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The Woman Who Ran Away

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She was last seen in the colony at five pm, dressed in a bright red *salwaar kameez* with a resplendent, red coloured *bandhni dupatta*. The evening walkers had begun crawling out of their homes and most of them, recognizing her as the Chopra bahu clearly recalled her happy, glowing face as she had greeted each of them.

“She looked *so* happy because she was running away with her lover ?”

“Oh my God !!!! What a shame !”

“What about her daughter ?”

“Never expected Kajal would be doing such a thing”

“That *dhobi*..of all the people.”

“Disgusting ! Isn't it ! Shows her character ! Must be having affairs with other men too...”

“Did she take cash and jewellery? Must have....”

“Who knows...you never know what girls today are up to.”

“ But she looked so decent.”

“You can't really trust people any more.I saw Madhavi sitting and crying....what a shame her daughter-in-law brought her.”

“What the world is coming to...you really don't know.”

The talks went on.It was human nature in its full element; after all a juicy piece of news, that too in a small colony is always welcome for days of verbal assassinations and character mutilation.And Kajal had done the worst that any quintessential Indian wife could do : she had run away with Prakash,the young *dhobi*, leaving her in-laws in a lurch, not bothering about her small daughter : just because her husband was working hard in some other place and they could not live together, maybe for a couple of years more. All the ladies continued talking about Kajal,each one trying to outdo the other in the contemptuous tone and volley of insults.What they discussed most was the person Kajal had chosen to run away with. A *dhobi*,of all the people.That immediately established her as low and characterless as if running away with a rich respectable man would not have lowered her credentials so

much. Her in-laws, especially the mother-in-law had refused meeting people in shame and in mortification. She could not bear the smirks that people threw at her, reminding her that her daughter-in-law had run away, and that too, with a *dhobi* of all the people. Such disgrace for the entire family!

I was not very close to Kajal. She was just one of the few people I knew in the colony. Since I neither had the free time nor the desire to keep sitting and listening to the endless talks, I got up : disturbed, confused, puzzled but also worried. Kajal *should have been* forgotten, should have been a fading memory, a closed chapter.

But Kajal kept haunting me. I remembered her smiling pretty face, the sparkling eyes so clearly. And that throaty laughter...it was like the bubbles of a spring, pure, happy and unbridled.

Kajal soon became a closed chapter for others. Life moved on and people busied themselves in various activities.

But for me, Kajal's story does not end here. On the contrary it begins now, taking me back to the day I met her on the streets, laden with packages, a beautiful but definitely over-weight young woman. Her nine year old daughter had slipped from her hold and had started running towards the shop on the other side of the road completely oblivious to the dangerous traffic. Seeing her helpless situation and her obese form, I came to her rescue and catching hold of her daughter swiftly, took her to the shop, placated her with a chocolate and waited for Kajal to arrive, huffing and puffing. She thanked me profusely and I could see her chewing gutka as she drew near. The casual conversation led to the discovery that both of us lived in the same adjoining colony and so we returned together.

There was a candour, an honesty about the girl which was very endearing and definitely very appealing. But I could feel that beneath her bubbly personality and her cheerfulness, there was some trouble. Her eyes became vacant for a few intermittent seconds but became alive the moment she glanced at her daughter, Janhvi. It was obvious that her daughter was her life. As we walked, she spoke a lot about herself. Within minutes I knew that she was born and brought up in Bhilai and her parents were soon going to shift to Delhi ; she was the eldest of the three sisters ; her husband worked in a construction company at Raipur and she had to stay with her aged in-laws at Ranchi due to their health issues ; also that she was an excellent cook as well as an entrepreneur running a small boutique from home, dealing in unstitched fabrics. Her eyes sparkled as she described her material and enthusiastically expressed her desire to plunge into stitching and designing , once her daughter grows up. Having had received an invitation to look at her fabrics, we bid goodbye, promising to be in touch. Since I was new to the city, this interesting and lively acquaintance seemed very promising.

