

Motia

by

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Amma has become one with the fan. In the hot, windowless room her body mimics the movement of the three filthy blades, each swish and bend becoming music for her waist. Then two. Then one. The dust bunnies fall to the ground unceremoniously, no music to guide their descent.

Amma stays one with the fan until Zakia reminds her there are other fans to be dusted, chip tiles to be scrubbed, dishes to be washed, laundry to be put away. Abba Jaan has demanded the house be spotless upon his return. '*Be-daagh*,' he says, leaving a curiously long space between *be* and *daagh*. *Bey-pause-pause-daagh*.

When the new bride is to arrive nobody knows. What she's like is an even bigger mystery. Where she places cleanliness everybody has understood, as Abba Jaan is not one to throw around words like *be-daagh*. *Bey-pause-pause-daagh*.

'Call her Choti Amma,' he says before climbing into his always-dirty, now-shiny blue Vespa. The reborn baby blue looks glumly at Zakia as it disappears into the noisy streets.

Amma stopped talking the day Abba Jaan sold her Singer sewing machine. 'The weather is getting better,' she said to Zakia on Thursday. '*Kal park chalen ge*.' On Friday the beastly thing had been sold, a bit of Amma with it.

They went to the park still, but this time Amma didn't stop to play *kho-kho* with the girls from Block 2, didn't stop to listen to the birds, didn't stop to tell off the rowdy teenage boys fighting over a coin toss, didn't stop to ask *the makai wala* why such *kanjoosi* over chaat masala. *Aur masala hi tou hei*, she would otherwise say, *Koh-i-Noor thori*.

It felt the weight of the grief, the wind, and blew cooler, softer, sweeter, hoping to offer respite to the woman who had none.

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Zakia wonders where Amma hides her anger. If somebody were to steal her favorite 150-piece coloring kit, which really is a coloring-cum-painting-cum-crayoning-cum-erasing-cum-sharpening kit, she would scream until her voice box gave out. Amma's lack of anger makes Zakia wonder if something's wrong with her, like when she had a fat tummy and took magic pills until it wasn't fat anymore. Let's try again until it's a boy, Abba Jaan had said. She had been angry then, her anger making a home in the living room curtains, their tight cotton fibers forcing space for the guest. Zakia could see it every time she opened the window, the curtains roaring, swishing, protesting. But now Amma refuses to get angry, or even choose an object to place her anger in.

Zakia checks the sofas, the pillowy pockets of seepage on the wall, Dadi Jaan's filthy *paan daan*. She undoes Amma's spools of thread, all colors, in case her anger is hiding in the tight layers of orange, magenta, red, green. The dirty spaces between the forks' tines. Under the bed, just in case, although unlikely. In Amma's Kishwar Naheeds, the pages yellowing but not with anger.

What she finds instead is a repulsive quietness, the house folding into itself.

4

The new bride is wearing motia in her ears. On her wrists. Around her carefully safety-pinned bun. Zakia wonders why she keeps her gaze fixed on her hands, then notices the sixty-watt fluorescent bulb burning into her face. 'And this is our sweet Zakia,' Abba Jaan announces.

In his voice Zakia hears an unfamiliar gentleness so unlike him it frightens her. ‘She’s excited to have a baby brother soon,’ he says.

Parveen Phuppo brings out a tray filled with *gulab jamun*, *cham cham*, *barfi*, *kalakand*. Citrus green cubes Zakia hasn’t seen before. A crumbly hodgepodge of rainbow colors. Dadi Jaan grabs the biggest gulab jamun she can find, brings it eerily close to the new bride’s mouth.

‘*Mu kholo, beta,*’ she says.

Hesitant compliance followed by regret. Expecting to take a small bite the new bride is now stuffed with gulab jamun, the oily *sheera* smudging her otherwise perfect red lipstick. She attempts to chew. Fails. Instead resorts to micro-chewing and tongue swishing. Eventually the gulab jamun makes its way down.

