

Waiting for the Angels

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The old lady sat on the toilet seat, her pajamas around her feet. “Is the door latched?” she mumbled. She lived all alone in the house and yet she wanted her bathroom door latched. She did not want to break the rules she had followed all her life.

She got up from the seat with some difficulty. These days she was not feeling agile anyway. Drops of perspiration smeared her forehead. She held the top of her pajama in one hand, struggled to the door and found it latched.

“What is happening to me?” she muttered. She could hear her own voice this time—it was clear. It was not a silent sentence echoing within the depths of her mind. She limped back to the toilet seat, her dress shuffling, her slippers squelching. After she sat down on the seat again, she held her head in both hands. She felt scared of her own voice.

“Did I take my morning pill?”

She tried to remember if she had taken the tablets but her mind went blank. She was not sure about it. She was not sure about anything.

She felt so enraged at her helplessness that it seemed as if blood would burst out of her veins, her heart would stop beating, and her lungs would stop breathing.

“Mama, you would take your medicines regularly, wouldn’t you?” said Shenaz, her younger sister, before leaving for the United States.

The pills were necessary to keep her mind in balance. Otherwise she encountered unusual experiences. They could be in the form of strange smells or hallucinations. The problem was that she thought they were real. Sometimes she talked to people who were not there. And she cursed her neighbours, the Iyers, when whiffs of odour came from their window, which was very often. She did not like the smell of *sambhar* and *rasam* that perpetually hung about the Iyer’s quarters.

She remembered how Shenaz would have rebuked her at this carelessness. “Mama, why can’t you take care of yourself?” she would have said.

She began to miss Shenaz. She also began to miss Shenaz’s cute little son. She was especially fond of the boy whom she doted on as if he were born of her own womb. When they were all together, which was about a year ago, she never felt lonely. She felt happy and animate in their midst. But now, without them, she felt like an abandoned woman, a tree left to die in a barren desert.

A rage began to build inside her. Why did Shenaz leave me behind like this, she thought with a querulous enthusiasm.

She had raised Shenaz like her own child. Their parents had died when Shenaz was in third standard and she in college. Being the eldest in the family, the responsibility of bringing her sister up fell on her shoulders. She continued her father's jewelry business and educated her sister in the best possible manner. She had given her all the comforts she could manage. For Shenaz's upbringing, she had decided to remain unmarried. And she remained committed to her pledge.

Because of her efforts, she made enough money to buy a new property. She disposed off her parental property and adding the proceeds of the sale to her own savings, she bought two flats in a new locality. She started living with her sister in the bigger flat and rented out the smaller one. Now that Shenaz was grown up and employed with a multinational corporation, she could sit at home and enjoy the fruits of her lifelong struggle. But then she had not imagined that her life would be rather lonely and sad towards the end.

At this point, she sucked her teeth, and shuffled on the seat.

The turning point had come, she reckoned, when Shenaz fell in love with one of her colleagues at office. She was already in her late twenties and needed to settle down soon.

One evening while she was watching TV in the drawing room, Shenaz brought her boyfriend home. "Adaab, Aapa," he greeted. "Adaab," she greeted back, with a welcome smile. Shenaz introduced them formally. She muted the TV's sound and asked him to sit on the sofa. The first thing she noted was that he was younger than Shenaz.

Shenaz went inside the kitchen to prepare tea and snacks.

“What does your father do?” she asked.

“He was in the government,” he said. “Retired. Sits at home now.”

“And your mother?”

“She has been a housewife all her life,” he said, picking his nose.

“I see.”

She did not like him picking his nose.

Silence followed. They both kept looking at the TV screen. Rajesh Khanna and Mumtaz were running around the trees, singing a song. The sound was still muted.

“Do you know,” she said, “that we have relations in the royal family of Rajasthan...”

“What is this Mama?” Shenaz interrupted her, handing her boyfriend a glass of Coca Cola.

“I was just telling him about my Aunt...”

