but a chatty college girl you meet at the stop will take you all the way there, listen to your entire life's story, and dump you at the doorway of your daughter's home.

You will meet your daughter, Maya at the door and start by listing the skills you possess: I can arrange flowers in a vase, give orders to the cooks for appropriate dishes based on occasion and guests, I can make small talk with important people, I know what type of sari to wear when, which song suits which occasion. I know decorum and ceremony. The history of this nation is within me, you will scream. You will demand first, then end by pleading. Tears and snot will run down your cheeks and chin.

Maya's hands will twist and turn in a dizzying pattern. It will give you a headache. You will not be able to make out anything of what is said. You will wonder if you should give her one tight perfect slap, but you are no longer young and your hands will fail you. You know that it worked when she was a child and a teenager but it would not work now. Your head will throb and burn. You cannot understand her. But you understand everything when she makes a big show of taking out money from the rabbit-shaped jar on top of the fridge. It will be money for your bus fare, for your return trip. Your daughter will hurry you out of the front entrance by the words: Quick. Quick, before my husband comes home and is a witness to this disgrace.

On the outside steps looking in, you will realize that the conversation lasted only fifteen minutes, and the bus ride is two hours.

That will be when faint memories of large temples with high ceilings will start to materialize. Corners to hide into, steps to ascend or descend. Names and images will flutter into your mind like transparent moths. A name, a word, a memory will beckon. Vrindavan. Close to Krishna's birthplace. You can go there. The city of ten thousand widows. You will go there. Other women do. Widows do. Thousands upon thousands of widows go to Vrindavan to achieve the moksha that is denied them in this life. They enter the various temples, or find a spot on the steps that lead down to the purifying Ganga. Groups of you swoop down and fight tooth and nail for scraps of food or coins flung by passing sadhus, strangers and other clients. Some of you are virgins: your older husbands dying before the marriage could be consummated. It is the largest gathering of virgin widows anywhere. Most of you come from a middle-class background. You have been kicked out, or you have left homes in the middle of the night. You have threatened and cajoled the servants in your house into driving you, conned taxi drivers, and swindled rickshaw drivers. Some of you are older, with grown children. But here some of you will beget more children. It is the largest gathering of prostitute widows anywhere. You will have children, raise children, sell children, and train them for all manner of trade and chicanery. Upon Vrindavan. Upon this holy site so close to where Radha and Krishna lived in love without children. You will do the same as all the others. Disappear into the city of rebirth. Set yourself ablaze in a new life.