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# Tonight, I'm Someone Elseo

### -Shaoni Dutta

Among the umpteen houses in this narrow street of a tiny town near Kolkata, moonlight refused to shine through the old-fashioned window of this particular house. Rani’s house. But never mind that. The para was finally well lit after a long year of stepping into potholes unwittingly, all thanks to Durga Pujo. One could ignore the weird, untimely clouds looming overhead when it’s that time of the year. Speakers had been placed throughout the streets at regular intervals (non-consensually, Rani might add), but right now she didn’t hate them so much. Nobody can hate Shreya Ghoshal’s mellifluous voice.

Rani’s first-floor window gave a clear view of the people downstairs. The para people. Including her unmarried niece-in-law, Kalpana. She was too old to dance publicly, but it would be the highlight of Rani’s evening. Bhegu, Kalpana’s unmarried sibling, suffered from piles. It would be rare to see him outside, let alone dance. Rani should go and greet Bhegu da. Rani’s brother-in-law lived around the corner, not really their street, but at the more posh, pothole-less turning of the street. His daughter-in-law, Gauri, fat, gregarious, and entirely unsophisticated, made for great gossip material. She would be here too, dancing with Kalpana. Rani would be peeking down from her elite window, laughing at them, and later she would call up her daughters to chronicle the newest para entertainment. Her granddaughter had shown her how to shoot a video on her mobile phone, so this time Rani could send a video on their WhatsApp group and it would be quite the chuckle.

It had been a long time since Rani was back at her house. Her house. She loved to claim her ownership of it. Living with her daughter Madhura and her family in Bombay was nice but... uncomfortable. It was not really hers, and she couldn’t help but prefix everything with a pronoun- “your house”, “your family”, “your choice”. It pissed them off. She knew it was her ego talking, but why would she want to go intervene in someone else’s family? She was not destitute. Manindra had left her more than enough. A lumpsum pension. A gigantic mansion. A family. Granted, she was a little too weak to be trusted to live alone, with her sugar level at an all-time high, a broken toe, and not to mention the godforsaken COPD, but she was also strong. Her daughters had a bad habit of forgetting who brought them up since they were teenagers.

She sighs, turning away from the window with her thoughts. Time for tea. The one thing she couldn’t live without. As the tea brews, Rani’s eyes are misted over with a long-buried longing. She wishes to go downstairs. As much as she laughs at Kalpana and Gauri for their unsophisticated rowdiness, Rani does harbour a desire to dance at a Pujo again, to the beats of the dhaak. Swaying her hips, like her granddaughter does. What was it that Didai had taught her? Right leg age age, left leg peeche peeche... Snapping her fingers (somewhat), rolling her shoulders, she bursts out laughing at her own nonsense. Besides, she had not gone out to a pandal during Pujo since 1988. Pujo was, concretely, a time of mourning.

She looks back at the framed photograph of her late husband. As the incense smoke fills the room, she is caught in a kind of resentment towards the photograph. She was fifteen when he married her, and her rowdiness stopped forever. She had found her joy instead, in golden jewellery and Benarasi sarees. She would take a lot of pride in being beautiful, with her thick, long locks of hair, her sarees... But the neighbouring jealousy that had followed her throughout her married years had found its appetite fulfilled with Manindra’s passing. Benarasi sarees became a thing of the past. She had suddenly found her beautiful hands full of two daughters, and her back, a graveyard of daggers.

She did what she had to. She wrapped herself in a white saree, put her luscious hair in a tight bun and sorted her life insurance and bank accounts. She raised her daughters, sent Madhura to Bhubaneswar for her father’s job, and sent Moyurie to Bethune for higher education. The rest followed smooth- evil eyes returned, her daughters built their own lives knowing whom not to trust, and Rani, she lived her life travelling from Bombay to Delhi to Kolkata, living three happy lives. Her daughters didn’t disappoint.

As happy as she was now, she couldn’t forgive Manindra for what he had unknowingly stolen. She still accused the pure man of good morals, too timid to know otherwise. Of late, he would appear in her dreams, asking her to don the red Benarasi. He would announce Maa’s arrival, and as much as she resisted, looked down upon such childish desires, she knew what she wanted this Pujo.

Who’s watching you? The little voice inside her head was back. She strains the boiling black tea into her cup and blows air onto it. The mirror on her Almira reflects back a younger Rani. She smiles, the perpetual cup of tea warming her palm, the way it always had. She undoes the tight bun, letting her hair fall to her hip as Uludhvani reaches its crescendo outside. It is as long as before. Madhura’s desperate attempts to modernise her mother hadn’t resulted in shoulder-length hair yet. The hair on her forehead has thinned a little down the middle. She puts some of Keya Seth’s Instant Black to cover up the white near her temples and lines her eyes with kohl. Some powder on her sagging cheeks. She was becoming stranger to herself by the second. She hunts among Moyurie’s things, finding the perfect golden jhumkas to go with her look. A necklace, a lipstick, some perfume maybe... She keeps the Benarasi for last.

The rusting Almira houses a shop’s worth of sarees, some of which had not been broken since her wedding day. She blissfully ignores the white ones on her left, and hunts downwards (ouch, knee trouble), until she finds the red one. Manindra had bought this for her when they were in Haridwar for a holiday. They had taken a picture together, with Rani wearing this. She breaks the folds, donning it on with practised ease. A safety pin to hold the aanchal. Another to hold the elaborate folds at her waist. Some jasmine in her hair, a dab of vermillion on her forehead.

To finish off, a dazzling, gap-toothed smile.

Rani did not know who she was anymore. The mirror could gasp. Tonight, she would not sleep. She dare not go out, but... she chuckles. Gone is the boring old lady in white. Gone are her glasses and her boring bun. This is her, at least in the safety of her bedroom. This is a new Durga Pujo. She sets up the video camera on the dressing table, pressing play, but not quite sure of herself. She rolls her shoulders, her jasmine-scented hair swaying with her hips. She snaps her fingers and taps her toes in rhythm.

Right leg age age, left leg peeche peeche, aaja yaara let’s start ve!



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