

The Interlude

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A strange feeling came over Ranjana after she saw her husband and children off. She was all alone, and the usually bustling house was unnaturally empty, silent. She couldn't recollect a single previous time in her life that she had been all by herself, as she was this evening. She came from a large family of brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts. She had married into a family at least as large as hers, if not larger. Even years after her marriage, when she and her husband, Ashutosh, moved into a house of their own, she had still had her two children around. Besides, never did a day go by without some relation or other dropping in. She felt strange now, a little flustered, a little unsettled. Only two days ago the kids and the dog and the servant boy, too, had left on a short vacation. They had brought the roof down with their commotion. The news of her father-in-law suddenly taking ill had reached them in the late afternoon and Ashutosh had decided to leave for the village immediately. The children, their school closed for the Pujā holidays, had insisted on accompanying him. She would gladly have left with them, but her college wasn't over yet.

She closed the door and went into the bedroom. She had had an early dinner with Ashutosh and the children, and now there was nothing

to do. She sat down on the bed and looked around. A feeling of fear and anxiety overtook her, chased away by undefinable surges of excitement. She threw herself on the bed, closing her eyes, with no hope of falling asleep early.

What could she do now? Was there anything, anything at all, anything absolutely personal she could do only when she was all alone? Was there anything strictly personal at all? Every joy, sorrow, desire, experience, encouragement, and accomplishment had included the entire family, and there didn't seem to be a life for her beyond her husband, children and home. Her job at the college was only an insignificant part of her life.

But nobody had foisted it on her, this life of domesticity. She had chosen it for herself. Unambitious from childhood, she finished college

and agreed to marry the man her parents chose for her. Ashutosh, fresh from medical college, had just joined government service. His salary was low, and Ranjana took it upon herself to make both ends meet. It kept her busy.

Ashutosh moved from one town to another. Ranjana bore two sons. Then Ashutosh was transferred to this small place, where for the first time in his life he began to make a little money on the side by setting up a private practice. Just when it began to flourish he received marching orders, but this time he decided to give up his job. In none of these momentous decisions had Ranjana had any say. Curiously enough, she seemed to have no interest beyond looking after domestic affairs.

When a women's college opened in their town, it was Ashutosh who goaded her into becoming a lecturer. Initially, she hadn't warmed to the idea, having blissfully forgotten everything she had once studied. She dreaded the prospect of teaching, but Ashutosh swamped her with the textbooks she needed to brush up. She continued to raise objections: who would look after the children if she went to college, since she'd be away most of the day? Ashutosh lost no time in arranging for a full-time servant. Then the man who ran the college, a patient of Ashutosh's, joined him in trying to



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persuade her. Ranjana's fear of the job made her so jittery that she fell ill, but Ashutosh stuffed her with medicines and had her up and about in a few days. There was just no way she could avoid taking it on.

Only a couple of days before she started lecturing she discovered she didn't have a single decent sari to wear. In the last few years she had become as indifferent to clothes as to her figure. After the birth of her first child she had lost all interest in sex, silently tolerating her husband's regular lovemaking as an unavoidable duty. She had stopped taking care of her health. She wasn't overly bothered if she skipped her bath because she was busy with chores; even basic things like combing her hair, and soaping the grease and oil off her hands and face had taken a back seat to other things. She looked after the cow and the dog herself and had grown to look upon dirt and untidiness as normal. The house was always a mess.

Ranjana realised that she would have to take better care of her appearance. Now that she was joining the college, she couldn't sport her usual slovenly, unkempt look. She had so happily neglected her appearance that even if Ashutosh sometimes showed his displeasure she couldn't have cared less. She was, in a word, wedded to a placid existence.

