

Rabbits

by

Sana Mohsin

My elder sister adopted a rabbit one day. A stark white thing with eerie red eyes, its ears appeared far too big for its body. One of her house-help, the cook who had been with the family since her mother-in-law got married, had brought the rabbit from his village to eventually turn into some sort of stew. Baaji took one look at it and scooped it into her arms.

Baaji says I shouldn't call it, it. That the rabbit is a girl, just like her and me, that I should call it Rani just like everyone else. Raat ki Rani officially, but Rani for short.

Despite Baaji's insistence, something in me held me back from cooing over the animal like her. Its long, thin body didn't allow it to be cute, and the face itself appeared as if permanently scrunched. Realistically, Rani is ugly. It wouldn't be anyone's first pick from among other rabbits.

Rani looks a lot like Baaji. Or, vice versa. The same pinched expression, the same hollowness, as if the bones are too heavy for her body. I realise that this is a particularly cruel observation, but it doesn't stop it from being the truth. The effect of the passage of time on my elder sister is not unlike the action of tearing petals from a flower. Gradually, the entirety of the flower's spirit is lost.

*

When Baaji got married nearly seven years ago our family was saved. That's how Ami phrased it, at least. That our family was saved by this particular blessing from Allah mian, that our kismet would only rise from here on out.

I was still in school when Fahad and his family came over with a rishta, preparing for my O Levels so the whole process didn't really interest me. All I really remember is the light pink of Baaji's three-piece suit, the colour so similar to the Rangoon creeper growing in the cracks of our terrace. That was my first thought when we were presented with the fabric at Liberty, with Baaji holding it gently between her fingertips, as if it were a second skin.

It had rained the night of their wedding; a sticky, humid downpour that was uncharacteristically out of season, so they had to shift all of the outdoor arrangements to an unsuitable hall. In the professional photographs Baaji's face shines with sweat from the lack of air conditioning, beads of perspiration so visible that instead of a smile there is a grimace of disgust in each one.

Fahad and Baaji were classmates in university, both majoring in business studies. Fahad had been poised to take over his family's plastic business since birth, while Baaji wanted to work in a bank. She isn't allowed to work anymore, of course. That's not how it's done in families of their status after all.

They weren't even friends, Baaji said when Fahad informed her he's sending a rishta. The first time they interacted was on a group project in third year, where Fahad's stare made Baaji's skin prickle. She didn't tell me until after the wedding that a peculiar feeling settles in her gut whenever she's near him. During their wedding everything had seemed so romantic. My cousins and I gushed about how Fahad had been silently in love with Baaji this entire time, with noble intentions, and how opposites attracted.

When Fahad enters a room he demands every eye on him. When Baaji enters a room she wants to blend into the wall.

Their first year of marriage was amicable. Fahad brought a single rose for Baaji every day when he returned from work, which she would accept with a simple thank you. Her mother-in-law would present Baaji to the women in her committee parties and they would be impressed by her manners and thick hair. Her father-in-law liked that she would help with the cleaning despite the abundance of house help.

The troubles started when two years passed and Baaji still wasn't pregnant. Fahad refused time and time again to visit the clinic, lest the problem lies with him. Her mother-in-law loved to remind her that many of her friends' daughters-in-law fell

pregnant in the first year of marriage. Her father-in-law eventually stopped singing Baaji's praises, choosing instead to stay silent as she scooped salan into his plate at meal times.

Understandably, our parents were concerned as well. Ami began to visit different shrines in the city—praying at Bibi Pak Daman, Data Darbar, Madho Lal Hussein. Abu dreaded every call from Baaji's father-in-law, his greeting of 'Imran sahab' so weighty that it echoed through the room, Abu's neck bending almost immediately at the declaration. Baaji told me repeatedly that this isn't something I should concern myself with, that I had my plate full with A levels and university admissions already. At the time of her wedding, she told me I could apply anywhere I wanted when the time came, and she would cover all of the fees. That didn't seem possible anymore as a permanent scowl had nested itself onto Fahad's face, only deepening when he looked at Baaji. Like a wilting flower, Baaji bends into herself.

*

My sister lies even in her diary. For Eid one year Baaji's in-laws hosted a dinner, catered by a famous restaurant. Fairy lights littered the stairs, and Baaji wore a suit like the row of blooming jacaranda trees in the lawn. In the middle of heaping my plate with chocolate mousse my period started, and Baaji directed me to her and Fahad's room lest I embarrass myself with blood all over my carefully pressed shalwar. In the closet, behind designer bags and multiple pieces of luggage, were a few

open packets of sanitary napkins. I reached into one, and instead of the familiar flimsy feel of a pad was the thick cover of a notebook. My sister's diary, carefully concealed.

