

Mothers and Daughters

By

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“Tum dekho, kuch bhi ho, main toh nahi jaaongi,” are the words I hear as I wake up. I am greeted to a sight that is much familiar to me: my mother is sitting at the end of my bed, her arms tightly crossed as she stares venomously at me. Before I can even say anything, she continues. “What did you decide?”

“About what?” I am still groggy, trying not only to deal with the fact that I am alive but that I am expected to continue a conversation right away.

“Weren’t you listening? *Khuda ki qasam*, no one in this family listens to me!” she snaps, rising to her feet.

“I was sleeping,” I protest.

“A luxury I never had, beta,” is all I hear and I am left alone.

This is quite common. In between my moments of sleep, my mother sits in my room and talks to me. I am not sure why she thinks I am awake or even listening, sometimes, I never wake up at all, but she continues to do this. She often gets mad when I am unable to recall whatever she has shared. It’s baffling considering I have three younger sisters, who are often around in the house and are not working throughout week and only have one day to catch up on sleep, that she still feels most comfortable sharing with me. When, in her own choice of words, she thinks I dislike her.

I get out of bed and make my way into her room where I find her scrutinizing herself in the mirror. I watch her looking at herself, wondering not for the first time, what she sees - if she sees what I see when I look at her: a face marked with stern lines that melt away at the right moment, sturdy and calloused hands that are as equipped to soothe any wailing baby as they are to spend hours churning away in the kitchen, and thinning dyed hair that I spent hours braiding with flowers as a girl.

However, her mouth remains pursed as she pokes at her waist. As I near, I hear her muttering how much she hates the way she looks.

I look just like her.

“You’re beautiful,” she tells me in a flat voice when she notices me, her eyes still on her reflection, still unhappy.

Later, I learn that she didn’t want to attend one of my father’s relatives’ events. She wins, of course. I am never sure, at what cost though.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as soon as I notice my mother. She is calmly dicing cucumbers, but something about the action instantly puts me on edge.

She does not respond. There are so many times I have talked to her, only for her to feign deafness or a sudden onset of mutism, that I am used to this. I am proud that unlike all the times before, I don’t lose my patience and find myself in a screaming match with her.

She continues dicing, as if nothing is wrong. Because she has often started talking without prompt before, I wait for her. Without even needing a signal, I start wiping down the counters, peeking at her every now and then. If you didn’t know her (and most people didn’t, at least not in the way I did), she’d appear the epitome of a perfect homemaker. Only I could see the twist in her face, the tension in her shoulders, and the extreme rigid and precise movements of her hands, that conveyed the emotion that she did not feel the need to hide from me.

I can see it because I also often see it in myself.

In a strange way, I hear her communicate with me through the kitchen utensils: as she lays the knife down, as she shuts cabinets, as she arranges her already-meticulous cabinets, as she sighs whenever she does not find whatever she is looking for. I nearly flinch when she shuts the fridge louder than necessary.

I start feeling guilty, wondering what I did to make her so angry. Maybe she didn’t appreciate how I attended that relative’s event she didn’t want to go to or

maybe she has discovered holes in the web of intricate lies and half-truths that I feed her. Whatever it is, I find myself feeling awful that she feels this way. The sounds continue around me and again, I wonder, how is it so possible for someone to be so loud without saying anything.

“I am sorry,” I whisper to the orchestra of the kitchen around me.

She does not hear or respond.

“You’ve become so skinny, you never eat,” my mother says in a disapproving voice as she looks at my dinner plate. Because of the hours I work, I often have dinner alone. My mother joins me sometimes.

“I eat,” I say, making a point to take a larger than usual bite and nearly choking on it.

She rolls her eyes. “All this concern for how you look gets you nowhere. When you have children and see the parasitic way they ruin your body, you won’t care.”

I don’t share the amount of times I have heard her care, loudly and profusely in front of me. “I don’t have any concern for how I look.”

“Of course. Otherwise, you’d look better than this starved and sleepless look you seem to be into.”

“I look like this; I can’t change how I look.” What I really want to say is that I can’t change that I look just like you but that would cause a verbal lashing I am not particularly in the mood for.

“You just don’t want to. You don’t think I don’t know how lazy and stubborn you are?”

I feel a burst of anger that I try to keep in, just because she gave me life doesn’t mean she lets me live it.

Later that night, I wake to the sound of my mother's frustrated yet weepy voice. Once one of my friends shared the conceptual idea of the confession in the Christian faith. It always sounded fascinating to me back then. Sometimes, I feel my mother thinks of these "talks" when I am asleep, as hers.

My mother scowls again at my lack of appetite. It's been a bone of contention between us. If it weren't for her, she likes to stress again and again, you would never even remember to eat.

Often, I am scared she is right.

There have been many times when I, too focused and anxious, forgot to eat until she came with a plate of food and hand-fed me while I worked. It's at times like these that I wonder how is it possible that anyone could ever care for me more than her. Better than her. I then miss her even though she's right here.

For all the traits that I could attribute to my father, I never am able to pinpoint what I have picked up from my mother.

Until I annoy her too much and she finally looks up from the novel she was finding escapism in, her expression and tone so familiarly exasperated at the thought of humouring a relative. It feels like an eerie reversal of our roles that stuns me to silence, earning me another reproachful look.

Whenever I have work-related news, my mother is my biggest champion. Despite me having to fight her for my right to a career, she's always been conditionally (supportive) of it. Is it because she, in a way, does want me to dream and achieve bigger and better? It's hard to say but it's interesting to me how in most households in our society, everyone's on edge around the father, however, in my household, it's my mother who always has the final say. I have also witnessed

my father to be more emotional compared to my mother who, other than her brief confessions to me, is mostly unemotional.

