

I'll Never be Young Again

My orange, *sakhra*-stained lips do not go unnoticed by the boy with the green eyes. As he peers over the cone-shaped mounds of spices on the stall, he drops the bag he is filling. Fiery-red paprika explodes into the wind.

I glimpse the pale skin on the inside of his wrist, the cleft in his chin and how the wind tugs at his embroidered *topi* on hair the colour of *gur*. Embarrassed, I giggle and walk past.

A flutter of butterflies takes off inside me. I'm unable to answer him when he asks me my name. He shouts his own after me: Rafeeq.

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Little do I know that our trysts in the park over the next few weeks are on borrowed time. My future will arrive a month later: a man more than twice my age, a stranger from overseas, welcomed into the house like a *maharajah*. A cup of sweet tea, a plate of samosas and a handshake, and the deal will be done – he will claim me for his own.

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I am seventeen years old: a child myself. Yet, here I am, holding my darling Tahir, kissing his wrinkled forehead, shushing his kitten cries. I cannot stop crying: exulting in the new life I have created while mourning the loss of the old. The girl is no more; I am a woman now.

He waits outside. He has taken the day off from the mill to bring me to the hospital. The nurse asks me something, but the only word I understand is “Father”. I shake my head. I want this time with my baby on my own. She nods and leaves.

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I needn't have worried. As days turn to weeks, and weeks turn to months, I care for Tahir all by myself. His father works endless shifts at the mill. I spend the days cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, my fingers red like radishes from washing the little one's nappies.

He returns in the evenings, tired and irritable. After tickling the little one's chin, he washes and does his *namaaz*, before expecting his dinner: a fresh curry each evening, always with two chapattis and a bowl of sliced cucumber. He soon realises I am no cook. How could I be, when I was just sixteen when he stole me away?

Reluctantly, he shows me how to brown the onions, when to add the spices, how to tell the *masala* is done by the oil separating, and a hundred other things.

His hard shell softens as the lessons go on. I no longer flinch when he walks into the room. Not because I enjoy being in his presence – how can I forgive such a villainous man,

who has taken me away from everything I have known? But I don't have the strength to hold onto my anger.

Two months later, I have mastered the final dish: *sath range chawal*, the jewel-coloured rice making my heart sing. I feed a few grains to Tahir, who smacks his lips. It is the last time his father spends any time in the kitchen. After that, he only comes in to drop off a glass or to ask how long it will be for dinner. The sadness I feel at his absence puzzles me. Then I realise: he is all I have in this cold, colourless country – apart from my precious boy.

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The first time we lay together on the metal-framed bed, I turned to the wall, knees drawn and arms crossed. I remained fully clothed. My heart beat so loudly I barely heard the creaking springs as he joined me. The mattress dipped and I rolled into the middle. I stopped breathing. As his hands undressed me, I lost myself in the world of my beloved films. Closing my eyes, I imagined *bulbuls* flying overhead, with sweeping, romantic music all around, as Rafeeq serenaded me on a mountaintop. The camera zoomed in as we held each other and our faces moved closer, before fading to black.

Afterwards, as he turned over and began to snore, I cried into the crook of my arm. I wept for myself, for the feelings of disgust that crawled through me. I cried for Ammi, whose betrayal had sent me off with this man.

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Some days, the pain of what I have left behind becomes too much. As sudden as a downpour in the monsoon, a sheet of blackness engulfs me. Day turns into night. No stars, no moon, just an all-consuming darkness. The only thing I can do is to take to my bed.

Sleep eludes me, my mind a scramble of thoughts. Like in an old cine-film, flickering images flash in and out. But instead of songs and dancing, ripples of light tear through the black, making me scrunch my eyes even tighter. Violins screech in my ear. I hold my head in my hands, praying for Him to release me, biting the pillow to muffle my screams.

In the morning, as he snores beside me, I drag myself downstairs to wash. A dull ache pounds in my head. Even with the lights on, the house remains dark. As I stand at the sink, I look over my shoulder in case I glimpse one of the *churails* that Ammi threatened me with when I was naughty. I tell myself to stop being silly, yet through the rumble of the geyser I hear its scaly claws as it walks up behind me on feet that point forever backwards.

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As the years pass, we have four more children. They are all my *chandh ka tukras*, my pieces of the moon. Without them, I would have long faded like the rose I wore in my hair when I

left everything I knew and loved. The woman I have become would no longer recognise the girl I was then, left forever on that once-familiar shore.

With the older children at school, I fill the day with a hundred and one chores, but the clock insists it is not yet noon. There are another six hours before their father returns from the mill.

As I scrub his filthy shirt collars in the sink, I hum a tune – a song I used to hear at the bazaar. What were the words? I sing louder, but they remain out of reach. The more I try to remember, the more the tune threatens to disappear along with them.

An overwhelming sense of helplessness washes over me. I grip the sink to stop myself from collapsing. The water is the colour of the river back home when it swells and breaks the banks. The walls close in around me and I fling out my arms to stop them crushing me.

Crying out, I stagger upstairs. The rain outside has turned everything in the bedroom grey. My heart races. I flick on the bare bulb. I grab Shaheena from her cot, hugging her to me. She smells of baby powder and rusks. Groggy with sleep, she screams to be put down.

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I rifle through my wardrobe, needing the desperate comfort of colour. I settle for an electric-blue *salwaar kameez* topped off with a mango-coloured *dupatta*. I dab rouge on my cheeks and line my eyes with *surma*. I add a beauty spot above my upper lip. Slowly, the pounding of blood in my ears lessens and the darkness retreats.

I work my way through my carrier bag of make-up. Scarlet eye-shadow the colour of pomegranate seeds, smeared generously on each eyelid. Plum-coloured lipstick applied in two quick strokes. I shore up my arms with glass bangles, reassured by their weight.

I return downstairs, my steps steady and my head held high.

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While I wait for the iron to heat, the clouds outside part. Shafts of sunlight pierce through the net curtains, cutting through the gloom. Dust specks tumble and whirl in the rays. I join in their dance, swaying in and out of the light, delighting as it caresses my body.

Closing my eyes, I journey back through distance and time, bridging the thousands of miles between Here and There. I feel the heat on my face and breathe in the sun-kissed dust.

I hum the melody of the song from earlier. Transistor radios on the stalls fill in the words I'd struggled to recall:

*“... those days that glowed with the reflection of the Beloved's face,
that hour of meeting, that would bloom like a flower ...”*

A gust of wind flaps the calico walls of the bazaar. I race through the narrow alleyways until I come across the familiar towers of paprika, turmeric, cumin and coriander. My heart threatens to burst from my chest, a caged *bulbul* set free.

There – at last – the colours that have haunted my dreams all these months: the cardamom green of his eyes and the cinnamon brown of his hair.

“Rafeeq, I am come home.”

For a few moments, I am young again – the girl I once was.