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## **Abstract**

He tossed from one side to the next; he sighed, he got up and rummaged in the plastic box for tablets, for a headache and nerves. I lay on the same bed watching him in the dark. The luminous hands of the alarm dock pointed eerily to 4. When he turned the radio on, I got out of bed. There wasn't much I could do for him. His beloved was dying and he was grieving for her - on my bed.

KANCHANA UGBABE

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He tossed from one side to the next; he sighed, he got up and rummaged in the plastic box for tablets, for a headache and nerves. I lay on the same bed watching him in the dark. The luminous hands of the alarm clock pointed eerily to 4. When he turned the radio on, I got out of bed. There wasn't much I could do for him. His beloved was dying and he was grieving for her – on my bed.

It is like a video-strip in my mind, that Easter Weekend when I first discovered I was sharing him with someone else. You put yourself in the right mood for misery and the whole thing comes back, complete with the colour of her wrapper, the nylon scarf and the tribal marks on her cheeks.

The job down south had been a turning point in our marriage – a detour, a bypass – a pleasant diversion for him in unfamiliar territory. He was to live away from me and the children for two years. I had discouraged him from going, I had put on tantrums, wept, created a scene in the presence of his close friends. But he was determined in his grim, tight-lipped manner. That was the beginning of our separate lives, for him a new lease of bachelorhood and the privilege of being alone after sixteen years of marriage, for me, feelings of despair, rejection and incompleteness in a foreign culture. He came every Friday evening though, after sundown and left before sunrise on the Monday morning. It was also the beginning of his life as a travelling husband and of all the trappings that go with it.

I lay awake at nights and wondered if he was cut out to be single like some people are. I called him my 'silent Buddha', my 'sadhu', my 'Buddhist monk', sometimes, as he sat in the living room lost in thought, coiling a single strand of hair around his finger. He doubted like Graham Greene. Surely that Genesis story was a myth like all the other creation myths. Surely, the earth being one of the numerous planets in the Universe, was not the only privileged one. Why didn't God make us perfect in the first place? Why the Fall? Why the test? Did God fear competition from man? What is sin anyway? Is it not a societal, cultural phenomenon?

When he moved away from us, he chose an austere existence in a three-roomed house standing crookedly on sandy soil with a single mango tree in the yard. Lizards chased each other over the cement steps leading to his place. The heat beat down with a vengeance on the corrugated zinc roof. The river was only minutes away, an enormous sheet of glass as far as the horizon, but you had to go up the slope on the road to see it. The place

had neither electricity nor water in the taps. A metal water tank sat precariously on a cement platform outside his front door. He used candles, and sometimes sat in the dark with his radio on.

'I have no emotion left for pets,' he declared once, when the children wanted to bring the dog into the house. Dogs had to be chained and kept in their place, strictly for guarding the house. Where *were* his emotions, I wondered, if he had any at all. His grandmother, with whom he had spent his early childhood in the village, found use for a child only when she needed firewood, or water from the stream. 'As far back as I can remember,' he would reprimand our private-school-trained, urban children, 'I did everything for myself.' To me, it sounded like something from the previous century – the boy from the village going to school in town, with his mat rolled up and his steel trunk on his head. Where was I, I wondered, as *he* walked miles to school from the railway station, in his khaki shorts, holding his Cortina shoes in one hand. They pinched. By the time he was ten years old, he had dispensed with everyone around him – he was fully capable of looking after himself. It is that self-same boy in the faded photograph that I saw in him now – tough, resilient and independent even of a God.

I was made to be part of a team, conditioned for marriage and for a life which venerated the husband. My Indian heritage kept my grandmother behind the steel almirah when she spoke to my grandfather; my mother had had her marriage arranged for her at seventeen, and derived her life's satisfaction from watching my father eat his meals and in caring for his needs to the minutest detail.

