

Spit Can

A Short Story

by

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I noticed my toenails while climbing up the stairs. I have always found my toes funny. My father calls them baby caterpillars because they are small and chubby. Like someone rolled a dime- sized ball of dough in their palm and pressed a small toenail into it. Repeat the process ten times and there you go. All 10 toes.

Why on earth did I waste 1500 rupees?

The expensive pedicure I got done a week ago was like an F-grade written in red ink on my report card. It makes me recall the time I flunked my school History exam and had my grade underlined red. *(Not that an A was any different from an F for a girl kid...except for the color maybe, my father believed. Because girls care for colors, not grades.)*

It was a tragic day because my red-line virginity had broken. Only bad students had report cards with red lines. Mine were clean except for that one time. The pedicure was another tragedy, like the red-line one.

I imagined my father's disapproval of this needless luxury. It couldn't turn my caterpillars into butterflies. Just like rouge couldn't make me blush like pretty girls. "Your feet still look manly", he once exclaimed as he chuckled proudly at his wit.

He doesn't like it when I brush some pink on my cheeks and so he feels the need to point it out every time I attempt to adorn my face in the mirror. We share one dresser – my parents and I – so we also share opinions on how I look, once I'm done plucking my brows neat and waxing my manly moustache for an outing. Except my father carefully dodges my input on matters of importance. We share everything except his authority to dismiss our opinions. The only one who could challenge it was never born.

"Sons and daughters are equal forms", my father once said to clear my doubts. But I never understood how sons are more blood than daughters.

"So why can't I learn to drive your car? If I was a son ..."

"You think too much", he said, and with that the chapter was closed.

I think too much and too long about things that should pass by like sign boards on a road. Things like why my father never wipes food leftovers that collect in the corners

of his mouth now, or why should I care about the red more than the F, or why... He just doesn't, and that is that.

The main gate of my house is framed with very heavy iron. This makes it hard to pull or push with a single hand. But the weight makes it seem important. Back when my father used to drive, I would get out of the front seat and open the gate for him to drive into the garage. This was my job, and I felt responsible for something important.

"Go", he would say when he stopped the car near our gate.

I would jump out and do my job. It made me feel like we were equal partners. He drove and I opened gates. I had a part in parking the car so I felt partially responsible for his job too. Things I had only seen boys do in the street where we lived.

Even though my father doesn't drive now, I still open gates. For myself.

Today, like all other days, I felt like an important man opening a very important gate that would lead me into a world very different from what I knew lay on the other side.

But the thing about the gate that has changed over the years is that even though I open it myself, it seems like it is just waiting for me. To walk right in. Like a hunch-backed cat, right before it pounces on a pigeon. Except my gate remains hunch-backed all day, lurking in my mind like an omen, waiting for me to walk into the snap trap.

It would eerily close behind my back; just like the metal bar that snaps on your toe in the cartoons and makes it pulsate and glow red. The pain would make a sound in my mind like when you take big sips of water, and they glide down your throat, past your Adam's apple, like a bug crawling under the carpet. *Dlop. Dlop. Dlop.* A lump of poop dropping with a *PLOP* to the commode floor. In my world, the toe would pulsate when I would reach the top of the stairs and stand in the doorway.

I stomped my feet on the last step as I reached the landing. To my left was the door to our floor. Walking up from the ground floor till the first floor (where we lived), I often let my thoughts wander to a nicer time or place. Like the salon episode and the signboard-thoughts. It helped prepare me for the task at hand.

And to call my father *a* task would be unfair. He is *THE* task planned for me every day. The hardest one to get through and the most important. Like the last period of classes in school just before home time when you have to copy all the homework from the board.

Every day I reached home soon after Maghrib and everyday I had a stifling urge to run back to nowhere. Never really understood why.

My mom makes fresh, round *rotis* for me every day for dinner and I love to eat. My dad's face lights up whenever he sees me after a long day of work; the same relief when a painkiller kicks in. But home was not simply home.

I dragged my feet up the last few steps, dreading the daily ritual. Upon reaching the landing, I generously filled my lungs with air—for it to last the night—and turned the doorknob. The coast was clear.

I left the door partly open behind me, for fear of making a sound. I clutched my handbag to my chest – like a girl walking alone on the streets at night – and tiptoed my way towards the bathroom. Just when I was about to reach, my mom announced my arrival, as delightfully as always:

“YOU'RE HOME!”

Her daily announcement of my homecoming was always a celebration.

“Why so late? Look, I made your favorite curry. Go wash up, I'll set your food. Tell me about your day. How was work?...”