‘And this is our special *pista barfi*,’ Dadi Jaan says. ‘All the way from Chakwal especially for you.’ She grabs two pieces, quickly pops them into her own mouth. A fleck of citrus green across her bottom lip. ‘*Suleman, apne hath se khilao.*’

Abba Jaan picks up a small cube, halves it. ‘Smaller, please,’ says the new bride. Quarters it. In it goes.

‘*Wah bhai, wah!*’ Parveen Phuppo swoons.

‘Zakia, where is your Amma?’ says Dadi Jaan. ‘Tell her to come meet the new bride.’

‘She must be tired.’ Parveen Phuppo looks around. ‘*Ghar tou bohat acha chamkaya hei!*’

Hiding under the sofa is an entire army of dust bunnies nobody can see. Yet. Under the carpet a battalion of fuzz fairies and crumb cupids. Zakia wonders how long before Amma’s shortcuts come flying out of their hiding places. She looks at the new bride, her eyes now starting to wander, kalakand in mouth. Smudged lipstick crisp again.

‘Go fetch your mother,’ says Abba Jaan brusquely, the veneer cracking. ‘Let the women of the house get acquainted.’

5

The quietness is quieter. Initially folding into itself the house is now an origami peacock. In the mornings Zakia feels it carrying a heavy, sticky shame, wearing it timidly, wanting to rid itself of it. Instead the feeling grows and grows until the house becomes it.

6

The new bride has brought along a Singer sewing machine. Her *jahaz*, Dadi Jaan explains. Zakia wonders whether the machine will sprout wings and fly off, and if she can catch a ride, and when she can catch a ride. Where to, she doesn’t care, as long as she gets out of the folding house. *Jahaz nahi, jahez*, Dadi Jaan clarifies when Zakia asks about the possibility of a window seat.

It arrives covered in dust, the Singer sewing machine. Within minutes the new bride transforms it into a glossy creature, without wings still, the black carrying a sheen unlike anything Zakia has seen before. *Be-daagh* it is. *Bey-pause-pause-daagh*.

Abba Jaan wears a prideful smile that doesn’t suit his face. The curl of his lip contrasts ridiculously with the curl of his moustache. One tight and rigid, the other soft, flaccid, despicable. Zakia says nothing.

‘Tumhara birthday gift finally agaya,’ he says to Amma, pride bubbling bright in his belly.

The new bride has busied herself with marinading chicken thighs in the kitchen. The smell of fresh ginger-garlic paste and yogurt makes its way into the folds of the house.

‘Come, take a look,’ Dadi Jaan gestures to Amma. ‘This is the latest model. *Tumhari wali se kaafi ziada mehenga.*’

Cumin in the folds now. Garam masala.

‘They could start a home business, Ammi.’

‘No need for that. *Ghar ka khayal kaun rakhega?*’

‘One will take care of the house while the other works, na,’ Abba Jaan says. ‘With the extra money we can send our boy to private school.’

The curl of the lip getting tighter, contrast improving, albeit still despicable. Coriander on the edges of the folds. Crushed green chilies sticking to the sides.

‘Paidā tou hojaye!’

‘Han han,’ says Abba Jaan. ‘We could call the business Faryal’s Fabrics.’

Upon hearing her name Dadi Jaan’s lip curls into a similar smile, less despicable, somewhat tolerable. The folds of the house disagree. Carrying black peppercorns, cloves and cardamom the granite mortar crashes into the ground, leaving a shrill echo in its wake.

‘Kambakht mari,’ Dadi Jaan mutters under her breath, making sure the soon-to-be baby boy machine doesn’t hear. A trail of hushed expletives rolls off her tongue.

Amma makes her way to the kitchen. Quietly brings a pair of slippers for the new bride, her naked feet inches away from the shards. The two begin to collect the pieces in a temporary shared silence. Outside the mango tree bends towards the kitchen, its trunk softening like putty.

When Zakia tells her best friend Huda about the new bride, she confides that her Baba too has one. It's been six months, she says. On her arms and legs she finds the same birthmarks her mother wears from time to time. That's not how birthmarks work, Zakia says, they don't just come and go. They bicker for a few minutes until it's lunch time. Then the two girls forget all about new brides and birthmarks, digging happily into the ample biryani Amma has packed for lunch.

