

The Heat

A Short Story

by

Aisha Khan

All Rukhsana has been saying these days is that it is too hot. Nothing else, just that it is too hot. She can't cook anymore because it is too hot. She can't lie in our bed with her head next to mine as she has been doing for six years because it is too hot and she needs the fan to be directly above her head. She has stopped wearing those three piece suits she used to fight women for at exhibitions and instead she wears thin, shapeless night-gowns all the time. She doesn't even wear a bra anymore for godsakes. Her breasts jiggle obscenely at the slightest movement under the thin cloth. Breasts that I have not touched for months because it is too hot. Once, I tried to hold her hand and she nearly screamed and shook me off like she had been burnt.

'Your hand has heat of its own, it's unbearable for me', she claimed, looking away.

The first time I noticed this was when I called for her to bring food. That she hadn't brought it out yet was odd in itself. She knew Amjad and Saleem were over. They watched as I called for her and heard nothing in response. I left them exchanging looks with each other. The kitchen was empty. There was nothing on the stove. Nothing. Amjad and Saleem have been coming over every Friday night since we got married six years ago. This was part of the rhythm of our marital life. I threw open the bedroom door to find Rukhsana seated on the edge of the bed. Doing nothing. Her face was as I had never seen it before, empty. Eyes still. Shoulders hunched.

'Where is the food Rukhsana,' I asked softly, I didn't want them to hear us.

'Which food?'

'Haven't you cooked anything?'

'No, it was too hot today.'

She said it just like that. Like it was the most normal thing in the world to say. Like the heat can stop you from doing things you are supposed to be doing. Like it was a perfectly reasonable explanation. At the time, I convinced the boys to a dinner out, but they soon realized something was going on when I started making excuses every Friday night.

I'm not sure how long I am expected to live like this. It *is* hot, but that doesn't mean you behave like this. Everyday I come home and there is nothing for me to eat. Now I bring food for myself from the market and eat it alone. The boys have stopped asking to come over. Rukhsana does not move

from her place near the fan where she sits and periodically squirts water on herself from an old bottle that used to contain window cleaner. She waits for it to dry and then squirts again.

Yesterday, I came home to find her naked, in a tub full of ice. The electricity had been gone for three hours, she explained. Well, the electricity goes every goddamn day in every goddamn house but you don't see people acting like lunatics, do you? I don't even know where she got all that ice from. She must have gone knocking on all the neighbour's doors dressed in that bloody gown, breasts swinging everywhere for the world to see. Today, I've called her parents because I have had enough of this.

'Chalo! Get up!' I hear her mother shouting as I enter the flat. 'Look at what you have done to yourself, *apna kya huliya bunaya huwa hai?* What must Sajid think? The poor man, he's been so patient. Do you think your own father would have ever put up with this behavior from me? *Chalo, ab jaldi se* go put these clothes on, I got them from Sana Safinaz, the new collection, told my tailor to stitch it special, express type, emergency situation *hai.*'

Rukhsana looked at her, but it was strange, it was like she didn't recognise who was standing in front of her, her own mother. It scared me, that vacant look. Her mother smiled at me.

'*Arrey beta*, I didn't hear you come in. Why don't you go freshen up, I've made your favourite for you, Nihari. Rukhsana told me how much you love it, it was her idea, she even helped.'

I smiled tightly and moved past her to my bedroom. She helped. My mother in law was always one to embellish truths. I know she meant well, but did she think I was stupid? I knew what state my wife was in.

I returned to the scene of my mother in law feverously reciting something from a small booklet while rocking back and forth. She then paused and blew air on Rukhsana taking care that the air touched every part of her body from head to toe. She even used her hand to rub it into her arm pits. She then kissed the booklet and touched it to her forehead before she put it down on to the table next to her. Rukhsana was unmoved by this. She just squirted her face with the water bottle as soon as her mother kept the book down.

