



Ahalya

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Inhale. Let your chest expand to contentment. Recognize the budding constriction, twisting in the pit deep in your stomach. Embrace the tightness until the back arches in release.

The air rushes through the small gap between the lips, brushing the tongue in a swift yet definitive motion, leaving without a taste.

His hands travelled to the end of your dupatta, pulling at the threads of broken fabric. His eyes rest on your being, subtle yet brazen. They scorch the covered skin more than the naked limbs. The friction of his calloused skin grazing your soft,

untouched one. The thrill—a strange, strange emotion—gushes and warms your stiff body.

This is not how your story began. You were not born today. It has been five years since your birth now. The year you were born was an auspicious one. Your father planned it such.

You were born on the lunar eclipse, with full breasts, plump to caress, ready to bleed with the changing moon. You were born a woman.

As part of your father's plan, you never had a childhood. So while the body bloomed, mature far beyond your years on earth, the mind still couldn't comprehend the beauty around—the texture of mud beneath your foot, the wet fruits dropping from thin branches, or the howling deep in the forest. The howling, much like your own, silent and deep, throbbing to a ubiquitous tone.

You fumbled over the stony path until your ankles were bloodied. Slowly, life was making sense. The sky would often open with nectar, only to drown or burn on a whim. You understood the pattern of clouds, learned to recognize the mischief of the moon, and the healing of flowing water. Once the elements of nature were no longer strange, you were betrothed to a sage.

He lived on the peak of the Himalaya. The white fluff covering the new world was brittle to the touch. But you learned to turn it soft. You learned to turn it into drinkable water and found sustenance in the cold eclipse.

You were tossed into his world unprompted, with a flick of a wrist, your destiny now intertwined with his. When you fell, he didn't stir. His eyes were closed to the material world, while open to something far more supreme. Nor did he flinch when you smeared the warm berries on his festering wounds.

Thus passed your first act of compassion. Many more were to come and pass as unnoticed.

The leaves were turning brown.

“What is a sage?” You demanded. Despite the passing months, the sage remains aloof. After a long wait, your father’s voice boomed from the sky. You took your position on the ground.

Given a bunch of grapes, juicy, tender, and within an arm’s reach. One might decide to let the senses take over, feasting on the delicacy first with the nose—the smell is around the environment, mixing in the air. Second is the eyes; they enjoy the appealing color, anticipating the joy to come. Third is touch, as your hands move over the smooth, green skin. Then comes the ear, the gulping sound of its skin breaking with the force of your teeth.

Lastly comes the tongue; the juice is sweet as nectar, at least as far as you know.

Ultimately, there is a lot to gain from your desire to take what is before the greedy eyes.

But a sage is after another pleasure. Of what is, and why.

You listened intently to your father, his voice like you had never heard before — a tinge of excitement submerged in pride. Your father was fascinated by the sage. Somewhere, the breeze was turning wild. The sage’s hair swayed with the wind, sticking to his sandalwood-painted forehead. You covered his frail body with warm wool, but with a shrug of his shoulder, the material would fall, leaving his malnourished body open to the elements of the sky.

You had always felt the emptiness. Your gut recognized its significance — not as a direct threat to your survival, but important enough to keep reminding you of its existence. Periodically, in small nudges so as not to overwhelm you, but enough to ensure you didn’t forget. You had only known your father, and now the sage. Did they feel the same urge? You were always too frightened to ask your father, and it was pointless to ask the sage. Even if his hearing had remained

intact after years of attacks by birds, beasts, and hail, you doubted that he would reply. So, you chose to ignore the pang of sadness that visited you at the start of every month.

The sage was a new source of entertainment — a new statue-shaped constant in your life. Your days now start with taking a dip in the nearby stream. You collected banana leaves from trees on your way back and, after soaking them in water, used them to wipe the dirt clean off the sage's chest and face. You carefully cleaned his hands, avoiding the cuts and bites. But even when you accidentally scraped a scab, he didn't flinch. In all your effort, you never felt him move or react to your touch. To him, you were like the birds — they pecked him, and you healed him; all part of the balance of the universe. At least, that is what you imagined. It was impossible to know his real thoughts.

You discovered the stain the berry left on your clothes by mistake. It created curious patterns on the white garments. You draped the now violet-dyed fabric just beneath your belly, covering your legs, and tied the edges around your waist. You looked at the sage's muddy clothes and remembered your father's pristine white ones and felt a quiet thrill — a secret you had discovered all on your own.

You started feeding grapes to the small birds to stop them from nibbling the sage. The grapes were sweeter, and the birds and insects were easily convinced. Again, the sage didn't register the lack of pain. His slumber seemed eternal.