It's instilled a very deep need in me to have her support. I've had to deal with never having it the way I wanted but still, it's difficult to not try at all.

The first time I ever got paid (a mere five thousand rupees), I spent nearly all of it on a present for her. My mother has a very specific taste – one that she never fails to remind me that I can't ever match - so it took me an extremely long time to get the perfect thing for her. My mother unwrapped it carefully, her entire demeanor suddenly unreadable to me.

She thanked me in a polite tone. I ask aloud whether she liked it. She assures me that she did. I never saw her use it.

Even though I am closer with my father, I have always depended more on my mother for anything I may need. She may not give me the proper emotional support, but she has always provided the physical, administrative, or logistical support with diligence and consistency. If it were up to her, I would have never spent hours after-school patiently waiting with the school principal for my father to pick me up. My father often forgets and conflates his fatherly duties against his brotherly ones for his family. Sometimes, he even forgets his husbandly duties, easily sidelining my mother, who on surface, remains as stoic as ever, but confesses to me at night (I mean, sometimes, I am awake for them) how she's so very tired.

On these occasions, I feel so angry on her behalf. I don't know how my mother hides it. It makes me wish I was like her – if only in this regard. When I am angry, it's two-fold because it's also her rage that I can tap into, and I often do let myself claim it. Just as much as she only feels comfortable to share the dark sides of herself with me, I feel the same with her when I pour my heart out to her only for her to give me a placid stare which means to say, And? making me realize that she probably doesn't care, not really.

Later, when I look through my mother's belongings for the shawl she suddenly felt a need for, I find the first ever present to her from my first ever salary, still wrapped up pristinely and carefully, tucked into a corner. It fills me with an emotion I cannot describe.

My mother is the youngest of ten siblings, seven of them boys. Naturally, she grew up as the only girl around the house as the older sisters were married.

It amazes me how changes occur within a generation. My maternal grandmother studied only till eighth grade, married at 13 and had ten children. My mother completed her graduation, married at 23, and had four children. And, because my mother never fails to remind me, here I am at 25, not yet married (with no plans to be) and no children (with no plans to have).

My father, coincidentally, is also the youngest of his siblings. Between the two of them and my younger three sisters, I often feel like the unofficial official head of the house. It never escapes me how all of them rely on me in ways that I can never even comprehend.

From problem-solving my sister's commute issues, to helping my youngest sister with her chemistry homework, to supporting my other sister with her university selection and looking for scholarships for her, to filing my father's taxes and providing him graphic design services (for free), and to being my mother's only friend.

It's ironic how much my parents turn to me when they don't know how to deal with my sisters. It's also ironic how much my sisters turn to me when they don't know how to deal with my parents. I often feel like an outsider, never really belonging with either because I am too much of an offspring like figure for my parents and I am too much of a parental like figure for my sisters. So, I remain

circling both, like a moon that can't help but be pulled due to the power of the gravitational force.

My mother and I are the same astrological sign. She sits with the latest *jantri* while I pull up the website where I can get our charts and we both sit and analyze them, realizing that we also have a few more planets in common. I am not sure who started this but we both enjoy this hobby. I don't know if I believe in it because how can I be like her? But with each passing year, I feel less rebellious and more resigned at that thought.

"Look, this year will bring you great fortune," she says, a girlish excitement in her voice.

I snort. "No, that's not what it means."

"You don't have to dismiss everything I say right away." She sounds hurt and I feel annoyed because she is reading this so wrong.

"I am not dismissing it, like you're literally reading it wrong."

"I know you're much smarter than everyone, you don't have to keep on proving it, especially to me. I know what you think of me."

I don't respond to that, overcome with embarrassment. As much as I thought I see my mother, I never realized that she could also see me. I used to think she doesn't see me but perhaps, she sees me more than anyone else but doesn't know what to do with it, just as I never knew what to do with what I see in her, first because I was too young, second because I would only amplify what she already felt.

Through all these sessions of us reading through our charts and *jantris*, I always feel an undercurrent of tension between us. Without our direct influence, these words say the statements that we don't want to.

Mother. Daughter. Cusps. At the beginning. At the end. Inversions. All she could have been. All I could become. Nothing alike. Everything alike.

“I would give you all the fortune,” she says, suddenly and softly. “If only so you could get everything you want.”

This is a sentiment she expresses now which always makes me feel like crying. When I was younger, we’d fight a lot over how I am never happy with “enough”. How I am obsessed with dreaming, aspiring, aiming, wanting, desiring, and wanting for more. How I don’t settle and refuse to stay within the containers she tries to place me in. She’d lecture me and it always felt she was really asking, how dare you dream big, how dare you dream at all.

She then continues. “Just so you could see that sometimes getting everything you want isn’t what you really want, ever. It always turns out to be the last thing you ever wanted.”

“What did you want then? What did you want so badly?” I ask, unable to keep the derision out of my voice.

She just looks at me sadly before looking away.

When my maternal grandmother passed away, my mother was a wreck. She spent weeks blaming herself and getting lost in her grief. It had scared me, wondering whether I’d be the same way.

It was then that it struck me how my mother needs an adult around – how sometimes, she thought of me as one even during those years when I was barely in my teens. She leans heavily onto me even now. I often feel like her peer.

When I look at our relationship through the years, especially considering how non-linear emotions and feelings are, I can see clear progress and regress. Sometimes, I worry I am nothing like her or that I am exactly like her. Sometimes, I never want to see her again or realize that I can bear being apart from her. My mother is the only person who knows me. I don’t even know my own mother.

But there are times when I wonder whether she likes me, whether she sees herself in me, whether she sees the things she hates about herself or the things she loves. I often wonder whether my mother has more regrets or more pride associated with me.

Sometimes, I look at her and then at myself and try to ask the same.

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