



The Commotion

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‘Her uncle has come upon her again, hurry,’ my cousin’s voice passed by the door of my crammed room leaving me bewildered by the uncertain heaviness of the scene she presented before my eyes. I put the dupatta around my plum-shaped breast covered tightly by the kurta and the red, woollen cardigan before unbolting the window that I had shut to change my clothes. The newly constructed frames of the window that my uncles had got from the city opened to the tresses of a guava tree swinging left and right in the breezy winter afternoon. The sun that swathed over my face reminded me of my skin-care routine that I had adopted from one of my friends back in the city. I rummaged through my vanity bag and plucked out a tube

of a drugstore sunscreen and applied it laboriously over my neck that looked boneless in the mirror, my face that was sprouting with pimples and dried-out scars left behind since the days I first menstruated. I zipped the frayed edges of my vanity bag, pushed clothes into the suitcase that I was carrying for my family's one-week visit to our village, climbed atop it and kept jabbing at the switches until I heard the two clicks of the suitcase. I clambered down to the dusty, new marbles and wore the slippers that I had to borrow from my cousin as the pair I had got from the city didn't last one trip to the lake at the edge of the settlement.

I remembered to lock the room behind me as my mother had instructed. She will use your strands of fallen hair to cause harm, that was the warning my mother pronounced before we got down from the train in the cold winter morning a week back. My father, my brother and I had nodded with paper cups brim with tea shivering in our hands, I remember. We were three puppets controlled by a string fitted around our backs. My father had lost the sense of power I bestowed on him a long time ago. He wasn't the father I had seen in films, read in books, or witnessed in the mundane drama of a family when I was at a friend's house. As I grew up, I saw him reduce. I began taking him to the appalling meetings with my teachers at school. I began asking money for outings from him as furtively as I could when I joined college. I hated him for not being the father he should have been. A man who told things, one who knew what was right, did not give a thought about what others said, set in his ways, stubborn in his assertions. I justified all the things I got through with him by his failure of being the father he should have been. My brother, I realised, would be the linocut of our father. Brayed with cool temper, patience, omniscient eyes rolled into a soft sheet of lean figure separating one from this ramshackle village and the other, a youth of the city. Without a question, they agreed to trail behind only one woman all their lives; my father his wife and my brother his middle school girlfriend who he's supposed to marry the following year.

I stared at my feet tucking a lock of wet hair behind my ears and dreaded how mismatched I would seem to the world that day. A yellow salwar-kameez, a red cardigan with big, blue, rubber slippers. I wished I was back to my home in the city. I would be sitting in one of the many classrooms of my college, writing plans on scraps of papers to visit the bar down the lane during the *Happy Hours* and smoke cheap cigarettes before taking rides back home. Where was I? A village far-removed from the language I was used to hearing, from the kind of scenes I was used to witnessing; building and vehicles piled on to one another into a play. The buildings here that were never there tired me and stole the love I had once had for the vast patches of empty land only thriving with greens and cows and shit and footprints lost in each other when I was a child.

I followed the annoying sound of my cousin who pulled me by my wrist and led me from the backdoor toward the house of the girl whom she had mentioned. We walked carefully with eagerness in our steps through a narrow path lined with open drains from which I saw soapy water run down into the mat of grass wet with dirt from half of the village's bodies. We crossed the medical hall that would be used as a guest house when there was a wedding in the village, or a voting station when there was panchayat election. A kid with only an underwear and a sweater cried as the doctor injected his pregnant mother with a syringe of some sort. Another girl with hair dry and golden as haystacks stared at us sitting in a squat position outside the medical hall with blobs of dirt drying at the mouth of her flat nostrils. We took a left ignoring the houses of all the women who would come to our house to massage ageing asses of our mothers, aunts and grandmothers, or clean our soiled utensils, dance during someone's wedding as though it were their own kids' and carry home leftover spreads of *puris* as big as the back of my underwear after a ceremony. Finally, we reached the house where the spoken girl was dispossessed of herself, according to my cousin.

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We passed the heads of cows and buffalos, their bodies covered by jute sacks, bent into their concrete basins full with food. The breeze that made me cover my arms with the dupatta, was shining on the pools of their urine and dung gloriously as my eyes fell on their babies staring right at us with an innocent hostility. My cousin shoved people gathered at the entrance claiming the space as the girl's closest friend and made way for me through the throngs of bodies smelling of *amla* oil and *clinic plus* shampoos and *lifebouy* soaps. When we were inside, I realised there weren't many people save the neighbours I had seen before when I visited the girl's house three days back with my cousin to leave a notebook they would require in the class the next day.