Dadi Jaan is getting angrier and angrier by the day. Zakia wishes it were this easy with Amma, that she didn't have to search for her anger like a madwoman, that she would wear it on her face, in her eyes, the mouth, the body like a rogue beast. But Amma makes things difficult for Zakia, her emotions always playing hide-and-seek. Never to be sought.

Dadi Jaan throws many fits throughout the day. At the *doodhwala* for being late; at Amma for forgetting to collect the laundry on time; at the new bride for not adding enough *laal mirch* to the *bhindi*; at the street watchman for taking micro-naps at night; even at the *malish wali* for being too aggressive, then too gentle, too aggressive again, *malish karna bhool gayi hei tu?*

Dadi Jaan's *chak-chak* slithers like a snake around the house. Without warning the venomous predator tightens its grip around rotating preys, its slimy body coiling and twisting and turning to no end.

This anger Zakia can easily place. Every morning Dadi Jaan wakes the new bride at five, poking and prodding her tummy, demanding she take a pregnancy test. Upon harassing Ambreen Khala's pharmacist daughter Dadi Jaan has now amassed an impressive collection

of free kits, not a single rupee spent, and did she tell you she didn't even have to go to the pharmacy? The kits were delivered to the house? Yes, Ammi, you mentioned that already, says Abba Jaan, or whoever is willing to lend an ear for that matter.

Each morning the ritual ends the same way. No fatness in the tummy, baby in the belly. The anger builds and builds, the snake getting plumper, stronger. When it lands on her one day Zakia attempts to grab it. Quickly she realizes her mistake. Lets it lurk and lunge and linger and leave as it pleases.

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The new bride too has stopped talking, even though her Singer sewing machine is safe and sound. Soon the snake also departs, the folds of the house multiplying, tightening. The origami peacock now one of many.

Zakia begins to see the birthmarks Huda was talking about. Little mountains of blue and purple on the new bride. Except they don't disappear. Instead the mountains erupt into little volcanoes of red from time to time.

10

What's with the stench coming from your house, Zakia's neighborhood friends ask one day. It's like a dead fish, says Wafa. Like the inside of a garbage can that's never cleaned. Yumna thinks it's very close to the smell of sewage. To Hajra it's more like a decaying rat. Have you even seen a dead rat let alone smelled it, Wafa wants to know. And how did you know it was a rat if it was in the middle of decaying? The beady eyes, Hajra explains, couldn't be mistaken. After arguing over rodent identification and what the house best smells like they finally decide whatever it is, it's the worst smell they've ever smelled.

Faryal's Fabrics falls apart as quickly as it falls into place. The cards are printed, ugly little rectangles of green and red to accompany each order. The name is tweaked for alliterative appeal. Faryal's *Fabulous* Fabrics. Two separate rate lists are set up, one for customers like them, the other for customers with Toyota Land Cruisers.

The first few orders are from within the neighborhood. Wives, mothers, grandmothers Dadi Jaan has personally phoned. The suits are packed, cards thrown in, a light mist of cheap oud sprayed on the packages. To create an impression, Abba Jaan explains. Free delivery with 15% discount. Yet, nobody orders again.

On Tuesday morning Dadi Jaan locks the new bride in the store room. Considering how stuffed the room is she gets precisely four square feet to herself. Zakia wants to tell her to climb to the topmost shelf, which has enough space for one to lie down. That if she digs her fingers and edges her toes into the indentations she can pull herself up. But every time she tries to pay the new bride a visit Dadi Jaan catches her.

'I saw the pills in your bloody pouch!' Dadi Jaan screams through the door. '*Namak haram aurat!*'

When Abba Jaan returns home that night he takes the new bride to his room and locks the door. Amma puts on the TV, increasing the volume to 100, Courage the Cowardly Dog bleeding into the folds of the house. From the corner of her eye Zakia sees tears falling down Amma's face, her finger still on the volume button. The mango tree begins to convulse with a full-bodied rage. Then splits in half, cracking the spine of the house.