“He knows, he knows,” Shenaz said, again cutting her mid-sentence. Shenaz gave her a hard look, asking her not to blabber on before the guest. She went back to the kitchen.

How much she had wanted to tell him about her dear Aunt who was married to a prince in Rajasthan and who was tragically killed in a freak plane crash! Her eyes became moist with the memories of her beautiful princess aunt—her embrace, her smell, her smile, her playfulness. The room was filled with the smell of her aunt—a pleasant smell that she always associated with her aunt. For a moment, she felt her aunt was there in that very room.

She remained silent for a while.

On the TV, Rajesh Khanna was teaching school children in a classroom.

“Do you read?” she asked him, breaking the hush.

“Yes, I do. I read everyday,” he said, with an unshakable confidence. “I never miss *The Economic Times* with my morning cup of tea.”

“That is good. But anything other than newspapers? Do you read books? Like novels, stories, or poems?”

“No. Actually I don’t get the time,” he said, smiling. “You see my work keeps me so busy.”

“Do you enjoy going to plays?”

“Plays?”

“Yes, I mean...theatre, dramas?”

“No. Never. Never seen a play after school,” he said triumphantly, as if he had successfully avoided plague all these years.

The man was a disaster, she thought. He looked good, he earned well, but was not well-acquainted in matters of art and culture. She was not amused at the match.

“Baby, the boy is fine but doesn’t smell of a wholesome upbringing,” she said when Shenaz was putting hair oil in her gray locks.

“Just because he doesn’t read novels?” Shenaz said angrily, “What Mama! Don’t foist your culture shulture on everyone, okay? Even I don’t read novels, so what?”

“Art and culture are too important to be neglected, Baby,” she said. “You know why I say this? I feel that people who don’t read, who don’t value aesthetics, are generally insensitive folks.”

Shenaz didn’t say anything more and kept rubbing oil on her scalp. The new generation, she often thought, had so little regard for the culture of the good old days. She hated the me-me-me new culture of selfishness and pushing around.

Her fears, however, were grounded elsewhere. She feared that once married Shenaz’s attention towards her might wane. When Shenaz decided to marry her boyfriend with the condition that after marriage they would stay together with her sister, she let go of her disapproval. At heart she thanked Shenaz for her loyalty towards her. But at the same time, her opinion about Shenaz’s husband became more negative. A man who could abandon his parents for his wife could also abandon his wife for somebody else! That was her new fear. But she never told this to her sister.

They lived together for a few years after marriage. Meanwhile, Shenaz gave birth to a child, Aryan. She was so ecstatic about this new creature. She could not experience the pleasures of motherhood. So this was her chance to enjoy the process vicariously. She took care of the baby while his parents were away at work. Everyday, she would supervise the baby being washed, cleaned, massaged, and fed by the maid. Once the maid’s job was over, she would take the baby in her lap. Then she would place him on the bed and fold his limbs diagonally across his body. This would, she thought,

strengthen his limbs. Then she would bring together both his hands and legs and release them in one go. The baby would laugh out loud with a startle. She would laugh too.

Those were the most joyous days of her life.

When Aryan was one year old, his father got a job in the States. He went to the States and her sister decided to stay back till arrangements could be made for her departure. She was not disturbed with this development inasmuch as Shenaz was with her. After one year, Shenaz too went over to her husband. Now she was all alone in the house. She missed Shenaz and Aryan. She called up Shenaz or they called her as frequently as possible. Sometimes she received their emails through her neighbour and tenant, Mr. Iyer. She dictated her emails to Mr. Iyer who then sent them to Shenaz from his office.

She now led a life of near confinement after she had fallen out with all her neighbours. First it happened with her top floor neighbours, the Imams. Initially they were friendly towards her. She would often go to them late in the afternoon or in the evenings. They offered her tea and biscuits. Sometimes they offered her dinner as well. She usually accepted their invitations for lunch or dinner. Everything was going fine till one day when her bathroom ceiling began to get damp. She asked the Imams to look into the seepage. They did not care much and the leakage became worse and worse with each passing day. Finally one day, out of impatience, she blasted them for their slovenly carelessness. That was the last she spoke with them.

