

# Kalkoti

*A Short Story*

by

Tamreez Inam

Dadi is waiting for us at the front door. She has aged considerably since the last time I saw her. Her hair in a coiffed bun is still the same shade of dyed dark brown, but she looks frail leaning on the carved wood door for support. The house, reassuringly, is unaltered. White marble façade with pillars overlooking a green manicured lawn. Dadi's face lights up as she sees Sameer, who insists on being carried. The overnight flight from London to Islamabad has made him clingy. It doesn't help that his father isn't here.

"Some time with the family should do you good," Jahanzeb had insisted as he booked our tickets, keeping the return date flexible.

"Sameer hasn't started nursery yet and you've extended your maternity break. It's the perfect opportunity. You can even visit Dadi in Islamabad before you go to your parents," he'd added cheerily as if he were a travel agent selling me a tropical getaway.

*Yes, and you can get a break from me,* I'd thought but kept my mouth shut.

Dadi and I sit in the living room watching a TV drama serial. Sameer is playing on the floor with his Thomas and Friends engines. Yasmeen Chachi has joined us for dinner. Unlike the *saas-bahoo* drama we are watching, this mother- and daughter-in-law duo actually get along.

"Half the drama is filled up with these ads," Dadi grumbles as yet another commercial comes on. Yasmeen Chachi and I are grateful for a chance to speak.

"Where is Chachoo?" I ask.

"Away on one of his business trips."

"How are Ali and Sara?"

“Good. Ali just moved to Boston from Seattle for his new job. Sara will come this weekend.” She adds with a smile, “Especially for you.”

“*Haan* she doesn’t have time for us. Always some assignment or internship or something in Lahore,” Dadi grumbles.

I smile at Dadi and turn to Yasmeen Chachi. “I can’t believe she’s already in her last year of uni. It’s been so long since we were all together.”

“It was at your wedding, *haina?* Almost four years ago.” She glances at the wall with the framed family photos. “With all you kids gone, the house is always so quiet now.”

Growing up, my sisters, cousins and I spent every summer vacation here, our parents joining us from Karachi for the last two weeks. It was days of cricket, cycling, water fights and actual fights. Nights were spent watching movies, playing Monopoly and building forts with mattresses and sheets. There was laughter and games, shouting and crying. The adults mostly left us to our own devices.

“Sameer is old enough now, why don’t you go back to work?” Dadi speaks up.

I’m taken aback by her abruptness and don’t respond.

“*Dimagh ko zung lag jaaye ga.* What was the use of all that study?” she continues. “I don’t understand you girls. We fought to take off our burqas, you want to wear the hijab. We fought to leave our houses, you want to sit at home with babies.”

“*Ji.* I’m just waiting for Sameer to start nursery next year.”

Dadi shakes her head, her features registering disappointment that borders on disgust.

I think of the sleepless nights. The uncontrollable rage and the impending tears. The mind-numbing monotony of taking care of a baby. The anti-depressants. I don't say any of this because I fear the response. *You have a great home, a loving husband and a healthy child. What more do you want?*

There is a knock on the living room door. A tall young man wearing an apron over his shalwar kameez enters. "Dinner is ready."

"The drama finishes in ten minutes. We'll eat then. Thank you." Dadi dismisses him.

"New cook?" I ask distractedly as I bend down to roll a small engine on the floor for Sameer.

"Not so new." Dadi answers.

"Do you remember Kalkoti?" Yasmeen Chachi asks. "He is her son."

I sit up straight. "Hamza?"

"Yes." She seems surprised I remember his name. "You played together in Swat that summer we all went."

"Yasmeen's family hardly visit the home in Swat any more. Its upkeep is so expensive," Dadi says. "Most of the servants have come to the cities to find work. Hamza came here after Kalkoti died. He cooks so well...nargisi koftay, dum biryani, shahi tukray..."

"Kalkoti died?" I cut in.

"Yes, last year."

The drama comes on then. Dadi shushes us as she gets engrossed in the story she has been following every day for months. The characters more constant and present to her than the people in her life.

\*\*\*

That summer in Swat. Where do I even begin?

*Kalkoti lives in a valley far far away. No one knows how old she is. Some say she is hundreds of years old. A beautiful pari. A jinn fell in love with her and captured her. He gave her a cursed emerald which she wears around her neck. The emerald matches her eyes, the greenest green you've ever seen. People are terrified of looking directly into them, for fear of getting bewitched.*

These were the opening lines of the fairy tales Yasmeen Chachi used to tell us as children. Although Kalkoti was never evil in these stories, we were terrified of her. Her name to me sounded like 'kal kotri', a dungeon. I thought if I did anything wrong she would lock me up in a dark room. As I grew older, I figured Kalkoti was just a myth and for a while I was no longer scared.