She continued talking to herself. Her babble became a distant murmur. The shrill in her voice was like a caricature of the pretence, under which I was obliged to give my salaam right after walking in.

“Yes I'm home. Work was good. I'm tired.”

I could hear water boiling and making that excited, sizzling sound as it rose to the brim of the pot that was brewing tea. The *tarka* roared like a chorus in another bigger pot, right before my mom muffled the concert with a lid. She shouted a reply above that kitchen noise:

“Stop murmuring for god’s sake. You talk in your mouth! What did you say?”

“Nothing Mama”

“Whaaaaaat?”

“I said nothing.”

“You and your father. Both talk in whispers. How will I survive like this! My ears will age before time. That stupid phone of yours has taken the life and now even your voice out of you. Did you bring the cell for the remote?”

“Yes Mama”

“What yes? Come here, tell me if the salt is fine.”

“Mama I’ll eat it anyway.”

“What am I telling you? Come here right away”

I complied before her voice got shriller. Something inside my head was bleeding because of her piercing shrieks.

“Yes it’s fine.”

“Fine? What is fine? Is it too much or too less? Your father doesn’t like bland food, you know that ...”

I thought of the trenches outside his mouth where all her efforts were laid to waste.

“Tell me more, how should I fix it then.”

“It tastes nice, Mama”

“Okay then. Go see what your father is saying. He has been asking about you for the past hour.”

“Jee”

I turned back toward my room and dropped my bag on the big hospital chair that had sat there, in a corner, ever since my father broke his hip bone. Quickly changing into my casual slippers, I hurried into my parents’ bedroom – which was still more like our family bedroom and everything else.

He was standing in front of the bathroom, trying to pull his vest down. He still had drops of water hanging from the grass-like hair that grew at his back.

I didn’t like looking at his grass or his shower-drops or his skin. I also didn’t like to wipe his drool-soaked beard and it made my fingers want to fall off.

This must be *Noorani* 36 because he wore a 38 now. I often argued with shopkeepers — over money or size — while buying vests for him.

On sensing that I was in the room, he started tilting to one side and called out for help. It was a trap, it always was. Like the metal gates calling to me.

“Hurriup! What areyou looking- holdmeholme. Come, hurryaahp-“

He had a strange way of talking. Ever since Parkinson’s and his hip-accident happened, he had quit investing energy in talking. He slurped on his saliva and mumbled and expected us to understand.

Sometimes he uttered the bare minimum or made an elusive gesture and we invoked our superpowers to comprehend it. He excused himself by saying his tongue is disloyal and doesn’t do what is told. But I knew it was a cover. He enjoyed having that power over us: dismissing us with a wave of the hand or letting out curses when something vexed him. Just some men things that all fathers do.

This was usual. The tilting and the falling.

I rushed to help my father balance on his heels. I caught him by the elbow and pressed my bony shoulder in his armpit. It was warm, and wet. He regained balance for a while, before leaning over me again. I tried to handle his weight but he kept falling and slipping out of my grip. I was pressed into the wall, under his weight, and the edge of the wall dug painfully into my back.

“Catch meeee!”

A sentence, finally!

“I’m holding you. Don’t worry. You’re safe”

The struggle went on for a few more minutes.

“LEAVE”, he thundered and yanked himself free from my weak hold. I skewed his fall towards the nearest edge of the bed and he fell on the creaking spring foam with a *boing*. His temper went down too.

“Youknow....I see...menmyage dependingon theirsons andIwonder...”

Hat-trick! Another successful sentence and look what came out. I did not have to wonder what he was wondering before he abandoned the sentence. I knew. I detested being compared to a son. It was a cursed dream for a girl like me. Because I never was and never could be the sun of his life. Even if I wiped, fed, or opened gates.

The mumbling usually improved when he had rested for a while, but his tongue still slurred a bit.

“Qazi calledtoday. His sonjussgraduated from turkey. Smart boy, he is. Also, nicelooking. That’s thesad part abouteducating children somuch. You can’t find a wife. Then these good-for-nothing kids alsogiveyou hardtime settling on one. But we axe our ownfoot by sendingchildren abroad.”

This was the longest he had spoken in a long time, but I knew his motivations. It was talks like these that made me believe all else was pretence. There was logic, information and sense in marriage talk. But none of that in normal talk.

The word “abroad” was uttered with much conviction, like a cuss-word. And “wife” was enunciated as clearly as possible despite the slur.

This conversation had reached a curve that was not unknown to me. That’s the thing about conversations like these. Talks about betrothals and potentially good husbands and wives are a rite of passage. It is a coming-of-age dinnertime speech that is either ignored or indulged in.