Then it happened with the Iyers. Iyer was a reporter with the *Daily Despatch* and his wife was a schoolteacher. They were kind and polite to her. She would sit in their drawing room, discussing politics and literature with Mr. Iyer. She counted Mr. Iyer as a cultured man and usually borrowed books from him. Mr. Iyer's fat books helped her fall asleep at night. Mr. Iyer was a useful person. He also helped her send emails to Shenaz, withdraw money for her from her bank account, and deposit her life insurance cheques, telephone bills, and electricity bills.

Once she went to the local cinema with the Iyers. The cinema was about two kilometers away from their house. She was going out after a long time and was a little happy about the brief excursion. But her mood was spoiled the moment Mrs. Iyer decided to walk the distance. By the time they reached the cinema complex, she was already tired and panting. She wanted to sit but the young couple decided to window shop, hopping from window to window. In the process, they passed McDonald's, Nirula's, Ruby Tuesday ... a whole lot of restaurants. She hoped they would ask her to get in in one of those swanky eateries but nothing like this happened. Or nearly so.

Sensing the Iyers' confusion, she decided to help them. She entered the Nirula's pastry shop, hoping the Iyers would follow her. Her spirit was lifted up with the smell of French fries and burgers. There was a rush of youngsters in the shop. A few elderly couples could also be seen, stoically sitting with resigned faces, and children fussing over their ice creams and colas. The counter was crowded with eager customers. She spotted an unoccupied table and rushed to reserve it before anybody else could. Luckily she was

spared any competition. She looked around for the Iyers but they were nowhere in sight. Then she found them—across the glass panel of the restaurant, they were standing outside, arguing. She waved at them calling for their attention. The Iyers did not move from their place and kept arguing. After a few minutes, she came out.

“Don’t you want to eat something?” she asked Mr. Iyer.

“No, no, not now,” said Mrs. Iyer grumpily. “Maybe later.”

The matter ended there and she joined them for further window-shopping. All they had, after ambling about for an hour or so, was an ice cream cone each, followed by a march back to their residence. By the time she reached home she felt tired like she had not felt in ages. She did not emerge from the house for the next two days.

But the bonhomie with the Iyers did not last long, even though she wanted it to continue. Both she and the Iyers had a common maid. The maid usually came to her first to do the cleaning and cooking. One day she saw Mrs. Iyer calling out the maid to do her work first. She did not like it that way; another rule was being broken. She shouted at the maid, calling her to finish her first work first. At this Mrs. Iyer came to the door, with her familiar odour, and said, “We are to go out just now, so I want the maid to do my work first.” That was the last she spoke to Mrs. Iyer. Her only fault was that she had said “mind your language” to Mrs. Iyer. And Mrs. Iyer had stopped speaking to her.

After that spat with Mrs. Iyer, she kept in touch with Mr. Iyer only. He was a necessary evil for her. She began seeing him in his true colors after one particular incident. Once she was proudly discussing her cousin, the famous editor of the famous *Bollywood Chronicle*. She was his childhood friend and they often talked on phone. The famous editor, her cousin, was over forty now and was still a bachelor. That worried her. At this Mr. Iyer had the temerity to say, “Don’t worry. He is a gay.” She became very upset with Mr. Iyer’s remark. She would not have spoken to him but for needing his favour of getting some money out of her bank account the very next day. An urgent bill had to be paid.

However, she made it a point to intimidate Mr. Iyer whenever possible. She hoped that he would take the message and keep his wife in check so that she does not get in her way. After all she was the landlord. To browbeat him, she found opportunities in one way or the other to recount the stories of her former tenants. Her last tenants were a bevy of five young girls. “They had an almirah full of sandals and lipsticks,” she told him in her good-humoured days. Not now. Now she only told him how she had summarily evicted them one day when she found young boys in expensive cars visiting them at midnight. “I asked them to pack their bags then and there,” she said proudly. “I did not give them even a day’s notice.”