You started spending most of the day exploring the woods. There was a restlessness in you that couldn't be ignored. Following different animals, you found various streams. You found fruits to harvest and patches full of colorful flowers. Once, you traveled too far and lost track of your route, only to find a waterfall. The sun had moved downwards in the sky, turning into a meager spot of orange. To counter the low visibility, you had lit a makeshift torch.

Amber of the flame touches the cup of your palm. You brushed the black soot off your hand on the rock.

The river was quiet at dusk. The splash of water, the gentle footsteps, and the hushed whispers, all audible. You saw the couple. Their limbs were outstretched on the rock in an uncomfortable position. The uneven surface had left an imprint on the female's soft back, but the female seemed unaware of any discomfort. From your elevated position, only the male's face was visible. Any second, he could turn his eyes a degree high and catch you, but his gaze never wandered.

The air turned heavy.

You stood still, clutching the tree trunk, until your legs and hands ached. A strange mixture of feelings and sensations coursing through your belly, moving lower, rendering your legs motionless. Heat from the air crept into your being.

You ran fast, your labored breathing drowning your thoughts. You ran without noticing the pebbles that pierced the soles of your feet or the pointed branches that attacked your naked arms. You fell, you stood, and after hours, found yourself curled up between the outgrown roots of a banyan tree. The soil was moist, and it comforted your burning skin. A new emotion emerged.

It was the first night you didn't return to the sage's hut. The next morning, when the earlier episode felt like a dream, you walked for hours in circles until you finally found your way back.

The sage was sitting on the stone platform with eyes closed and a smooth forehead. An untouched deity at peace.

In the coming days, you stopped venturing outside the hut. You destroyed your supply of banana leaves with firewood and gave up on treating the sage's wounds.

You slept till the sun was bright and angry. Most nights were spent awake, while the body tossed and turned to relieve it of

its discomfort. A nagging sensation was stuck to you, but you couldn't recognise its source or where it currently resides. It was subtle, slippery, and unforgettable.

When you finally exited the cottage, something was missing. You couldn't point it out at once. The three trees still surrounded the hut, and the birds were feasting on the leftovers from the previous night, and yet something was amiss.

You took the first few steps before you realized the absence of the sage. The stone was now empty. A dread set into your bones. Even if he was not a responsive companion, he was still all you had known. He was the proof that the world was real—that you weren't truly alone.

Your heartbeat quickened. Why did he leave? Did he know what you saw that night? Was he somehow aware of your actions?

Heat crept up your wet cheeks—voyeuring on the voyeur. Although you never meant to be. Why did you have to go so far? Why did you have to chart territory that was not yours? You should have remained where it was safe, as you had been taught.

You sat on the sage's stone. It was a rough spot. Tiny pebbles pinched your skin. From the top, you could see the entire meadow at a glance—the clearing where you burnt the firewood for food, and the doorless hut where you slept every night—all visible without moving a muscle. He sat here with his eyes closed. His stillness turned his existence into stone.

While his presence was silent, his absence was equally loud. And you despised the sound.

That day, you scraped the entire forest for dry wood and burned the heap at the top of the stone. The black soot that remained after hours and hours of burning—you decided to keep it, in honor of his memory.

The gods and winds wait for none, and thus passed more floods, droughts, and wars.

You decorated the hut with flowers and berries. You filled the walls with strange stories. The creatures of your creation had long limbs and naked backs; even they refused to meet your eyes.

Solitude was not your punishment.

You embodied the silence of a dried well—deep, dark, and parched. Down the stony walls, the bottom was cracked. The wind entered through the crevices, making the dirt swirl in the circular space—trapped, peeping at the unreachable bright halo of light. Then the sun set, and the opening disappeared, consuming the well and its being into emptiness.

In the empty well lay a racing mind, frantically crashing into the walls headfirst. Until fatigue took over, and mixing sweat with the bottom sand, a pungent elixir was born. It relaxed the taut nerves, paralyzing the strained muscles. The body was now in a catatonic state of rest. It refused to register external stimuli. It was one with the soft rhythm of the beating heart.

Ever so often, emotions tried to surround the numbed brain—panic, fear, adrenaline—all pleading to revive the decaying shell of a human.

Although the shell remained pristine on the outside, regularly cleaned, fed, and groomed, you kept the smell of decay hidden.

Your past life had disappeared into fiction, conjured by the desperation of a lonely mind.

So one day, when the sage appeared just as he had disappeared—quietly—you didn't register his presence. You seemed to have erased him from your memory.

So, the second time the sage entered your life, he entered as a stranger. The elixir was still potent enough to shield you from

the torrent of this stranger who was now to be your companion.