Zakia often thinks of the mountains. The first and only time she visited, with Amma, just Amma. They had been so little then, both she and Amma.

Selling the only piece of jewelry she ever owned, a gold bracelet with emerald accents from Amritsar, Amma had decided to book two train tickets to the mountains. At the station Zakia kept wondering if Abba Jaan would call asking them to come back home, if he would apologize for throwing them out of the house. If Dadi Jaan would send a search party for them, and who would make up the search party? Parveen Phuppo? Huda?

Every few minutes she would turn around, scan the mass of strangers, then find her bearings, only to lose them again. This continued for a while until Amma took notice.

‘Do you trust me, Zak?’

‘Yes, Amma.’

‘Do you trust me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Trust me?’

‘Yes, Amma! Yes!’

The mountains had held them in their arms gently, majestically, creating an intimacy that would comfort them, take them back to sweet places in unsweet places. Linger in memory. Wipe out the day’s stains like bleach.

Zakia phones them now. Two rings and they pick up.

On the stove a pot of goodness is bubbling. Onions, tomatoes, garlic, cardamon. Cloves. Star anise. It fills the air, the aroma, every space of the new flat welcoming it, savoring it.

‘Zak, dum pe lagane ka time agaya hei.’

On the walls of the new flat a series of carefully cut childhood photos. By the window a collection of funny little terracotta pots. Amma is wondering what to do with the one empty wall, no more photos left to hang. She wants to brighten it up. Maybe some color. Maybe yellow.

‘Not yellow, Amma!’

‘Purple?’

‘Maybe... what shade?’

‘Light? A soft shade of lavender.’

‘Yes!’

Twelve minutes later the *yakhni pulao* is ready. Another ten minutes and it’s gone, plates licked clean, but for a medium-sized box Amma keeps aside.

In the evening they take a stroll in the new park. ‘*Chaat masala bilkul mast ho ke,*’ Amma says to the woman selling *makai*. She gives her a warm smile, which the woman returns with even greater warmth, the kind of tenderness that makes you feel loved. She’s generous with it, taking her time to sprinkle it evenly across the top, then shaking the pack delicately, letting the masala travel all the way to the bottom, coating every tiny piece of *makai*. Once done she pulls out a small paper bag, fills it with even more masala, hands it to Amma.

They sit on a broken bench, Amma and Zakia, watching the sunset. A pack of giggling kids with cheeks the color of a fresh prank passes by. A few feet away a pair of mynas pecks at a half-eaten mango.

‘Amma, I want to go to the mountains again.’

A smile. The sun finally saying goodbye for the day. A quiet in the air, some choosing to stay, most choosing to depart with the sun.

‘Do you miss them?’ Zakia asks.

Amma is holding the small paper bag filled with *chaat masala*. Every few minutes she licks her finger, dips it in the bag, brings it to her mouth. She repeats this a few times.

‘Amma?’

‘Yes, Zak.’

‘Do you miss them? The mountains?’

She looks up at the darkening sky, a sheet of grey slowly forcing the orange out.

‘I think I have become them.’

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Once back in the flat Amma quickly puts together a small serving of raita to go with the box of pulao. A splash of yogurt, mint and coriander. Some green chilies. A final squeeze of lime and it's ready. She must be back by now, Amma thinks.

When the clock hits eight thirty she gently closes the door behind her, takes the stairs to the sixth floor. Standing outside she can hear the hum of the machine on the other side of the door. The motor running, needle punching through cloth. A soft whirring followed by a

metallic clatter. She listens for a while, not wanting to disturb the cadence, not wanting to break away. Then rings the bell finally.

Outside two small mango trees grow towards twin flats.

16

When she returns later that night Amma is wearing motia in her ears, motia on her wrists. In the braid dangling by her side. She picks up the phone, asks to book train tickets. In the pale yellow of the zero bulb her eyes are alive, the pupils two thick spools of the blackest thread. How many, the ticketing agent wants to know, and where to. Three, for the women of the flats. To the mountains.

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