Days Past

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Abstract
In the middle of a dream I am being roused: 'Shruti ... Shruti ... ' My name sounds like a wail. Above mine, an ancient face leans, with eyes that have been sucked into their sockets; cheeks, caved in. A frayed hand grips my shoulder and shakes it hard: 'Shruti, Shruti ... I forgot my medicines ... '
In the middle of a dream I am being roused: 'Shruti... Shruti...' My name sounds like a wail. Above mine, an ancient face leans, with eyes that have been sucked into their sockets; cheeks, caved in. A frayed hand grips my shoulder and shakes it hard: 'Shruti, Shruti... I forgot my medicines...'

I cover the knobbly fingers with my own: 'No ma, you didn’t... I gave them to you myself – with Horlicks.'

One or two blinks, and then back to her bed she shuffles. I, to my dream of other nights, to a time when I slept with the moon and stars looking down at me. Inhaling jasmine perfumed air. Through shut eyes I would know when the first light had seeped through the darkness. In the trees, the birds chorused. Air, chilled and crisp, sifted through my sleep-warm bed. An hour later the aroma of hot milk would arouse me. Time to get up for school. I smile now, sleepy as I was then, as the image of mama slides before my eyes: Standing beside my bed in one of her high necked dressing gowns, holding a glass of milk flavoured with crushed almonds and cardamom. This, she awoke me with every morning.

I try harder and harder to hang on to this vision. For many mornings now she looks at me through vacant, faded eyes. 'Who are you?' she says, 'Don’t I know you?' Her eyebrows bridge together as she tries to place me.

'IT’s me ma, Shruti...'

From my mind I try to skim the knowledge that I no longer belong to her world.

'Shruti...' She tries it out, pleased by the sound.

'Shruti... haven’t I heard that before?' She is like a child who can’t quite grasp an idea.

'Yes ma, it’s me... your daughter... Shruti...'

A calm then descends, her face clears, like a suddenly cloudless sky.

'Ah yes... Shruti...'

In a room that smells of used clothing, propped up on a mound of pillows, mama lies. A glassful of yellow teeth sit on the table beside her. Close to her ear she clutches a worn-out radio emitting squeaky, scratchy sounds. She listens intently. Until six months ago, I could hear the newsreader’s voice at the end of the corridor; at that time she listened to
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four bulletins a day.

‘Shruti...’ she once said, ‘The English news reported four dead after
the temple explosion in Bhatinda...but the Hindi newsreader said 20 had
died...which do you think I should believe?’

Another recent morning she greeted me, dressed in a silk saree. It was
mid-June and the air was swollen with heat. On mama’s forehead and
upper lip, moisture beads coalesced.

‘Ma, why are you wearing such thick clothes?’

That she was not complaining irritated rather than pleased me.

‘But Shruti...you know I have no other clothes...’ Her expression and
tone expressed her utter confusion.

I led her to the cupboard. One look inside at the piles of cotton clothes,
and the wizened face collapsed, a hundred more lines appeared. ‘Oh
Shruti’, she sobbed, ‘I forgot...I keep forgetting...’

In the kitchen I collect plates for breakfast, looking away from decayed
surfaces, the dirt that encrusts them. My eyes settle instead on the wood
of a lost time, rich and glossy from constant care. I imagine the whiff of
the lemon polish that used to tinge the air. Yet I cannot ignore the
cobwebs matting the corners of walls; the stained cracked kitchen sink.

Tup, Tup, the tap dribbles. Blotching the embroidered traycloth there are
tea stains, that I try to cover with cups. It doesn’t matter, though: She
doesn’t notice these details anymore. At one time she would remind us,
her children, time and again, ‘Maintainence is the key to longevity...’

On the first of every month the silver and brassware was polished;
shoes and handbags aired. The family always slept on stiff white sheets.
For every meal the table was set formally; placemats, silverware, and
even starched napkins. Paying attention to these details seemed
effortless for her, like sleeping or eating.