*She* was a receptionist in that little private hospital tucked away among the Neem trees at the end of a bumpy stretch of dirt road. His sister's house was right next to the hospital – a roomy house with children playing on the verandah amidst piles of washing that awaited ironing. It was here, in his sister's yard that he would sit on steamy, hot afternoons with his glass of beer, watching the bustle outside the hospital. They exchanged greetings as she came in for the afternoon shift. He knew she was from a neighbouring village by her accent; she spoke his language except for those colourful phrases peculiar to her village. She helped out in his sister's house whenever she was off duty, cooking, ironing or plaiting someone's hair. She would have merged with the other invisible members of the extended family who did odd chores around the house, if it weren't for the fact that she stood out in my husband's mind.

Sometimes she would come forward to take his empty glass inside. He looked her over and enquired gently about her work, her parents, her village. She would answer in monosyllables, but she was a constant presence in his sister's house when he was around. If he didn't see her there when he stopped by after work, his eyes searched her out. Sometimes he would park his car outside the hospital and go in to greet her.

It was when my husband moved into the three-roomed house that I felt the first stirrings of unease – he would have called it jealousy. He was leading a life of his own, unaccountable to me as a partner in marriage. And what was wrong with that? I knew several commuting husbands, men who for years lived away from their families in big cities visiting their wives and children periodically. Hannatu, Biola and my other women friends didn't brood over companionship or the lack of it, nor did they get hysterical over similar, convenient arrangements. They accepted it with grace and lived their lives to the full. They kept the household going with the help of numerous sisters, cousins and brothers-in-law, the children fed and sent to school, the vegetable patch weeded, the poultry-yard swept and the Volkswagen Beetle in manageable condition. The husband arrives for a weekend and it is like Christmas! A chicken freshly slaughtered for his dinner, the pepper-soup bubbles in the pot, the house gets tidied and order is restored for forty-eight hours. He comes to a ready-made home. He mercifully escapes the grinding routine and the problems encountered in his absence – the malaria attacks, the pneumonia, the broken arm, the petrol queues and the electricity cuts.

With me it was never a honeymoon when he drove in on Friday evenings. I bristled with resentment. By Saturday, I loosened up a little and narrated all the trivia that had kept me going in his absence. I expected an hour-by-hour run down of events from him. But he carefully sifted and censored and selected what he told me. I blossomed in his presence though, however brief it was. In the way he took control of things from the moment he arrived. There was a precision, a firmness even in the way he turned on the radio. He always got the frequency and the metre-band he was looking for, clean and clear, not fuzzy and muffled as I heard it usually, with sea gulls crying in the background.

It was on one of his weekend visits that he mentioned her, very casually. *He didn't single her out for mention – he remarked in passing that he would be in a real strait, if it weren't for his niece and a certain Agnes who came each week to help clean his little house.* He didn't have to say more – my wifely intuition determined the rest. And that is where, I presume, it all began. He sipped his beer in the living room and watched her thin frame through the open door as she dusted and lingered over the louvres, folded his dressing-gown tenderly, and made his bed. Week after week she was into the little intimate details of where he kept his toothbrush, the side of the bed he slept on, the way he hung his shirt by the collar in the corner of the wardrobe-door. He watched her leave her fingerprints on everything, and as he moved about his solitary house late in the evening, he felt her lingering presence.

At Christmas and Easter, we usually accompanied him down south for a brief holiday, and we stayed in this stark and crooked house, without water and electricity. I had the uneasy feeling right from the start that my being there was an intrusion. I went about the house changing things

around, putting his shirts on hangers, trying to leave my stamp where she had been. The house was spotless. The children enjoyed this place hugely. It was like camping, they said. An empty living room with two chairs, an ash-tray and a little Sony pocket-radio on the dining table. His files, books, Milan Kundera and John Updike lay scattered on the floor. The kitchen had a kerosene stove, a box of matches, one set of cutlery, a plate, a coffee mug and an aluminium kettle. No 'fridge. No flowers.