Not that she needs to hide it. Baaji can't even confront the truth of her situation in her innermost thoughts. Her diary detailed an idyllic life: her daily chores, conversations with Fahad, her charity work, and her visits home. All while concealing the taunts, the abuse she suffered on an almost daily basis. One entry explained that she had forgone dinner that day because she wasn't feeling well, even though I had overheard Baaji telling Ami that it was Fahad who hadn't allowed her to eat that day after she had upset him over something or the other.

It was only at that moment that I realized the depth of my elder sister's misery.

*

Baaji thinks Rani might get lonely all by herself. No matter that Baaji spends every waking moment with the rabbit, ignoring much of her daily life. Still, she wants Rani to have a rabbit partner of her own, so that she doesn't get bored being around humans all of the time.

The cook is asked to bring another rabbit when he goes to his village, a male this time. Perhaps because it's not intended for consumption this rabbit fares a bit

better in appearance, with black ears and wide black spots surrounding its eyes.

Fittingly, Baaji names it Din ka Raja, or just Raja.

Baaji had already called over workers to build a small hutch in Fahad's expansive lawn for Rani. The workers spent two days constructing a wooden structure with a metal fence surrounding it. Baaji didn't want it to feel suffocated, so the fence occupies a significant portion of the lawn.

Fahad wasn't really happy about any of this but at least he didn't care enough yet to have her stop. He called it her new hobby. Other things he calls her include cold, unfeeling, ungrateful, an utter waste of space, barren, a woman I can divorce at any given moment. He blamed their infertility on her, saying that her frigidness didn't let him get it up. Our Khala, the one who lives in Islamabad, had seen him with a woman in a Chinese restaurant, and he was brazen enough to come up to her and say salam.

*

Rani and Raja get along so swimmingly that in just a few weeks the rabbit enclosure is filled with six of their babies. Everyone is overjoyed at the tiny balls of fluff, including Fahad who occasionally walks out to look over and appraise them. Baaji's mother-in-law comments that she can't believe an animal gave birth before her daughter-in-law did.

After their birth, it's as if Baaji has become a new person. The first time I visit her house to see the babies she wears the widest smile I haven't seen in some years now. Gone is the pinched expression, the heavy brow, the dull skin. I tell her so, and she chooses to ignore me.

She introduces each one, marvelling over how big they've gotten in just a few day's time, and fusses over Rani who lays horizontally on one side. Ami asks who Baaji'll give the babies to when they've grown older, and she frowns. She'll keep them, obviously. Why would she need to give them away?

But what does Fahad think about her decision?

Baaji turns away and mutters that she'll ask when the opportunity arises. In the meantime, she'll have to see about expanding the hutch, and the metal fence.

Baaji is straightforward with her naming: aik, dou, teen, chaar, panch, cheh. Not that there's much difference in them with their white fur and red eyes, as if Rani has just multiplied itself.

Identical pairs of beady eyes follow Baaji wherever she goes. She is thrilled with all of the attention.

*

The first time Fahad threatens to get rid of the rabbits Baaji shrugs him off, holding one in her arms as if it were a baby. She is used to his moods after so many years of marriage, used to his threats and hateful words. There comes a second, third, and fourth time all the way until the sixteenth when Fahad says either she listens to him, or she can leave the house altogether with them in tow.

By the time of his breaking point, Rani has been with the family for an entire year. Not wasting any time she's had two more litters since her first, leading to such an overabundance of rabbits that Baaji stopped naming them and just let them be. Baaji had the metal fence removed, and rabbits of all sizes have occupied the entirety of the lawn like scatterings of sunlight. All day they munched on the marigolds, the pansies, the petunias, and the roses, all of which Baaji's mother-in-law had so carefully asked the gardeners to plant. Instead of fixing the situation, the gardeners were directed to look after the rabbits instead.

It's as if Baaji glows in her in-laws' fury instead of her usual shrinking. She dismisses each complaint, each taunt, each scream at her that she is ruining their garden, their house, their life. Baaji ignores Ami, who calls her hour after hour and

begs her to save her relationship, and most of all Abu, whose opinion matters to her most of all, who implores her not to ruin this for all of us, for me who is yet still unmarried.

