

## Story 108.

She woke up five minutes before the alarm, lay in bed watching as the seconds hand inched forward. The only two sounds in the room were of the fan – proving there was electricity; and, her husband’s snoring – proving that he was alive.

The alarm buzzed, and she switched it off. She sat up straight in bed and folded her hands in a prayer. Then, she turned to look at her husband who was sleeping peacefully undisturbed by the sound of the alarm. She bent closer to him and planted a kiss on his forehead.

He was tired as he had just returned from a business trip, though that had not stopped him from telling her how much he had missed her. He told her three times and then rolled on to his side of the bed and slept.

Her body ached. It was not the fresh start of the day she had been expecting. She had been happy to see her husband back home, she had been happy making love to him, but the soreness of her body took away part of the pleasure. She stretched, tied her hair in a loose bun and climbed out of the bed. She picked up her Mangalsutra from the night-stand and put it around her neck on her way out of the bedroom.

After picking up the milk bags and newspaper from outside, she walked to their daughter’s room to wake her up. Instead of waking up her daughter, she slid into her daughter’s bed and wrapped her arm around her daughter. Five minutes, she told herself.

She opened her eyes after half an hour. It was her mistake that her daughter was going to be late. Under these circumstances, other parents might have hurriedly woken up their child and rushed through rest of the activities with super-speed – causing their child to panic for no fault of theirs. She took a deep breath and calmly woke up her daughter.

Once she was out of her daughter’s room she picked up speed. Handling hurried situations was not new to her. She boiled the milk, made dosas and sandwiches, while her daughter got ready and stepped out for breakfast. The school bus came when her daughter was still having her breakfast, so she went to the door and told the bus driver to go ahead without her daughter.

“Papa will drop you to school” she told her daughter.

“Papa will not do any such thing.” Her husband said as he walked out of the bedroom dragging his feet. He knew she did not like it but that did not stop him from doing it. She took a deep breath and calmly replied, “She’s late for school”

“Because of no fault of mine.” He replied as he sat down at the dining table and looked at her. “I am hungry” he said when she did not move.

She took a plate from the shelf, filled it with two dosas, small bowl of sambar and a sandwich and placed the plate in front of him. She brought him a cup of tea and a cup of bournvita for the kid. Then, she walked to the bedroom to change her clothes. When she walked out her hair was neatly tied into a ponytail, she was wearing a salwar-kameez and had the car keys in her hand.

She stepped out of the house with her daughter while her husband continued eating his breakfast while reading the newspaper. She slid into the driver’s seat and opened the passenger door for her daughter. That’s when she saw him in the side-view mirror, standing at the balcony of the house on the opposite side of the street. She knew the house had been rented recently to some young man but she had not seen him before. He spent most of his time inside the house. No one knew when he stepped out of the house, when he got his groceries, when he did his job – if he had a job.

“Mom! We are already late.” Her daughter’s words put a halt to her thought-process and she started the ignition. She dropped her daughter to school and bought some vegetables on her way back home. Her husband was idling around the house since it was his day off. She took a quick bath, wore a saree and was on her way to the puja room when her husband wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. He knew she did not like it, and that’s why he enjoyed doing it. He kissed her on the neck and then let her go. He walked to the bathroom to take a shower.

“You forgot the proof of our marriage in the bathroom.” he called out to her. She stepped into the bathroom and picked up the Mangalsutra she had kept on the wash basin. Her husband had already started to shower.

“Want to join me?” he said trying to get her attention. She shook her head in reply and walked out of the bathroom.

“So unromantic” he yelled at her as she walked out of the bedroom and to the puja room. She then stepped out of the house for Tulsi Puja. She finished her puja and closed her eyes to pray. When she opened her eyes she saw him. He had been watching her. The moment their eyes met, he stepped back into the house and closed the door. She was baffled by his reaction. She shook her head and stepped back into the house. It was going to be a long tiring day and she was not 100% mentally prepared for it yet.

She walked to the kitchen and started preparing meals. Her husband was out from the shower and was watching TV. The rice was in the pressure cooker and she was about to cut the vegetables when she felt her husband’s hands around her waist.

