

FROM

A House Is a Body: Stories

BY SHRUTI SWAMY

from "Blindness"

Sudha and Vinod had a modest wedding. At their parents' insistence, Vinod had ridden in on a horse. It was wedding season in Delhi, and every night the streets were filled with the raucous dancing of the families of bridegrooms, the weather gentle, still a few weeks away from ferocious heat. Sudha's body was covered in turmeric the night before. She didn't think she would enjoy it, but there was the undeniable pleasure of being touched by so many loving hands. The turmeric was cool, and resembled in texture and consistency the river-mud of her mother's ancestral home, where she had swum summers as a girl. She also took a milk bath. How do you feel, her mother asked her, bathing her like she had when Sudha was a child, and because of this, Sudha had not felt any shame in her nakedness.

Fine, said Sudha. She smelled of bitter herbs, but tomorrow she was promised she would look beautiful. When she got out of the bath her mother rubbed her down vigorously with a rough towel.

And your wedding night?

What about it?

Are you ready?

What is there to be ready for? But then she smiled at her mother and her mother knew that she was just teasing. At night some weeks later Sudha and Vinod climbed up to the roof of their new flat to smoke a cigarette. It was the last of the weddings before the punishing heat, and from somewhere in a twist of road below them they could hear the brass sounds of the wedding

band. They didn't speak, just passed the cigarette back and forth. There was a cap of smog that made the sunsets blaze with color but obscured the stars. Sudha took her husband's hand. It was thin and dry and warm. She had memorized the lines in his palm, cut deep as though in wood. She listened to the sound of his breathing. Once she had lain on top of him, very still, and kept her face close to his so that she could taste the air that came from his mouth, tinged with clove from the kernels he sucked for better digestion.

Do you find me handsome?

Do you?

Yes, he said, smiling his kind smile, I find you very handsome.

I do too.

We'll have to stop smoking these things soon. It's bad for us.

Is that what you're thinking about?

No, he said. I was thinking about the time you tried to teach me how to swim, and I nearly drowned. Do you remember?

I remember.

How old were you, nine?

I was eight, you were nine.

Did you find me handsome then?

No. I wasn't thinking like that.

The music from the street faded. There were kites in the air, but who was flying them? It was late, and Sudha felt tired, leaning against the concrete railing, her lungs full of the smog of the old city. It felt close to dawn, though it was not nearly that late: the sky was a deep purple. Downstairs she took off her clothes, and lay down naked in the bed. Her body took to water, while Vinod's rejected it, and he had flailed his skinny arms wildly, his mouth gulped down lungfuls of riverwater. At first she laughed, thinking it was a joke; then, with effort, she pulled him out. In her mind as she fell asleep: a cigarette, a river, a baby, and her husband's eyes, the same dark eyes of that drowning boy.

DO YOU LOVE ME? she said.

I love you, he said. He entered her. She had pushed her dress up around her breasts and pulled aside her underwear. She closed her eyes. Look at me, he

said, but she couldn't look at him. When Dhritarashtra's mother made love to his father with her eyes closed, her son was born blind. Look at me, he said again, but she still wouldn't. Fear, a sick-good feeling, tenderness, a strange terror. Hush, she said, and he bucked against her, breathing hard on her. The sound of his breathing was like a train she was trying to catch. She raced after it and she knew that if she could leap onto it, it would carry her away.

Should I stop? he said. Sudha—

Don't stop, she said, and thrust him deeper. He pulled out and came on her belly. They lay beside each other not touching. She didn't move to wipe his semen off her belly. It was warm, the air was warm, the sweat on his back dried against the sheets and thickened into the fabric. Things that seemed like they should be disgusting were suddenly not disgusting. She was amazed by this.

IN JULY A BLACK FEELING RETURNED and she left work early, rode the Metro home and sat on the hard divan in front of the television, muted, not really watching anything at all, sitting in the living room and gazing at the actors' lips shaping soundless words. Vinod found her like this and tried to speak to her, but she felt he was very far away. She was all blurry, translucent and unreachable, and she watched Vinod as he paced around the living room in great agitation. What is the matter? he said.

I don't know, she said. She could feel the voice in her throat, but it didn't sound like her own.

Should I call someone?

Call who?

A doctor? Your mother?

She shook her head. I'm fine, she said. When she was a girl she would fall asleep on her arm, and turning in the night she would wake and realize her body had pressed the blood out of it, and heavy, it became a stranger's arm. In the minutes before the needling pain came, she would touch it with her other hand, running a fingertip along the skin of her forearm, the fine hair, the burl of her elbow. It was then the feeling arrived, but on those nights she had felt only the first pricks of it, the way a person crushed to death by stones might enjoy the first on his chest, the pleasant heaviness of them, the way they make the body feel smaller, or held in an embrace.

She did not know how to explain it, so she stayed silent until it passed, and then gorged herself on the cold dinner Vinod had prepared, sat in bed beside him, watching his fingers twitch in sleep.

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by Shruti Swamy

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