Remnants

by

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I always wondered when I would visit my childhood home again. It was an ancestral home that had served my family for generations. I imagined that the red-brick walls had started looking worn after years in Karachi's sweltering sun. I wondered too often about the blue swing in the garden where I wasted my afternoons plucking fistfuls of grass and destroying my mother's flowers. She spent ages on them, jasmines and sunflowers and her favorite red roses. She spent longer beating sense into me. "I don't know why you must be so disruptive," she'd say. "Do other things children do. Look at the clouds and find shapes in them."

I reminisced about the interconnected rooms, each containing its own little world. My father spent ages picking the furniture, painstakingly sourcing it from different corners of the world. He loved telling me about the intricate engravings on the wood, about how the centerpiece in our dining lounge was actually from a village all the way in India. I listened to him talk for hours, asking all sorts of silly questions. How do we know which trees have the best wood? How does it come from India to Pakistan? Could you teach me how to make this?

I thought I would have a few more years to myself before I walked into the mouth of the beast I once loved so dearly. But it was an ordinary Tuesday morning when I got the call. Funnily enough, it was the first time in years I looked at a cloud and saw something vaguely resembling a rose.

"Adina, please come home immediately. Your mother is no longer with us."

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The first thing I thought was: the house looks different. The red-brick was painted over with a cream white. The garden looked unkempt, no longer dotted with pinks and yellows. The rooms were strangers to me, the furniture covered with white sheets as if it was ashamed. My mother had left us not too long ago and I had spent most of my flight thinking about how the house would feel without her. But everything here told me she had been gone for a while.

"Bibi, please follow me to the guests in the dining hall," Sikander Chacha said. His smile lines told me the years had been kind to him and his gentle face stirred me from my melancholy. My feet followed him of their own accord, perhaps remembering the years too well.

I paused in my steps briefly, considering something.

"Could I see her first?" I asked.

"You have to. When the body arrives."

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The word of my mother's demise had spread through the neighborhood. The dining hall was ripe with an oppressive sense of loss so palpable I could've cut it up and eaten it like fruit. Half the people had arrived before I had. It wasn't lost on any of us that she was a woman of her people. My mother's mourners seemed surprised to see me, pausing briefly from their grief to make an occasional remark about how different I looked now and as an afterthought, how sorry they were for my loss.

Their voices were quiet little shadows, as if speaking loudly would shatter the delicate balance of sorrow holding the room together. My mother's spirit was probably watching this sordid affair from somewhere. She loved the grandeur of grief, the enormity of suffering for others. The memory of her joy made me feel queasy.

It reminded me of the first time I'd gotten seriously sick. I'd fallen off the balcony and broken two teeth and a femur. They couldn't find a match for my blood type. "Adina is a universal donor but she can only accept blood from someone with her exact blood type," the doctor had said.

"Ironic," my mother replied, "for a selfish girl."

I stayed in that hospital for a week in her company but punished with her silence. It was her favorite weapon. She weaved it into everything, painting our home with long pauses. There was so much weight in the absence of words, I couldn't help but suffocate under it.

The nights congealed around me as I kept having the same dream of falling to my death, my body snapping like a tree branch. Every time I looked up from the ground, she was standing at the balcony, staring at me with cold, unfeeling eyes. And every time I woke up she would be sitting at the foot of my bed with that same, quiet stare.

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I've always felt a sense of resentment towards the customs of food at funerals. Growing up, my mother and I graced many homes with our grief. We were always

greeted with sobs and platters of food. It was an egregious thing, pausing the mourning to gorge yourself on biryani. And yet, today I gorged the most.

I helped the guests too, asking everyone if they'd eaten. Saying things like "Please don't leave without eating." I went around the room offering second helpings to our neighbors, my mother's dear friends, the aunties who had been a thorn in my side since my teenage years. I was dancing the dance of sorrow: wiping a tear, nodding solemnly and then carrying trays of chai to people who would go home after all of this, exchange one sentence about it all and drift into a peaceful slumber.

In some attempt at reclusion, I retreated away when everyone decided they had mourned enough. Lukewarm cup of chai in hand, I found myself walking to my mother's room. Everything looked unremarkable. The curtains were open, a patch of light forming a perfect square on the wooden floor. The bed was neatly made exactly how she liked it with the blanket covering the pillows. Her shawl and purse were thrown carelessly on the ottoman, as if she'd hurried out and would quickly return.