He went to work as usual while we were there, calling at his sister's place to see her before coming home to the little house. He was a dutiful man, my husband, and made sure he did the right thing by her, and by me. Some men are clumsy when it comes to two women, they lie, they cheat, they are so heavy-handed about it, it shows. One of the women suffers, and it is usually the wife. I suffered within but not because my husband treated me badly. Oh, no! I suffered because he was so adept, because he was such an artist and because he 'loved' me in his own way. He was so careful not to hurt me that in my Anglo-Saxon-trained, Indian mind, his deception seemed doubly worse. He bought expensive presents for the children whenever we visited. He took us to the Palm Grove Restaurant where we sat under palm trees as freshly tapped palm wine was brought down from the trees and served along with peppered meat grilled on hot charcoal. He was 'bridging the cultures' admirably. He had, as they say, his act together. I was the misfit sitting in the heart of Nigeria, donning a brightly coloured wrapper and blouse, but within, experiencing an irreparable loss. The Indian movies of my childhood and youth hadn't prepared me for this.

I was six years old in my purple skirt and blouse and hair plaited and tied with purple ribbons. It was my first week at school. My father was the newly posted magistrate in that town. My mother, the daughter of a wealthy landowner, was conscious of our social standing and expected me to be friendly with suitable well-dressed children at school. But the teacher came by to visit at the end of the week, and in between the coffee and the tiffin that arrived on a stainless steel tray, I heard her say to my mother: 'This child has a large heart, Ma. She is always with the poorest girl in the class, that peon's daughter who comes to school with a row of safety pins on her blouse, and no chappals... The child has the heart of a saint, Ma.' Where was my large heart now, and my saintly disposition?

It was when his friend Yakubu was visiting that I first heard of the white rooster. A tribal funeral rite, he explained, where at a man's death (or a woman's), all his earthly lovers presented themselves at the burial with a white rooster each. It was a ceremony discreetly carried out at the tail end of the funeral when the immediate family had left the place. But it was not without its spectators who boasted of the man's conquests or the woman's promiscuity as the case may be. Adultery, tacitly or openly accepted, got a public airing. Yakubu made a joke of it in his usual facetious way, something about the white roosters lining up to follow the man to

the other world. It intrigued me though, as many of my husband's tribal customs did. Why white? White that is worn by widows in India, symbolically shunning the colour and splendour of this world on the death of a husband? White that stands for unblemished bridal purity and innocence in some places? White that now signified adultery, deceit, 'the other woman'.

That Easter my uneasiness poisoned our entire visit. Not without reason though. He seemed more familiar with her than ever before, a mutual understanding that excluded suspicion and query. Agnes didn't come to clean the house while I was there. However, I did see her from time to time. With me she was polite, almost respectful, like the pubescent 'amariya' in the Hausa culture, distractingly invisible, hiding behind her nylon 'gelle'. It was a little tableau in which he and she were the central characters and I, the unseen but all-knowing chorus.

I lost out on all counts. I hadn't neglected him or his household or our children. They had always been my priority. He had never complained. But I was not *her* and could never unlearn myself to be. I did all the little things that wives usually outgrow after sixteen years of marriage – freshly squeezed orange juice when he came in after a game of badminton, his meals served on special plates, flowers in vases, books and cards, in and out of birthday seasons. But I was not monosyllabic like her, nor servile, even when I tried to be a wholesome and cheerful chattel. My education and upbringing came through when I dusted the *louvres*. She was without expectation; she had him when *he* chose to be with her, and demanded nothing of him. When she was not in her hospital uniform and smelling of antiseptic, she was in what seemed to be her one and only faded blue wrapper. She didn't listen to the radio and didn't claim to know about existentialism. But she probably knew how to love.

That was eight years ago. Since then my husband has resigned his job down south and has moved back with us. Every time his travels took him in that direction, my thoughts went to her. But I assuaged my fears thinking that distance would have cooled his ardour.

The grimness with which he announced her illness startled me. She was dying of an undiagnosed disease in the same hospital where she had worked. A telephone message had said she was on the decline. A cloud hung over the two of us that entire evening; he, choked with grief, tried to doze in snatches with the radio on. I tried to read a book, my head splitting with questions. It didn't come as a surprise to me when I saw him packing his travelling case early in the morning. If there was a message for him at the office that she had died, he would travel directly, he said. The menacing white rooster rose like a spectre in my mind.