

WHILE at work she would often sense that creepy, insect-crawling feeling on her back, and her skin would tighten as if covered with water-filled sores.

Is this it? Is this why she started life anew? Why she had left Surjit behind? For this same living ... waiting until sundown, waiting and holding out the remains of her time for someone else.

And Surjit was one who did not resist or oppose, nor did he stake claim. He had simply said, "If you don't want to live here, don't. I won't die without you."

Yet her boss Misra had warned: "He is cunning. Later he will create a scene and refuse you a divorce." But that moment never came. Even as she had shouted and screamed accusations, Surjit was silent. On the day of the hearing the judgement was ex-parte. He never came. There was no anxiety. The silence was undisturbed by any sound of his footsteps. She felt that everything that had happened was for herself, from herself. There was nothing in it for anyone called Surjit.

If their relationship had been so one-sided, why did she have a dilemma at all?

Conscious of Surjit's brute indifference she might not have ever asked for a divorce, but Misra had been adamant — freedom is essential. Legal protection! Legitimate rights! He was loath to tolerate Surjit's interference in his future. Despicable creature!

Now she wonders why she came here? Why did she choose this particular kind of life?

There she cooked and cleaned and here the servants slave. Surjit's habits were of one kind and Misra's another.

## SHORT STORY

# Beyond the Blind Alley

Rajee Seth

Translated from Hindi by Jasjit Purewal

Surjit ate noisily and this one snores through his sleep. One liked red shoes, the other black. That one drank milk and this one prefers coffee. Surjit drank Indian whisky and Misra guzzles scotch. One man reached for her body with his kind of lust and this one claims her with another.

At night, after the lights are out the soft mattresses on Misra's bed are very real but she can't distinguish them from the discomfort of sleeping on the coarse cot of Surjit's house. It was only the night which freed her from the cloying snare that had become this room. In the dark she was no longer a part of it.

At midnight when Misra awakens from his snores and with feverish urgency fumbles for her bed stumbling under the weight of his own body, he is no longer Misra. He becomes the same — what he thinks of Surjit — despicable creature!

When he sat before her in the office in his suit, tie, sparkling shoes, and cigar he seemed to epitomise the seductive charm of upper class affectations. But at home he was stripped bare. All that was left was the banal aftertaste of this sticky truth.

She wondered whether her attraction for him was merely a reaction to his sophisticated veneer. Now freed from it why couldn't she see Misra as before? When he sat opposite her in the office? Why doesn't her world sway at the sight of him like it once did? To the extent that she never used to want to return home to Surjit!

Perhaps such a major decision would never have been possible if Surjit had only resisted or if Misra had not provided an option. Bribed her everyday with the promise of a better life. Warmed her body with a new attraction. He had found many ways of convincing her that living with Surjit or for that matter to live unwillingly with anyone (to



underline his scrupulous objectivity) is a promise of violence.

Why had he assumed that she was living with Surjit unwillingly? Perhaps because Surjit had not opposed, fought or pleaded for her. Granting her an easy, convenient release he had moved on.

If only her freedom had not been so easy, perhaps getting Misra would have meant something, an achievement. Misra desired her, so he got her. Surjit did not, so he abandoned her. What about her own desire?

These questions are disquieting now, these feelings so alien. Sometimes while she works around the house she feels she is a minute, inconsequential part of the house.

Suddenly it feels that a large part of the house is locked away in its cupboards and boxes along with the memories of Misra's dead wife. Most of this house is spent, it is history. And Misra's wrinkled body is testimony to this wasting away. That buried past — the largest part of this house — is no part of her. But now, standing in Misra's kitchen, she could see what she couldn't see before when she was typing in his office.

She feels here now that every kitchen in her life will continue to be linked to Surjit's kitchen. When Misra is in his office, he does not seem like Surjit but when he comes home he is Surjit!

And when Misra and Surjit become one, it is Surjit who endears. He has no wrinkled past pasted to his arms. So what if his hand had struck her face? He would abuse her, beat her, and hurl dishes. In a fit of stubbornness he would refuse to let her visit her mother and if she cried his violent possessiveness would destroy even that moment.



