SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

YOU WERE ALWAYS DYING

Alka Roy

1.

The black-and-white photograph is of a young Indian couple and their two children. It's a studio picture. Their expressions are defiant, eyes covered by dark sunglasses. The mother is young and beautiful. The father is handsome. The older girl, her hair pulled tight in a ponytail on top of her head, like punishment, is scowling. The younger one, in a pair of shorts and a fitted double-breasted shirt with a stand-up collar, her body leaning against her mother's, her elbow digging into the mother's thigh, looks like a boy.

2.

Whenever the giant, harrowing waves charge in, a large hairy and mustached man-for-hire in black swimming trunks lifts the two-year-old along with the black rubber tube she is lodged in. When the man-for-hire misses, the waves smack her, take over her ears, nose, and mouth. She gasps but doesn't close her eyes. She can't. Hands and feet of other children, salt, screams, the sound of water against water, smell of dead fish crowd against her, and the girl, without wanting to, grasps for the man-for-hire, the only man who might save her. She is either naked or in underwear. Whatever the case, even at two, she feels exposed. Her mind constructs sophisticated conclusions: My parents have left me. They are irresponsible. They don't care. This man will do the same—leave me to be harmed or destroyed or whatever it is that a two-year-old fears is the end of existence.

This is my first memory. And now, I cannot shake the conviction that I'll die of drowning—ears filled with stillness, eyes witnesses, refusing to close. That is, of course, before the flailing and the gasping will begin, the bloating and the bulging, before my body will realize what my mind has always known—that we are and have always been, utterly alone.

3.

"I thought Papa would kill Mummy." My older sister, who was five years old that afternoon at the beach, does not remember the man-for-hire. "Papa took Mummy out in a boat and left her in the middle of the ocean. She looked like a blip and Papa stood at the beach laughing with a friend. He said she goes on and

on about how her father dug up a pond just for her. 'Let's see if her rich father can save her now.'"

My *didi*'s vigilance to save me, her little sister, started on the day I was born. But her vigilance to save my mother had already begun. She kept her eyes wide open.

"Did you see him hit her?"

"No," she says. "It wasn't anything like that. I don't think it was physical. Something more sinister. Like neglect or disregard."

For my sister, there is nothing more important than paying attention. It was when she wasn't looking that her little brother, the one I never met, left. He was only a baby, barely six months old. Mummy insisted that the hospitals were making him sicker. The day she promised to bring him back home, *Didi* sat on the living room steps and waited. The sun entered the house through large paneled windows and surrounded her so that she had to squint. Even now, bright lights streaming in give her an uneasy, wistful feeling, like she's waiting for something that will never come.

When Mummy and Papa returned, *Didi* kept asking, "Where have you left my brother?" But Mummy didn't answer. She didn't say anything for days. She lay in bed, one hand over her eyes, the other over her bulging stomach. *Didi* searched—inside bedroom drawers, in kitchen cupboards, under desks, dining tables, the upholstered flaps of our green family sofa. But the boy was gone. *Didi* was sure it was Papa's fault but she suspected that Mummy was somehow involved too. They had either lost the boy or forgotten him, the way Papa forgot about everyone when he played bridge with his friends. Or did they leave him in the hospital because he was too much trouble? When *Didi* insisted that she needed to go to the hospital to find him, they didn't bother to take her. That's the kind of people they were.

"You were born as sick as him," *Didi* says. "And I was determined not to let the same thing happen to you. Or watch Mummy cry like someone was taking the life out of her."

"Where was Papa during all this?" I ask.

"Exactly," she says. "We were told that you could die any day and Papa was off on one of his work trips. We kept waiting for something to happen to you. Like people wait for the inevitable—hoping it will avert itself but convinced that it won't. You looked just like our brother."

She says our brother to include me. But I don't feel included.

"Exactly like him. That's what everyone said. It was spooky. Mummy said he had come back to us in your body. Did you know that Mummy was going to have an operation after him—one boy and one girl—that's all everyone wanted. But what's meant to be is meant to be. A *fakir* gave us an amulet to tie around your neck to ward off dark forces he said were after you. Once you were back from the hospital, we watched over you and you did your part to keep us on guard. When you were two, you decided to stand on the lid of a boiling pot of

water to get to the box of cookies on the shelf above the stove. Then there was the time when you pushed pieces of chalk up your nose and couldn't breathe. Whenever I saw Mummy engrossed with her cooking or reading a book or Papa hunched over his work at his desk and you unaccounted for, out of sight, I was furious at their carelessness."

