

Meher Ali

A-88

The one who told us had green eyes, translucent skin, boy cut with full breasts.

“No way,” we said.

“Yeah, this is what happens,” she said, not matter-of-factly at all but amazed like the rest of us, as if it wasn’t her but someone else who had broken the news.



I’m standing above the toilet in our flat in Z——, feet apart, my threaded, off-white underwear in hand.

There’s a stain. It should have been the color of mud but instead it is a vibrant splotch of red. I panic and throw the underwear on top of the *tanki*, the cistern.

I debate whether to tell my mother or not and then do. She grabs a measuring tape and makes me stand against a wall as she measures my height.

“*Iska matlab tum ab kabhi lambi nabin hogi*,” she says. This means you will never ever grow any taller.

“How did you find out?” she asks.

“My underwear had a stain.”

“Where is it?”

“I threw it outside—in the garden.”

“Why did you do that? We have to find it,” she says moving towards the dressing table to get a torch. The time is 8:00 p.m.

We are out in the garden next to one of our bedrooms (our flat is on the ground floor). My mother pokes around the bushes with a torch.

I poke around as well, filled with dread, as if there is a possibility that the underwear will materialize or that she’ll get it out of me that I’ve thrown it on top of the *tanki*.

After that, this happens:

My elder cousin brother comes to visit with an aunt who is travelling to the US. I’ve just used the toilet and, as he goes in, he covers his nose with his shirtsleeves. My aunt looks at him sympathetically; I’ll forever associate my middle class existence with looking down deep into the hole

of an Indian toilet.

We get robbed and don't know about it until my father decides to play music one night. The thieves stole the speakers and put back the outer cover so we wouldn't notice they were gone.

Our neighbors replace their green window screen that has "Allah" written on it with glass. We mock them saying that they are afraid of the Hindu procession that, it is rumored, will pass by our neighborhood in the following week.

They are on their way to Ayodhya,¹ people say.

I grow breasts but will continue to wear a chemise for the next three years, after which I start wearing my mother's bras without her knowledge.

I hurt my knee in the park behind our flat and it bleeds a warm red; my brother's golden-brown hair gets highlighted by the setting sun and a person he loves but no longer knows calls him "Gorbachev"; my father cuts mine and my brother's hair on a Saturday leading teenaged girls who get beaten by their fathers to say:

"Is your father a barber, then?"

A young cook who will go on to molest me shows me a chicken's heart and then slices it in half.

I use wet, mosquito-infested school bathrooms and wipe myself after with my skirt. It gets wet but dries out as I play with my friends in the football field.

My mother and I forget about the underwear.

And unless the new tenants have decided to replace the Indian toilet with a western one, it's still there, not dirty because dirt doesn't reach up there, the stain now fully absorbed into the fabric, protected by spider webs: an unopened present in a young girl's hands.

¹ In 1992, Babri Masjid, a mosque constructed in the 16th century during the reign of the Mughal ruler Babur, was destroyed by Hindu nationalists. They claimed that the site of the mosque used to house a temple which was demolished when the mosque was built. Following the demolition, there were widespread riots between Hindus and Muslims.