



FICTION

STORM CHILD

I remember the sense of disquiet I'd get, looking at random strangers on the road, and how, whenever I told anyone about it, they'd take it incredibly seriously.

SARAZEEN SAIF AHANA

The majority of my early childhood was spent in a big house filled with endless possibilities. At least, that's what my preteen self thought at the time.

Here in South Asia, kids don't generally move out of their parents' home until they have a house of their own, though that's a tradition that's slowly edging out. Anyways, what that means is I lived with my parents, my older sister, my grandparents, three uncles, two aunts, and two cousins. The latter two were both boys, the older being about two years older than my sister, and the younger about a year my junior. We were essentially raised as two sets of twins, and I did not realise my brothers were my "cousins" and not "actual" brothers until I was well into my teens. To us, we were brothers and sisters, and that was that.

The thing you need to know about my family is that we're bat sh*t crazy. It was a house full of overly-emotional, excitable, very noisy, and very loving people, and we kids grew up loved and pampered, but not spoiled. The first thing we were taught was respect, and it's a lesson I retain to this day. My world was one of hugs and being sneakily handed treats by winking aunts so my mother didn't see.

It was idyllic.

I didn't realise until last year that it was not as perfect as I remembered. There were hints of something darker, especially concerning me, that my preteen mind either didn't notice or just ignored.

Like how there was a room in the southwest corner of the big house that no one was allowed to enter, and how no one ever told me what was in there. I'd overhear snatches of conversation about "that room" at times, but those conversations always cut off whenever they saw me. I never tried to sneak in, because that would be disrespectful, and over time, my curiosity faded.

There were other odd aspects of life in that place, too.

Like the time I bounced past my youngest uncle's room (on a yoga ball, of all things), and I thought he must have invited at least 50 people over because of all the voices. When I bounced in, ready to be cuddled and made a fuss over by the guests, I found the room empty, and my uncle fast asleep.

I prodded him awake. "Where are your friends?"

"At home..." he said groggily. "What're you talking about, you under-sized elf?" He reached over with a half-asleep arm and mussed my hair.

I giggled. "But they were *here!* I just heard them!"

"I thought *I* was the one asleep."

And I squealed as he grabbed me, and I fell asleep in the crook of his arm, tucked safe and warm. He smelled like ice cream. I woke up to my mom calling everyone to dinner and was vaguely surprised to find the blankets

I'd burrowed under replaced with musty old curtains I'd never seen before. They smelled like foetid meat.

"Sarah! Get your plate before your brothers eat the whole fridge."

"Coming, Mommy! And someone please tell Uncle Sam to change his curtains. They're ew!"

But everyone was too busy with the food, and I only mentioned the curtains in passing. I told my eldest aunt to get me better toys on my birthday when I found a rubber snake in the formal sitting room. A toy that I now realise was too thick and skin-like to be a toy. It was striped yellowish-orange and black, and the end was oozing blood, with bits of flesh still attached. It was too morbid, especially with what looked like a tooth stuck on the bloody end. I was too young to pay attention to the news, but I remember my father and my eldest uncle discussing a break-in at the local zoo.

I remember, when I was about eight, I saw two kids push another one down the stairs at school. He bounced all the way down, and when he finally stopped at the landing, his neck was bent at a strange angle, with blood gushing from the place in his throat where something white was poking out.

I ran, crying, to my favourite teacher, and I led her to the stairs. There was nothing there, not even the blood. When she very gently asked me about all three of the children, my descriptions matched none of the students enrolled in that school. I sat in the principal's office, shaking, and she sat with me, holding me close until my mother came to get me.

At home, I found the kid in my room, his neck still broken, holding my favourite teddy.

I asked him if he was okay, but he said nothing. His eyes were hauntingly empty. I heard someone laugh in the other room, but when I looked back, he was gone.

My teddy's neck was twisted around, and not even my grandmother could fix it. She had to get me a new one.

I remember the smoke that I saw sometimes, seeping under the locked door of that forbidden room, thick and oily.

I remember the sense of disquiet I'd get, looking at random strangers on the road, and how, whenever I told anyone about it, they'd take it incredibly seriously.

I remember feeling that way about an old friend of my grandfather's, and how, after I told Grandda about it, he flew into a rage and threw him out of the house. One of my uncles told me a few years ago that, a couple of weeks after that, the man was arrested for filming child pornography.

My early childhood was not idyllic at all. Not even remotely. It's just that my entire family worked so hard to give me good memories that I eventually forgot the strange ones.

Until last year.

I was eleven years old when my parents purchased a big, beautiful apartment in a newer part of the city, and we moved out. My

new home felt strange to me, with no rambling uncles and aunts, and none of my brothers with me. It was lonely. My grandfather died about a year after that, an event that none of us ever really recovered from.

After Grandda's death, the family sort of unwound. My uncles and their families eventually moved out of the big house until it was just Gramma living there. We'd all gather every few weeks for dinner and a family movie night, but it wasn't the same.

As time went by, those odd memories of mine faded, and my brothers and sister grew up. The two sets of twins were not twins anymore, but two brothers and two sisters, and, eventually, we became cousins. We were still close, but not like before. I guess that happens as time goes by, but it's still sad.

And then, last year, Gramma called me. That, in itself, was nothing special, but she didn't sound right to me.

"Darling, can you come to see me this weekend?"

I had plans with a bunch of my friends, but this was *Gramma*. She is important. "Sure. What time? And what're you cooking for me?"

She laughed. "Anything you want, my love. Do you still like candy? I have a bunch left."

"I'm 25, Gramma."

"So? I'm almost 90, and I still like candy."

"That's why you barely have any teeth left," I teased her.

"Life's too short for teeth. Can you come over after breakfast?"