And on the chair in the corner sat a very old man. His salt and pepper hair had thinned over the years with wide spaces between slivers of white and gray. His spectacles hung off his long nose, his expression unreadable as he stared right through me.

"Najma?"

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In the first few years after I left my house, my father didn't call. I had hoped he would but somewhere in my mind I knew it would be a while before he came around. He was a Sindhi man of archaic and rigid principles, sweat-slicked from the heat of his village, sharpened by city life into a blade.

The silences between us had been long but this one stretched all around the clock, time covering my memories with cobwebs. I wondered if there was any way to right my wrongs without going back – but I couldn't do it. I guess he got tired of waiting too because one morning on Eid-ul-Fitr, I had three missed calls from him.

Things were never the same but we stayed in touch, amicable despite our differences. He congratulated me when I got promoted and I sent him a card on his birthday. We had healed over the splinters of our old wounds but I so desperately wished we could be young again. When I was a child and he was my father but still a child. I couldn't get rid of that yearning at the pit of my throat, that growing sob that refused to come out.

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"Not Najma, Baba, it's Adina."

I put my cup on the ground and held his weathered hands in mine, noticing the long wrinkles and creases that marred them. He had worked hard for us his whole life with those worn out hands. They trembled in my grasp like leaves in the wind.

"Najma, where were you?"

His brown eyes bored into mine with sincerity. He was confusing me with my mother. Najma. Her name felt like paper in my mouth. I thought of our similarities – I had inherited her dark hair, her terrible eyesight, her sharp chin and all of her anger. I spent years unmaking myself, pulling apart that resemblance thread by thread until there was nothing left. I kept my hair short and dyed it lighter. I wore contacts. I swallowed my anger like a bitter pill. I tried to scrub myself clean of her. And yet here I was, full of ache, so easily mistaken for her. Even in death there was no escape.

"Bibi, Najma Begum is here."

I looked at the doorway and saw Sikander Chacha. For a second I thought I saw her too, standing behind him and gazing quietly into the distance.

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Najma always hated smoking. My father told me she'd done it a few times when they were younger but I wasn't supposed to mention this to her. Cigarettes were the antithesis of all she believed in: beauty, grace and poise. Which is why I gravitated towards them as soon as I was old enough to buy my own.

There wasn't a corner of the house I didn't secretly smoke in. The smell of tobacco would hang heavy in the air for hours afterwards, just waiting for me to get in trouble. But I never did. I was clever about it, sneaking around her, pushing the boundaries of her world in the shadows.

It had been my father who mentioned it to her. I was smoking in the bathroom attached to our guest room, a spacious area with a big window to get rid of the smell.

I suppose they were in an argument about something and he remarked on her careless, callous parenting as a quick jibe to even the score.

She'd banged on the door loudly until I opened it. My body, possessed with fear and anxiety, had been unable to hide the evidence of my crime. The cigarette lay alight on the sink, looking sad and despicable.

She hadn't said a word. Just stared at me for a few seconds before she grabbed my arm, picked up the cigarette and pressed it to my skin. I had promised myself I would never cry in front of her but I howled in pain. She looked me in my eyes as she pressed it further into soft flesh, her face unreadable.

"The pain you're in," she calmly said, "is nothing compared to how hurt I feel right now."

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There is no profound truth in seeing someone you know come back as a body. I hunched over my mother, washing her in silence with two older women. They had asked me to come fulfill my religious duty as Najma's only daughter. She looked more alive in death than anyone I'd ever known. Her body was pale and sickly but her face looked rosy and supple, like she would open her mouth and say something to shatter this entire illusion of her demise.

"You thought you could get rid of me this easily?" She would say. Then she would comment on my hair or my weight or tell me how shocking it was that I

showed up, after all. She would say something about my divorce or something about me being too much of a coward to choose my family.

With trembling hands, I washed her hair. I had only done this once before, when my Dadi Amma had passed. Her hair had been frail and thready, coming loose under my fingers. But Najma's hair was thick and full of life, it seemed to squirm and writhe under my touch, a nest of snakes coiling around my fingers.

"This is a final act of love for her," one of the women said. I don't remember which one. I just kept my head down, letting the water run over her, hoping it would drown us both.

