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An Unrestored Woman

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AN UNRESTORED WOMAN

Neela, on the night she learned of her husband's death, sat under the banyan tree outside their hut and felt an intense hunger. It was on the night of the train accident. No, not an accident, she corrected herself. Not at all. She felt this same hunger on her wedding day. She was thirteen years old, and she sat on the altar wearing a sparkling red sari and the gold *mangal sutra* around her neck—thin, even by the reduced standards of the impoverished northern village—and tried desperately to silence her growling stomach.

The hunger on her wedding day might've been caused by the tempting mountains of food stacked around her. Fruits, coconuts, *laddoos*, twisted piles of orange *jilebi*. She'd never seen so much food; her mouth watered. She hadn't eaten since early morning and that had only been a meager helping of rice and buttermilk. Neela eyed the bananas and mangoes piled on the plate between her and the priest. He was reciting Sanskrit prayers. Her soon-to-be husband who sat beside her, wiry and dark like a dry summer chili, was turned away from her talking to a man she didn't recognize. In truth, she hardly recognized even her groom. Her red veil obscured him from view. Besides, she'd only seen him once before; she'd stolen a glimpse when he'd sat talking with her father, both of them bent and pecking over the details of her marriage like two crows over a piece of stale bread.

Her father had said it was a good match; he'd given her future husband—who was 24 years old and owned a tea shop catering to the commuter trains between Amritsar and Lahore—two cows, a trunk full of pots and pans, a bag of seed, and a green woolen blanket. Even the thickness of the gold necklace had been negotiated. Babu, her groom, had scowled at its flimsiness and had only been appeased when Neela's father had said, "Look. Look at that girl. Strong as an ox. She'll bear you no less than ten sons!"

Neela stared at the plate. She obviously couldn't eat one of the mangoes, but why not a banana? If only she could sneak it from the plate then she could manage peeling it under her veil. Her bent head would

hide the chewing. She extended an arm forward surreptitiously. Then a little further. She sighed. It was just beyond her reach. Someone would notice. She pulled back, weak, hungrier than ever. The plump yellow of the bananas called to her. Their smooth skins were the edge of a sunrise. They were the voice of her mother. She'd died giving birth to Neela, but Neela had imagined her voice many, many times, flawless and brave, and cool like the banana skin. Just then, the priest shifted his legs and jostled the plate. What luck! It bumped closer to Neela. This was her chance. Her arm darted out, plucked the outermost banana, and whisked it under her veil. The first bite slid down her throat and into her empty stomach. Her eyes widened with delight just as her husband's had when he'd opened the trunk full of glistening pots.

The details of the train wreck trickled down to Neela. First over the news wire, heard by the men of the village over the transistor radio in the home of Lalla, the village elder. He brought the news to her mother-in-law, who Lalla came to see as soon as the news program ended. "Those ugly Muslims," he said, "They would torch a train full of children as long as they were Hindu." Her mother-in-law—nearly blind, kind and gentle compared to most mother-in-laws Neela had heard stories about—had only looked up at Lalla with her sad, unadorned eyes and said, "Every mother will tell you: that train *was* full of children."

The events, as Neela peeked from behind the bamboo screen separating the main room of the hut from the kitchen, followed many of the stories of madness in the months after partition. The train had been traveling its eastern course, the last evening run to Lahore. Babu had gotten on with his kettle of tea at Wagah, and that was the last anyone had seen of him. The train had been ambushed a few kilometers outside of Wagah by a horde of Muslim men. They'd torched each of the cars one by one, back to front, as if lighting a row of candles. "My son's body," Neela's mother-in-law asked slowly. Lalla shook his head. "They were laid out like rows of roasted corn," he said indecently, "No one can tell them apart." Then he rose to leave, handing her mother-in-law something Neela couldn't see. "Enough for both of you," he said, closing the door behind him.

Her mother-in-law, bent by a long and pitiless life, entered the kitchen. "Finish your tea, *beti*," she said, "Then we'll take care of your hair." Neela

nodded. She would soon be bald. She would never again be allowed to use *kumkum* or anything else to adorn her face. She would not be allowed to grow out her hair or go to the temple or to ever wear anything but white, the color of death. Even the thin gold *mangal sutra* she slid off her neck and handed to her mother-in-law, who buried it deep in the bag of rice for safekeeping. Though none of this Neela minded, not very much, not as much as she'd minded the nights with Babu.

