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That Night

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The house seemed deliciously silent after he left for office. She could breathe freely now.

She could never adjust to his moods and his anger.His anger was always terrifying in nature.It was harsh,sudden and always unreasonable,never used for discipline or to guide.It always fuelled the burning vengeance in the hearts of the ones who had been unnecessarily silenced.The house ran on *his* moods.The entire household waited with bated breath when he started one of his raving 'sessions'.Each prayed to be spared as a victim and all prayed for the chosen 'culprit'.Nobody was allowed to put in a word.It was always the other one at fault ; to have had done something that triggered *his* mood.He was not to be blamed *ever*.He was ,after all, *forced* to behave like this. Her poor mother-in-law had never been able to control her son and had only sobbed whenever asked about her dead husband. She had perhaps been waiting for her son's bride to come and take charge, leaving for her eternal journey just one year after the marriage.

She hated her life.She hated her submission,her gradual helplessness to deal with the violent streaks of his character. She could never understand him.What did he want? There was no one to guide her, help her, advise her to understand him better. Why was he like this ? And how could she prevent the wild reactions that could be elicited out of *anything*. Breaking a Ming vase was allowed but extra salt in the curry was almost a crime.

She remembered her college days.She had gone to the Archies,to get a gift for her friend's birthday.There it was,the cute wall hanging..." I am the boss of my house,with my wife's permission."Her friends had loved it.They thought it suited her personality. "She would really twiddle her hubby around her little finger, they had teased. Her friends had pooled in and gifted it to her.The news of her engagement had leaked.But the wall hanging could never be displayed.It lay buried under the quilts.

She went and opened the big trunk.The quilts were taken out one by one.It lay there, still covered in the golden cellophane.She picked it up and threw it against the wall.It shattered into tiny fragments and only 'boss' glared at her.

She felt like crying.The pent up emotions took their toil.Quiet often she spent her afternoons weeping copiously,hidden in her bedroom after he had stung her with his venomous words.She thought of sitting in front of the mirror,to gaze at her herself as she shed tears. Her aunt always said she looked like Manisha Koirala, more so, when she cried,all puffy eyed,red nosed,tousled hair.Yes,she needed to feed her narcissism ; in order to survive. She moved towards the dressing table.The doorbell rang.She ignored it.It rang again.She cursed the

caller. Crossing the long alley she went towards the door, straightening the cushions and also checking her reflection in the hall mirror. She was very conscious of their public image. It might be Mrs. Mehta... or Mrs. Shukla. She had to be cautious. All of them, especially these two neighbours were always trying to fork out something. They guessed all was not well but never asked and she never discussed. She would *never* wash her dirty linen in public. This was not her nature. Even he maintained this. Thank God she was not weeping, that would have been hot gossip.

The long silent corridor greeted her. A small bird chirped at the parapet. She stood perplexed. Who could have come? Must have been one of the mischief makers, ringing bells and disturbing people in the afternoons. Silently she turned and then saw it : the envelope, lying near the doormat. She picked it up eagerly but was disappointed to find it addressed to him. Of course who would write to her ? That too, in this internet age. With no smartphone and no internet connection she could never even think of connecting with her old friends. She switched on the television but found nothing interesting. What a waste of time! She had to spend long hours all alone, simply killing time. She was not allowed to take up any job. That would be unbearable to him. And she hated kitty parties. Oh ! why had papa chosen this man for me. She always asked this question but there was no one to answer her. Her parents had succumbed to the injuries in a road accident just eight months after her marriage.

Soon it was time to cook the snacks and prepare the evening meal, to make the house spic n span and be ready---bright and beautiful---to welcome home the 'boss'.

His manner was surprisingly calm and the evening passed quietly. He was immersed in his paper work and she busied herself arranging the wardrobe. Dinner was to be served exactly at nine pm even if it meant missing her favourite serial. He was pleased with her dishes, taking two helpings of the curry and an extra chapatti.

She finished her chores silently and came to bed. She saw him propped up against the pillow, leafing through a magazine. Her body instantly stiffened. He was wide awake. He was waiting---for her---his prey. He usually fell fast asleep by ten. This was the indication that he wanted her today---he chose his moments of passion very selfishly. She sighed and picked up her nightie, proceeding towards the bathroom. But he lay his fingers on her nape and pulled her back. His gentle touch turned strong and hurting in no time. He was violent and brutal even in his love-making. Due to reasons best known to him, he preferred making love in the dark : rapid and fast. He never bothered removing their clothes, pushing the saree up and loosening his pajamas was enough. There seemed to be a cruel urgency in him, as if he was running against time. He *never* kissed, never ever on her lips ; she got only love bites at the tender places, as if an animal had gnawed at her body. She always kept her eyes shut and teeth clenched waiting for the ordeal to get over. Not a single sound was expected to come out---whether of pain or of passion. She felt no joy ever, there was never a union of bodies, let alone of souls. It was just by chance that she opened her eyes and saw him, poised over her, eyes glinting even in the dark. The expression on his face had been unreadable but nevertheless frightening. It was a full moon night and the hovering clouds had drifted away, leaving the silvery glow to walk through the window panes and illumine his face. With flared

nostrils,widely open mouth,dilated pupils,tongue hanging out and a heaving chest ; perspiration running down, he seemed to resemble an Alsatian. He needed just two long canines to complete the picture.The mere idea made her break into a fit of giggles.He was shocked.His concentration was broken.He remained momentarily perplexed but soon his eyes expressed acute anger.She could feel his body stiffening and then losing its strength. But she could not stop her giggles.They went on and on.As if a lifetime of misery was being obliterated in those never ending giggles.