Stepping out of the house to teach in the college was like setting foot in another world. Not only did she have to be conscious of her clothes and looks, she had to deal with strangers. In the beginning, it all got on her nerves. Then she hit upon an ideal solution: maintaining only a working relationship with her colleagues, just as much as was absolutely necessary, and not having anything to do with the college beyond the classes she was required to teach. After some time



she allowed herself to become lax about dressing up and began to show up at work with her hair untidy and undone. It didn't bother her too much that others might notice. As far as she was concerned, the college was only an aberration - a departure from the normal routine of life; and she erased it completely from her mind the moment she reached home.

Despite her indifference and lack of warmth, her colleagues wouldn't leave her alone. In between classes they made overtures to draw her out. Her husband was a doctor, after all, and the female colleagues had a vested interest in keeping in touch. They poured their hearts out to her, bared their souls; in fact, some of

them had no hesitation confessing their most intimate secrets. But Ranjana remained tight-lipped about herself. She neither encouraged nor took interest in their confidences; she showed no curiosity whatsoever and always heard them out in bored silence. Beyond family, clothes and keeping house, the only other topic her colleagues displayed an interest in was other people's love lives. They were up on all the scandals of the town, and delighted in graphically describing the affairs. Their two male colleagues of course merited special attention. Between the two, one was dull and middle-aged; the other, who naturally figured more in their gossip, was Srimant, a handsome young man. From the little contact Ranjana had with this colleague, she had taken him for a polite and well-behaved person, and she could scarcely believe the dirt her colleagues dished out about him.

Lying in bed, she began to think about her female colleagues. What would they do if they were to suddenly find themselves all alone? What would Pravina do? She had been in love with somebody before getting married and had kept all his love letters. Would she take them out and reread them? What would Niharika do? She claimed Srimant was after her, but her claim had been dismissed as wishful thinking. Would she think up ways of arranging a tryst with Srimant? What about Jyoti, Susama, Anuradha, none of whom had any sensational affair to brag about? What would they do - reflect on their lackluster love life? How would they pass the long night?

She suddenly knew how she would pass it. There was only one incident in her life she could mull over. It had happened almost a decade ago and had nothing to do with her homelife, and quite often in

the recent past - whether due to the pressure of life or due to the strange situation she was in - the details had begun to blur; sometimes she felt perhaps it hadn't happened after all and was only a figment of her imagination.

She sat on the bed. It wouldn't do to summon up the memories of the incident in just any old way; she must prepare for it. First of all, she must dress suitably. Leisurely she took off her clothes, one by one. She had all the time on earth, a whole long night ahead of her. Undressed, she ran her hand over the body and felt a tingling sensation spread throughout her. She stretched, swung off the bed and walked to the mirror. She scrutinized herself from several angles, turning and twirling in front of the mirror. She was seeing her whole body for the first time in years, in what seemed like a strange act of self-discovery. Speechless, she looked herself up and down. So much flesh! The years had endowed her thin frame with a wholesome roundness, with which she began to acquaint herself by running her hands slowly over her body, caressing it everywhere.

It was a novel experience for her to be standing around, bare-bodied, barefoot. She stepped out of the bedroom, and as she walked into the other rooms, she flicked the lights on and strutted about as if she wanted to advertise her transformed self, daring the darkness lingering in the corners to take a good look at her, to stretch out and touch her to see how real she was, to soak into her, to get intimate with her. She sat down on a chair for a while, then sprang up and stepped into the corridor. There she stood leaning on the wall for some time. Afterwards she crossed over to the kitchen and drank a glass of water. Then she entered the bathroom, and was, out of habit, about to close the door when it dawned on her that that wasn't necessary, and joyfully she offered herself up under the shower.

She had adjusted to her new working life and had a fine balance worked out between home and college. In time, college became a routine. The syllabus was the same year after year, only the faces in her classes changed, and she was hopeful she'd be able to continue, much the same way she ran her home, until it was time for retirement. But after a few years, the pressure got to her. She had to have a doctorate. She would much rather have foregone the promotion than wade through the trouble of doing research, but once again it was Ashutosh who practically forced her into it. Not only did he fix up a thesis director for her, he took the trouble to collect books for her from various libraries. Her topic related to a little-known period of Orissa history, and after the first few months of indifference she began to become interested in it. Not only did she write her thesis with a great degree of self-confidence, but she submitted it to the university on time.

