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The Housing Colony Secret

Vrushali Telang

Packed with residents, the din of colony premises was hushed to whispers and stiff sobs. 65 year old Radha Kerkar, one of them, had passed away after being born and married here in.

Built at the fulcrum of Indian Independence, Shantashram was one of the first co-operative housing societies of Bombay (now called Mumbai). 5 storey buildings starting from Block A all the way to Block O, a volleyball court, two open air badminton courts, a lush green garden, 2 walkways

circumventing the garden and a large community hall – Shantashram was a self-contained universe in itself.

Dotted with coconut palms, it was as stunning then, as it was today. Now, many builders were eyeing the plot to redevelop it, but the housing officials were evasive. They wanted to retain the expanse of land which would then be crammed with buildings by the builders. Only two families had sold their flats to date. No one who was born here wanted to leave. Even if they did leave for studies and work abroad, they held onto their share of the flat.

Despite its splendour and sheer beauty in a polluted city like Mumbai, Shantashram was a very incestuous place to live in. Most residents were related in some way or another.

Radha Kerker lived in M Block with her family: one husband, twin daughters and a new born son. The infant however bore a striking resemblance to H-Block's Sandesh Hegde – The Smoking Bachelor as he was popularly known.

Radha had always been prim and proper, but it seems that these prim and proper types were always the ones to live the most scandalous lives. She'd been born Jaya Nadkarni in H Block, where she lived with her over-fertile mother who popped ovum like a popcorn vending machine. Her parents had 14 children. Jaya was the oldest and helped bring up her sisters and brothers. At a suitable age she was married to M Block's Suresh Kerkar. When she was married, as was true in India in the mid-70s, her first and last name changed and she acquired a whole new identity. From Jaya Nadkarni she was now Radha Kerkar.

Radha and Suresh had an arranged marriage. They never dated.

As both the Kerkar and Nadkarni families belonged to the same sub-caste, Suresh Kerkar's mother thought Jaya would make the perfect daughter-in-law. Coming from a large family, she'd be well behaved, unspoiled and faithful. Her light

complexion was an added attraction as there would then be some hope of a fair-skinned child in the dark Kerkar world.

As a young man, Suresh Kerkar was too busy studying and never noticed Jaya. So when his mother suggested Jaya as a prospective bride, he simply shrugged “okay.” As long as the girl would clean, cook and keep him, he was fine with anybody. His mother had selected her, so it had to be a decent choice. After all, who worried most about a man? His mother, right?

A quick marriage in Santashram’s society hall followed by a routine honeymoon in Matheran’s Circuit House, for three days, and he was back into his books. When he changed her name from Jaya to Radha, Suresh Kerkar was at his proactive best as a husband.

Housework and two stunning black-beauties, the twin girls that followed precisely nine months after the marriage kept Radha busy for the first couple of years. By then Suresh had just become someone who gave her money to run her house. Radha Kerkar’s life was as humdrum as any middle-class woman’s who had not much exposure. Her only sizeable move was from the 4th floor of H Block to the 5th floor of M Block.

She never really noticed him, but Sandesh Hegde was always there in his balcony at H Block smoking his Marlboros. It was only when the twins went to kindergarten that Radha had the time to stand out in her balcony, breathe the air, and look out.

Radha, after dropping the wailing twins at school, would always have just enough time to make their lunch and a cup of tea for herself. Sipping her well boiled brew in solitude was the only luxury she had.

One rainy morning as she took her first sip, she looked at Sandesh. He was a laid back guy who was never hassled or stressed. A bachelor, he was rich enough to live comfortably on the dividends from his dead father’s provident and mutual funds. She’d been his neighbor since childhood, but had never

really noticed him before. Her strict mother had never allowed playing with boys.

With dead parents and in-laws, a husband who was studying for a Ph.D. and young children at school –Radha Kerkar’s existence was rather unpopulated now. At that precise moment when she saw Sandesh, her heart lurched and life took on a new meaning. There was an excitement that Radha had not known in four decades of her existence.

They began with furtive glances, and then progressed to waving to each other and looking away. Then, they held their looks just long enough till they became meaningful smiles. Their little games continued until one day Sandesh winked and Radha blushed.

The neighbors began to talk. At the newly widowed Priya Kulkarni’s flat, four neighbours dropped in for a condolence visit.

“Radha’s 40!” mentioned Madhuri Kamat.

“Closer to menopause,” sniggered Sunanda Rege.

“You know the other day she forgot her umbrella in the rains. Her children were soaked but she was smiling and giggling,” informed Dr. (Mrs) Mina Pai.

“I even saw her peck Suresh on his lips when he got back from work. The things people do in love, I tell you,” added Mrs.Cawasji, the much-loved solitary Parsi of Shantashram colony.

Love changes lives. Radha Kerkar suddenly became super-efficient and time-conscious. She also lost a bunch of weight. She’d wake up at the crack of dawn and cook breakfast, lunch, tea-time snacks, and a hot dinner by 7:30 in the morning.

She’d then help Suresh get ready: iron his already ironed shirt from the *dhobi*, stack his books, notepads and files over the shoe rack so he would remember to carry them on his way to

the University, tie his tie, and pack his separate lunch and afternoon snack boxes for work. Sometimes, if he was getting late, she even spoon-fed him breakfast as he got ready for work. Basically, other than washing his bum and physically bathing Suresh, she'd do everything for him, happily. She had the same routine with the twins.

She would then come back to her M Block and instead of climbing four flights of stairs, she'd climb six. She'd make her way up to the terrace that spanned the entire colony from Block A to O, and walk down another four flights of the H block. She'd then burn five hundred calories during hard core passionate sex, and then walk back up the stairs, across the terrace, down the six floors and back to school.

Picking up her twins from school, they'd all walk back, eat together, and sleep like babies-- tired, happy and satiated. Heaven or hell, wherever Radha's dead mother-in-law was now, must have been very happy. Finally a fair infant was born into the Kerkar family!

People began to whisper, however. He looked nothing like Suresh Kerkar. The resemblance to Sandesh Hegde, the smoking bachelor, was so striking that the only thing missing in the new born infant was a nicotine stick between his tiny bunched fingers. The senior members tried to hush the matter. After all, both lovers were from Shantashram they explained to the gossip-mongers. Had the father been a Mohmeddan from Saifee Manzil or a Ciristaon from Pinto Villa, *that* would be something to tattletale about. While Suresh Kerkar was too busy to notice, it remained the entire colony's not-so-well-kept secret to date.

Now Radha's grown up and almost- legitimate son, lifted one end of the plank and Suresh lifted another. Two more men were needed... and the bunch of women looked towards Sandesh Hegde, waiting for him to step in. They exchanged

furtive glances at each other as well. But Sandesh did not move.

Just then two other men stepped in and took Radha's corpse into the hearse. Just as the door shut, Sandesh lit a cigarette, turned around and walked away.

This time however, no one noticed the tears that started to trickle through.

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