He shook her violently.He seized her shoulders and pulled her up roughly.But the fits of laughter continued.And then he slapped her---right across her face---his palm solid and strong---his rings cutting across her already lacerated lips.Her shock,her pain seemed to revitalize him and he resumed his task,pumping with all his vigour,concentrating on achieving his goal.

She realized at this point that she hated him more than anyone or anything in this world and she could not bear to stay any longer with him.He kept on hurting her,focused on satisfying himself.She flayed her arms wildly and felt the statue touch her fingers.The statue of the naked dancing girl---one that she had seen and admired at Bangkok---on their honeymoon--- he had bought it for her---one of the rare moments when he had been generous. He could be generous and extremely loving only when he wanted to. She remembered her first night.How loving, how gentle, how patient he had been, turning every minute into moments of exquisite delight.Her reverie was broken by the acute pain she felt. It jolted her to reality. His left paw clutched her left breast. His fingers moved callously as if he was kneading some dough. The insensitive man ! She had complained of pain and a probable lump in that area but he had merely shrugged. And now...how inhuman one could be !!! Was this a kind of punishment for her giggles. Must be.

Suddenly it was too much---unbearable.The dam broke.The volcano erupted.The bomb exploded.She had to hurt him---make him experience pain---real excruciating pain.Make him realize what pain meant.The agony that she felt always and the physical assault that she had to endure as his wife.She *had* to hurt him.There was no time to lose.She picked up the statue and hit him hard at the back of his head.It was the perfect angle and a perfect hit.The action had the desired effect.Her pain stopped instantly.He froze.Then put his hands up to his head,the pain mirrored on his face.And then he looked down at her,still spread-eagled on the bed.He looked murderous.She saw his eyes---full of mad fury.She had to save herself.She picked up all her strength and pushed him back.He fell backwards on the bed.She rolled over and began to run.But he was very quick.He caught her leg and pulled her.She wrenched herself free and ran towards the balcony, to shout for help.She knew he was going to kill her.She heard his body moving towards her,bent in pain,clutching his head.It was dark now.The moon was hidden by the clouds.He was trying hard not to scream aloud.She could see that.She could not see any blood.Twice he fell down but did not stop moving towards her.She was horrified.She realized she had been so foolish---so stupid---in fact mad to have even made such an attempt.She could not move back any further.She was trapped.The low wall of the balcony was behind her,they lived in the thirteenth floor ; an ominous number. His sinister presence loomed large in front. Will he kill me,she asked herself.Is he going to throw

me down? She watched him coming closer and closer. He clutched at the door and the *toran* hanging at the door broke. Even in her acute fear she could recall how beautiful the torans were. Big and small glistening, violet coloured beads were strung together lovingly into layered patterns to make the beautiful *torans*. Of all the colours available in the shop, she had chosen violet: so regal and beautiful, the colour of royalty. Her father had remarked, 'just right for my princess,'. She had made those torans so lovingly. So many of them. Hung them at every door of her home---her sweet home, to cast off the evil eye and to welcome peace and prosperity. As he took the final lunge towards her, trying to catch her, he slipped over the beads and collided against the large rubber plant. He was thrown towards the balcony, right on the edge, his body dangling almost halfway down the railing. Her blood turned cold in horror and in fear. His body swayed dangerously against the fragile railing. She pushed her knuckles in her mouth trying to stifle her screams. She was too terrified to even give him a hand, to pull him towards the safer corner.

“ You bitch !!! you dirty bitch...I'll kill you,” he cried and tried to haul himself up with great effort but lost his balance. The moon went behind the clouds the very same moment and there was darkness. The next moment, the clouds drifted slightly and she could make out his body falling down the empty space, down...down...down... and away from her sight. Her scream was loud enough to wake the whole building and then she fainted, mercifully. Even in shock she remembered that she was not naked, she was thankful to him for that ; he never undressed her completely.

Twenty five years later.

She was going past her son's bedroom when she halted. She heard the ever familiar...similar voice...the same tone ; mocking...humiliating...hurting.

“You bitch, you couldn't even polish my shoes properly.” Then the sound of someone being hit. The glass falling on the floor with a shatter. A soft thud. The shoe hurled maybe. She felt sick. The floor shook. The *toran* made of the violet beads, made and hung by her so long ago still shone bright and swayed lightly in the gentle morning wind. She kept gazing at it. And then she heard it. The stifled sobs of her daughter-in-law.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. The bastard had taken his revenge, after all. His son...their son...her only child...the seed sown that dark night was an exact replica of his father...she had tried...tried all the time but had failed. And she could not even think of *killing him/wishing him dead*.