The Ghost of the Waxing Woman

by

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Yesterday Durr-e's client was a seventeen year old, one of many socialite off-spring whose mothers had them waxed hairless all over once they set foot in primary school, instilling a life-long dedication to meticulous full-body hair removal. Durr-e wasn't her first in-house waxing woman – she gauged that from the ease with which the younger woman had peeled her clothes and the rehearsed, supple acrobatics with which she'd facilitated Durr-e such that no hidden hair was left unattended. She'd made conversation too, a densely bilingual soliloquy Durr-e was glad she didn't have to muster the English to respond to. How she was putting together an NGO that was soon going to make their inaugural trip to Durr-e's neighborhood and organize a seminar to educate local women in matters of career selection. She'd previously shared that in 2 months she would submit her American university applications, after which Durr-e feared the incipient NGO ran the risk of disappearing forever.

Today, Durr-e stands at the door waiting for her brother. An old screw juts out from the hinge – she has learned to avoid it but today, in her wistfulness, she scrapes her arm. The washed khaddar of her sleeve shows a splotch of crimson – but the pain is dull, made nugatory by the pain she knows she is going to experience in an hour. Maybe two, if there's traffic. Or if the rickshaw breaks down. Or if they run out of fuel and have to stop for a refill. That is the thing about womanhood and misfortune – you don't know where one ends and the other begins.

She's cognizant she'll need the rickshaw again later in the day, for a waxing appointment. Sometimes clients send transport – this one would not, and Nayab suggests she bargain a top-up fuel price at the end of the session.

On her way out, she catches a glimpse of Nayab, perched with a book on the seam of her balcony. Modelled like in a Glow and Lovely advert. As always, Nayab is mute – by birth or by choice, Durr-e does not know. She is a young widow – the steely glint in her gaze suggests she arranged her own widowhood. Durr-e's relationship with Nayab is like a watercolor palette – she doesn't remember it's beginning, has no end, just cryptic fusion. Many days they sit in noiseless conversation, Nayab's eyes telling Durr-e stories, and sometimes, Durr-e's stories.

Bile that stings like acid rises in her throat. Her brother comes out and leads her towards a friend's father's rickshaw, which they are borrowing for the day. She feels like a vegetable – one that is grown underground, like a potato, that will be skinned, boiled and eaten if it is dug up into the light.

Of-course, she now ventures into the light often. In larger houses, across renovated roads. She is aware that she'll run into one client at the least at Azeem's school too. She doesn't know if it humbles those women to come face to face in a non-transactional circumstance, with someone who has seen their stubbly body hair everywhere, waxed it out of nooks and corners, but is in this rare setting, all things disregarded, their equal? It doesn't make Durr-e feel anything, if she's honest. She, too, has hair in all the places they do. She usually doesn't have the time or ambition to wax herself. Nayab thinks it's all grossly unfair.

The rickshaw ride is smooth enough – smooth as a crate-like vehicle with a precariously balanced center-of-gravity on broken roads can be. The driver knows they're tight on time so he steers off the main roads and squeezes into the smaller

alleys – a city-wide maze that Durr-e knows inside out; conditioned learning. Most of her life has been lived in these smaller alleys, at the fringe of society, coming off the wider roads like condiments, inconveniences, the spaces between reality.

When they choke to a stop near the school, her kameez is stuck to her skin in two places – at the small of her back, from sweat, and at her thighs, from the weight of ten-year-old Azeem. He's fidgeted the whole way and her kameez is creased, showing for what it is, an ill-concealed watermark that says something about the two meagerly furnished bedrooms of their house, the tightness of the streets they've driven through, the dinginess of their commute, the never-ending labor of being the adult woman in a house with no grown man – a truly vacationless working class.

She carts her brother off and taps his shoulder so he stands erect, proper. She gets in line to the entrance, takes a minute to observe the protocol and then walks without faltering through the metal detector. Wordlessly she takes a brochure from the receptionist and hands it to Azeem. He tells her which teachers of his they're meant to see. They're walking across the school cricket ground and Azeem is telling her of how he almost made the team this year. Durr-e nods. Azeem is good at sports, always has been.

Again she envisions Nayab's eyes, her legs scissoring over the rail, effortless agility. Chic, almost passes for high society. It is as if she is perpetually challenging Durr-e to reach up and leap over.

In the waiting chairs to see Azeem's English teacher, she can see her through the heads of the couple already seated across her, their consult appearing to be something excessively jovial and unrelated to reading and comprehension and essay writing. Durr-e has all of Azeem's assignments sealed in a file in her bag, she read and re-read them until she knew all of his scores, all his spelling mistakes; she has perused them with a sort of obsessive efficiency, as if the teacher might just quiz her about Azeem's progress instead.

Has Nayab made mistakes? In school, in life? She must have, Durr-e always reasons, but she lives still without the principally feminine, low-simmering fear of the consequences of her own actions.