Notice! That was the key word. And Mr. Iyer always touched the corner of his glasses and smacked his lips with the tip of his tongue at this word. Seeing Mr. Iyer behave in this fashion would satisfy her immensely.

To avoid all these disagreements and bickering, she preferred to stay indoors. Most of the time she watched TV or read books of Urdu prose. She would watch TV till late into the night and then go to her bed. This habit had, of late, affected her eyesight. Her eyesight weakened day by day but she did not give up her habit. She got up late in the mornings, usually woken up by the maid. The maid cleaned her house and cooked food for her. She led a comfortable life.

What she lacked was company. The only company she had, until a few weeks ago, was that of Saima. She was the daughter of one of her poor cousins who lived in a far away village. Saima was a young girl who was pursuing her high school studies through correspondence. She took good care of her; yet she was not happy to have left her home. Saima stayed with her for about six months, and then one day she left for her village, pretending to have perennial headaches affecting her studies.

Her self-confinement, her loneliness made her giddy with grief. How long could one watch TV and look at the growing patch of water on the wall (These days her sole attention was focused on the patch of leaking water on the drawing room wall, which was growing, inch by inch everyday.) Even her maid, who was tired of cleaning the skirting of the walls thrice a day, had threatened to leave her job. Yet she found ways to keep busy and please herself. She spoke to the clock, the chair, the table, her clothes, the curtains—anything that caught her attention.

When she decided to take a break, she would catch a three wheeler to Nadia' house. That was her aunt, one of the last of her family in the town. She had lost nearly all of the friends and family of her generation. For years, she had been undergoing the distressing experience of having to cross out name after name from the list of people she knew. It seemed, at last, she would be the only one left.

She could, however, handle all this. What she could not handle was the fear of being put in a home for good, away from Shenaz and Aryan. What would her sister do if, for example, she became disabled or if something bad happened to her? How then would she take her to the States? She was not afraid of death. To her, death was unpleasant but agreeable. At last, everyone had to make peace with death. But this fear of a permanent separation from her family filled her with dread.

She would think about it again and again, looking around, as she was seated on the toilet seat. And sometimes, she would fall asleep.

Once, she heard someone knock at her door.

When she opened the door, she saw two men standing there; they were sweating profusely. One of them was holding a huge, ungainly register in a hand. There was a pitchpine coffin lying behind the two men, choking the staircase landing. They had a strange glow in their eyes. She at once recognized that they were not human beings but

angels. One of them was slightly fat and the other had a big nose and kept wiping his face with his handkerchief.

“Is this the house?” they asked.

She said it was and asked them in. They looked haggard, as if they had been trudging up all through the day. She offered them a seat. She fetched them wafers and a glass of Coca-Cola. Then she sat down at an empty stool in the corner.

The angels were preoccupied, eating noisily, their faces glowing with contentment. She saw their hardened hands picking up the wafers and shoving them into their mouths. Their nails were corrugated and warped.

“Are you ready, then?” the big-nosed angel asked, munching the words. The fat angel was champing and squelching through a mouthful.

She nodded.

“It is a long journey,” they said.

“That’s great,” said the old lady. “I have never been on a long journey before. I am only curious.”

Living had always been a preparation, a waiting.

“Good,” said the fat angel, taking a noisy draught of the cola. “Any last wish?”

“No,” said the old lady.

And so the years had passed; and now there was nothing to wait for.

The angels did not say anything. They kept drinking the Coca-Cola.

Then it occurred to her that she should put on her best dress and arrange her hair in a pleat. She might also be given time to go to the beauty parlor for dyeing her hair and for a facial. But then she laughed at the ridiculousness of the idea.

End

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