Didi doesn't like to talk about the past. It makes her excitable. But I am convinced that to recover she has to keep digging, distinguish between what was or wasn't there.

"Papa would make fun of me. 'Yes, her younger sister will die when she needs to, but this one will die from worrying about her.' The day you put that chalk up your nose, I ran to his office barefoot, knees and legs bloodied from falling down again and again on the potholed road. By the time I brought Papa home, Mummy had smacked the back of your head and dislodged the chalk. You ran up to me with a toy, squatted at my bloody knees and looked up with those dark receded eyes. I was the one who had to be taken to the doctor's office."

"The holy *fakir* is probably sitting somewhere wondering if he saved the wrong child," I say. Sometimes I feel like a trespasser. As though, this is someone else's life. A boy had to die for me to live. A sister had to bloody her knees to keep watch. What have I done that is worth those kinds of sacrifices?

"You could say we were waiting for you to die. Maybe it was just me. Anyway, it didn't happen. But then it had become a habit. I suppose you could say that I resent you for always being on the verge of dying." She laughs.

"Aren't we all?" I say, interrupting her over the phone. I have let her go on while scanning e-mails at work but now I have to get back. It takes her time to wind down or maybe work is a convenient excuse because her stories sound like accusations and I feel responsible. It's always like that with us. When I try to help, I can't, because somehow, in the end, I become the problem. But I keep trying. Where does this come from? This need to fix things, figure it out, know ourselves. Even when it's too late to change?

"Mummy didn't look too good when she visited the last time. It's harder for her now that Papa has retired."

Maybe it's you, I want to say. Maybe it's hard for a mother to see her first born in pain, refusing to get help. I know that despite *Didi*'s moods and accusations, both Mummy and Papa love her more deeply than they'll ever be able to love me. It breaks their hearts to see her suffer. Me, they boast about, admire. But her, they love like a child. I get it. The way she cuts and bleeds—her wounds fresh and open—it is hard not to love her like that.

Didi is a few years away from forty. I am close behind. Neither of us plan to marry or have children. Sometimes *Didi* jokes with Papa, says that killing off his lineage is our way of punishing him. She and I rarely mention love-interests, unless they can be rolled up into funny stories or are relentless pursuers to be armed against. I am financially well-off and physically active, a marathon runner and a rock-climber. *Didi* lives alone, is often bed-ridden, encumbered by

something that keeps getting misdiagnosed—slowly eating at her joints, tiring her bones, swelling up her body so that on many days her biggest accomplishments are being able to get out of bed, cook a meal, swallow it, or sleep through the pain. Though she can't hold a job, she refuses to accept anything more than minimal financial help from Papa. And of course, there is no question about her taking anything from her younger sister. Her voice grows heavy whenever I tell her about a potential treatment or suggest a health center that I or my parents could afford to sent her to, or refer her to talk to someone, get help.

"That's not what I need," she says. She wants her old friends back, not the opportunistic takers that many of them turned out to be, but as sincere as they appeared when they first came to her for help or advice. She wants what is not there.

"You've a savior complex," I say.

"Let's not talk about me. I am in no position to be analyzed today." Her legs and arms have swollen up. Stress aggravates her condition. I know that but I can't seem to stop.

"What keeps you from recovering is the feeling of being irrelevant," I say. "If I were a doctor, I would prescribe you a person to save."

"And what would you prescribe yourself?"

Whenever I underestimate her and she manages to put me back in place, a sense of generousness comes over her. Despite her financial and physical limitations, she is once again *Didi*, the older sister. "I shouldn't be so hard on them. Mummy was so young when she had us. Only a teenager. And Papa was what, in his early 20s? We forget that because they seemed so old to us, so grown up, no?"

She adds, "You were right. I do feel better."

I say nothing. Even after she hangs up, I keep holding the line.