Baaji isn't like me; she's never demanded attention from our parents, never forced them to listen or look her way. She hides when Abu gets into his moods, keeps quiet when Ami makes an excuse to get out of listening to her problems. Ages and ages ago Baaji told me that she feels like I'm her only person in the whole world. I didn't understand it then, and so couldn't be the person that she needed. I still don't think I understand what she needs, or what she wants to the same effect, to this day. No matter how much I struggle, or Baaji struggles, her problems will never hold the same significance for me as they do for her.

The rabbits continue to hop around and reproduce. They move as if they own the land, with an arrogance that shouldn't be found in simple creatures. I can't stand their lack of hesitation, their lack of fear even in the face of human beings. Most of all, I can't stand how they've utterly consumed my sister's life.

Fahad doesn't seem to mind the rabbits themselves, but rather he is affected by Baaji's unwillingness to pay attention to him any longer. For the length of their marriage, he has delighted in her flinches, her tears, and the especially rare outburst in

between. When the illusion of true love burst Fahad was disappointed by who Baaji was as a person. He took her demure nature for disinterest and began to demand what was so wrong with him, with the lifestyle he is paying for, for her to behave in such a manner. When he didn't seem satisfied with her reassurances, he demanded she change herself to suit his needs, to act as he wanted. When that didn't work to his standard either, their relationship established itself into what it's become today, with Fahad demeaning Baaji so confidently, it's as if we're the ones in the wrong for even thinking otherwise.

So, he asks her to choose: her life or the rabbits.

Baaji picks her rabbits.

*

With an unexpected strength Baaji pulls out her phone and shows Fahad rows and rows of screenshots. She sends them to me after the confrontation, in case Fahad tries to destroy her phone, and they contained the vilest of text messages that Fahad had sent Baaji over the course of their marriage. He started deleting them later on, as to cover his tracks of course, but Baaji was quick enough to screen capture before he did.

Where had this cleverness come from? Where was it when she needed it in the beginning? Not that it matters any longer. There would be no use in clinging to other branches of the fig tree.

Baaji tells Fahad that she'll send the photos to all of his friends. Take him to court if the need be. Baaji remains murky on the details after that, says that she can't possibly remember all of what Fahad shouts in the time after that, what he destroys, what he further threatens. He goes to the lawn and warns Baaji that he'll kill each one of her rabbits. In turn, she reminds him of the security cameras installed around the house, the footage of which all of the members of the family have access to. After a few days he packs and leaves to live with his mistress in Islamabad.

Baaji's mother-in-law has a nervous breakdown in the midst of all of this. During their fight she was screaming on her own, reciting duas at the top of her voice, saying that a jinn must have possessed Baaji for her to behave this way. She is swiftly sent to a care centre in the mountains to recuperate.

Her father-in-law stays for a while longer, mumbling about being the owner of the house and how he won't be driven away. However, that's exactly what happens since he too packs and leaves for his ancestral village near Sialkot.

*

There is a sea of rabbits as far as my sight will take me. For a second I think I am dreaming, because for months this vision has dominated all my nightmares: my elder sister buried in an avalanche of white fur.

With no person other than Baaji, the creatures are given full reign to act as they please. Which isn't all that different from before. The rabbits occupy: the sofas of the living room, which have been chewed on so much that it's hard to distinguish between fluff and rabbit; the grey marble of the stairs, where under the cool touch many of them nap; hopping along the floor with ferocious speed, moving from room to room; the countertops of the kitchen, eating fruit and vegetables spread across the room.

The smell of faeces is unbearable, not even the dupatta I wrap around my mouth can stop it. I call out for Baaji, and her voice directs me towards the lawn.

It's fitting, I suppose, to go to the place where it all began. Baaji has her back towards me, and suddenly there's a burning feeling in my chest, like tap water in the middle of July.

She turns to me with a smile and I ask her, how are you?

For the first time in my life, I don't feel lonely, she says smiling down at the rabbits surrounding her. Her hair has grown nearly waist-length since I last saw her, matted and wild.

A cold hurt drenches the burning feeling.

Baaji continues, bringing her thumb and index finger close together, it's been weighing on me, as if I'd swallowed a stone for all these years. And now, it's as if it's vanished.

The wind especially harsh, soft yellow petals scramble across Baaji's untamed bushel of hair. I pick them off one by one.

Copyright © Sana Mohsin 2023. All rights reserved