"I can't wait. Love you to bits!"

"I love you more, sweetheart."

Gramma is the most beautiful woman in the entire world. Yes, she's old and stooped and her skin is wrinkled, but she's beautiful. She has the brightest smile I've ever seen, and she's tough as old roots. She's probably smarter than my entire group of friends put together. Half of my poetry is inspired by her. That morning, she looked like none of it. She did not look bright or tough or smart. She looked old and weary and slightly scared.

She smiled and hugged me, but there was no heart in it. It was not a Gramma hug at all. Not remotely.

I knew something was wrong, and I knew it was big. I tried to lead her inside because I didn't want her to be cold, but she shook her head, and we sat on the old swing by the porch.

"Tell me," I said.

She did not speak for a long time, and I did not urge her. She'd tell me when she was ready. And she did. And it was a story like none I could ever have expected.

This is part one of "Storm Child", to be serialised here on Star Literature.

Sarazeen Saif Ahana is an adjunct member of the faculty at Independent University, Bangladesh where she teaches English and has a small cult of friends similarly obsessed with genre fiction.

POETRY

Raw Magnolias

SNATA BASU

This is a garden, these are my petals; this is my armoring plant that harbours the first light. Birthing river, are you ready to give to the world? Are you ready to dawn my beloved auroras? To break my darling things—evil-eyed and crouched against the cold respite? *What can I say about being a woman?* There is nothing much I can say.

In a cup pin-floats your passive nescience; my resistance, ready to arm itself, coils against the ripples of a mighty hot earth, pulped like barbed wire that's easy to bloom, quick to swallow...difficult to crack.

Here in this deity-womb climbs shoddy water, fighting dislocations of the body—this body that is a temple,

a malady, a ground of battling pilgrims.

This body is disarmed and gentler than all that has ever happened to it.

Lunar dust that's blocked against the light patter of the rain

bears this body that is fleshed into something human,

so that one day you might understand what a mother's labour has prized, what her blood has given.

This body that has loved and forgiven, disfigured by a thousand cruelties, asks to flower like a bare sea.

All it asks is to be left alone, to be freed remorseless into a grave of everyone it had had to be.

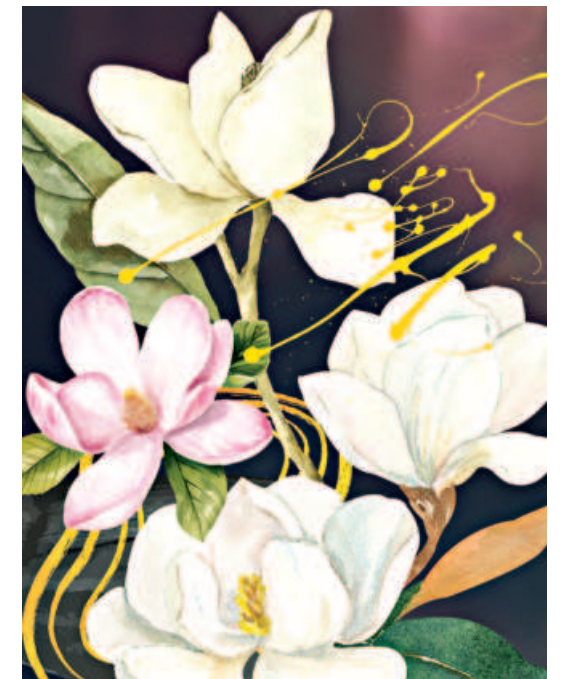


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

What is there to say about being a woman? Now, there is that question.

Will you allow me a final hour to heap up all the bodies, disclaimed and given up to cerebrate on these trifling convictions hollowed to the bone? Not much to say about being a woman, but while the shell cracks open, would you peer inside:

in it, raw magnolias—dispetaling like Venus in a drought; scraps crocheting into a blooming Moon-God.

Snata Basu is an aspiring poet from Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her work mostly centres on passionate, personal bindings. She is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature at North South University.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

POETRY

burnt honey

MARISSA MANAL WAIZ

the terracotta stain
as i stand in my kitchen
with hands hovering over the tawa in which i
cooked my morning paratha
i see the bubbles in the kettle
and move one of my hands to infuse the water
with tea leaves and cardamom
after all, everyone is home.
stacks of unwashed plates in the sink
leaning, like the tower of Pisa
i let my hands drown in the smoke
i quite like the smell of cloves, even more
when they're burning
turning charcoal in front of my eyes
while my henna darkens and it dries.
i turn the button as right as it goes
remove the tawa and pull back my long

sleeved shirt so it rests above my elbows
i put my hands close to the sapphire flame
the heat makes me feel something
it makes me feel better
burning but better.
"what's the weather today, alexa?"
43 degrees, i hear from the living room
i pour the milk inside the kettle
i take two teacups out, fill it with tea
mix a spoon of ginger and dash of honey
and i pull my sleeves down, purple patches
peaking through the translucent cream linen.
i give him the tea
he complains about my henna possibly
staining the white shirt
and notices his marks through it
eyes fixated on it, like it's a piece of art
before they're shut;
ignored, like a masterpiece he cannot afford.

he raises his gaze to my face
his iris pulls and his pupils dilate
a curve breaks open a familiar dimple
as he compliments my henna and the tea
even the honey, like i don't mix a spoonful
everyday.
i smile, as i burn my tongue on my cup
with a closed fist to endure the heat of the sip
like the one i took not too many cups of burnt
honey before.
here, open arms come with a closed fist
just like tea comes with burnt honey.
"Burnt honey" was the winning entry in
last month's Khero Khata.

Marissa Waiz is just another 17-year-old girl from Dhaka who writes by taking every minor inconvenience as inspiration.