Until I came face to face with her.

It was the summer I was ten. The monsoons hadn't come yet. Eid was around the corner. So the adults decided Yasmeen Chachi's family home in Swat would provide the perfect respite from Islamabad's heat.

We arrived in Swat after a long winding drive up the mountains. The road got narrower and narrower the higher we went, surrounded by green forests of pine trees that were so tall I had to lean out of the car window to see their tops. The sky was a clear blue. White clouds seemed to have come down to greet us and I wondered if I could sit on them like Mary Poppins.

When we reached the rusted black wrought iron gates of the house, I was taken aback by the sheer size: two long buildings facing each other painted pistachio green, separated by a lawn with a round marble fountain in the middle. The buildings had rows of doors that opened onto verandahs with white pillars. Instead of boundary walls, orchards lined the house and merged into the forest beyond.

We jumped out of the jeeps and we were greeted by a line of servants who came to help us with our bags and show us to our rooms. A plump middle-aged woman came forward wearing a white chaadar covering her head.

Yasmeen Chachi embraced the woman and turned to us, “Kids, this is Kalkoti.”

We let out a collective gasp and stopped dead in our tracks. I thought Yasmeen Chachi was joking, but then Kalkoti smiled and I saw her eyes. The most brilliant shade of green. I imagined laser beams coming out of them, like Superman, and looked away.

Later that night we sat in the lawn near a bonfire. The adults told us to look up as they marvelled at the starry night sky away from city lights. Kalkoti went in and out of the house to serve dinner with the other servants and every time she offered something to me, I shook my head. Tired from our long journey and petrified at the thought of Kalkoti lurking nearby, we went to bed without fuss. No one asked for stories.

The next morning, we went out to play in the lawn. A little boy, wearing an old shalwar kameez, joined us in our game of hide and seek. He was around my age, but his tiny frame made him look younger. He spoke only Pashto and we spoke Urdu, but we were at the age when children can play without the crutches of language.

The boy seemed awkwardly shy, as if he didn’t play with children much. He wasn’t a great runner, ran out of breath easily but was eager to please and carry on with whatever we wanted to play.

In the afternoon, Kalkoti called out to him, “Hamza, come inside and help me wash the dishes.” We looked at each other and with the instincts of children knew he was her son.

The eldest three, Ali, my sister Maleeha and I, came together to confer.

“If Kalkoti is a hundred years old, how can her son be so small?” Maleeha wanted to know.

“Maybe he’s magical too.” Ali responded.

“You mean like Peter Pan? A small boy forever?” I was incredulous.

Urged by Sara and Ayesha, the younger ones left out of the discussion, we finally resumed play. Later when Hamza came running back with a big goofy grin eager to join, we didn’t want anything to do with him.

He picked up a flat stone from the ground and offered it to me for the tower of stones for pithoo garam.

“No.” I said.

“I can fetch the ball for you,” he said in Pashto.

We shook our heads.

The more he pleaded, the more we refused with innocent cruelty only children are capable of. He finally went away with tears in his eyes.

There were animals in the house for Eid: a cow and four goats. Sara took a particular liking to one of the goats. She named him Billy and fed him leaves and branches. On Eid, when the animals were taken away, Sara bawled and later refused to eat the barbecued meat. Hamza brought her a peach from the orchards. The rest of us watched this as we sat on the charpoy in the lawn putting mehndi on our hands.

“What’s that?” Sara pointed to the bowl containing the greenish brown paste. It wasn’t like the shop-bought plastic cones from which the mehndi squeezed out of a thin nozzle.

“It’s mehndi,” I said dipping the back of a matchstick into the mixture to draw flower and paisley motifs. They looked thick and clumsy.

“Looks like potty.” She scrunched up her nose.

Maleeha leaned over the edge of the charpoy, hair cascading around her face. She spotted a coddung pat drying in the late afternoon sun, a parting gift from the cow that had been tethered to a nearby tree a few hours ago. She sat up and showed it to me. We looked at Hamza and then at each other and giggled.

“Hamza, come here.” I put the nearly empty mehndi bowl on the ground next to the dung.

Having been rebuffed the whole week, he walked over hesitantly.

“We dropped some mehndi. Why don’t you put it on?” I said.

He shook his head.

“Look, Ali also put some,” Maleeha piped up.

“Come on Ali, show him.” I urged.