They hadn't been so bad in the beginning. He'd seemed just as shy as she was when he'd reached for her in the dark. There had been blood and a little pain but that had soon passed. It was only after a few months that Babu had become rough. Tugging at her sari, pushing himself inside her, slapping her if she resisted. She knew it was her duty, a part of being an obedient wife, and she bore it without a word of complaint. But what she didn't understand was why he never spoke to her. Why he ate his dinner without a word. Even when the jasmine bloomed lush and fragrant in her hair, and she served him tea in the evening shade of the banyan tree, he'd hardly look at her.

"Will you build me a swing," she'd once asked, a year after they'd been married. "It could hang from there," she'd said, pointing to the lowest branch of the tree.

He'd looked up towards where she was pointing, into the wide cover of green, leathery leaves and hoary branches, and said, "Swinging is for monkeys. Are you a monkey?"

Neela thought of monkeys and of bananas and realized—with a clarity that was surprising in its force—that she recognized the man sitting in front of her no more than she had on their wedding day.

Her mother-in-law looked at her. Her hand trembled as it reached for Neela's. How different they were: Neela's moist and smooth, her mother-in-law's tough and wrinkled like dried dates. She was crying again. "We'll drink this tonight," she said, slipping a thick bottle into Neela's hand. The bottle was made of dark brown glass and filled with liquid. "What is it?" Neela asked.

"Something to make us sleep," her mother-in-law said.

And Neela understood. Her father-in-law had died years ago, she'd never even met him, and now Babu was dead. What good were two women, two widows, alone in this world?

“Lalla said it would be quiet, peaceful, like falling asleep in a mother’s arms,” she said. Neela bent her head and wondered what that might feel like, to fall asleep in a mother’s arms.

Neela woke the second morning after her husband’s death with a pounding headache. She was groggy; her muscles ached. She was confused. Her mother-in-law had drunk half the bottle then handed it to Neela. She’d sipped it, not more than a drop or two, and held it in her mouth. Neela had waited till the old woman had closed her eyes then ran to the back of the hut and vomited. She’d then slipped into the kitchen and buried the bottle in the bag of rice. Now, in the grim morning light, she turned to look at her mother-in-law. Her chest was still. Neela reached for her then snapped her hand away. Her mother-in-law’s body was cold. Her eyes were open and lifeless, staring in the direction of the banyan tree.

Lalla came by later in the morning. He did nothing to hide his disgust. “You fool,” he scowled, “You think that bottle was cheap? You spit it out, didn’t you?” He eyed her with a cold stare. Neela wrapped her *pullo* tighter around her shoulders. “No,” she said, “I didn’t spit it out.” Her face grew warm. What if he asked to see the bottle?

“Give me your *mangal sutra*,” he finally said, “I’ll see what I can do.” Neela went to the bag of rice and dug her fingers into the kernels. How pleasant: the cool of the rice. Her hand first grazed the solidness of the bottle. She kept her expression unchanged; Lalla was watching her. She wriggled past it until she found the necklace. When her hands came up they were coated in a thin dust as if hundreds of butterfly wings had brushed against them. She handed Lalla the necklace. He returned an hour later and told her he’d secured passage for her on a bus headed for a nearby camp. It was set up by the Indian government, he said.

“For what?” she asked.

“For items that are useless,” he said, “Like you.”

When the bus pulled into the camp, some four hours after it’d set off from Atari, Neela noticed the small handwritten sign posted on the gate: “Camp for Refugees and Unrestored Women. District 15, Punjab State.” Beyond was a row of tents. She was assigned to a small, dirty cot in the largest of the tents. Neela set down her bag, containing only her mother-in-law’s white sari so that she’d have a change of clothes, and a pair of socks and *chapals* for when it got too cold to go barefoot.

She met Renu on the first night. She was Neela's age, maybe a year or two older. Her wide eyes were lustrous and pretty even under her shorn head. She was as thin as a reed, and Neela realized they'd been assigned to the same cot due to lack of space. Renu took one look at Neela and burst out laughing. "Do you know you have the silliest bump on the top of your head?" she asked. Neela shook her head. "Haven't you looked in a mirror since your head was shaved?" Neela shook her head again. "It looks like a hillock in my old village," Renu said, "The one our temple is built on." She pulled a handkerchief from her bag, knotted it into a wide dome, and balanced it on Neela's head. "There," she said, "Now you have the temple too."

They were inseparable after that. They ate together, did chores together, gossiped together. They played among the tents and fetched water from the nearby well in the mornings. Sometimes they slept holding hands. Renu told her about her husband. He'd been a farmer. They'd had three acres and a pair of goats. The Muslim mob had burned everything, including her husband. Renu said this with tears in her eyes, and Neela knew she should feel sad for her, but she didn't. She did feel awful that her husband had died, but she was also glad that he had; how else would they have met?