However, life became very busy thereafter, setting up my house and while settling in the ever familiar routine, my self-made promise to visit Kajal's place remained forgotten for a very long time. It was just by chance that I went to her place, accompanying my neighbour for buying *rakhis*, not knowing it was actually Kajal's home I was visiting. Kajal's surprise at seeing me was soon matched by her hospitality and her zeal in displaying her products. Her

lovely fabrics tempted me to buy one for myself, even if it meant stretching my budget a little more. She was quick to offer me credit, assuring me that her customers never cheated her and also that nothing should come between a woman's efforts to please her aesthetic senses and her ability to do so. Though I declined the offer, I was touched by the beautiful feelings she possessed. Her daughter was beside her all the time, demanding her mother's attention. Kajal dealt with everything calmly, checking her daughter's spellings, giving vegetables to the cook, talking to the plumber and at the same time remembering to give medicines to her father-in-law on time.

The more I saw her, moving around : eager and enthusiastic, chirpy and cheerful, the more I fell in love with this girl. There was a certain charm in her that made her so endearing and likeable. Her mother-in-law also came and joined us as Kajal served us tea. She was polite and caring but I could make out that the two ladies did not share a very comfortable relationship. The usual story everywhere I thought, sipping my tea. It was amusing however to observe the old lady pick up and try every dress material against herself, even the brightest ones. Moreover, she behaved as if she was a customer herself, even asking the price of a few from Kajal. Laden with packets, my neighbour Sudha having had gladly availed Kajal's generous offer, we took our leave.

Sudha burst out in a loud guffaw as we turned into the alley.

"Gosh ! auntie will never change. Do you know she had actually hidden Kajal's *lahanga*, the one that she was supposed to wear at her reception because she thought it would make Kajal look more attractive than her."

"What ??? I don't believe it." I said.

"Nobody does. But its true. Auntie is very jealous of Kajal : the usual single son, mama's boy thing you know. Kajal tries her best, she's very patient. I would have been completely intolerant to the kind of demands they make. The worst thing is, when Vijay comes home, auntie tries to monopolize him totally, not giving a single moment of privacy to the couple", said Sudha running out of breath after this strong outburst.

"That's actually very bad."

"Of course it is. In fact my maid was telling me that she even coaxes Vijay to sleep in her room ; pretending to miss him, being terrified of old age. Wanting to keep him near her as much as possible."

What an incredulous thing, I thought As we climbed the stairs, I could not resist asking Sudha whether Kajal talked to anyone about her problems. Did she have any friends.

"No ! Never. She does have a friend in the real sense of the word. As it is, she is very busy and she is not the kind of person to wash her dirty linen in public. She's very dignified, in fact a boon as a daughter-in-law in the Chopra household. Auntie and uncle have always been troublesome and not very adjustable. Before Kajal came, no maid was ready to work in their house. Imagine paying your maid on a daily basis. How cheap could you get."

I kept meeting the two Chopra ladies quite often, although they were rarely together. Auntie's favourite haunt seemed to be the tailor's shop in our colony; a place I frequented very often too. Sometimes she asked my advice on a certain design. I remained polite and very guarded because I had observed that the advice offered was actually very rarely implemented. Kajal I always found in high spirits, dressed in beautiful embroidered salwar-suits, mostly bright yellows and vibrant reds.

"The colours you wear seem to suit your personality", I told her as I met her near the grocery shop. She grinned, exposing gutka stained teeth. I wanted to ask her to stop this dirty habit but then I restrained myself : after all we were not on such intimate terms.

"I bought these earrings yesterday, with my earnings," she said proudly ,leaning closer to let me have a look.

"Very pretty," I said. But with the earrings, I also saw the dullness in her eyes : the same pain that she always tried to camouflage with her carefree demeanour. Something is wrong. Definitely. But what ? Her eyes met mine momentarily. She seemed to be on the verge of saying something, hesitating, still undecided. Before I could help her open up, Jahnvi came running with the ice-cream cone and the brief moment was interrupted.

