

A Room in the Corner

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"Do you think our souls have a uterus, Nargis?" she whispered.

Why did she whisper? She isn't the whispering kind. Nargis can't remember the last time she heard Rakib Bhai's wife whisper. Sure, she always had a trembling voice, like windows quiver on a stormy night. Only her storm never really stopped. But this time, she whispered. Like she was sharing a grave secret with Nargis, someone she didn't talk to for the past 19 years.

"I don't know, Apa. I haven't really thought about it," Nargis replied hesitantly.

"I don't think they do," she sighed, "Souls are separated from our bodies, right? It doesn't have anatomy, no physical agony. No arthritis, no diabetes, no headaches. And no uterus." She laughed and started coughing, choking on her own blood.

Renu! Her name was Renu, Nargis suddenly remembered. In the five years when they were neighbours, she probably mentioned her name once. It didn't matter though. She was Rakib Bhai's wife to the entire building. Rakib Bhai's wife, who always had a smile on her face, who always helped everyone with whatever they needed. And most importantly, who couldn't give her husband a child.

Over the hundred desolate afternoons, cooped up in that small corner bedroom as Nargis's daughter would sleep, she'd tell Nargis her stories. How she was married off to this insect of a human being in exchange for a job by her father because her skin tone couldn't afford any better. How her insomnia wouldn't let her sleep at night and she'd stare at the moon in silence for hours as her husband would snore like a growling wolf. And how the moon looked the most beautiful when blurry.

She'd stare at Nargis's infant and sigh, "I had one of those, you know? I named her Jasmine. Our house's all empty now but for those seven days, it was like a Bazaar! They'd try to pick her up but she'd cry, for all she wanted was her mother's warmth. She was the only one who wanted me unconditionally. I'd wait for everyone else to leave so that I could be with my Jasmine in those quiet afternoons. Just me and my Jasmine. And then she'd grow up and I'd take her to that kindergarten at the end of the lane. I'd sit outside the entire time she'd be in class – like those mothers do! And my Jasmine and I would walk home and I'd buy her ice cream. Not every day, though. Only on special occasions. I wouldn't wanna spoil her."

Rakib Bhai's daughter was 7 days old when she died. They buried her at Rakib Bhai's village graveyard. His wife started visiting Nargis more frequently after Jasmine's death. When Nargis wasn't home, she'd sit outside the kindergarten at the end of the lane. She'd talk to the other guardians waiting outside, and hear their stories. And just before the bell rang, she'd walk right back home as fast as she could before anyone noticed.

"I shouldn't have listened to him," she blurted out one afternoon, "I was young and didn't know any better. And he kept saying how this was the right decision for our future and that we couldn't afford a child back then."

"What are you talking about, Apa?" Nargis asked in fear.

