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Embarrass me, please

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Embarrass me, please // Sabrina Islam

It was time for my sister's bath. Her rashes were getting worse and I knew that the water from the river was to be blamed for the red spots. I couldn't think of anywhere else I could take her.

It was a dry summer. My father hadn't been on the fields for days. He stayed in and got drunk every night. I would have said, he then beat my mother, but that wouldn't be true. He was a good man. He had never lost any of his possessions gambling because he never followed his brother to the local bazaar on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. My uncle, on the other hand, had nothing. His wife left him in December and his only daughter ran off somewhere two years ago. She was fourteen.

"Rehena, give your sister a bath," my mother said.

I took a bath last night in the rain. It was very cold. I knew I was dying as the drops pelted on my head. I was considering whether it was worth it. It was either smelling bad for another who knew how many more days or not being able to sleep because of my shaking body. I chose the latter and so I was up until sunrise.

"I think the rashes... I think it's the water. You have some on your face too," I said.

"I know it's the water. What do you expect me to do?" my mother replied.

The rain started very late yesterday. I was lying on my belly smelling the grass when my father appeared and sat next to me. The moon had a wonderful circular glow. My grandmother told me that the glow was a sign of heavy rain on its way. She was right. She also said that she never told this secret to Jannat, Reshmi or any of the other farmer wives. They were amazed at my grandmother's natural instinct of knowing when to pick the crop. She snickered when she was passed on the heirloom to me. My father admired the moon for a while and then smiled. I could see him remembering her.

At times it seemed like a miracle that my father was a good man. I saw my lousy uncle beat the hell out of my cousin and her mother. I would run out of their home when I saw him coming. My father intervened whenever he could but he was not there all the time.

One time, my cousin, Sheema, and I were playing with a doll we stole from a shop when my uncle came and started beating his wife. He was beating her because she didn't make dinner. There was no dinner to make. My cousin and I ran out of the house and peeked through the window to see what happened inside. Sheema's face was resting on the wooden pane and the turquoise stone, which was tied around her neck on a black string, dangled and lightly hit the wall now and then, as she watched her mother being struck, now and then.

The rain began as a light shower. My father said that it felt different being in his senses so late at night. He would have been drunk but he was out of booze. He doesn't want to gamble like my uncle or put Draupadi on a bet. He got drunk because there was no business, and because my sister and I slept hungry.

"Can we bathe her with the water you got yesterday?" I asked my mother.

"You know I got that for cooking. Do you want her to get some rashes in her stomach too?" she asked me back.

"Well fine then. I'll take her somewhere where there is good water."

"Good luck."

I pulled my sister on my back and left home. I didn't know where I was supposed to go so I started heading out of the village.

There was a strange smell in the mixture of the humid air and the sun burnt, roasted leaves, which were soaking in piles all over the muddy roads. My bare and dirty feet scratched the small

stones on the narrow, broken path. I could feel my sister slipping. I crouched and as she slid forward, I could feel her tiny neck brush against the rough skin of my shoulder.

“Where? Where? Where?” my sister nagged.

“We are going to give you a bath,” I said.

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

It bothered me that I didn’t know where we were headed. It bothered me that we had to even go somewhere. There was a lot of green in our village, and the sky was clear and blue. Everything was clean except the river. There was a monstrous pipeline that carried beautiful dyes, meshed together to form ugly colors, which was then vomited into our lovely river. The elders at the bazaar said that the pipe came from the factory, a few miles down.

I sometimes went to the bazaar and listened to the conversations the elders had. The owner of the sweetshop, Kamal, gave me a treat whenever I went. He said that my grandmother fed him when his mother didn’t, or rather couldn’t. He had a small television in his sweetshop. Old men sat there all day and chat and ate and watched the news and other boring stuff. It was better than nothing, so I watched along. They always talked about the embargo. They talked about these distant places with great amazement and wonder. We used to sell rice to the people from those lands but they didn’t want to buy it from us anymore. It was called the embargo.

My father had the embargo. It was like a disease where no one wanted to buy your rice. I didn’t understand it. He said that the shops at the city wouldn’t buy from him because there was too much rice in our third world country. So there he was, embargoed twice.

The elders said that the embargo virus spread because the men beat their wives. The virus was supposed to embarrass them. I

didn't know how it helped because now the wives were not only bruised, but hungry too.

After walking for an hour and almost losing hope, I saw the top of some huts appear. It was a village I had never been to but it didn't stop me from walking straight in. I turned around in a circle to find their water source while my sister's head bobbed behind me. She was giggling. She thought it was a game.

I noticed a large bucket behind one of the homes. There was water in it so I gathered some in my hands and breathed in. Yes, it was clean and it was finally time for my sister's bath. I knew it had to be quick since we were stealing water from a stranger.

"Stand here and don't make any noise," I instructed her.

I took the bucket and hugged it close to my chest. Fresh water poured out as I tilt it. She shivered but she was also enjoying the bath. Sticking out her tongue and her arms, she tried to touch every drop of misplaced water. Seeing my judgment of her futile attempt, she broke into a gorgeous smile, the pressure of which exploded one of the red bulbs near her right cheek.

The splashes were loud and soon I heard some low voices, which almost suddenly turned into resounding roars as the water owners realized that an intruder was in their home.

In a swift motion, I threw the bucket, grabbed my sister and broke into a sprint. The tip of the bucket got stuck into the ground at an angle near the bottom of a small plant. My sister and I became smaller in the eyes of the water providers. I was laughing hysterically as my sister jolted in my arms. She liked the wind blowing on her skin. Her curly hair swam like brown waves in the empty space. Squinting her tiny eyes, she flashed her baby teeth at me once more. We were victors.

For a moment, the blue sky above us, the green horizon in front, and the brown dirt beneath my feet—were all beautiful.