Tired and broken, she would arrive at the office and Misra would begin his ministrations. The pink-patterned porcelain teacups would soothe her wounds. And after sipping her tea diffidently when she rose to return to work his tightening grip on her hand would pinch the cheap silver band on her finger and a tiny scream would rise in her. He would release her hand only to touch her foot with his: "I understand your needs."

What needs? This was hardly a relationship where she could have had the courage to ask this question. Instead she would lower her eyes and sit in silence.

He would insist that she sit closer to him. Moving away from that frontal position did help her cope with her helplessness in facing him. She was never sure what she feared facing. Facing Misra or facing herself, reflected as she was clearly in the pupils of his eyes.

Once she was close he would gently place his hands on her shoulders. She would not protest. Could not. Instead she would lose to a gripping silence in which lay a protective caution in favour of her precious job.

His hands would slowly grow insistent. And after a while he would whisper hoarsely: "Let's go out this evening. Can you?"

Seeing her quietly struggling for an answer he would decide in his favour and insist: "Call Surjit now. It won't be right to call him later."

Call Surjit? He was not like Misra with two or three telephones on his desk. He had to be traced from the workshop of the technical section. And he would come to the supervisor's table with soiled hands and ask with extreme irritation: "Why do you bother me with trivia? If you can't come home early is there anything I can do about it?"

At first she used to tolerate the irritation. Then she began to avoid calling him. Instead she would tell Misra that it was not important to call Surjit. Misra was relieved. From this state of 'not-so-important', Surjit gradually became unimportant.

She began to return home at all hours. Surjit, too, was frequently staying away all night. Now he just stayed away for longer periods. When she asked her brother-in-law, Taru, she was told mockingly: "Don't you count



the money in his pocket everyday? You are very innocent, Bhabhi."

Misra had egged her on to tell Surjit plainly that she did not want to live with him anymore. Surjit retorted: "If you don't want to live here anymore don't. Do you think I am going to die without you?"

No provocation, anger, abuses, violence. Nothing. If he had done so he would have perhaps exercised a right. He had freed her so easily that she felt that she must have been living out on the street all along. Had this been her home, its walls would have surely trembled to see her go.

So coming to Misra was no achievement for her. At the office she would suddenly feel that Surjit might call. But the telephone bells were only ringing in her head. Outside there was only the silence.

Misra had taken her to Bombay soon after. Not only had he cast off the experience which was Surjit, but he had wrapped her in new experiences. And she was submerged like a broken sea-shell embedded in the sand, overpowered by the rising waves but lying there unabsorbed, untouched. How odd. She was seeing the ocean for the first time. And with it she sensed immediately the suffocation of being buried under its intemperate, unrelenting force.

They had stayed in a fancy hotel. Then came the expensive clothes, the movies, the sightseeing and ... and the flimsy lace gown. He had seen and possessed her body with a passion in which even as they drowned she would pale each time at the sight of the tired wrinkled face which betrayed his wanton past. Along with a deep sadness, that clammy feeling would linger. And her anguish like that of a



wave torn from its ocean would dog her for a long time. When they returned he began to insist that a legal divorce was necessary. She too agreed — it was necessary. She must know to whom she belongs legally. They sent a notice — Surjit is an alcoholic, licentious, violent, and lives off a woman's earnings.

But the stolid Surjit who faced the metal and the cacophony of his machines everyday was unmoved by the outburst. He tore the notice, spat on it and said: "You can go to hell and so can your boss."

Misra was a good friend of Judge Saxena. Forcing her to wear clothes she would even normally resent, he introduced her one day to the Judge, adding with seasoned nonchalance: "Friend, hurry this case up, will you? You know how that damn Surjit has been harassing us."

Having had every reason to harass Misra, Surjit had merely spat on his face.

Though the divorce decree was won easily, Misra had made it his weapon. He would tease her constantly, fiendishly, "What a struggle it was to win you, darling."

If only! If only that had been true. If only Surjit had let her go with a struggle and Misra had won her with an effort she would have had some sense of herself. Instead, here she was! Bent and broken by an easy surrender to a faithless compromise! It would have been good to resist. To fight off this temptation! Fighting would have given her a sense of being!

The agony has now deepened. Since the hour that she resigned from the office and chose to face Misra's past, captive in his cupboards, she no longer belonged to her own present.