After breakfast mama bathes. I fill her bucket with tepid water, set her
towel and clothes so that she can reach them easily. From her shrunken
body, clothes are removed: she is half her size now. Age, and a
dwindling interest in food has seen to that. I wait outside, alert for the
sounds from the bathroom. When mama emerges, I massage coconut oil
into the roots of her hair, gradually working it into the strands, that have
faded from ebony to ash to the white threads that now lace her scalp.

Finely etched lines divide her face into countless parts, her skin is
yellowed, like a dirty tooth. The flesh on her face and body seems to
have fallen out of its bony frame: her neck now sags, like an unfixed
curtain.

When I was as old as my daughter is now, I used to admire the
tautness of mama’s midriff, her crisp cotton sarees. Just as I loved
watching her sit before the tall straight backed mirror in her bedroom,
using the silver backed combs and brushes that belonged to her mother,
and now belong to me. The kajal box always lay in the right hand corner
of her top drawer. In it lay the sooty waxy kohl she made at home, by
burning a cotton wick in mustard oil. When she applied it, her eyes would assume a luminous quality, a clear steady gaze. Calm that would be disrupted by turbulence in an instant: Mama angered very quickly.

Still clear in my mind are the frequent clashes that took place between our old cook, Sitaram, and her. She would constantly supervise his cooking, insisting that he do things exactly her way; put ginger in a curry that he believed ought to have garlic, or pepper where there should have been chilli. He never seemed to cook anything the way mama believed it ought to have been cooked. In the middle of a meal she would suddenly pick up the dish of meat, and rush into the kitchen. Papa and I would continue eating, and talking in loud voices, in an attempt to ignore the angry exchange going on in the kitchen:

'It is two day old, this meat,' she shouted, 'where did you buy it...?' And Sitaram’s equally heated response, ‘It is absolutely fresh madam, no one can sell ME old meat...’

With Papa, too she would erupt. On the way to the market one day, papa realized that the petrol level in the tank was low. He started veering the car towards the closest petrol station, only to be stopped by mama.

‘No pa, don’t go there, Kamal always gets cheated...they mixed kerosene in the petrol last time she was here...’

Papa’s expression was disbelieving. He continued driving in the same direction. ‘I don’t trust Kamal,’ he said, ‘I always buy petrol here.’ From the back seat I could sense mama’s anger, that seemed to rise from somewhere deep within, and erupt with a force that was frightening. As soon as papa stopped the car and handed the attendant the keys, mama stepped out of the car, slammed the door shut, and began marching home.

Now, mama is so quiet, so passive. People frighten her. She can’t place them or remember their names. So she sits quietly, numb in their presence, afraid that whatever she says will reveal her state of mind. When mama does talk her speech is incoherent and she drifts wildly, from one subject to another. ‘I think I should call up the post office – for the letters you know...letters...Shruti, should I eat a toast now, or later?’

Last evening I was entertaining some friends when mama strutted in, clad in a long black coat, a red muffler, carrying an umbrella. ‘Shruti’, she said, ‘I’m off for a walk with your father...’. The moment had transformed her into a young wife again, dressed for the morning walk she and papa went for, twenty years ago.

Sometimes I wake at night to see her sitting up, clutching her bed; her eyes luminous with terror. She can’t remember where she is, what day or time it is. Her mind travels only backwards now, to her days as a young girl: the rides in her father’s glistening Jaguar are vivid, as is an image of herself in a pink dress, at her tenth birthday party, and the face of the teacher who taught her to say ‘She sells sea shells on the sea
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... without stumbling. But she can’t remember what she ate for breakfast that morning, whether she had a bath or not, and what her grandson’s name is.

Mama’s connection only to the past makes me wonder how she views the future. What does it look like in her eyes? What are its elements? The image that forms in my mind is threatening, like a giant cloud of dust. It’s garbled, and jars like spliced photographs that have been stuck together at random, or different kinds of music being played together. Discordant, clashing.

Looking at her I think of conversations that have not been had, lost time. I want to ask her what her favourite subject at school was, or what I was like as a baby. But she has no answers anymore: they are trapped, entangled inside her.