

We would have merged into each other so much
So much would have
The grass and milk merged
Where the grass ends
And the milk begins
In the cows belly
No one poses such queries
There the distance
between the tree and the mendicant
ends

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[*Rukh Te Rishi* – a 100-page long poem by Harbhajan Singh was published in 1992 and was awarded the prestigious Saraswati Sammaan by the KK Birla Foundation. The poem has been translated into English by various linguists.]

Sweater

Zubair Ahmed

Mother told me that she had knitted this sweater the same year that Abbi, my father, stopped breathing in the hospital due to doctors' negligence. All her life, Mother insisted that my father would not have died if doctors had not injected him the wrong medicine. My mother and father have come up here by chance, this story is about a sweater.

Father died in the winter. Before that he must have been bed-ridden for a couple of months. The poor man was not lucky enough to live through the winter let alone to enjoy wearing his new sweater. Mother had knitted this sweater with great fondness that year. We were little children at the time, still we remember that each time Mother recalled our father, she would add: "I knitted that sweater with so much affection but your father didn't have the chance to use it. He wore it only once when we went to the bazaar on a tonga. We ate fresh coconut and bought flannel cloth for you guys."

After Father passed away, some of his clothes were given to the poor, and some were saved for us children for when we would grow into them. This sweater was taken by our youngest uncle who was studying then, and who also was the one who was close to my father. Now my own hair is turning grey but I do remember that there used to be a lot less clutter in the house, and whatever things there were, we all knew their history. I remember after Father passed away, Mother did bring some household items that had been stored in the house of our other uncle since the partition. A big brass *praat* (dough-container), a headboard, sidebars and posters of a good-sized bed, a large brass platter, and two very old chairs.

Mother remembered the history of each and every thing. "This brass *praat* was bought by your Maternal Uncle from Dhariwal, this big headboard was made under the very eyes of your Maternal Grand Father, who while sitting in the court

yard, had personally supervised the carpenter. The carpenter was paid with that much sugar and wheat for his labour.” Though the bed had arrived, ~~but~~ we had no space for it. There was only one room for all of us to live in. Later, the bed was assembled, pushed and prodded into the room, and Mother saved old trunks and things under it. We, the three brothers, slept on that bed for many years. Though just after a few months, the cotton weaving had loosened and begun to fall apart. Often we would go to sleep on the bed at night only to wake up on the floor in the morning. But this story is about the sweater. Mother did remember it for many years.

Mother was in the habit of relating her dreams each morning. She would say: “I saw your Abbi in my dream last night. He was wearing a white dress, and he was looking at me with a smile. He was wearing the same sweater.” My youngest uncle became a big officer after completing his studies, and once he got married his closeness with our family diminished. But he would come to visit us once or twice in a year and each time before leaving would caress our hair, sigh heavily, and hand something to Mother. For many years, our uncle’s one or two visits were our only celebrations in a year. When I passed 10th class with good grades, our uncle came to meet us, and advocated my going for higher studies. While for many years, the other uncles had been saying that we should be sent to work. When leaving, my Aunty left us some used clothes, and in them was the sweater Mother had knitted. When I wore that sweater, mother went into the other room. We knew this habit of hers.

After my graduation, a different kind of bird began to fly in me. I didn’t know much about it except that its flight was toward the West. With a friend I headed towards Afghanistan, Turkey, Bulgaria, Belgrade, and we reached Italy by train. I became more like a tree there. A tree without a bird, or a sparrow without a land. No one offers you sustenance upon arrival. But how can one earn a living without work? But then you may or may not find work. When our money finished, we

had to live on the street. And then the winter. Those who have not experienced the winter over there, would not be able to understand its impact. The underground rail system, from where the metro trains run, had become our last resort, the only place left that could keep us warm. And there too, many were those who were exiled in their own country. The old men, drunken women, the boys who had fled from work or were without work, the coloured boys from our poor countries. A few middle aged people.