His desire for her was first fanned by the furtive shadows of the hotels, restaurants and office ante rooms where he would consume her in its delirium. Now there is only the lifeless monotony of satiation. She winces at the realisation that she is now just like his whiskey peg; a part of his evening routine.

And trapped in the daily chores of his house she suddenly senses that insect-crawling across her back!

What if she had continued to do this for Surjit?

What if she continues to do all this for Misra now?

All at once she longed to return to Surjit's house. This very evening to sit in front of the coal stove of his kitchen, brew tea on its smoky glow and wait for Surjit. With her head resting on her knees, she stared at the door for a few moments anxiously awaiting the sound of footsteps. If Surjit should come and ....

She started out of her thoughts scared. The joy of reunion? With Surjit? No! No! Surjit never looks back. Neither in the past nor towards the future. He cannot be threatened. His is

a lone path, distinct from all others. When her father had died, he had dismissed her melancholia with his brusque manner, "Go stay with your mother for a few days. Come back when you are consoled."

"What if it had been your father?"

"Forget about my father," he had thundered, cutting her off as he strode out gnashing his teeth. The man who had abandoned his mother in her youth to take off with some doped *sadhus* aroused little sympathy in Surjit. His mother had toiled over her machine to make him worth this much. And this self-worth he carried with a vengeance. There was nothing in between. And between them?

Between her and Surjit now lie the miles of these one and a half year. An eternity. History.

The history of her surrender to that looming was that was Misra. To her own vulnerability. And the legal abyss between them called a divorce.

Misra's seed! Inside her, kicking the walls of her womb. Real and binding. And Surjit, unrelenting, aloof. There are no calls. There is no way back from here.

No paths lead into the future. Ahead lies the boundary of the graveyard which is now her future — decaying like the numerous pasts which lie buried within Misra. No paths lead anywhere from here!

If there are feet then linked to them is that inescapable helplessness of trudging on. Blocked paths lie in front and behind her ... blind alleys — winding, misty, unending.

For what has she been breaking herself? And expectations like bubbles of soap — arresting, colourful, endearing ... momentary. And somewhere while she was chasing

these bubbles she lost her own strength to fight. Now there are only blind alleys at both ends and caught between them is a bewildered present.

She shoves aside Misra's half unbuttoned shirt and stumbles towards his room.

In the burning afternoon heat the closed cool, dark ambience of the room was pleasing. Walking towards the bed her hands reached out for the air-conditioner and switched it off. Suddenly she turned to those heavy, imposing, rarely opened curtains. Brushed them aside. Pushed open the doors and windows.

A gust of hot air and light poured into the unfamiliar room. Burning and blinding. Damning the conditioned order of the room. Shattering its artificial laws.

She gasped. Breaking the authority of the room filled her with joy. Just as if a sudden burst of joy cutting through pained, oppressed moments can draw tears.

In the tiny little moment she saw it all, clearly — away from Misra, detached from Surjit. A singular, alone, free self-possessed moment. Challenging the lifeless past and the artificial future of this room.

Had she not stood in this dense darkness she might have never seen clearly beyond this moment's core — at the path etched before it.

Missed its infectious courage!

She realised that now she would be able to break away — from Misra's physical oppression and Surjit's emotional violence — self-contained, alone.

Something leapt inside her. Clear, alive, irrefutable. She arrived barefoot outside Dr Agnihotir's clinic where she had once accompanied a colleague.

"I need help, doctor." Her eyes were cold and resolute.

The doctor looked her over and handed her the form.

"That won't be necessary. No one will share the responsibility of my abortion," she said calmly.

"You mean ...?"

"I was raped."



*Illustrations by Pijush Mukherjee*

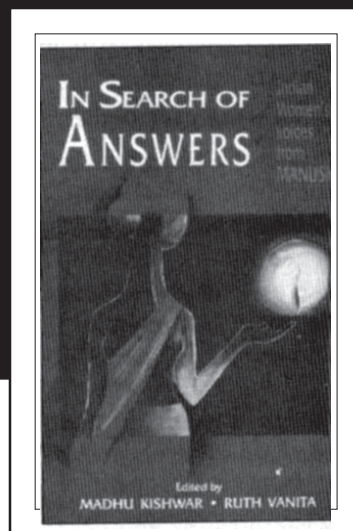
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