The ground broke, and from the pit emerged the holy fire. Your hand was placed into the sage's grasp. The sudden touch of a human sent a shock to every nerve in your body; the rush of emotions drowned out the elixir. Fear quickened your breath. You circled the fire nine times, hand still under the sage's hold, with your father as sole witness.

His presence had shifted the paradigm of your simple hut. Unlike the sage, who was bound within himself, your father's presence burned. Like a bonfire, his wild flames rose, cinders flying a little too close to the dry husk. Tragedy averted, but for one strong wind, you stood with your head bowed, eyes tracing the violet circles of your skirt.

The sage bowed to touch your father's feet, and you followed him. For a second, you felt the weight of his hand on your head, and then it disappeared.

The coming days were to take a new routine. Unspoken, the sage - now your husband - took up half the load. The firewood was now cut, and water was set to boil by the time you returned from your morning bath. A new harmony was building with the labour. Your feet were now less tired in the night. There was someone else to consider when you foraged for food in the woods. The space beside you on the floor was slightly warm.

Meditation still took half of his day. The other half was divided between sleep and chores. He was surprisingly competent in every task you assigned, while some he took over on his own. You realised he loved keeping busy. Except during his meditation, his restless hands were always in search of labour. You watched him clear a small patch of wood in a week. Every morning, you would watch him leave with his axe and return by sunset with a heap of wood, tied together by a jute rope.

One day, you followed him into the jungle, watching him walk a small distance before stopping near a huge banyan tree. He sat under the tree for some time in silence. After hours, you grew bored and walked closer. Again, you were met with the same peaceful face, lost in another world. This is how you had remembered him for months—seeing him like this sent a needle of panic through your bones, a pinch in your heart that was silenced as soon as it appeared. *What if he never wakes up again?*

Even though he was not truly a companion, even though he didn't notice the patterns on your colorful tunic, even though his eyes never registered the stories on your wall, he was still the only other person in your life. He was the one you heard breathe when you tossed and turned in the night.

These thoughts only strengthened the elixir, which was still not expelled from your bloodstream. While you were slowly getting lost in the dismay, the sage lightly stirred. Sadness being chased away by a near fear. You sprinted to the tree and hid behind its tall trunk—the motion reminiscent of past transgressions. You felt guilty when you peeked through the space between two branches and spied on the sage.

The frail figure had already picked up a weapon and was cutting down the tree with precise, unhurried strikes. When the tree finally fell, he bowed to the fallen carcass in respect and busied himself with cutting the trunk into smaller pieces. You were afraid to make a move. You couldn't be sure of the sage's reaction, since you were never berated or praised by him, but still, being discovered was an uneasy thought.

In the end, all your worries were in vain. The sage didn't question you when you emerged from the jungle after him. He never enquired about your muddy clothes. He merely dropped the haul near the hut and walked away, his gaze passing through you.

You gave up on following him and chose to spend your days cleaning or exploring the woods, as you did before.

After several failed attempts, you succeeded in finding the waterfall. This time, the rock was empty. You lie on the rock just like the female and let the pointy surface etch its story on your back.

Soon, the waterfall became your regular haunt, and the rock your throne, where you sat to watch the pigeons fly in unison—a group flowing in synchronized motion. It felt like each bird was connected to another by an invisible string, so that each turn, each movement was made together. They flew in an ellipse, almost gliding through the wind, then suddenly turned, each in a different direction, yet never distorting the formation. Too symmetrical to be natural.

Nothing ached your heart more than the acrobats of the sky.

Mockery, admiration, or even disgust would have passed. But silence was like drops falling into a river, too much and too fast into the sea of conformity for you to grasp at the breath of sensibility. Things were yet to tear and bleed.

He was your husband. You were aware of it as a fact. What the word implied was another mystery. From the day you were betrothed you assumed that he was somehow connected to all the emotions troubling you, making you feel incomplete. But nothing in his presence changed anything. He was a statue. And silence was the only gift he was willing to offer.

Then, for better or worse, one night things changed. The day was as monotonous as any other day. The sage spent the entire day in the woods. He came back only once the sun was long gone. His solitary figure emerged from the bushes. Strange only because he was without the typical stock of woods.

He had freshly washed himself in the river. You could see his wet hair clinging to his forehead. He gave his tresses a shake,

letting drops of water flow in all directions. You stood at your post, and he walked to you, placing the pitcher full of water in front of you.

Stream water, cold and still.

“You should clean yourself,” he said.

It was strange. He had never cared about your hygiene or complained about your odour. Subconsciously, at his comment, you conspicuously sniffed your clothes. They didn’t smell different than usual.