When we finished, the older women left first, to give us a moment of privacy. I stared at Najma and her gently braided hair. For the first time in my life, she was powerless. And yet, I felt a flicker of hope that she would open her eyes once more. I hated that I wanted her to come back.

When they took her away, I stayed back. There was nothing left to say, anyway.

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It was a winter afternoon the day it happened. I always loved Karachi winters: chilly breeze, hot coffee, wrap-around shawls. Sunset drives to Seaview and chai paratha at Alamgir. They were underscored with a kind of comfort I haven't found since.

It had been an ordinary altercation. Forgettable, almost. I'd gotten home after staying the night at a university friend's house. I had been spending more time away from home. The relationship had grown strained under the weight of Najma's expectations.

"Finally remembered that we exist?" She'd asked.

It was always like this. No greeting, just a quick bite.

"Did you miss me?"

I was being cheerful, hoping I could humor her into a better mood.

"Your friends are a bad influence, Adina. My mother would never let me do night stays with strange girls."

"She's not a strange girl. You've met her a hundred times."

"I don't like her."

"You don't like anyone that I hang out with. You don't like me."

There was a painful silence after that. She couldn't deny the truth of herself.

"What have you done to be liked?"

The question was a clean injury, a knife to the heart. In the years that followed, I would go on to do things for myself. I would build a simple life with bare hands, I would meet people and I would grow to love them. But no matter what I did or where I went, the question would be an unwelcome guest at every dinner table and every party. What have you done to be liked? It was an open wound that wouldn't stop bleeding for years.

"Everything," I replied. "I've done everything."

"No. You go out with these characterless girls who wear tight clothes. You smoke and talk back to your mother."

"You're being cruel, Ammi."

"No, you are cruel to me. If you want to be a disobedient daughter, do it somewhere else. There is no need to keep coming back here."

For a second, I just looked at her. She'd grown older. Her foundation creased over the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. Her eyes stared right through me, like they always did. I wanted so badly in that moment for her to relax her shoulders and ask me anything about my night. If I had eaten. If I had slept well. A moment of respite, a moment that said I was loved. That I was good. But I knew the truth. There was nothing behind her eyes. I might have lost her over the years, bit by bit, but she had lost me too. This was all that remained.

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I was nineteen when I left. There were no goodbyes, only stillness. Outside, sweet birdsong filled the air. I suppose the birds didn't know. My father was hunched over a newspaper, his forehead creased with dismay. He didn't stop me. Perhaps he was under the assumption that I was acting out. Or perhaps I was just fulfilling my fate as a daughter, the fate of leaving.

I remember Najma's last words to me as I dragged my suitcase across the gravel.

"You can come back over my dead body."

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I checked the time of my flight back on my phone. I still had a few more hours. The house was buzzing with chatter from all the guests that had hung back to pray for Najma. Sikander Chacha and my father still hadn't returned. It had been almost twenty-four hours since my mother had passed and I hadn't shed a single tear. I felt the brokenness like a noose around my neck.

In the end, I found myself going back to her room. I couldn't help myself. Her whole lifespan drenched this space, the shelves and cabinets kept pristine like dollhouse accessories, each containing versions of her I would never meet. I sat in the dim lights and scavenged through her things, rummaging through her clothes and jewelry, finding cookbooks and Kishore Kumar cassette tapes. I didn't know what I was looking for in the wreckage. Perhaps a sign of myself, an acknowledgment that she had a daughter. She took up so much space. There was never room for me.

Frustrated with my failure, I opened the green purse lying on the ottoman. I remembered this purse. It was a gift from Baba on her birthday. Hundred rupee notes lined the velvet pockets, tucked between discount coupons for grocery stores in the vicinity. Amidst them was the kajal pencil she would lovingly line her eyes with. My fingers fumbled around aimlessly until they found something. In a very small pocket tucked away at the bottom was a faded, grainy photograph.

It was the three of us. Me, Najma and Baba. It had been taken when I had that bowl cut all Pakistani mothers gave their kids. We were sitting in the garden outside. Baba had his arm around Najma and I was sitting on her lap. The funniest part is all of us were smiling ear to ear, like we were the happiest people in the world.

"Adina."

I looked up from the photograph at Baba standing over me, his face finally full of recognition. He put his arms around me tenderly, as if he was afraid to break me.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into my hair.

And I finally wept.

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