

# WE WERE NEVER HERE

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*'The first word was written by a man, but the ink came from the blood of a woman.'*

— Zehra Mumtaz Rashid, *The Eighth Wave of Feminism*

We all left one bright morning, when the sun's golden streaks shot across the heavily cracked pavement, as the roosters were still crowing, as the call to prayer receded into an echo. The dry leaves scattered on the brick road crunched beneath our feet, the garbage bags steaming in the heat, yellowing apple peels scattered about from last night's meals, paan spit blending into the dust, the refuse of a world we no longer wanted.

At first, they didn't notice us leave. Some of them were in the mosque, some washing their faces over their bathroom sinks, shaving, groaning on their toilet seats as they relieved themselves of the previous day's burdens. Some of them were still asleep, snoring softly as we put on our scarves, packed a small bag of everything we loved, and quietly closed the doors behind us. Some of us had no one to leave behind, we departed from empty rooms without fixing our beds, the sheets softly crumpled, the smell of our powder, the henna from our hair, sweat, soap, oily skin lingering as if we had evaporated. We rolled off the hard mats we put on the ground by the roadside, under the shredded tarp that covered us in the harsh foggy winter, rubbing our chapped hands, leaving behind the stench of poverty that quickly faded as we walked away. Perhaps we hoped that by leaving, we would shed all the smells, all the fat of this gluttonous city, all the heaviness that sank deep into our skin and into the skin of men.

We had heard whispers, passed from one woman's mouth to another's ears. Whispers of a secret tunnel running through the salt mines outside the city. Against the crystal walls where carts were once propelled forward

along firm tracks, that were now tossed aside, where men once toiled under single light bulbs or in complete darkness. We heard of others disappearing, after making their way into the tunnel in search of sanctuary.

We heard of her, the mother, vanishing in a puff of smoke one morning as the vegetable seller haggled with her grown son. They turned around and she was gone, her plastic shopping bag abandoned, without a sound of protest. We imagined she had given up on this life of compromise, this constant back and forth from the vegetable stand, and decided to make her way through the tunnel in search of something.

We heard of her, the young bride, who calmly walked away from her marriage bed as her husband prepared to enter their room. No note, just a bundle of vermillion and gold, with her diamonds placed on top like heirlooms from an age long past resting in a museum.

We heard of her, the tired middle-aged schoolteacher, who did not return to her class after the break, whose disappearance was only noticed when the principal realized the sounds of mayhem in the classroom had been going on for an hour.

We heard of a secret garden lying hidden at the end of the tunnel, and on the other side of the garden in an old convent was the sanctuary. Whatever was waiting for us there, it could be better than this – anything must be better than this, we thought.

We were afraid at first, deathly afraid. What would they all feel when they realized we were missing? How would they go on?



*'We toiled in fields, we nurtured our screaming children, we lay on our backs as men pounded fragments of themselves into our bodies. We were sucked dry, beaten, pampered, preened, torn, broken, peeled, rubbed, touched, prodded, pricked, pinched, painted over, painted under, painted within, stripped to make us beautiful, and then covered to protect our beauty.'*

— Kausar Jehangir, *The Ninth Wave of Feminism*

Once, long before we were here, the convent protected women from another world, wives who arrived with their men, the invaders, who enriched themselves off our labour and left. Then the convent selected a few of us, the indoctrinated ones, the wealthy ones, the malleable ones.

Once, we were prepared for marriage behind these walls. When the invaders departed, taking our wealth with them, the convent fell into disrepair, ruin. A few missionaries remained, seeking to salvage its cruel purpose from the rubble, begging for donations from any poor converts. Eventually, they also gave up and left. Now, the convent sits heavily among the rushes behind a dark mountain, just for us, surrounded by grey rocks and a wind that whispers the past to us in our sleep.

Our sanctuary is a large dark house of brick with hidden walls and endless passageways, lined with carpets and high windows. The caretakers, stern women with bamboo canes, tell us in hushed voices to strip ourselves of our clothes, jewels, everything and line up.

'Your journey begins with purification,' a woman with a long gaunt nose and drooping cheeks intoned. 'You are now in our care,' says Nosewoman. 'You need nothing from your past lives.'

'But this is mother's bracelet!' One of us, a small girl with small features, as if they were painted on her porcelain face by a brush of goat's hair, huffs at the end of the line. A sharp snap, the stick makes a *thwack* on the floor and the girl winces.

'Why did you come here, little girl?'

'To get away from my father.'

'And why did you want to leave your father?'