Still, you followed through with his request. You went to the clearing behind the hut and wiped the sweat and dirt off your body with a banana leaf, occasionally wetting it by dipping it in the water. The wet skin shivered under the cold wind. You quickly toppled the entire contents of the container over your head. Tiny streams of water flowed from your head, through your hair, to your legs. You covered your hair with one cloth and wrapped your body with another.

When you entered the hut, the sage was sitting on your mat, cross-legged. You stood near the door, feeling as if you had walked into unknown territory.

He took your hand for the second time in your life, under the darkness of the hut.

“Don’t be afraid. This is natural. Don’t feel shame,” his whispers melted in the night.

When he lay on you, you felt a hint of his bony ribcage touch your stomach. He released a disgruntled breath, and his scent overtook your senses, turning your body stiff, afraid to move. Foreign sensations coursed through, travelling lower — your heartbeat between your legs. Maybe the beating was audible to him, for this is where you felt the first touch. The beating only escalated with his motion, while the untouched skin, lying vulnerable, burned. You felt a thirst in your throat and belly — poignant and striking, immediate and unmet. The mind

disconnected from the body, the frustrated spirit only to be suddenly blinded by pain. It bled through your skin, clouding every sense. The pain finally alerted the lost body, bringing awareness back, and your breathing resumed.

You were back on the hut's floor, alone.

The days continued as before, and you were left to your own devices. Then, once or twice every fortnight, you found the vessel filled with cold water near the shed.

Every fortnight, you doused your body with the cold water and quietly stepped into the hut. With every ritual, the pain faded, and the strange need intensified, until the body learned to anticipate his motion. You felt like a parched traveller, your body paralysed to touch the rejuvenating liquid dripping within an arm's distance. Once, in frustration, your restless hand clashed with his clammy palms, and you pulled them closer until his calloused hands met your warm skin. Suddenly, a frenzy took over the sage, and his hands ran wild like a blind horse. A yelp escaped your lips, and he froze. For the first time, his gaze was directly at you, and his expression was distorted, as if in disgust.

He left the hut mid-ritual that night and walked away. You lay on the cold ground watching him meditate on the rock, the pungent elixir now covered you from the roots of your hair to the ends of your toes.

The rituals continued as before. The skin, now hardened with the elixir, barely moved.

Soft and slow. When you stop paying attention, that is how the vegetation grows. Like a whisper in the air, tiny sprouts emerge from the soil.

Lush green and dirty brown. One day, the land was barren, and now weeds have covered every inch of it. Roots have grown over your crouched form. Leaves growing out of your

arms, their stalk going through you into the ground, turning you immobile.

The cold winds have crossed the horizon, and small buds of mogra have grown in the vines covering your head. You still lie with your face, relishing the comfort of cold mud.

The sage stopped visiting the forest. His every waking moment was spent in meditation. The only time he left his throne on the stone was the nights of the ritual.

And then just like before, one day he disappeared. Life continued as before.

Soon it was the day of ritual. In his absence, you had taken back the axe. The rough weapon felt familiar in your grip. The exertion was comforting.

You stepped on the soft moss-covered path and reached the destination before your brain could comprehend. The dried river could barely sustain the waterfall. You walked to the rock without water touching your clothes.

He was there, sitting on the boulder.

It was too dark to clearly see his face.

Your legs took the first step.

His hands travelled to the end of your dupatta, pulling at the threads of broken fabric. His eyes rested on your being, subtle yet brazen. They scorch the covered skin more than the naked limbs.

It was as if the invisible barrier between you had shattered with a single gaze.

The friction of his calloused skin grazing your soft, untouched one. The thrill—a strange, strange emotion—gushes and warms your stiff body.

Touch. You were born touch-starved. You never grew in a mother's womb. You never suckled on her nourishing breast. You were born of dirt and your father's craft.

Your hands touched his, greedily, tracing the pattern on his palm. Delight filled your heart at the simple movement, growing bolder in the absence of resistance. Curiously, you explored and discovered. He stood there patiently, silently studying you. With newfound interest, you turn to your own skin, exploring it with his hands. You guided his hands over your arm, and when they slid upward to meet the curve of your neck, he took charge. Gently, he lowered himself on you, his ragged breathing mixed with your own. His motion is in perfect sync with the thumping in your heart. The sensations take over your brain in a frenzy, and the effect of every brush is intensified a thousandfold.

For the first time, you registered every part of your body. Finally, you recognised your body. With all the other sensations, the thirst had also intensified. The dripping of water is too close but beyond reach. Then, with some unknown strength, a push, and the paralysis broke,

The thick muck of the elixir which was covering your skin hardened and broke and finally you emerged free.

Your body sang under your own touch. The final touch.

You were alive.

He lay beside watching you when the sage walked through the woods.

Rupali Kathal

Rupali is a creative writer, blogger and tech-enthusiast.

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