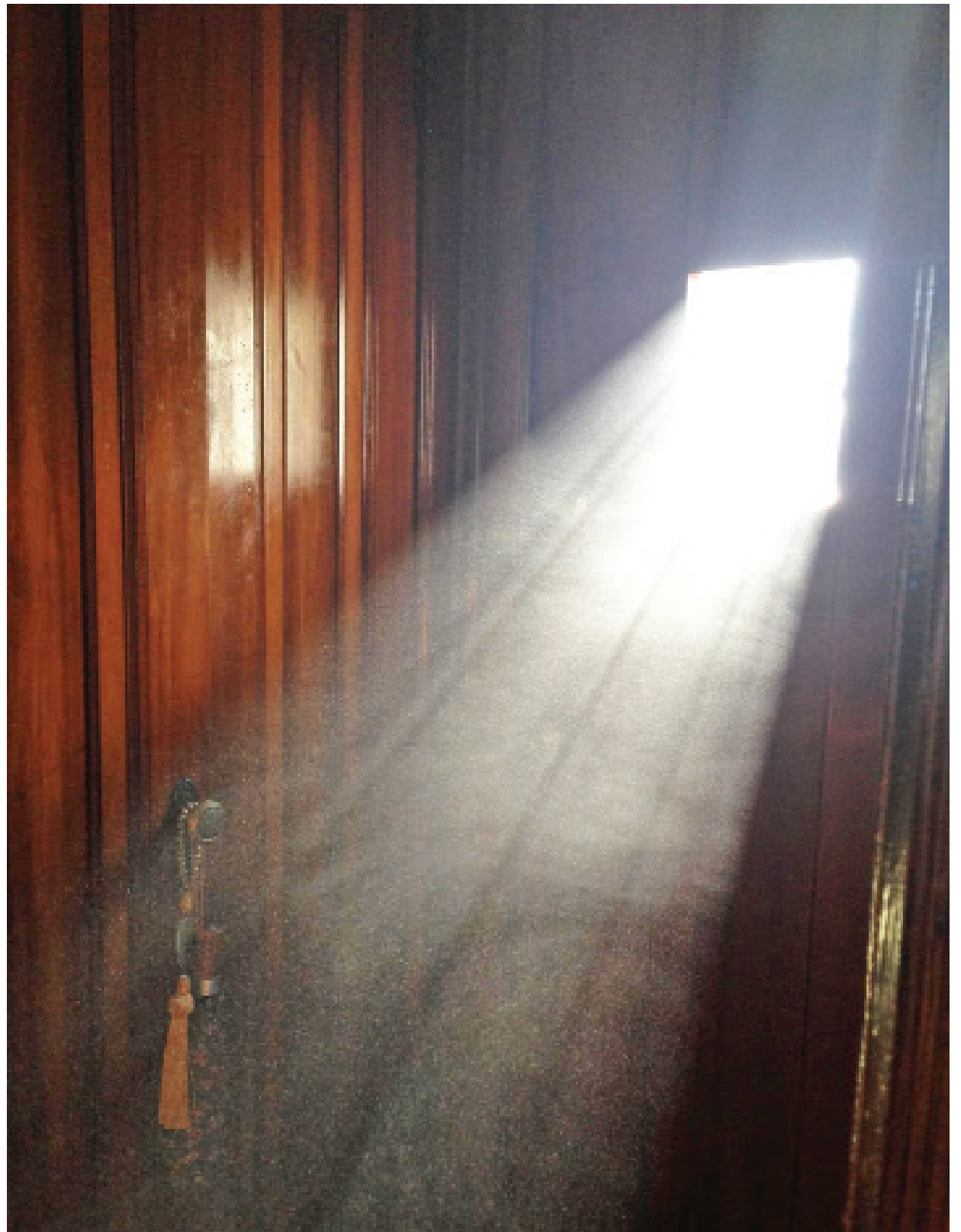
"He made me do it, Nargis!" she cried, holding Nargis's hand in fear and unrest, "he said we were too young and he didn't earn enough to support a child. There was so much... The sheets were soaked in red. I squealed and I cried but not a drop of tear or a hint of sound would come out. I have this... I'm trying so hard, but..."

"You can tell me, Apa," Nargis held her hand tight and came closer.

"I can't scream, Nargis," she said. Her voice cracked, "I have this scream stuck in my throat, trapped inside. I keep trying to scream at the top of my lungs, but it just won't come out. Your brother's a doctor, right? I know this sounds silly, but would you mind asking him?"

Nargis and her husband moved out with their child later that year. Renu didn't contact her anymore, not once in the next 19 years. The next time Nargis heard her voice was on a Thursday afternoon in June 2018.

After Jasmine died, Rakib grew distant realising another child with Renu was unlikely. He got a few rapid promotions, made some money and built a nice little house in



his village. He convinced Renu to live there because his job needed him to move around a lot.

"I was in Faridpur when I heard he'd married again, in secret. He started looking for another wife right after I left Dhaka. Apparently, he told his new wife that he'd been a widow," she laughed over the phone, "I wish I'd died with Jasmine."

Renu shifted to her brother's house later that year. Her brother was the only family she had left. She was allotted a small corner room, similar to the one at Nargis's house. Maybe that's what reminded her of Nargis after all these years – Nargis thought to herself.

Renu brought a steel-plated almirah, her only property, to her brother's house. She bought that with her own money right after she moved to Dhaka with Rakib.

"They don't talk to me, my brother's kids," she sighed, "I can't move without the nurse as well. She comes twice a day, cleans the pan and sweeps the entire room. Takes her

about 8 minutes. I ask her about her family, her children – the same questions again and again. I know she gets a bit annoyed, but I can't really afford having manners at this stage, can I?"

Nargis had guests waiting for her. "Apa, I have to go now," she said quietly.

"Yes, yes," Renu sounded embarrassed, "Listen, before you go, did you ask your brother about that problem I had in my throat? About the scream?"

"I forgot, Apa. I'll try asking him again," Nargis replied hesitantly.

"No, it's okay," she said after a pause, "Will you call me again, Nargis?"

Nargis didn't. Renu died 4 months later, in her sleep. Her brother sold her steel-plated Almirah for 6000 Taka.

Remind Ifti to be quieter at hasiburrashidifti@gmail.com