I noticed a significant change in Kajal when I saw her next, after a gap of almost two months. She had somehow managed to spend the summer holidays with her husband and had returned slimmer and trimmer, looking prettier and definitely more sophisticated. Her voice had lost that noisy shriek, she draped her dupatta more demurely now and she had stopped chewing *gutka* completely. She seemed very happy when I complimented her, confiding that her husband had made her promise not to eat gutka ever and her svelte figure was a result of following a strict diet and exercising regularly and also that she had been very slim before her marriage and won't be lackadaisical regarding her health and appearance thereafter. I was happy to see that this time her eyes sparkled fully. The dull pain seemed to have disappeared. God bless her always, I sent a silent prayer to Gods. Kajal informed me proudly that her husband had been chosen the district Rotary Head and as his wife, she was supposed to address two meetings in the next week. She ran towards the tailor's shop, obviously in preparation for her new role and as I followed her spree, my eyes fell on her mother-in-law standing beside the pillar, half-hidden, but apparently eavesdropping, going by the expression on her face. Strangely I felt more sympathy than anger for this old lady and hoped she did not resort to any evil deed.

My next and perhaps the last meeting with Kajal was the only one where I got glimpses of her troubles. Never a person to complain or to show disrespect towards her elders, things had become indeed worsened to the point where it became difficult to bear any longer. In that vulnerable moment, she poured her heart out : in broken fragments, sometimes incoherent, at times slightly abusive, particularly towards her husband whom she termed an escapist, running away from his responsibilities as a son and expecting the daughter-in-law to be fully devoted. What was remarkable was her complete lack of tears or self-reproach. She just went on stating facts, oblivious to the surroundings. The vegetable-seller was the only person who

listened to her words and she even turned to him to confirm what she was saying as he, a virtual stranger had offered to personally deliver vegetables everyday, something that he never did, seeing her plight and had inadvertently witnessed the ugly scene at home. From her angry words I somehow understood that her father-in-law had been operated suddenly for his prostrates and Kajal had managed everything efficiently, from monitoring the hospital activities, looking after her daughter and preparing food for the patient, even spending the night at the hospital because her mother-in-law was very 'delicate', and then rushing home early in the morning to supervise the household activities. Her mother-in-law remained confined to her bedroom, supposedly shattered and fearful, providing no assistance whatsoever. Even the son left her to cope alone under the pretext of work load. Kajal *had* continued her work dutifully, even going without a bath for two days and missing meals in her tight schedule. What completely unsettled her was that while no one was ready to appreciate her dedicated service; her mother-in-law was angry with her because Kajal had prepared only gourd curry for the patient, forgetting that her mother-in-law never touched gourd and needed her bhindi very urgently. If this childish demand was not enough, she had the gall to ring up her son and complain to him of gross neglect and the icing on the cake was the audacity of Vijay, her husband, ringing her up and scolding her very badly for this 'heinous crime'.

I saw this whole thing as an attention-seeking strategy of an old, psychologically plagued woman, but Kajal's fury had no bounds. She seemed unstoppable and only after she had let out her anger that she calmed down, took the vegetables and proceeded towards her home. This outburst made me understand the mental anguish this young girl underwent daily and what a strain it was for her to keep up the happy façade to blend in with the societal norms.

Five years later.

I was busy bargaining with the shoe seller at Janpath when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around expecting my daughter who had promised to join me for lunch if possible. But what stood in front of me appeared to be a mirage. It was Kajal, the same Kajal who had run away with the *dhobi*, shaming her whole family. But how different this Kajal was!!!!