My mother in law gestured to the table that she had laid for me and explained, '*Haye beta*, I think some one has cursed our Rukhsana with the evil eye. She was such an obedient girl all her life, she never gave her father and I any trouble. Her teachers also loved her.'

I raised a bite of nihari to my mouth. I could already tell it was going to be delicious, the scents filled the flat and had me salivating the moment I had entered. Rukhsana had never learnt to cook like her mother. Her mother watched me while I ate. I made no attempt at making conversation with her. From time to time she would say something like, 'Beta, don't you worry I'll send you food everyday until Rukhsana gets better.' and 'I will tell her father to come see her, she has always listened to him.'

After I was done, her mother began cleaning up. I watched as she took the plates I had eaten on to the kitchen.

'Thank you, it's been so long since I have eaten anything cooked at home.'

I could hear her tut tutting in the kitchen.

'*Bas beta*, don't worry. I will send you food until Rukhsana is better. *Bas* she just needs some rest, it looks like she hasn't slept in days. Tomorrow I will bring her father.'

'Yes. I hope she gets better. Why don't you take her with you? Maybe that will help?' I turned to see if Rukhsana had heard me. She sat unaffected, staring into space.

Her mother's eyes widened. She quickly turned to me and said, 'No, no, this is her home. This is her place. She will get better here, where her husband is. Don't worry, you'll see, her father will fix her.'

That night, I tried again. She was sitting at her dressing table coiling up her long black hair into a bun. I watched and felt a flash of anger pulse through me. She came to the bed and took her pillow and was setting it down on the bare floor next to the bed.

'So now you can't even sleep next to me, Rukhsana? Come back to the bed, I am your husband.'

I couldn't believe my eyes. She continued to do what she was doing as if I had not spoken. I am usually a calm man. I never raise my voice unless I need to. But I found myself standing over her, screaming, 'Didn't you hear me? Why are you still lying there? Are you crazy? Are you on some kind of medication or something?'

Her face felt soft in my hand, her head turned the way I chose. I tilted her head so that she would see me, my face, but she closed her eyes.

'Kanjari, saali, you bloody whore! Why are you here? If you can't even look at me? Get the fuck out of my house!' I let go of her face and she slumped back into her pillow and turned over as if nothing had happened. Normally a woman would cry but she merely closed her eyes and turned to face the other side.

In the morning her father came. He rang the doorbell at 10 a.m. It was a Sunday and I was still in bed. Before Rukhsana became like this she used to make me *aloo ke parathey* every Sunday morning which I ate while reading the newspaper. Now Rukhsana sat in her usual position these days, in front of the pedestal fan, with that spray bottle in her hand. She didn't even move when the bell rang.

I opened the door and in marched her father trailed by her mother. He turned to say Salaam to me and then moved towards his daughter. He stood in front of her and she still stared straight ahead into the distance. She didn't even greet him.

'Dekhain, what was I telling you, this is how she sits all day. She doesn't change, doesn't leave the house, doesn't cook, she doesn't even speak. I can't imagine what Sajid must think', her mother spoke without pausing until Rukhsana's father waved his hand at her.

'Rukhsana I want you to stop this nonsense now, do you understand?' her father said in a low serious voice, 'I am ashamed of you. What must your husband think? Is this the kind of daughter we raised?'

Rukhsana sat still, unaffected.

Her father's voice grew louder. 'Rukhsana, did you hear what I have just said? Get up, right now'.

Rukhsana's mother began sobbing. 'Rukhsana, beta, don't do this to us, what has happened to you, please listen to your father'. She was cupping Rukhsana's face with both hands and then she began to clutch her head desperately to her bosom.

'Hat jao, Shama, move she will not listen like this,' he pushed his wife aside and grabbed his daughter by her arms and pulled her into standing position. Rukhsana looked at the floor. There really was something wrong with this woman, the way she passively allowed her father to drag her into the room. Her mother, sobbing, followed.