During their fifth night in the camp, Renu and Neela lay on their cot talking in whispers. Since the camp had no electricity or kerosene they slept soon after their dinner of one thin *roti* and a small spoonful of potato curry. Most of the other women were already asleep. Renu had snuck in an extra *roti* for Neela, and she nibbled it while Renu talked about their lives.

"It wasn't the actual, you know, *chum chum* that was nice," Renu said with a sigh, "It was how he held me afterwards."

Neela stopped chewing.

Renu looked at her in the dark. "Didn't yours?"

"No."

"Put the *roti* away. I'll show you." Neela stuffed the remaining piece into her mouth. "Lie on your side," Renu said, turning onto her back and slipping her arm under Neela's while guiding her towards her shoulder until Neela's head came to rest against her neck. "Like this," she said.

Neela closed her eyes. The warmth of Renu's neck, the scent of her body, left Neela aching. Hollow. It was a feeling she could not describe.

Though she *could* describe what it was not: it was not lonely, it was not sad. It was keenly felt but it caused no pain. It was not the skin of a banana. Nor the leaves of the dusty banyan tree. It was not hunger, not anymore.

On Neela's ninth day at the camp, Babu came to fetch her. She was ushered into the tent by one of the camp administrators. "Your husband is here," the woman announced.

"That's impossible," Neela said, "He's dead."

The woman nodded towards the far end of the tent. And there he was, exactly as Neela remembered him: dry and depleted, as if he'd been left out in the sun too long. She blinked and blinked, and then she felt faint. It couldn't be. All the blood drained from her body. Her mouth filled with the bitterness of the liquid in the dark brown bottle. "But I thought—"

"I was never on that train," he said, "A whole week in a cell without a window. Stripping a man just to see if he's a Muslim. Lying, telling me my mother is dead. Those bastards, they're no better than animals."

He reached for her absently as if reaching for fruit on a high branch. For fruit he barely wanted to eat. It occurred to her in that moment that her husband had not died. He had not. And that her life had taken yet another turn: she was no longer a widow. She heard the laughter of the women in the camp. The sound came to her as if through a long and airy tunnel. She listened for Renu's. What reached her instead was Babu's voice saying, "Get your things. The bus leaves in ten minutes."

The hut was just as she'd left it. Babu's pants still hung from the nail by the door. The reed mats were still folded neatly in the kitchen. The bag of rice stood untouched. Even the banyan tree looked as if not a wisp of wind had troubled it in the nine days Neela had been gone.

For dinner that night she made rice and *dahl* and *subzi* with the egg-plant Babu had purchased at the market on their way home from the bus stop. After they'd eaten, she made two cups of tea and took them out to the banyan tree. Babu was sitting cross-legged beneath it. Earlier she'd noticed his eyes glisten with tears when he'd discovered that the police hadn't lied: his mother was dead. He'd stood at the door, stolen one quick glance at Neela, then left the hut without a word. Now he was bent over

something she could not see. When she handed him his tea, she saw that it was her *mangal sutra*. She sat down beside him.

Babu took a sip of his tea. "I'm glad I found you," he said.

Neela turned to look at him. *He was?* A sudden warmth flooded her. She'd been wrong. He cared for her after all. He'd been lonely too. He just hadn't known how to show it but now he would. Now they'd show each other.

"That's the only way Lalla would give the *mangal sutra* back," he continued, "He said, 'Why do you need it? She's gone.' You should've seen the look on his face when I told him I'd found you." He finished his tea and held the empty cup out to Neela. "Hope that hair doesn't take long to grow back," he said, "Your head looks like a melon."

That night Babu took her, as Neela knew he would. Then he turned over and went to sleep. She lay awake for a long while afterwards. They'd moved their reed mat outdoors because of the heat. The branches of the banyan tree swayed in the hot wind, and Neela lay in the dark looking into them. How long had it stood there? Maybe hundreds of years. She thought of her mother and wondered whether she'd been cradled in her arms for even a moment before she'd died. She thought of her father. Then she thought of Renu. She felt her eyes warm with tears. With hardly a thought, almost as if the decision had been waiting there all along, Neela rose soundlessly and walked back into the hut. She dug her fingers through the bag of rice and lifted the dark brown bottle out of the kernels.

And so there *was* one thing that was different: it was not as bitter as she remembered it.

She went back to the reed mat and lay down next to Babu. He was snoring lightly. She looked again into the branches. They fluttered and hummed with her every breath. The stars beyond spun like wheels. The branches reached down, and just as she closed her eyes, they gathered her up onto their shoulders and held her as she had always dreamed of being held. As she would never be held again.