She felt a chill come over her and wondered how long she had stood under the water. Stepping out, she dried herself vigorously, went into the bedroom and stood before the mirror. The dressing table drawers were crammed with bottles of cosmetics she had never used. She put kohl under her eyes and combed her hair with smooth long strokes. A glow of satisfaction lit her up as she preened before the mirror.

Both the examiners were full of praise for her thesis, but the London-based examiner commented in passing that the research would remain incomplete if the primary materials available in the India Office Library were not consulted. He also went out of his way to mention that he was willing to help the scholar locate them should she wish to examine them. Ranjana was somewhat disappointed by his remark, but it served to whet her curiosity to know what she had missed out on. She ruled out the

possibility of going to London, however; if she had to do that then the research could go to hell, for all she cared.

Once again it was Ashutosh who wouldn't let it go that easily. He made Ranjana write to the British professor. When his reply came it turned out to be very encouraging. The university agreed to fund her travel expenses. An inexpensive paying-guest accommodation was located in London. Matters moved rather smoothly, in spite of her mounting anxiety and fear. The day the tickets and the visa arrived, she came down with a raging fever, and that she thought was a good enough pretext for calling the visit off. But Ashutosh not only took care of her, he got the journey postponed for a few days. He also made an elaborate list of everything she might need in London and provided her with these necessities.

Ranjana opened the almirah where she had hastily unloaded her clothes. Looking for something to wear, her eyes fell on a pair of jeans tucked away under the pile of saris. She hadn't worn them in ages and had completely forgotten she had ever owned something like that. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she struggled to push her legs into them; they were tight at the waist too. She had forgotten how much weight she had put on. She sucked in her tummy, and buttoned the jeans up somehow. To loosen them up, she walked about a little and did a few push-ups. She went back to the almirah to select a suitable top and rummaged around until she found a soft cashmere pullover. Ranjana put on a pair of socks before looking at herself again in the mirror.

When she landed at Heathrow and stood in the queue to go through immigration she was almost in tears. She had never been away from home, let alone abroad, by herself. Everyone around her was a

stranger, cold, closed and distant. She fiddled with her watch to adjust it to the local time, but mercifully an elderly white man standing next to her did it for her. She had to wait a long time for her turn, and by the time she was through it was already two o'clock. Outside, the afternoon had become damp and grey. She felt a massive depression take possession of her soul. Why had she bothered to take all this trouble to be here? But when the taxi entered London, she felt a little better. She was getting to see a new place, after all; besides, it wouldn't be for too long, just three weeks. What mattered most was collecting and studying the materials for her research.

After an hour, the taxi-driver dropped her at her address and she rang the doorbell. An Indian woman opened the door and welcomed her; Ranjana felt a surge of joy which the rather hefty taxifare had somewhat dampened. Mrs. Patel helped her carry her suitcase upstairs. Of the three rooms on the first floor, the middle one was hers. Mrs. Patel, originally from Kenya, had, after her husband's death, started hiring out rooms, mostly to overseas students and scholars. She explained the rules of the house: supper was at six in the evening; the guests made their own breakfast — they were welcome to use her fridge and gas — and took lunch outside; they could use her phone, but only for receiving calls; for making calls they had to go to the phone booth outside; and so on and so forth. Mrs. Patel collected a week's rent in advance and showed Ranjana around the kitchen.

All the other guests were out and Ranjana felt at ease. But when she learnt there was only one toilet upstairs, which she would have to share with others, her heart sank. Mercifully, the jet lag began to get to her the moment Mrs. Patel left her



alone; without changing she lay down on the bed and fell asleep.

