

Sanawbar by Homeira Qaderi

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It was two past midnight. I am lying on my mother's empty bed, with my long hair forming a wave around me. I closed my eyes, hoping that the memory would still be there.

Tears were uncontrollably flowing down my face. Mother then came with a bottle of coconut oil and a wooden comb my father had brought as a gift from India. Mother's fingers slipped into my hair as the smell of coconut oil entered my chest. But I was still shedding tears; she was trying to comfort me,

"Your father will be back soon. He loves us both."

I hit the ground. With tears now stopped, I screamed:

"I want him back right now. Right now!"

I shake and open my eyes. I walk out of the bedroom and through the empty hall, counting my steps. The house looks like an abandoned graveyard of a long-forgotten city. Mother is in the hospital after a heart attack, and father has not returned for fifteen years. I touch my face- it has become smaller under my hand, and my eyes are burning from crying. The dizziness and insomnia of this last week drained every ounce of energy out of me. I need to get some sleep. I promised my mother that I would take care of myself. Yesterday, on the hospital bed, she said to me:

"My eyes are happy with your color and young face, my daughter."

In the past fifteen years since my father left, her heart trembled every day, but she never let me despair. But then, suddenly, she fell on the kitchen floor. When she opened her eyes in the hospital, she seemed to have aged a thousand years. All those sorrows had jumped out from under the mask of her face.

I am closing my eyes once again.

I am in India with my father. In Delhi, at the Babar garden. Everything around us is green except for the blue sky. The weather is humid and hot. Black clouds are stirring. There is a loud commotion when the raindrops hit the pile of tangled leaves. I have brought a cheap colored chocolate envelope with me. Squirrels hear the opening of the chocolate cover and rush toward me. I sprinkle the chocolates on the ground, entertained by their battle over the crunches. I say, "I will take one back to Kabul."

Father does not answer. I look behind me, trying to see why he doesn't say anything, but he is not there. I start screaming.

My mother hugs me,

"Father is coming back. He loves us both."

I scream,

"I want my father right now!"

When I wake up, my pillow is wet. I have never been to Bagh Babar. My father brought colorful bangles from there and stories that we had never heard before. He promised to get me a velvet-tail squirrel, but he didn't return to bring it.

For us, he was lost, dead or alive. Mother did not know any of my father's friends. My father did not have a brother to search for him, and his two sisters had never seen any other place beyond Kabul. But my mother kept saying:

"He will return."

As soon as the sun had risen, I stood behind the window to watch my mother's garden. Under the sun, the garden looked thirsty. I was playing with my curly-hair doll when my uncle entered the yard. I was nine or ten years old back then.

My uncle told my mother:

"I will find this unzealous man. He has been missing for two years. I will find him and send his daughter to him."

My uncle picked a rosebud from the garden and cut off its leaf before dropping it on the ground.

"How can a man leave his wife and daughter so indifferently? If he had fallen in love there, he should have told you so that you know what to do with your destiny."

My mother responded:

"He will be found. He will return."

My uncle grims:

"If he wanted to come back, he would have done it by now. You shouldn't be alone in this house. Gather your things and come to your father's house with your daughter."

Hearing that, I ran to my mother and cried.

My mother said to my uncle:

"This is my daughter's father's house. I will wait for her father here. You can visit us anytime if you want to know how we are doing."

It is half past eight in the morning. They won't let me see my mother until two o'clock in the afternoon. Every day, from two o'clock to six in the evening, I stay with my mother. I've got a private room for her so that she does not have to deal with the visits of other patients. I know how hard it is for her to lie in front of unknown men.

In those distant years, after the father did not come, my mother threw herself into the little garden in our yard. She soon became a knowledgeable gardener and gathered flowers from everywhere. Her brothers came many times and said:

"Go get a divorce in absentia. You are still young. Go back to your life."

My mother looked at me and said:

"He will return. We will wait for him."

I walk into the mother's room; there, in her wardrobe, hangs a purple satin shirt with an open collar and embellished sleeve ends. My father had brought it back the last time he came from India; my mother wore it once and never touched it again. I look at a photo of the two of them that's sitting next to my mother's dusty dressing table. It was taken in our garden, under the grapevine. My father was tall and thin and had his arms wrapped around my mother's waist. My mother rested her arms on his. Her brown eyes were calm and happy. Her hair was as short as my father's hair. She had red lipstick on her lips.

I touch the photo, moving my finger across their faces. Two watches are placed next to the photo- the same two watches that they wore in the photo. Father had forgotten to put it on at

the last minute of the trip. Mother never took the watch away from her eyes. She kept it there, next to hers, to remind her that he would come.

I put the photo in its place and went to the kitchen. I put the kettle on the gas flame. I don't need to close my eyes anymore.