“You smell good.” He said as he kissed her neck.

“I missed you so much” he said kissing her jaw.

“Come to the bedroom” he said and started to walk towards the bedroom.

She switched off the burner after the final whistle of the cooker, closed the main door and walked to the bedroom. Her husband had opened the suitcase he had taken with him to the office tour. He took out a package from the suitcase and handed it to her. “I bought this for you.” He said.

She took it and thanked him. “Open it” he said, and she obeyed. It was a negligee.

“Wear it” he said and moved closer to her. He slipped the Pallu of her saree from over her shoulder and took off her saree and then, he walked to the bed and watched her as she undressed and put on the negligee for him. He smiled.

“You are so beautiful” he said and patted the bed signalling her to come and sit next to him. She started to walk towards the bed and that’s when she saw him again for the third time in the day. “Shit” she whispered. She had forgotten to close the bedroom window. He was watching her, he had seen her in the negligee. It took a while for him to react. He closed the window of his room and she closed the one of hers.

They lay in bed after love-making, it was a lazy afternoon. She would have loved to sleep-in the whole day, but she had to get up to finish making lunch. By the time lunch was prepared her husband was already waiting at the dining table.

They finished their lunch in silence, she cleaned the plates while he watched TV. She decided to take a nap before starting her second half of the day. She had just climbed into bed when her husband joined her. He kissed her on the lips and wrapped his arm around her and fell asleep almost immediately. She was relieved that he had not initiated sex. She had been taught by her mother to never say no to the advances of her husband and always fulfil his desires. “I will teach my daughter differently”, she had promised herself the moment she had held a baby girl in her arms. She lived in the time and at a place where going against the will of the husband was considered a sin, but she was not going to let the tradition continue for her daughter’s sake.

She woke up when she heard the constant ringing of the doorbell. She climbed out of bed and rushed to open the door. It was evening and her daughter was back from school. She opened the door to her daughter and involuntarily looked towards the house on the opposite side of the street. The door and the windows were closed.

Her thoughts went back to the afternoon incident. She felt a weird fluttering in her stomach when she thought about how he had devoured her body with his eyes, through the negligee.

“Mom!” her daughter yelled. “Let me come in”. She did not realize she was still standing at the door, her hand blocking her daughter’s way in. She stepped back and let her daughter inside the house.

Time for second innings, she told herself as she closed the door behind her.

Story 109.

He had been through a lot in his life. He'd been diagnosed with a disorder no one believed to be true. Because of the tendency of people to not consider it as a serious and genuine problem; it was quite late when he was finally diagnosed.

By then, he had become a disgrace to his mother and his step-father. His friends had started to avoid him, he did not have any girlfriend and no girl dared cross his path.

'I feel as if hundreds of spiders are crawling over my body when that freak looks at me.' He had heard a girl talking to her friend about him. That's what he was – a freak.

Everybody blamed him for his actions without really caring to know why he was the way he was.

No one bothered to consider the kind of atmosphere he was growing up in.

No one bothered to find out what had been done to him.

No one showed concern for him except one woman.

He looked at the closed curtains and sighed. He had left his country to avoid living like this. He wanted to start fresh at a place where no one knew about his past. He was not completely cured but he had been 'sober' for a few years. He wanted it to be that way.

When he had been looking for a house he had clearly told the agent that he wanted to stay at a place where there were few neighbors and where people minded their own business. A place which was mostly occupied by middle-aged or elderly people.

His agent had found this place for him, the town where people minded their own business. There were less neighbors and mostly belonged to the elder age group. The married women kept to themselves in the safe confines of their house, their daughters were well-protected and did not leave the house unaccompanied.

It seemed as if he had travelled back in time. He was glad about that.

When he had told the agent about the conditions, the agent had looked at him, perplexed. He could not tell the agent why he wanted it that way. How could he explain to a stranger what his family had failed to understand?

The only woman who cared for him had told his mother about the disorder and his mother had laughed at her and insulted her for what she was. His mother was not mentally prepared to believe her son had some serious problem and was not a freak like everyone had labelled him to be.