She paraded before the mirror. Ashutosh had packed the jeans for her on the eve of her London trip; the beautiful orange pullover was something she had bought for herself on her third day in London. She looked so radiant, so different; really, how vastly different her body, so used to being wrapped in saris, looked now! She seemed to have grown years younger and certainly much more lively. She sat in front of the dressing table and applied a coat of varnish to her nails. She inaugurated a lipstick she had long neglected and painted her lips a flaming red. Then she stood up, her hands on her hips, and rolled her head sideways to get a better look at herself, making broad winks; she leaned over, hugged the mirror and gave it a big kiss.

Exactly at six in the evening, Mrs. Patel woke her up and took her downstairs for supper. The other guests had still not returned. The sky had cleared, swathed in bright sunshine. Ranjana found it a little strange to have dinner before dark. There was still so much light, and she remembered that in the west the

sunlight lingered on until eight in the evening. After supper she went back to bed but couldn't fall asleep immediately. Thoughts of her children and husband came crowding into her mind and she wondered how she would survive without them during the three long weeks ahead of her. She resolved to find a phone booth first thing tomorrow morning and call Ashutosh. How did one find a booth? The very thought made her cry. How would she get in touch with her professor? Would he understand her accent? How would she get onto the buses and the underground trains to reach the India Office Library? Even as she agonised she drifted asleep; and when she awoke the next morning it was already seven o'clock. She hurried to the bathroom before others could use it. She put on a new salwar and kurta and went down to the kitchen for a cup of tea.

She filled the kettle with water, but couldn't get the gas ring lighted. So badly did she crave some tea that she tried once again, but just didn't seem to remember how to get it working. Defeated, she sat back with a sigh. Outside, a steady drizzle fell.

If only she didn't have to step out of Mrs. Patel's house! Just then a young Indian man came into the room; with a pleasant greeting, he inquired whether she would like to have some tea with him. She nodded eagerly. The fellow brewed the tea and brought a pot to the table. He pulled up a chair opposite her, sat down and introduced himself. He, Javed Akhtar, was from Pakistan, here to do a three-month course. Ranjana introduced herself, but already the joy of seeing him had evaporated. Not only was he a Muslim, but he was from Pakistan in the bargain. She hurriedly drank the tea and left. There'd be enough time later to ask Mrs. Patel to show her again how the gas worked. She went back to her room.

An hour later she came down and found Mrs. Patel having tea with a young Englishman. Mrs. Patel made the introductions: David was her daughter's fiance; they both worked some place outside London, where they had met and fallen in love; he was here in town on a short business trip. When Ranjana turned to Mrs. Patel for help locating a phone booth and reaching her professor, Mrs. Patel turned to her future son-in-law, asking if he'd be kind enough to be of assistance. David wanted Ranjana to get ready soon, because he was about to set out. Mrs. Patel kindly lent them an old umbrella.

The phone booth was just around the corner. With her money, David bought Ranjana phone cards and dialed the overseas number she wanted; she had her first talk with Ashutosh since leaving home. It did her a world of good. Everyone at home was fine and she had nothing to worry about. On the contrary, Ashutosh seemed concerned about her well-being, and she had to reassure him. Then, at Ranjana's request again, David phoned her professor and set up an appointment

for an hour and a half later. He gave her detailed instructions on which train to take, where to change lines, and how to reach the place. He was willing to go with her only to the nearest Underground station, but she begged him to take her to the professor's house the first time.

David bought her tickets for a week, took out a map of London and showed her the place where they were, the professor's residence, and the India Office Library. Once again he explained where to change the trains. She hardly heard him. The sight of the escalator had already sent a shiver of fright through her. She refused to get on it and David had to lift her and put her on it. She breathed a sigh of relief but discovered that David was holding her rather too closely. She freed herself, but a minute later when it was time to step off she meekly offered herself to David's grasp. This time, he held her even more tightly and she could do nothing about it.

The professor turned out to be a nice person who showed exemplary patience in explaining all the materials she must consult and the manner in which to approach the subject. He even offered to phone someone he knew at the Library who might be of assistance to her. David fidgeted throughout, repeatedly glancing at his watch. The moment they were out of the professor's house he wanted to go his way, but once again she pleaded with him to take her home. It took some begging to get him to agree, but first he wanted a drink.

