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The Bathtub

Harini Rajasekhar

Water gushed into my mouth, water burned my open eyes, fought my eyelids as I tried to screw them shut. Green water, swirling and splashing – my choking gasps were clouds of bubbles. I could feel his hand on the back of my neck, his fingers crushing my windpipe. I tried to get back up but he only pushed me down deeper. I was kneeling on the cold bathroom floor, and my knees felt like they were about to crack under the pressure. My fingers struggled frantically to remove his grip. My temples began to throb and my eyesight started to blur. I felt light-headed, a darkness began to creep in through the corners of my vision.

My thrashing ceased, my hands floated down through the green and rested, palms down, on the floor of the bath tub. It was cold and smooth, and criss-crossed with shimmering light reflected through the sea green of the water. I remember how he had laughed at my desire to buy a bath tub.

“It’s like bathing in your own dirty water!”

I had imagined a white walled bathroom, with champagne coloured tiles and shiny taps and faucets, all bathed in golden yellow lights. And an ornate oval mirror that hung above the sleek sink, opposite to the big bathtub. And oh, for that bathtub, what plans I had had. Scented candles and aromatic bath oils, white foam thick on the hot water.

But not this. Never this.

My eyes closed. The first time he hit me, I was too stunned to speak. And I didn’t speak – and no one knew.

“You’re so lucky , he gets you such beautiful things!” exclaimed my aunt, as she unfurled heavy silk saree out on the bed.

“And that too, without you even asking!” My mother ran her fingers over the dark pink silk and the gold mango patterns.

“You remember how she used to go on and on about her bathtub fantasies? Well, right after they got married , he got her one!” my mother said to my aunt.

They both laughed.

“I really hope Priya gets someone just like him.” Said my aunt.

I smiled. I turned and quickly whispered a prayer for Priya to never get a husband like mine.

The next day, we arrived at my aunt’s new house for the grahapravesha.

I was very busy the whole day, helping around the house for the pooja - arranging flowers, putting kumkum tikkas on photos of Gods, arranging little pots of milk and water, and trays of jaggery and bananas. The guests came and I had to attend to them, show them around the house and to the dining hall where they would be served a traditional lunch on banana leaves. I did not

have much time for Anand. He walked around, socializing with my family, charming all my aunts and grandaunts and nieces, making sure they were seated and comfortable and talking to them about me. They were all a flutter, flattered and excited at receiving such treatment, and fawned over him. He really knew how to please everyone. A part of me hoped this was how he really was, but I knew Anand, and he was nothing like this. He was bored; he expected me to be at his side constantly.

The few times I went to stand by his side to pose for the over-enthusiastic photographer and to receive his parents, I felt the hardness of his grip over my waist.

“I knew she’d look beautiful in this colour,” he said, when I was complimented on my pink silk. “That’s why the moment I saw it, I picked it up.”

Even though he was smiling, I knew by his coldness toward me – that nobody else noticed- that I was in trouble.

When we got home, he removed his belt and left ugly blue bruises on my arms and back.

“What did you think I was, some dog that should just tag along everywhere behind you?” he had shouted, while he removed his belt. “I am not a dog, I am your husband, and you will treat me like that, understand? Don’t expect me to follow you around!”

I wore long sleeved kurtas or used dupattas and jackets to hide my bruises. I showed no one, told no one.

It was my word against his, who would believe me?

On the days we went to visit my parents, I would watch my mother happily gossiping while she made biryani, or my father drinking his filter coffee behind the open newspaper, and I would wonder what they would do if they knew. What would they feel if they found out that the very man they chose to be my husband, was a monster?

Through the darkness, something glinted. I opened my eyes a tiny bit. Through the green shimmered what looked like a pool of liquid mercury. I tried to focus on it, my mind slowly waking up. I put out one finger to touch it.

It wasn’t liquid – it was flat and smooth. It was a shard from the broken mirror –the one he had flung at me in a murderous rage, when I told him, finally, that I would leave him. The mirror that shattered into a thousand pieces of glittering glass on the wall behind the bathtub.

My fingers closed around the shard.

He was standing behind me, stooping, one hand on my throat, and the other pushing my head under the water. I frantically put my hands out of the water, groping around, feeling for his face. My hands fell on warm skin and I felt a vein pulse under my finger tips – with a vengeance, with all the pent-up rage in me, I thrust the glass blindly into his flesh. I felt it sink in, deep, and heard his cry of anger and pain as his grip relaxed. He released me.

I pulled my head out of the water and fell on the floor, gasping and retching.

“You bitch!” he screamed. He had fallen to the floor, thrashing, clutching his neck – I had pushed the glass into his throat.

Dark blood was streaming down his chest, staining his shirt, pooling on the floor beside him. I stood up, shaking, and watched him scream. He was trying to pull it out of his flesh.

I did nothing to help him. I just watched him lie there for a moment, his cussing and screaming echoing off the walls of the bathroom. I just watched him, and I felt nothing.

After a moment, I walked out of the bathroom and sat down on the bed.

Gradually, his screaming faded to hoarse gasps. I heard him grunt, and the tinkle of glass on the tiled floor. He was trying to stand up. My neck and shoulders tensed, and my hands balled into fists, buried in the folds of my salwaar.

My heart began to thump hard. I had just attacked him, I had stabbed him. What would he do to me now? *He'll kill you.* A voice said in my head.

My breath caught at my throat when I saw the already ajar bathroom door creak open further. He stepped outside, blood all over his hands, shoulders, neck and chest. He was holding the snowy white towel I used to keep by the bath tub over his wound. He looked at me, and despite the fear in every part of my being, I stared back at him. I looked into his eyes, and as he looked into mine, he realized I had made up my mind. He realized that had he not pulled the glass out by himself, had it been pushed deeper into his flesh and cut his arteries, I would have not come to his aid. I would have left him there to die.

And then Anand did the most shocking thing. He didn't raise a finger on me. He turned around, and left the room, leaving the door open behind him. I released my breath, afraid no more.