The girl looks at her feet. She shrinks. 'He beat me.'

'Your friend tells me he did much more than that.'

The girl glances up, eyes wide, her face reddens.

'We are all women of pain here. We have no secrets. Tell us what he did.'

'He touched me,' she whimpers. 'Every night, he came to my bed and took off my clothes and touched the parts mother said we were supposed to cover. He did that thing married people do. Except he is my father and I let him -- because I was taught obedience!' Her voice is shrill and she is shaking.

We gasp, shake our heads, tug our earlobes in shock. Some of us weep with her, others pray loudly; the caretakers are sombre and wait for the clamour to subside. Nosewoman's cheeks stretch as she smiles.

'He was your father. You are no longer his. You are free.'

The girl sighs, her face is now in her hands, and Nosewoman embraces her. Nosewoman shakes, her arms so tightly wound around the girl that

some of us start forward. *Is she strangling her? Is she going to ever let her go?*

But she releases her and tears the girl's gold bracelet off her arm and throws it on to the floor. It is an elaborate piece with jasmynes carved on its surface. A glint of light shines off the end of the circle, a snake's head with its mouth open, diamond teeth spark menacingly until another caretaker kicks it away in disgust.

We begin to peel off our clothes; some of us have more to peel than the others. Some came here wearing nothing but thin shirts, light shawls covering our heads, escaping with little to show from our past lives. Some came kicking and screaming, bearing bags of jewellery, pictures of husbands, children, grandchildren, letters from old lovers, tattered copies of the Quran, or gold-leaf encrusted leather-bound copies wrapped in velvet or silk.

Some of us have soft hands smelling of powder, expensive creams with lavender, rose and flowers that the others have never even seen. Others have hands with callused, peeling skin that smell like soapsuds, onions, garlic, turmeric and flour.

We are old and young, we have sagging breasts with wrinkled nipples and round breasts tipped with pink, unbroken circles. We left our babies or we escaped the marital bed. Some of us came here as lovers. Some of us came searching for love. Some of us have marks around the thighs, handprints larger than ours. Some of us have smooth, untouched skin but burning discontent inside us.

Some of us were picked up, bereft on the roadside. Some plotted their escapes in secret alleyways, using telephones inside petrol pumps, travelling long distances in the back of a truck. Some of us don't share how we arrived.

Some of us were given the wrong names, wrong bodies, wrong faces. Some of us brought our new names, new bodies. Some hoped to find new names, new bodies.

Some of us can't explain why we are here.

There was a gaping hole inside us, we say.

Some of us can read very well and are assigned to teach those who cannot. It is a useful skill for women, our caretakers tell us. Reading in the hands of women is like fire in the hands of men.

We read scripture in a vast library remade for us. Books line dark walls in rooms with dark carpets on the floor where we sit wearing threadbare

white shalwar-kameezes and clean faces. Our rooms are circular with round windows, dropping smooth beams of light on to us. The shelves strain under the weight of knowing. We crave more, we are starved, we tear through the books, their spines straining under our hands, the wind rushing from their pages. We whisper the words to ourselves.

Our bodies are free, we laugh, we walk with our shoulders pulled back, unencumbered by the weight of the outside world.

A thin wind rattles through the halls, bringing fresh air around our ankles. We sleep in a long hallway and a pale moon grins from the high windows above us. Dark blue shadows flit across our mattresses, spectres from the outside, but by the time we turn to the roof, they are gone. The wind makes us shiver at night and the excitement of this new world vanishes with sleep. We toss and turn and wake up screaming in the night, imagining that by some cruel twist of fate, we were never here.



*'The past is a rock pulling us to the bottom of the flowing river of patriarchy.'*

—Sultana Shakir, *The Tenth Wave of Feminism*

Before the sun rises, we wait in the dark as our hallway turns a pale blue and the grey stone walls sharpen and shimmer like the insides of a pond. At dawn, thin shards of light emerge from the small windows high above us.

One of us likes to tell the others she is a self-taught reader. But Nosewoman, whom we now call Madam Parveen, rebukes her. 'We are not here to reflect on our past. We are here to shed it.'

The root causes of our oppression is the subject of the first lesson of the day. It is an exhaustive deconstruction of the wrongs done to us over generations, from the control exerted over our bodies to the forceful disenfranchisement of our mothers and grandmothers through oppressive property and inheritance laws.

Some of us shift around, picking at our noses or nails, or breaking off split ends, others pay rapt attention. A former lawyer, the best student among us, was threatened by the police for fighting for a woman burned by her husband with acid. Another one of us has a face scarred and pockmarked by petrol.