The girl, who I had known to be anything but strong-willed, was sprawled on the floor in the middle of the *angan* like a corpse. Her mother was bent over her face with her hand on the girl's blossoming breasts. Her father was sitting on a chair with his head, that seemed, as though it were crumbling in his hands. My cousin ran over to the mother and knelt down beside her. The mother startled and fell into my cousin's bosom with tears in her eyes.

'It is the uncle again, isn't it?' I heard voices from the people at the entrance. I moved away and proceeded toward a chair I found on my left beside a pillar from which flakes of red paint peeled off unceremoniously.

'I will ruin her. Ruin the bitch... ruin the slut,' the girl roared shaking her head that banged with a thud on the mud floor. I gasped and sat down on the chair I had spotted.

The mother shrieked, 'Why don't you leave my girl alone? What has she done to deserve this?'

My cousin said, in a serious voice, 'What do you want? What is it you want from her? Tell us. We will give you.'

The girl was silently lying down on the floor with hair all over her face shining like the ones from a shampoo advertisement under the sun that fell all over the *angan* opened from the ceiling looking into the sky. The father raised a stick resting at the side of his chair and poked at his daughter's waist from where he was seated. There was no response. He shouted, 'What are you doing, brother?'

He took hold of his head again dropping the stick and said, 'Didn't you want this house to be peaceful and respected? Look, the whole village is at our doorstep because of you.'

The girl smiled but remained still.

'What kind of puja do you want? What form of sacrifice should we perform to have you let my daughter live in peace?' The mother asked over her sobs.

My cousin nodded, 'Tell us, what do you want to leave her alone?'

From a room, an elderly voice of the girl's grandmother emerged, 'Why is he ruining such a young girl's life? What is wrong with him? Wasn't he enough trouble already by himself?'

An aunt stepped out of a kitchen saying, 'Why don't you let her be? Who will marry this girl if this continues? Don't you understand?'

The aunt wiped tears from her face and entered the kitchen after having spoken. The girl's mother scowled at her back and said, 'Shut up. Shut up, you bitch. Why won't anyone marry my girl?'

I heard hobs being turned off in the kitchen and lids placed over pans and vessels before the aunt stomped out of the kitchen screaming as though she questioned the mother's audacity, 'What did you say? What did you call me? What have I done? Why do you blame me always?'

My cousin held on to the mother and didn't let her stand up to face the aunt. The grandmother cried from her room, 'take me out of this room now. Come on, take me out. Let me see my girl. Why won't anyone marry her? She is totally fine.'

The father silenced the grandmother with irritation ringing in his voice, ‘You keep quiet and stay where you are. Don’t add to the commotion building here. She will wake up any minute now.’

The aunt tucked her saree soiled by spots of flour at her waist and raised her finger to the people standing at the entrance saying, ‘Every time this girl gets possessed, I am blamed. I am made the reason. He was my husband...’

The mother cut her, ‘You have cursed your husband’s spirit on my daughter.’

The aunt sat on her haunches now with the girl lying still between her and the mother and said, ‘what did you say? Come again? I have sent my husband’s soul on this young girl?’ She slapped her breasts and said, ‘I have loved this girl like my younger sister since the day I came to this house. My sister! Do you get that?’

The father interrupted, ‘Please stop this right now.’

‘No, I will not stop it. Your wife will answer me first. Who does she think I am?’ The aunt faced her elder brother-in-law right into his eyes forgetting all the shame she was once used to when she had set foot in the house seven years back.

I was startled out of the scene by a child of three or four who stood at my side out of nowhere and mumbled, ‘You cannot sit on this chair.’

The aunt stood up seeing her child beside me and grabbed him and took him near the girl. She put her hand on his head and said, ‘He is the only person I have left to call my own now and I swear on my only child and say that I have nothing to do with this.’

‘Please stop it,’ the father said and asked the boy to go back to the room from where he came.

The boy kept staring at me and played with his fingers. The aunt wiped tears again from her face and hugged her child and said, ‘Your sister is unwell. She will be fine.’

The mother shook her daughter and said, ‘Wake up, please wake up. Leave my daughter alone. She is your daughter too. How could you do this with her? Don’t you have any idea about the seriousness of her life? Her reputation? She will finish her graduation soon. We have already begun to look for a man to marry her.’

She sobbed and my cousin continued from where the mother left, ‘Who will marry her, uncle? Tell us, who will marry her if they get to know about this business of hers with her uncle? Don’t you want your niece to have a happy life?’