Clad in slim fitting black trousers and a white shirt, a beautiful red dupatta draped around her neck, she appeared smart and confident, displaying poise and composure, oozing self-confidence. What was remarkable was that this confidence did not seem to be a product of a change in attire but that of her inner strength and overall assertiveness that was clearly reflected in the way she carried herself. And as she removed her glasses, the transformation seemed complete. The eyes shone bright. There was no pain, no dullness seen anymore. They were full of life, of effervescence, of joy and peace.

Kajal laughed aloud at the expression on my face. The same laughter, pure and unbridled.

"Aren't you going to ask about my lover, *that dhobi*? Aren't you curious?", she asked, as if provoking me.

I remained quiet. Suddenly she hugged me tight. Then withdrawing quickly, she confessed softly, “You won’t believe it, but you are the only person I really wanted to meet after that incident. Everyday, I prayed to God, asking him for this meeting and today, my prayers were answered.”

“Me...”, why ?”, I asked her, clearly puzzled.

“Because you are the only one in the colony who is not judgemental, the only one who would actually reflect upon ‘why’ and the only one who would think good of me even after what I am supposed to have done”, she replied.

She is actually speaking the truth, I said to myself.

“Come, let’s sit somewhere, we need to talk”, she urged.

We were soon seated at a nearby café and having ordered cold coffee, Kajal turned to me and dropped her first bomb.

“Would you believe me if I told you that the entire ‘dhobi’ episode was actually planned by me?”

That I was speechless would be the understatement of the year. Before I could recover from the initial shock, the second missile was shot.

“That this was the revenge I took on the whole family for the injustices they had inflicted on me and treating me as a servant? My love and dedication had no value for them.”

“But...but what about Jahnvi?, I stammered. “Your daughter ! You left her ! You did not think of her ! Who would take care of her ? You..you didn’t think of what would happen to her ?”

“Do you really think that ? Do you really believe I could do that to my daughter, the very reason of my existence, leaving her in the care of such heartless people? A woman who never once held my daughter in her arms ; would I dare to leave her in her care.”

“So...where is she?”

“What have they been telling people ?”

“They said she’s in a hostel, difficult to manage without a mother, and that how heartless you were.”

“Huh ! Liars ! All three of them !! Lying to save their face. Heartless my foot !!! Jahnvi is with me, here in Delhi, she’s in 8th Std. now.”

“Kajal, I don’t understand !”

“The entire episode was staged, well-planned, as it is in the movies . Jahnvi was already in Delhi with my parents, enrolled in a school. I did not want *her* to know about this incident. I had discussed everything with my family lawyer the last time I visited my parents. Presently, I am working as an apprentice under him.”

“Wow, a lawyer!”, even in that confusion, I admired her emancipation.

“You see, I was ready to tolerate the callous behavior of my in-laws, taking care of them as my own parents, forgiving their deliberate mistakes and trying to be a dutiful *bahu*, even if they were *never* satisfied. I gave up my family life to take care of them, never wanting to displace or uproot them from *their* home. I *hardly* met my parents and sisters, I neglected my daughter, I gave up my career !!! But I never complained, I always tried to be happy. You realised all this didn’t you?”, she enquired fervently, as if seeking affirmation.

“Yes, of course you did. All of us realized this.”

Her eyes lit up brilliantly and she continued.

“But Vijay had been cheating on me. He had another woman living with him at Raipur. He exploited me, his legally wedded wife to bear the responsibilities at home while he enjoyed his life to the hilt. He always excused himself saying he had to work hard for our future. What future? Now that I look back I realize how naïve I was. Why didn’t I ask him to look for a job in our hometown?”

“Are you sure about this?”

“Of course ! I was getting hints but I chose to ignore them. I behaved like an ostrich, you know. It was my sister and her friend who brought all the details. They contacted someone in Vijay’s company who gave them all details. He had married that girl, cheating her too and he is ready for the alimony only on condition that I keep quiet about his illegal second marriage. Vijay wants to move to Dubai, has applied for a visa. If I lodge a case, the visa and his life both are finished. So he is ready for an out of court settlement.”