And then the police came and forced us to leave, and lo, we were standing on the road in the piercing cold night. I was wearing the same sweater. This one, two more, and then a fat jacket over them. But no way, this was not the winter of our country. The winter was foreign, and the slaying air was unfamiliar too. One morning, after staying awake all night at the station, I was freshening up at a public toilet. We could have a free meal at a church if we were to get there in time. If late, we would have to starve for the day. So, I was in a hurry, and left my sweater hanging in the toilet. After a couple of hours, I ran back for it. And the sweater was still hanging there, waiting for me.

When I did find work, I was overwhelmed by strange memories of my country. A dream that I saw many times would appear like a painted Still Life. An empty room, a table and some chairs; some crockery, half-eaten food left over at the table but nobody is sitting there. As if someone was here. I try to reach inside but cannot. I am hungry, and I want to have a full meal. But I cannot eat much. I had not realized that I would never be able to eat to my satisfaction without being with my own people.

My memories would descend on me, and my eyes would be soaked in tears. I would remember the air on the Mall road, Lahore’s old trees. The empty crate of Fajjy’s Café where we used to drink tea. The standing rainwater, the moving snake in the deserted streets of Krishan Nagar. The weak street lights, and the dim light filtering out of silent homes.

After a year and a half, I came back to my country like a man without spirit, shivering with cold. I was wearing the same sweater. Mother said: “You have come back the same person as when you had gone away.” After a long and hard struggle, I was able to complete my education, and begin my career. With time, more was added to it.

Some time back, one of Mother’s relative came over to visit her. She used to live in another city but her husband had just retired. When she went away, Mother told me that she was looking for a job for her elder son. They had been living well until her husband retired, and then it appeared they did not have anything to live on. It was difficult for them to even keep a roof over their heads. She kept talking to Mother in a low voice, and I saw that her eyes were so sad.

When the woman was leaving, Mother gave her some old clothes and that sweater was in them too. By now, it had become too old to be worn. The wool was coming out of its loops, and the shoulders had become oversized. It had a strange and clumsy appearance. I said: “Mother, an old thing must also be in good shape to be given away. How can anyone wear it?” But the woman quickly picked it up and dropped it back with the other clothes, saying: “It can be worn under the shirt. Besides, handmade sweaters have a warmth of their own.”

Translated from Punjabi by the author and Fauzia Rafiq.

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A Goat, Three Chickens, the Elephant in the Room and a Greencard

Rosalia Scalia

I can now write about the goat. And the catch-your-own free-range chickens. And the elephant in the room of immigration reform. Now, more than a decade after the demise of my marriage to a Nepali-national who, unbeknownst to me, had used our marriage as the fast-track to a US citizenship, I can finally bring myself to think about the past with indifference and even a bit of humor.

Abandoned without explanation, my first thought was that my husband Bikram had suffered a nervous breakdown. After eight years, his sudden change in behavior had been so out of character that I had felt compelled to consult with medical experts about committing him to a mental health facility. He’d refused to come home, staying instead with his brother. He’d refused to answer any of my phone calls, ironically to a cell phone in my name due to discounts received because of my company benefits. When I did button hole him in the parking lot outside his brother’s apartment, nothing he said made sense: He wanted to return to Nepal and live in a temple with sadhus and monkeys. He wept and rocked saying he’d wrecked his karma. Getting him to sign a joint tax return required begging, pleading, and threatening. Four months of this crazymaking dragged on before a Nepali woman came forward and told me the truth: Bikram had married me for green card/citizenship purposes, and using his newly-minted U.S. citizenship as leverage, his family in Nepal had already arranged him into marriage to his “real” wife. This story sounded so incredible and outlandish, so unlike Bikram, I didn’t believe her. So she phoned him, allowing me to listen on the extension line, and he answered her call though he wouldn’t answer any of mine. He sounded fine. He talked about how hard it was to be separated by half a world from his wife (as if I, his real wife, had never existed), and he