A man offers her tea, a cluster of cups on a tray. She refuses intuitively; other people pluck them off and pay nothing. There's no cash counter, no receipts – she concludes it was free, and she refused it, but she doesn't have time to regret this.

Once she's seated in front of the teacher she notices the rimmed glasses with golden loops that sway as the teacher moves her head – something she does often, her words emphatic and played out, loud – like an actress. Sweat beads across her upper lip, which is lined with some small follicular eruptions of new hair – too small, Durr-e is aware, to be threaded out yet. She sorts a pile of paper and produces an assignment Durr-e hasn't seen before.

"His grammar is a nightmare," the teacher flips through the essay Azeem has a C in. "The spellings are getting better," she does not sound congratulatory. "But the

content is still lacking, he doesn't understand the topic, even though I explain it before they start." She levels an unfriendly stare at Azeem instead.

Durr-e takes the assignment and the paper sags in her hands. She uses the retort she has rehearsed ad nauseum at home. Calculated, the right degree of parental and professional. "I'll work it," she says in slow English, instantly realizing she's forgotten the preposition.

The teacher is unmoved. "Only a little bit of effort and he'll pass. I'm sure."

What could be the consequences of consistently failing English class for Azeem? What dent does it put in the prospectus of his future? Durr-e laughs a little. It's not like he can take up the role a waxing waali, even as a side hustle. The men in big housing societies run the government, the parliament, industries, banks. The city depends on these houses that stand proud on those expensive acres. The women in these houses, though, depend a great deal on their waxing consultant. It is a food pyramid and Durr-e likes to see herself at its base. A job that is as easy and devoid of skill as it is important.

Outside, the rickshaw has disappeared. In its place a car has pulled up, its window rolling down as her line of sight intersects. Like a constellation aligns, she sees what she has fervently prayed long nights she would not have to see ever again, not in this life at-least, where she has no means to rewrite or avenge the past. She only lingers so long as to see her old manager's hair, gusted in a wave away from his forehead from the car's air-conditioning vent. She feels nothing – not hostility, not

estrangement, not even a tingle – except this feeling that the footpath between them will fissure if she attempts to walk across it.

Nonetheless, she's been to his house many other times. Even when it wasn't for their little thing, and even after their thing had been called off. She waxes his wife – a tired, stodgy woman – who unfailingly tips well.

So, in the end they walk past the entourage of cars and hop onto a bus. There is familiarity in its oppressive heat, its rickety gender segregation. They walk a familiar walk down the aisle to the back, the air charged with the scent of sweat and the uneasy warmth of the collective scrutiny of the men in the front half. One thing Durr-e is learning about men is the laxity of their standards – they look at anything: unwaxed legs, exposed ankles, barely-there contour under strata of draping. Also, how they all do it: the conductor, the drained office husband heading home, the teenagers without a ticket, the devout *Jamiat* rep with a beard that scrapes his chest – a great feat of communal synchrony. Is religion really the ultimate equalizer of men, or is it the unaccompanied woman walking down an accessible path?

She pulls Azeem onto her lap and assures him none of his friends saw them get on. Out the window, his vehicle has wafted away. Her heart sinks as it settles.

On the bus, her mouth forms into a moue as she goes over the red annotations on Azeem's essay. His essay seems special to her, in a way. The prompt had been a current affairs thing, and the essay he'd produced detailed an affair between a married man and a struggling lower-middle income arriviste. Huh.

Her actual name is Durr-e-Nayab, something her father used to call her. A rare gem. But there is nothing rare about her. Perhaps she should've been named Dur-e-Aam – a common gem, imbued in mediocrity. In Azeem's new school, though, she is eccentric in a way, different in her un-specialness.

On their way home they pick up medicines for their mother, medicines that cost a lot more than a new cricket bat for Azeem would have. When she's paying for them, she's thinking about this, and about how if her mother wasn't always ill, and if they didn't live in a small rental in a tight alley, and if her mother could speak any English and attend the parent teacher meeting instead, Azeem could pass English class. Only a little bit of effort.

The cataclysm of her thoughts – dry, redundant – subsides as she grabs a wafer box from the kitchen and lands unceremoniously into her yard chair at home, from where she can see Nayab. Conjured like an apparition, ethereal as a numen.

In the background her mother is voicing well-placed concern about Azeem's fee waiver. Durr-e's office job, even with the bonus she makes with her waxing, will not pay for everything – not her mother's treatments, not home bills, not Azeem's fee if the fee waiver is not renewed. A good marriage may save them – but Durr-e has been jilted once, and she feels that is enough for one lifetime. In any case, in forging a good marriage a man is born anew and a woman slowly perishes. Durr-e is too mired in debt to offer herself up to death – real or metaphorical.