Being the only boy, Ali usually joined in all our activities. Instead of any elaborate patterns though, he had got his name written on his right hand in tiny Urdu lettering. He got off the charpoy, marched over to Hamza and showed him his hand.

“Just pat your hands on the mehndi, you don’t need to make a design.” Ali said.

In the face of this fraternal compromise, Hamza relented. He sat down on his haunches next to the dung pat. I jumped off the charpoy, took his hand and pressed it firmly into the dung. We roared with laughter.

Hamza started crying as we danced around him clapping, “Potty hands. Potty hands.”

Just then Kalkoti came out. She looked at Hamza’s hand and the handprint in the dung. We stopped laughing.

“Come and wash your hand,” she grabbed Hamza by the arm and jerked him away.

The next day was our last in Swat. As our jeeps moved along the driveway towards the gate, the servants waved us farewell. Kalkoti stood looking away into the distance. Hamza stood next to her holding her hand. As our eyes met, he looked down.

\*\*\*

The drama ends and Dadi beckons us to the dining room. I sit down at the table. My mouth is dry and I can feel a headache coming on.

Hamza enters carrying a plate of hot rotis wrapped in cloth. I glance at him trying to find something of the gentle little boy in this tall man with squared shoulders and a stern expression. He places the rotis on the table.

“Assalam alaikum. Dadi jaan told me about...” I hesitate, “about your mother’s death. Inna lillahe wa inna ilaihe raajioon.”

Hamza stands straight, eyes cast down and nods.

“What happened?” I ask.

He looks up from me to Yasmeen Chachi to my grandmother.

“She committed suicide,” Dadi hisses to me in English, chiding me for my impertinence.

I gasp and tears spring to my eyes. “I... I’m so sorry.”

Hamza stands still. I feel silly at my dramatic outburst in the face of his stoicism. Lately tears come easily to me.

“Thank you Hamza,” Yasmeen Chachi says with a gentle nod and he leaves the room.

An image flashes to my mind. Kalkoti sitting on the stoop outside her hut in the servants’ quarters. Her putting her hands in mud and slapping it on to her face. Again and again. Hamza coming out and pulling her hands away, “No Ami, no.” The vacant look in her eyes. A green gemstone around her neck glinting in the sun. Confused and terrified, I had run away and told the others.

“Who was she really?” I ask.

My grandmother looks at Yasmeen Chachi.

“She was a maid my father fell in love with.” Yasmeen Chachi says in a small voice. “My mother was mad with jealousy. Especially when Hamza was born.”

“He is your...” I can barely form the words, “your step-brother?”

Yasmeen Chachi nods and then talks faster as if she wants to get the words out before she changes her mind, “As long as my father was alive, Kalkoti was taken care of. But Hamza was only two when my father died. There was supposedly a nikahnama but nobody ever found it. My mother and brothers made sure Hamza didn’t get any inheritance.”

I look at Sameer sitting in my lap picking peas from the pulao and popping them in his mouth, the same age Hamza would have been.

“Why the stories?” I ask.

“I was fascinated with Kalkoti when she first came to our house. She was only a few years older than me and so incredibly beautiful. We used to talk and laugh. I got married and left. It was later that...everything happened.” She shrugs. “I think I made up stories to distract myself from the truth.”

“You told the children stories about Kalkoti?” Dadi looks shocked.

Colour rises to Yasmeen Chachi’s face. “I didn’t mean any harm.”

“The jinn? Was she possessed” I blurt out sounding a bit silly even to my own ears.

Before Yasmeen Chachi can answer, Dadi lets out a wry laugh, “In our country every mentally ill woman is possessed by a jinn.”

I feel queasy and close my eyes.

*Kalkoti slapping mud on her face.*

*Me howling in the shower, banging my head against the wall.*

*Hamza pulling Kalkoti’s hands away begging her to stop.*

*My husband wrapping a towel around me, the baby crying outside.*

\*\*\*\*

The next morning I walk into the kitchen. Hamza is making halwa poori. I watch as he drops a poori into the bubbling wok of oil. The disc puffs up and rises to the surface.

“Would you like some breakfast?” he asks.

“Actually I wanted to apologise to you.” I come and stand next to him. “For last night. I didn’t know. I’m so sorry. For everything.”

He takes the poori out and looks at me. Meeting his gaze, I add, “I can only imagine how tough it was for your mother to raise you by herself. In the circumstances that she did.”

I see recognition flicker in his eyes. His impassive expression changes to something registering pain.

“Yes, she was extraordinary.” He says as he turns back to the stove and puts another poori in the oil.