They went to a nearby pub. He asked her what she would like. Ranjana refused to have anything. David got two pints of beer for himself and settled into his chair. Half an hour later, suddenly thinking she might be hungry, he suggested she might as well have a bite to eat before they left. With her money, he paid

for lunch. The food was too bland and unappetising for her palate, and Ranjana nibbled at it listlessly. David proceeded to drink one more pint. Finally, they left.

There was no one home, Mrs. Patel and her paying guests had all gone out. Ranjana was seized with a sudden fear of being left alone in the house with David. She said a quick goodbye and scampered up the stairs. Moments later there was a knock on her door. She decided to ignore it, but then it occurred to her that it could be somebody else. As soon as she opened the door, David barged in. She didn't have time to protest. The large-size map he brought her was just a pretext. Seated comfortably at the table, he proceeded to slowly unfold it and explain the intricate city routes. She stood as far away as she could without giving offence, even as she desperately tried to absorb the information. He tried to prolong his stay by asking her all sorts of questions about India. She could make out his intentions were far from honourable and she became curt in her replies, but David wouldn't take the hint. She had to finally tell him she was not feeling too well and would really like to have a little rest. David stood up reluctantly, but at the door he suddenly held her in an intimate embrace again.

She lay in bed, thinking about him. He was a creep all right. But why hadn't she felt as deeply mortified as she ought to, when somebody other than her husband held her so closely? For years she had taken it for granted that she had irrecoverably lost what made a woman desirable. David's behaviour had given her food for thought; and oddly enough, it hadn't felt so unpleasant, either. But she vowed not to have anything to do with the fellow. She swung off the bed and busied herself with a long and careful

study of the city map he had left her. She must learn to go places on her own.

She met Javed at dinner and wondered if she shouldn't find out a little more about him, whether he was worth being friendly with. Not only was he handsome, but he was also polite and well-behaved. A lecturer in English in a Pakistan university, he had been to London before and was ready to give her whatever help she might need to settle in.

Next morning they walked together to the Underground. In the station he drew her a route so that she could reach the Library without seeking anybody's help. She found it all so complicated that she stood staring at the platform. When he reminded her to go to another platform, she looked so lost and helpless that after a cursory glance at his watch he offered to accompany her to her destination. It hadn't taken any begging on her part. Nor did he attempt to hug her when it came to getting on the escalator.

Ranjana suddenly remembered the lights were on in all the rooms. She got up and walked into the next room. She found the windows wide open. Were they like this when she had come in earlier to switch the lights on? The windows overlooked the garden and there was little chance of any passer-by noticing her, but still she felt a rising wave of shame. Then a strange thought came into her mind: what if somebody was to see her now! She switched on the lights, went into another room, opened the windows and looked out. She could now be clearly seen from the road, but it was completely deserted.

She flicked the lights off and walked out into the inner courtyard. On the far side stood the cowshed. As she approached it, she felt hot and peeled off her pullover. She found the cow staring at her. She stepped in front of the animal and spoke to her in silence: Boula, you're about the only living thing to see me now, so go ahead and drink in the sight.

Inside of a week she became fairly familiar with London. She took to wearing her jeans; she went places on her own, she caught on the clipped British accent and conversed with strangers without feeling shy; she assimilated herself into the Patel household. She did not see David around anymore. Perhaps he had gone back to wherever he had come from. She liked the black man who had taken the room next to hers. A large jovial man, he was full of flirtatious praise for Ranjana's beauty and often joked that were he not married already he'd have certainly fallen for a perfect Indian beauty like her.

Ranjana's work in the Library progressed and on Sunday she went

sightseeing with Javed. The western ways of men and women hugging, kissing and showing affection for each other in public no longer offended her.