The burn victim despises the once-wealthy bride ever since she said the burn victim's face was lopsided. The lawyer rants on property laws while the burn victim hates that we call her the burn victim. She was a beautician in her former life and is glad we have no mirrors here.

Our second lesson is on vanity. Vanity is a woman's worst enemy. It kept us in the thrall of products, gimmicks and medical procedures that forced us to reshape ourselves for the pleasure of men. It forced us into harems.

But a former professor raises her hand. 'Excuse me, men forced us into harems.'

A gaunt lady with high cheekbones teaches this class. She prefers to be known as Madam Sophia. She has a high voice, and flutters her hands as if she were waving a wand. We speculate she must have been a fairy in her former life, or at the very least a low-end fashion model.

'Yes, but what kept us in those harems?'

A pause. 'Well...men did, madam.'

'No! And yes. We kept ourselves in those harems, we turned our attentions to matters of the face, the body, of beauty and maintaining that beauty to keep a man's attention,' Madam Sophia says. 'Why would we need a man's attention? We are resilient and can survive without a man's aid.'

'That's well and good,' the professor says impatiently. 'But many of us fought for a man's attention because keeping a marriage was the only way to survive.'

'What if we wanted to be there? What if we liked that life?' another voice pipes up.

'Oh, be quiet!'

As weeks go by, we cannot help but think about the past. The housewife wants to run back to her husband, she misses his touch she says. 'When he didn't hit me, he was gentle,' she complains.

The professor wants to read Hemingway, but his work is forbidden.

The burnt beautician desperately longs for a mirror in this house of endless walls. Her eyebrows are growing out, she complains, even though we can't see them, but no one has the heart to tell her.

Several of us don't belong here, and perhaps we never will.

Some of us have been women all our lives, but born in bodies we did not want. Others call us interlopers, pretenders, even though we have been

abused, isolated, ridiculed, our souls questioned, our sisters murdered. We are the least welcome here; even some of the caretakers resist our entrance into this sanctuary.

'Find your own space!' they say.

But others caution them – all women are welcome here.

Some of us escaped abusive lovers, others wanted a life beyond singing, dancing and begging; others had built their lives against all odds, only to have the newly independent world snatch their hard work away. Like the rest of womankind, we also sought disappearance.

We find our only mirrors in the clear invisible water sitting in our bowls every morning. We wash our faces, brush *meswak* across our teeth and catch glimpses of our new selves – scrubbed clean, fresh-faced and neutralized. The burn victim weeps into a bowl, the lawyer notices how her eyes have fresh wrinkles around them, the former dancer sees new hair on her chin, the professor notices how her eyes no longer burn brightly, starved of the books from her old library.

One of us wonders how Madam Parveen came to lead us. One of us watches her with narrowed eyes, and imagines she must have been a nun in her past life.

Madam Parveen knows how to control women, she walks around the reading groups with her arms folded on her long white kameez and chooses to wrap her hair in a black scarf that hangs over one shoulder.

'Shush! The past is the past! Anyone who thinks otherwise might as well go back.'

But how do we go back? There is no exit.

We often imagine the world we left behind, the towns and the big cities where the men surely must have noticed our disappearances. They must begin to see their houses fall into dust and disrepair, their hospitals running low on staff, their schools emptying and their children running amok.

It won't be long, we say, until they find us and drag us away. We should be better at hiding.

'Would that be so bad?' the others say. 'We made our point. Perhaps they will learn a lesson this time.'

Some of us are quiet. Some of us want to go home, some of us miss our children.

But others among us are deeply afraid of returning.

Our divisions grow. We no longer remember what we ran away from. The outside world seems like a distant nightmare, a hazy recollection of another's life.

Some of us even fear that no one had noticed our departure. All of it, all the doubt, the second-guessing would have been for nothing. We had been duped, we had blindly followed an idea without a goal. We are cattle, gratefully responding to any sound of freedom ringing from a convincing source. We are dandelion seeds, waiting for the next wind to carry us to new destinations, unable to direct the wind ourselves.

So we wait and we bicker. We watch the sun rise and fall from our mattresses, we visualize our city in the distance, the old domain of mosques and minarets fallen into disrepair, of empires long destroyed, the city of men that will age into nothingness. Eventually, we begin to forget the streets and the men who caused us pain. We forget why we left. We forget our old lives, we forget if we were lawyers, doctors, wives, beggars, prostitutes, mothers, teachers, beauticians, labourers, servants. We let them forget us – as if we were never there to begin with.