The food on Fridays was broth. Father was tying his apron before he would start cooking. I would always become his little trainee. When my father did not come, my mother continued to cook broth on Friday. I have seen her kneeling in the kitchen many times, crying. As I grew older, I noticed that the mother crying in the kitchen became sadder and more desperate.

I feel nauseous. It's because I'm hungry. I open the breadbasket, but the bread is completely dry and moldy. The last time I was at this table with my mother. I pour a spoonful of sugar into the tea.

My father and I used to go to the corner of the garden to feed my ants. We used to give a little more sugar to Zarghone and to Leila. We had named all the ants. One was named after mother, Sanowbar, another was named after father, Rahmat.

I finish the tea halfway and go to the garden. It screams:

“We want her right now. Right now. “

I turn on the water and put the hose next to the bushes. Two of my mother's apple trees have had a blooming year. The branches are full of small unripe apples. I take the water to withered pots. I am upset with myself. When the mother returns home, we will leave the father's house. I want her to take her eyes away from this house. Everything that is a relic of the father should stay here. His watch included. Even if he comes back, we have lost a lot of time. *I will take my mother from here.*

I walk to the hospital at two o'clock. I'm stopping by the flower shop on my way. I look at the flowers. I say to the florist:

“Two of these furn branches, two white roses and this pink rose.”

Between the white and pink roses appears a red rose. I say:

“Only white and pink”

A fresh purple orchid branch catches my eye.

“I also want this orchid.”

I bend down, on the leaves and green branches that are placed a few rows below the flowers.

“Use some lilies of the valley to decorate. You can add some eucalyptus leaves too.”

I continue:

“Leaf foliages are also beautiful. Place a few of them on top of the decorative leaves.”

The florist replies:

“Excuse me, which ones?”

I will show him the leaf.

The florist places all the ordered bouquets on the counter. Meanwhile, the choice of paper and ribbon is around the flowers.

“White please. Both ribbon and paper.”

I want it to look like a hand of white wedding flowers.

Last year, in the springtime, I went with my mother to her father's house.

Among all the flowers she knew and she had seen, my mother loved tulips the most. She never picked them; instead, she used to sit in the garden and look at them, saying:

“This flower has a very weak heart. Displace it, and it will fall down.”

Every year she used to tell the story of all red tulips:

“Once upon a time, there was a girl whose lover, one day in spring, left her in the plain and went away. The girl could not survive the grief caused by her lover's leave and cried so much that the tears turned into blood. After that, every year in the spring, every drop of that blood becomes a red tulip.”

The florist asks:

“How do you know the names of all these flowers?”

I smile at the boy and say,

“My mother is a florist too.”

I won't say that my mother was busy in her garden in spring and summer to escape from her grief, and during the long winter nights, she spent many hours reading about flowers to me so that the sadness of our father not coming would not destroy us.

I leave the shop. According to my mother, our life is not a tablecloth spread everywhere.

In those years, I was happy to have the photos of my father and I. On his shoulder, on his knees, beside him. One evening my uncle sat next to me:

“Susan, your mother lived through those photos and grew old. Do not follow her path. The nature of people is different from their photos. That man must have another wife and children by now.”

I cried all night. In the morning, I heard my mother talking on the phone:

“What are you doing! She loves her father. He is not a snowman that melted with the passage of seasons!”

My mother was right. Each of us had kept our father in the corner of our hearts.

Of course, these last few years I didn't talk about my father anymore. If my mother would mention him, I would get aggressive and say that's enough. Two weeks ago, my mother was pounding ginger in the kitchen. Suddenly I heard a loud sound- not a sound of breaking, but a heavy sound of falling. I ran to the kitchen. My mother was lying still on the floor. She has had a stroke.

When she opened her eyes in the hospital, I kissed her a hundred times, and said,

“Speak about my father as much as you want.”

My uncle came to the hospital immediately after. He cried and said,

“Did you see, Sanowbar? This is what the sorrow did with your heart!”

The hospital is not far from our home. I walk the way there. My headache has started again. I wish I could eat something. I want to be strong and fresh in front of my mother.

When I get to the hospital, the visits have already started. I open the door of my mother's room. She is asleep, so I sit on the chair, trying to move as little as possible. I have decorated my mother's room with beautiful bouquets of flowers. Even yesterday, I brought two of the vases

from the house, which my mother likes very much, and placed them next to her bed. The uncle reached after me and says:

“Such beautiful flowers!”

My mother opens her eyes. I say,

“A hand of flowers for a beautiful lady. A beautiful bride.”

"It is still not late. If Sanowbar wants...," my uncle says.

My mother's tears start running down her face.

Then, someone knocks on the door of the room.