In my case, it was a conversation starter for the rare moments when we talked. Our chats were mostly a hiccup-long or sometimes as wordy as a gasp or a “hmm”.

Noticing my disregard for the news he had just shared, he tried again.

Except this time, it was worse.

“He has bintoa foreign country, so youcantoo. You’re badwith routes ina newplace; Aman will be good, showyouaround”

This was one of those times when just a gasp was the daughterly thing to do.

“Did you do your exercises today,” I asked him dismissively.

“He didHonors degreein Economics, youknow”.

“Okay let me get your food. Here, keep a towel under your chin. And sit up, please, or you’ll choke on the food.”

“No.”

“We’ll do your exercises after”

“No. Imnothungry. Gimme foodfirst”

Now he just didn’t bother to make sense because it was normal talk.

“Yes that’s what I said. It’s 9:30. Let’s get done with your dinner before 10 so you can take your pills on time”

“No”

“Okay no we won’t have medicines. But we’ll eat, okay?”

He mumbled something which I took as an affirmative. I placed the tray of food on my lap. Carefully plucking a chunk of meat from one of the *botis* and soaking it in the gravy, I made a *navala* with my fingers and took it toward his mouth.

He had closed his eyes and let his head hand to one side. I nudged him with my elbow so he would wake. He didn’t. The carefully folded *navala* in my hand was beginning to unfold. The oily gravy trickled down my palm and toward my wrist.

“Baba!”

He didn’t answer and pretended to snore. I thought of that incomplete story waiting to be finished in my laptop and nudged harder.

“Baba please! Wake up and have your food. It’s time for your medicines”

“Mmnaahonummum”

He mumbled again and tried to turn to his side. I touched the morsel gently against his lips. The warm gravy and meat left a wet mark.

His lips quivered faintly, registering the warmth.

The tip of his tongue peeped discreetly and lingered a moment before licking the flavor off and surreptitiously pulling back in.

A second later, he parted his lip and opened a centimeter-wide gateway.

“Open wide like aaaa...”

Clearly, he had gone deaf to my calls.

I folded the *navala* tighter, into a smaller size, and tried to push it through his stubborn mouth. He seemed to have slept again between opening the mouth and letting it in. I had to pry it open but his teeth stood in the way; steadfast and unmoving.

Either due to sleep or empathy, his mouth loosened, and the food landed inside. His teeth scraped the skin of my thumb when I pulled my hand back. The spices made it burn and the thumb pulsated.

I focused on making the next *navala*. Just when I was about to get done, I stole a look at his moving jaws. There was some reluctance there, as if it was too much to chew. His eyes squeezed and his forehead creased. His oily mouth turned into an upside-down smile and the trenches filled with oil and spit.

“What happened?”

“Ummm-myumn-myumn”

He made the sound that made my ears bleed. The thick chewing sounds. Like rainboots stomping in a puddle of muck. Like scrunching and punching wet dough with your fists as it sticks to your skin. It made me want to scratch the insides of my ears and grind my teeth.

I wondered if boy-kids also had to listen to this noise while feeding their fathers, *if they fed their fathers*.

I felt an instant pride in myself because I didn't leave my thoughts unfinished at "I wonder...". Maybe that's something girl kids have to do: listen to chewing sounds and finish their thoughts. Leaving one's thoughts unsaid and open for the listener to complete was a privilege that I couldn't afford. Like the 1500-rupee pedicure.

His lips parted and I could see the food lying dismembered on the tongue, against the backdrop of the pink throat-bell dangling from the roof.

"AHH"

He made a sound that made his tongue move like an ocean wave in the mouth. I figured he wanted me to take the morsel out.

Women often say boys take what is theirs. Do they also take a chewed-up food, slick with saliva, out of their father's mouths with bare fingers? I bit my lip as bile rose up in my throat.

It was then that it happened, hitting me like a meteor.

It slapped on my face, beside my nose, and bits went flying to my ear. The thickest part, lathered in saliva and softened by chewing, was where the meat was. It slid down toward my mouth, to find a trench. But there was none.

It took a while for me to register what had happened. It was hard to focus while my eyes burnt from inside.

The bones in my face seemed to have frozen like the dead in their graves. I forgot to blink as I stifled the urge to return to an important sign-board thought; out of the room, out of the metal gates, out of here and into nowhere.

Just like that, it happened. Just like that, he spat out the food that he didn't like onto my face because I took too long to take it out when I had the chance.

In his defence, he had given me the green signal. He had said "Go". I just missed the cue and forgot to open the gate and do the job I was given.

And I wondered if the sons in the streets, who drove cars, and opened gates, and made important decisions also earned their wages in spits.