She doesn't need to vocalize any of this to Nayab. Nayab knows. Nayab has what Durr-e dearly misses – the di-chromatic lens through which she saw the world as a child, a lens like a heirloom, inherited from her Maa Jee, who had educated her about a woman's two roles – wife, in health and breadwinner, in tragedy. Hero, by all forces of nature, never a villain. Until, of course, her father had died, money had evaporated, she had passed on her college admission and taken up an office job and freelance waxing work. Durr-e had watched the absoluteness of her landscape rapidly dissolve into hazy penumbras and she had hated it. Nayab was catchy, original – Durr-e was kind of like the postlapsarian filtrate.

But she blames no one. If she were a man she would have done mostly exactly the same things – except this exceedingly comfortable job which involved such barren intimacy with rich women in air conditioned homes would not have been open to her. Instead, she may have become someone's driver – meh. Perhaps people around would've been kinder, but the muhalla's appraisal doesn't bring with it a wage anyway.

Only in the presence of Nayab Durr-e lets her mind wander into the terra-incognita that was her first job. It had turned out to be a string of firsts – her first boss, her first romantic attachment, her first heart-break, first run-in with the merciless tattle of the muhalla that had previously only looked at them with frugal sympathy. Why had he turned away, when he had always known the state of her finances, and when she had always known of his wife and two kids? She thought these things, rocking under the overgrown bark. Her and Nayab – comfortably ensconced in the convenience of such unanswered questions.

Nayab suggests – at times – things discretely scandalous. What if she were to forget to help Maa Jee to her medicines? What if she were to accidentally give her one too many of some? Would the universe conspire? Would some of her expenses disappear? Would the boss from the office accept her like before, without marriage but with a stipend that would take care of her and her brother? Would she be able to attend college?

Azeem's football ricochets off a wooden sill, punctuated with a bout of Maa Jee's tuberculous cough. It is easy to sin in the privacy of her ageing rocking chair, chipping at her nails, heard only and condoned by some deeply interred version of herself.

Nayab and Durr-e go back and forth about things, and sometimes Nayab wins. Yesterday she convinced Durr-e to spend some spare money she'd remorselessly plucked out of the office lost and found on a pack of cigarettes. They're resting with a lighter in the pocket sewn into her shalwar.

Inside the house the coughing reaches a crescendo and punctures the dreamy undercurrent of the girls' near-clairvoyant exchange. Azeem is saying Durr-e's name. Nayab stretches like a feral cat; Durr-e stalls. In Nayab's eyes is the omnipresent demurral – a challenge to be more, to do less, to acknowledge that straight-laced labor alone had brought her to a point of diminishing returns. Nothing was falling in place; everything was collapsing gently around them.

Her forehead creases as she trudges back into her house, up a small staircase to Maa Jee's room. At the doorstep is the old sewing machine the older woman would use, as a home tailoress, when she could still work her hands with some dexterity. In the beginning Nayab had pointed out that in handing back these hand-sewn clothes on which Maa Jee coughed and spat they may be – guiltlessly – trojan-horsing TB into other peoples' homes. Nayab's little rebellion was unheeded, like always.

Maa jee's blanket is bunched onto her chest, her fists holding it there. Azeem is struggling with the nebulizer Durr-e knows does not work anymore.

The cough is suddenly quieter, replaced by a throaty rattle. Behind her a woman Durr-e recognizes has come up. She lands in a frantic clutter at the bedside and starts ploughing through the drawer where Durr-e stows medical supplies.

"Call an ambulance," she hands her cell phone to Azeem. She turns to speak to Durr-e, who has inched unceremoniously out the door, but not out of earshot.

"Where was Durr-e the whole time? We need help," her words falter, with pauses. She's upset, she's the woman who comes home for chest physio.

"In the lawn." Azeem responds, skeptic. "Staring over the wall, into that empty house. Like she always does."

"I've heard someone's buying it, finally," the woman adds, distracted.

Moving steadily away, Durr-e does not stop to peer over at Nayab. She walks out the garden, where the evening sky has congealed from crimson to grey. She pulls out a cigarette, lights then ashes it. Vendors and their tow carts crawl past her, side-stepping potholes. Good men walk in unorderly congregation to the masjid for the evening prayer, the charas-addled native who everyone knows but no-one notices stretches in his sleep by the footpath. The street is a pastiche of a tired woman – razor-like hair, natural oddities, mushrooming in places meant to be kept barren, raw but sturdy, ready to be mowed down by an unmerciful waxing waali. There is the rickshaw of her friend's father, parked with a dangerous lack of supervision for the city at this time. She nods at it almost congenially, discards the first, lights another cigarette – risqué largesse given her money situation – takes a swig, and keeps walking. A performative, taciturn disruption of the muhalla's hegemony. She hopes Nayab is watching. Maybe next time they meet she'll have her voice back.

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