Her father shook his head and said under his breath with anger in his voice, ‘Our fathers and grandfathers have done so much to build this house and this reputation. Why are you putting us all to shame? Don’t you understand the kind of lives our forefathers have lived for us to build this house in this village full of those Bhumihaar animals?’ My cousin and I exchanged a hesitant look at his last words.

He continued, ‘We toiled. They killed our fathers because we refused to work on their land and wished to buy ours. Look at us, none of those assholes can even bat an eye at us. Do you see it? Do you?’

He sighed and I shifted on the chair uncomfortably seeing my cousin busy herself with the mother.

‘He is ruining everything for us, son. All hard work and misery for nothing. I knew it since the day I conceived him. The brat he would grow up to be!’ The grandmother spoke with helpless tears thickening her voice. My stomach lurched at that and I had an urge to run into her room and hug her into my chest and bury all the years she had lived flung from her village to this, marrying, giving birth to six girls and two boys, being beaten by her husband until the decade before he finally died. My eyes gathered tears remembering the stories of the old woman my cousin had narrated to me once upon a time. I heard her sigh and then plead to the sky she could see from the window, ‘take me, God. Take me away before I see this family,

I, so lovingly, built, fall apart. Take my life and give this young girl the years to keep this family's name. What face will I show to my husband?'

The grandmother kept speaking, 'he will blame me saying , "you couldn't take care of everything I did for the family when I left you alone. You are useless. I should never have trusted you with that responsibility." Oh, how bad I would feel at my death. I couldn't take care of this family, huh?'

The old woman screamed with all the life that was left in her broken body, 'Leave, leave, leave the girl alone, you bastard.'

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They were all waiting in silence with their eyes fixed at the shamelessness of the still girl smiling intermittently on the freezing, mud floor. The crowd at the entrance got bored of the quiet spell spread over the family that was presenting before them the drama that would be the talk of the village in the coming days. The entrance began emptying gradually with only five people left out of the fifteen or twenty that had assembled when the girl howled for mercy and fell crashing down at her mother's feet.

I was watching the scene with interest because for the first time in the past few days I had visited a place in the village where conversations had not been about me, my life in the city, my education, my boring, non-sparkly clothes, my bland makeup, my thick arms, my spaghetti hair, and if I was seeing a boy and not misusing my youthful years. I was peaceful to return to the background as I was used to at home. A girl who never managed to hold an attention until she carried stories of other people. However, the thread that held them together in one knot on the girl suddenly died and the eyes turned toward me.

The boy leaned away from the aunt after whispering something that prompted her to instruct me, 'Get up from that chair, girl.'

The father, the mother, my cousin and the people at the entrance stared at me blankly. My lips quivered with a question but my speech died as I heaved myself from the chair.

My cousin ran toward me but moved away at a distance to avoid touching me and said, ‘Couldn’t you see? This chair is not meant for sitting.’

I turned around to stare at the chair and found nothing wrong with it save for a hole smack in the middle which I found a little uncomfortable when I sat on it. I asked under my breath, ‘Why not? What’s wrong with it?’

A murmur rose at the entrance and the family seemed embarrassed at my question. My cousin pointed to the hole and then to the room from where we had heard the grandmother. She said gnashing her teeth, ‘Idiot, this chair is meant for her to sit and shit since she can’t use the regular toilet.’

My mind revulsed at the image of the old woman sitting with her bare, wrinkled ass and pushing shit through the hole into the ground. For a second, I could smell the shit and felt like puking the oily breakfast I had had in the morning.

I spoke audibly, ‘why is that kept out in the open?’

My cousin shook her head saying, ‘it was kept out in the sun, foolish girl. Wait here for me, or go back home and take a bath.’

My eyes convulsed with shame seeing the grin on the faces at the entrance at my foolishness. The family went back to their daughter basking in the sun. My cousin shook her head at me and said, ‘Dirty, shameful.’

I wanted to grab her hair and slap her tightly across her cheeks. I rolled my eyes at her and mumbled uneducated slut under my breath and was about to head toward the entrance when everything came to a standstill.

A loud piercing cry forced us to turn our heads back to the girl. She rose from the floor and sat cross-legged. My cousin ran toward her and tried to grab her. The girl pushed her away and my cousin went rolling on the floor. The mother tried to grab the girl's hand but began pleading to leave her daughter alone with her palms joined together. The aunt hid her son's face in her crotch and began chanting some God's name. From the room the grandmother howled for help, 'Take me out, take out to that girl. He will kill her. Let me talk to that bastard.'

The father had now gripped the stick firmly in his hand and said with an authority I had always wanted my father to speak in, 'What do you want? Why don't you leave my girl? What has she done?'