“Did you meet him?”

“No way ! Never!! He doesn’t even know where I might be. All the correspondence is through my lawyers”, Kajal added emphatically.

“But why did you run away like that? With all the evidence you had you could have got a divorce anyway”, I could not help asking.

“*But I wanted to teach them a lesson.* I was shocked to know that Vijay’s mom knew all the time about Vijay’s affair and that it was she who not only encouraged him but also pressurized to solemnize the relationship, reminding him not to take undue advantage of any woman.”

“And what about you? Are you not a woman? How could she do this to you? Such hypocrisy!!!” I almost shouted aloud.

“Exactly!!! *How could she do this to me?* What kind of a woman is she? The kind who doesn’t feel anything. The kind who ought to be taught a lesson. Thus this drama !!! I convinced Sushil, the ironwallah with great difficulty. In return he was not only reimbursed well but also employed in my cousin’s firm ; the only clause being he will not set foot in

Ranchi for the next ten years. Sushil was all alone, his parents were dead, so with nobody back home, it was easier remaining committed.”

“Who planned all this?” I couldn’t help asking.

“My younger sister”, Kajal blurted instantly, proudly. “She is a lawyer herself and since I had been a role model to her, she could not bear the deception and the exploitation I was subjected to. Putting the brightest dresses, being conspicuous and remaining an introvert were her ideas. It was she who picked this dupatta for me,” said Kajal, fingering the red dupatta lovingly, “and instructed me to wear it on my person so that people retain this image of me after my supposed ‘running away’, ”she said, guffawing in laughter. The next moment she whispered in a misty voice, “My family is my greatest support. I feel so loved, so protected. My father took a long time to recover from what he considers the guilt of a wrong decision in my case but I consider it destiny. Today can look after my parents, I have my daughter, I have my job : what more do I need?”

“Well.... do you...”, I didn’t know how to put it but Kajal came to my rescue.

“You want to know whether or not I would marry again, and if there is a man in my life?” she implored, cheekily and continued, smiling at my bemused expression. “There isn’t anyone in my life right now and the question of remarriage is definitely out of question : what the future holds I don’t know. But in any case, you will be the first person, apart from my family to know about it.”

“Just one question Kajal”, I could not help asking. “Why did you need to go through all this? From all that you have told me I can see that a divorce was inevitable and justified in your case. But this elopement, with a *dhobi*, does not seem correct for. Particularly for you !!! You have no idea how people keep talking about you. How insulting they can be!!! Why did you allow them to think of you in such a bad light ?”

“Oh do they? Do they still talk badly about me?”, she asked in an unbelieving happy tone.

“Why are you so happy to know that people consider you a fallen woman, a woman with a ‘loose character’? Do you want to spend your life being branded a fallen woman?”, I questioned her angrily.

“Yes...!! Yes !!! Oh yes !!! I want them to remember me as a fallen woman, a characterless woman !!!!! This the image that I wanted to leave behind.... Now my revenge is complete... I have avenged myself. Thank you for this wonderful news !!! And please, please never disclose my whereabouts and my plan to anyone in the colony, ever. Let them keep thinking of me as the fallen woman... exactly how I wanted... do.... do let them. ”

My wide-eyed gaze and dumb expression was enough to produce that warm throaty chuckle. Then covering her head with her dupatta, looking like a beautiful young bride, she leaned closer, held my hands and whispered softly,

“Don’t you understand : the fallen woman, the characterless girl ,the *dhobi*’s lover they are talking about is *not* Kajal...she is Vijay’s wife, Mrs. Vijay Chopra, the daughter-in-law of Mr. Vinay Chopra and Mrs. Madhavi Chopra. It is *she who has run away, not Kajal*. And as long as the Chopras are alive, *they* will have to live with this insult, this disgrace, this dishonor, brought on their family by *their* daughter-in-law, “ *the woman who ran away.*”

And the laughter continued.