I sat in the living room, waiting to see what would happen next. I could hear Rukhsana's father and mother but I couldn't hear Rukhsana. A moment later, Rukhsana's father stormed out of the room, shouting, 'It would have been better if I had no children at all than to see this day. Is this how you repay your father for feeding you, clothing you, getting you married? Today, I have lost a daughter. Shama leave this *kambakhat, manhoos larki*. She is no daughter of mine.'

He marched past me, shouting, without meeting my eyes. So he had failed also. The much respected and revered Qazi Sahab had been defied by his own daughter. Saleem and Amjad will love this.

Rukhsana's mother, sobbing hysterically, let out a low wail. Tears covered her cheeks and her nose dripped as she shook her head from side to side with her palms pressed against both her ears, 'Nai, nai, she doesn't know what she is doing. Rukhsana! Rukhsana please *beta, baat maan lo mera beta, jaldi se ao*, come apologise to your father. Don't let him leave your house angry.'

At this, I wanted to tell them to take her with them, that there was no place for her in my house. But I held my tongue. I was going to try with her one last time. Make her listen, make her remember. Maybe I could have my life back then. It was worth one last shot.

So I said nothing as Rukhsana emerged from the bedroom and took her seat in front of the fan. Rukhsana's father turned towards the door but then suddenly changed direction.

'This is your last chance Rukhsana, I am warning you.' He was bent over her chair, his hands gripping either arm rest, his face inches from hers. Still, she did not respond. The fan sounded deafening, almost drowning out her mother's sobs.

It seemed as though he was going to give up and leave, but something passed over his face making his features seem like they were carved in stone. He lifted himself off of her chair, drew back his hand and struck her face. Rukhsana's cheek quivered, her mother gasped and stopped sobbing, only the fan droned on. Rukhsana sprayed water on her reddening cheek and her mother resumed her sobbing and followed her husband out of the flat.

I felt like I had been watching something on television and was now sitting in the silence that takes over when you switch it off.

'Rukhsana,' I called, expecting nothing in reply.

I walked towards her and placed my hands on the arm rest, hunching over her.

'Rukhsana,' I began again, but before I could continue further she tilted her head to the side and looked away. I pulled her by her wrists into our bedroom, pushed her face down on to our bed and raised her thin nightgown to her waist. I held her down with one hand and undid my shalwar with the other, not that there was any need to hold her down.

After I was done, I felt much calmer, much like the time I wiped my car clean after I came back from a week long trip to Lahore, every swipe moving away the layer of dust. Rukhsana had just stood up and walked to the bathroom, her night gown falling once again to her ankles. I rolled to my side and fell asleep.

When I woke, I heard noises from the kitchen. It seemed Rukhsana had finally come to her senses. Cautiously, I peeked inside. Rukhsana's bare scalp glinted under the yellow light from the bulb that hung from the ceiling. It was completely smooth, she would have had to have used a razor to achieve that sort of smoothness. She was ladling out some daal in to a bowl. I felt disgusted but couldn't look away, I don't think I had ever seen anything like this before.

I didn't want her to see me, so I rushed back to the bedroom and silently locked the door. All I knew was I wanted her out of my house.

Rukhsana called from outside, 'Food is ready.'

She would now be seated at the table waiting for me like she always had before all this madness.

I wasn't sure what to do. I knew it would grow back, but as it was, it was grotesque. I couldn't be around what my wife had become. I couldn't sit across the table from her like it wasn't a big deal.

'It's not hot anymore', she smiled at me from the table as I walked in. But her eyes, her eyes are what made me decide to do what I did next.

I pulled her to a standing position and dragged her behind me, out of the flat, down the stairs and into my car. Rukhsana said nothing and followed me, barefooted, without resistance. After a short, furiously quiet drive during which I avoided looking at Rukhsana, I reached over to open her door and pushed her out. With the car still running, I watched as she walked, still smiling, through the gates of the Edhi Centre for Mentally Ill Women.