The girl stared at the entrance where I was standing since the crowd had cleared the way to avoid touching me. She kept looking at me and grinning and then turned to her father and said hoarsely, 'I will kill her. I won't let go of her. She is mine, mine, and will remain mine.'

'What are you talking?' The mother screamed, 'look at yourself. Have you lost your mind? She is like your daughter. How can you cause her this much pain?'

The girl began laughing hysterically. She parted her hair and I saw her face sodden with tears. She laughed with her mouth wide open and stared at the sky. She said, 'I won't ... I will... I won't let go of her...' Suddenly the husky voice disappeared and out came a helpless and angry shrilled voice of the girl I knew, 'Kill him, bash it in...kill.'

The father stood up now and raised the stick in the air and brought it down heavily on the girl's back. The girl kept sitting and indicated no sign of the pain the stick might have caused on her back. The father hit her once again and said, 'leave the girl, leave my daughter now. Come on, let her go.'

The girl stared at her father and smiled with sadness heavy in her cheeks. She whispered papa softly and fell on her back in her mother's lap.

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I moved to the side as the five people wanted to leave the house. The father stood with the stick in his hands staring at his daughter lying desolately in her mother's lap. My cousin came out from the back of the house with a mug of water. She sprinkled it on the girl who blinked her eyes and opened it gently like a princess waking up after a prince's kiss. She smiled at my cousin and rose seeing her mother's face splashed with tears. She asked, 'What happened?'

She looked over at her father and turned away from him asking my cousin, 'What happened?'

The aunt came forward to help the mother. The mother nudged her hand away and stood up drying her face. The two women returned to the kitchen. The father went into the room in the corner. The girl walked into the room where the grandmother was. The grandmother must have seen the girl because she exclaimed, 'Oh my, my girl is back. She is alive. Thank you, thank you, god. For a moment I had thought the man must have killed you. Ah, come, come, let me see, my girl.'

My cousin strode toward the entrance and stepped out without waiting for me. I followed her out passing through the cows and buffalos that were lounging in the sun chewing cud like a bevy at a fancy party. The flies lent music to the party hovering over their dung and urine. Their babies stared at us, now, with disgust and pity.

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We walked side-by-side with a distance maintained between us. She said, 'That aunt is a witch.'

I nodded, ‘How do you know?’

‘We all know it,’ she said assertively.

‘How?’ I insisted.

She stopped and stared at me and then continued walking, ‘The aunt’s mother was a renowned witch in their village. One of her brothers is born mentally deranged because of that. It is in their blood, you see.’

I must have snorted at that which made her feel as though I looked down on her. She said, ‘You know nothing staying in a city and wearing these stupid clothes.’

I retorted, ‘How do you know who is a witch and who isn’t? I didn’t see the aunt’s legs twisted or anything as such, did I or did you?’

She giggled at my naïveté and replied, ‘You really know nothing. Now listen to me.’

I saw a big stone resembling a rock at the side of the road and wished to pick it up and distort her face with it but I waited and decided to listen to her. She said, ‘people become witches when they have eaten or tasted either their shit or someone else’s. This is why if they say anything bad, it’s like a curse.’

I paused for a moment to control the laughter that arose from my stomach. However, I changed my mind and pushed myself ahead. She turned to me and said, ‘I know these things seem fun and joke to you but I realised you must have been more aware of it given your mother...’

She fell silent abruptly at that and we walked without exchanging another word.

At the entrance to our house, I asked, ‘how did her uncle die? Why did he come upon her?’

She grinned at me as though she were concealing a secret. She said, ‘maybe because he died in the room she sleeps. Blood everywhere, you know, from her bed to the broken pieces of mirror on the floor.’

‘Whose blood?’

‘The uncle’s,’ she shrugged as a matter of factly.

‘Why was there blood?’ I was curious and failed to understand what she was saying.

‘He thought only he could make my friend bleed from there’, she said and pointed at my crotch.

‘What?’ My brows were knotted with blur.

She clicked her tongue and said looking into my eyes, ‘He wanted to fuck her when the whole house had gone to the hospital with the grandmother.’

She sighed and trailed into the house saying, ‘he didn’t know my friend had called me in the house that afternoon,’ a thoughtful pause and then, ‘Clean the shit off you now, go.’

Glossary of words

1. Puris - Puri is a deep-fat fried bread made from unleavened whole-wheat flour that originated in the Indian subcontinent.
2. Angan - A courtyard
3. Bhumihar - A Hindu-upper caste from the state of Bihar in India.



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