

To Paradise

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pounced and replied. Like a snake, she hissed, "And may I know how many men you have known?" How cold and ruthless her look was. Her face changed. Her teeth clenched, exactly like mine. We had both inherited this from our father. I stared at those teeth showing between her explosive lips. She continued in the same vein, "You live alone, independently, and that's why I want to know."

Whom had I sheltered in my home? Who was she, really? My sister? Or someone else in disguise?! Her anger was surprising. Just as there was no escape from my mother's table, she too cooked and called me to eat at night. We sat together, eating. Neither of us spoke. She had blustered at me before we sat to eat, telling me all kinds of stories. But, as soon as we sat, she seemed to drift off into her own thoughts. I spoke first. "Listen, you know, this room is bad luck. It's impossible to think straight here. Let's look for a place together. A two-bedroom apartment. You'll stay in your room and I'll stay in mine." Her indifferent laugh told me she had already rejected the idea. I thought if she stayed with me in this one room, she would burn me out. That's what she'd come for. After dinner, she forcefully picked up my empty plate with hers and, without any show of emotion, said, "I'm thinking of returning the money you gave me for my college admission."

I was thunderstruck. I thought I didn't understand what she meant. Hesitantly, I asked, "To whom?" Without a word, as though she didn't hear me, she went into the bathroom and locked the door.

My sister had been writing a letter to someone for a few days. She would turn on the table lamp and start writing once I went to bed. In the morning, there would be a pile of discarded drafts of the unfinished letter. Who was she writing to so hesitatingly? I didn't have the guts to ask. My sister was waiting for me to step on her tail so she could attack me and spread her

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poison. So I stepped warily. We don't talk much. One day when I asked how she liked her college, she answered nonchalantly and purposefully turned a page in her book. I knew she was pretending to study but her heart wasn't in it. I couldn't guess the reason for her restlessness. She was an expert in cooking and household chores. How surprising! Abba was so strict – how did she become so careless about her studies? "So, doesn't Abba scold you all any more about studying?" In response, she said, "The more laws, the more flaws." The next moment, she



shut me up, as if on purpose, by asking, without raising her head from her book, "Why did you get divorced? The way you're living now - is this any way to live?"

Only a few days later did I discover why she was so concerned about my life. And then I felt like banging my head against the wall. I don't know why I didn't figure it out earlier – why I didn't think of it on the very first day. My sister had come to me just to make a little joke out of my life. What a fool I've been! I thought I had come this far after going through so much and this was just my little sister. Where the doctors had failed to revive me from my death-like surroundings, my sister had succeeded. She had set sail with me to Paradise on Behula's raft. I was in mid-sea now. There was no bank in sight. She had taken me far from shore before telling me, one by one, all the secrets she had harbored for so long.

My sister had got married about a year ago without our parents' consent. The boy was from our town. They had not been seeing eye to eye for a few months now. So she had become frustrated and come to me. Had she not uttered the word "frustrated" with such endearment, I would never have guessed even at my age that this "frustration" was something one would wish to return to repeatedly. And so, she had written letter after letter of her own accord, made him swear and agree over the phone that she

could return. The very next day.

As her older sister, I could have asked her a myriad questions: what kind of person is the boy, what does he do, what if you become frustrated with him again, will you be able to handle it? But I never thought of anything. And even if I had, would I have said anything? The tail was still laid out. So, even though I knew she was leaving the next day, I asked, as if to remind her, "You said you wanted to study. Won't you go to college anymore?" My sister flashed me her smooth, clenched teeth and said, "Why college? I go to university over there. My studies have suffered so much in these few days!"

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I kept waking up every few minutes during the night. Each time I saw my sister putting something in its place. She had just the one suitcase – it shouldn't take her so much time to pack. Actually, my sister was putting everything in order for me before she left. Who was she doing it for? What would I do with a neatly ordered household? I seemed to think this but,