She grew to like Javed a lot and spent most of her free time with him. She found him sensitive, well-behaved, even a little respectful, but not really warm enough. Sometimes he was stiff and formal for no reason. She freely unburdened herself, although he did not reveal much about himself. She so much wanted him to laugh and joke with her, even flirt a little, but he continued being solemn and wasn't ever as light-hearted with her as he was with the others. One day when she was in the shower he had suddenly entered the bathroom, but had withdrawn instantly, muttering an apology. The fault was certainly not his — Ranjana wondered how she could have forgotten to lock the door — but what seemed worse than her shame at being surprised in the shower was the sense of guilt which seemed to overwhelm him, and she decided she must make him feel all right.

A day or two later she barged into his room, causing him visible consternation, but of course he quickly got a grip on himself. Recollecting that he had mentioned he was unmarried, she wanted to know if he was in love with someone. Afterwards she would wonder at herself: what made her go into a stranger's room and ask him such a strictly personal question? Javed blushed when he nodded yes and showed her a photograph of a girl. She held it in her hand for a



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long time but had already lost all interest in the subject. She veered the topic around to her research, his experiences at the university and his parents. After some time he asked her whether she'd like some tea. Instead of answering, she demanded to know if he drank; when he answered that he did, she said she wanted to go with him to a pub that evening and find out for herself what it felt like to have a drink. Javed was hesitant, but she forced him to agree.

At the pub, she insisted on taking the same thing he did, although he repeatedly advised her to settle for a sweet wine. So he got her a pint of beer, and she sat there drinking it without enjoying it. Then she wanted to stand him a round and wouldn't take no for an answer. It was quite late when she finished. Feeling light-headed, they left the pub.

At Mrs. Patel's everyone had gone to bed. Javed re-heated the food the landlady had left for those who hadn't been able to join her for supper, and they sat down to dinner. Ranjana could feel a horrible headache coming on. She was so unsteady as she climbed up the stairs that she needed help. Javed was such a gentleman; he held her most discreetly, left her at her door and walked back to his room double quick. She went in and slumped on the bed without changing. The headache became steadily worse and she didn't have the patience to open her suitcase and look for the medicine Ashutosh had packed. She dragged herself out of her room and knocked on Javed's door. When it opened a little, she asked plaintively if he had something for headaches. Javed didn't ask her in. He pushed something at her through the crack and she went back to her room. She had no desire to take the medicine; she threw herself on the bed and passed out.



Time passed quickly. Ranjana's research at the Library was finished, and her stay drew to an end. She went to her professor to say goodbye. She saw the remaining sights of London in Javed's company. She got her return ticket confirmed and phoned Ashutosh. She settled Mrs. Patel's bill, and bought all the presents she wanted, along with a new suitcase to carry everything in. The moment she expressed a twinge of apprehension about lugging two bulging suitcases to the airport, Javed offered to come with her.

On the evening before her departure Ranjana was alone with Javed at dinner. After they had finished eating, he asked how her packing was going, but she didn't answer. He made coffee and they drank it in silence. After a long time he gently enquired what time she intended to leave for the airport; he wanted to know so that he would have enough time to get ready to accompany her. When she said she wondered how on earth she was going to wake up so early in the morning, he promptly offered her his alarm clock.

He wiped off the dinner table and they went up. On top of the stairs she stopped, wondering out loud if an alarm clock would be any help at all. Since he was a light sleeper, would he mind waking her up? He said he wouldn't. Before she turned in she whispered she would leave the door unlocked all night.

Already in a feverish pitch, Ranjana tore off her clothes and threw herself on the bed, surrendering to the ministrations of her frantic fingers, all thoughts of tomorrow pushed out of her mind. She felt she was outside her past, present and future, floating free in space, light years from the earth. All she could hear was her own quickening breath; all she could smell was her own intimate odour. Her senses seemed to have converged on a single pulsating point. She tried to recall Javed's face, but it remained hazy and blurred. Dizzy, desperate, drowning, she summoned up Srimant's face as she gave herself pleasure with sweet urgency. □

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