When the agent had shown him this house he had fallen in love with it at first sight. There were not many houses on the street and the one opposite to his house belonged to a man in his late 40's living with his wife and daughter of eleven. The agent had not mentioned the age of the wife because it seemed irrelevant to the agent and he had assumed that the wife must be in her early 40's.

When he saw her for the first time he could not breathe. The very reason for which he had left his country, had chosen to stay in a small town, was there right in front of him, stayed in the house opposite his. Her beauty mesmerized him, and he was aroused. The wife of the man in late 40's was much younger than he had expected her to be. She was perhaps in her early 30's but looked a lot younger than that.

He found it unbelievable that a woman like her would be married to a man like him, a man who was more than a decade older than her. It was none of his business, but it bothered him; especially because the woman was not much older than him and belonged to the age group he had been interested in – all his life.

Sexual addiction. No one believed it to be true. It was often considered as a sign of growing up, or an excuse given by a married man when caught cheating on his wife. It was not different in his case. No one believed that all the porn he watched, all the masturbation was not merely a sign of growing up – it was beyond that.

His mother, after leaving his father, had married a rich man who was much younger than her. He had often returned home from school to find his mother and step-father entangled in coitus in the living room. Most of the times he shied away but sometimes, he could not take his eyes off.

His step-father had seen him watching once and had taunted him about it often. His step-father had introduced him to porn and had insisted they watch it together when his mother was not around.

One night, after a porn viewing session, his father had asked him to undress and had raped him. He was ten when it had happened.

It continued to happen, as and when the step-father pleased. He had tried telling his mother once, but she had been too drunk to understand or care. His step-father had overheard the conversation and as a punishment he had been asked to give his step-father a blow job; right there in the living room with his mother passed out on the couch. His step-father had come in his mouth and he had rushed to the bathroom to vomit.

He got up from the couch and rushed to the bathroom. He felt the nausea from the memories but when he tried to vomit nothing came out. He was still on his knees, his hands tightly gripping the commode when the tears came.

By the time he matured, he had more knowledge than his friends his age. When he was fourteen, he had been caught masturbating in boy's room in school. His parents had been called and his step-father had slapped him in front of the principal.

His step-father had told the principal that he would punish his son for this and he had. Back home, with his mother crying in the living room, his step-father had beaten him black and blue and had taken him to the bedroom.

Kids in school started making fun of him but that had not stopped him from continuing. He watched the cheerleaders – girls older than him, and did his act sitting on the bench in the ground, his shoulder bag on his lap. No one suspected him until he was spotted by one of players. His senior, who had caught him acting out had introduced him to prostitutes.

'he's too young' a 20-year old prostitute had told the senior and the senior had paid her double. She'd then bedded him. He lost his virginity to a prostitute.

By the time he was Nineteen he had numerous sexual partners, he did not care to count. By that time, he had been expelled from school, his mother subjected to humiliation. She had finally believed that her son was constantly raped by her husband. She had caught the man in act when she had returned home early one evening. She had separated from the man but had not done anything legally. Girls avoided him, talked about him, made fun of him and feared him.

Therefore, his mother left town with him. He settled into the new town, joined new school, everything continued as it did in the old town. He could not control his urges. He found a girl who was interested in him and he took her like an animal. He could not connect with the girl even though she tried to. For her, it was more like an affair; for him it was nothing more than sex. It was after spotting him with a prostitute that the girl left him for good.

It was one of the prostitutes he visited that finally realized what was happening with him. He'd already climaxed twice and climbed on top of her for the third time when she finally stopped him. He told her he was ready to pay more, but she insisted that they talked. He had laughed when she had said that but within minutes, he found himself crying like a baby, hiding his face in her bosom. He had then told her about the abuse, the porn-viewing, the masturbation and the uncontrollable sexual urge.

That's when she had introduced him to the term – sexual addiction. That's when she had told him that he needed help.

He had been glad to have found an educated whore. He told her that and she had smiled sympathetically. She had offered to talk to his mother about this. He had not been sure initially, but she had insisted. 'you need some serious help, dude.' She had told him.

When they had approached his mother together and the woman he was with had told his mother about the addiction, his mother had laughed at the woman and insulted her for what she was. It did not help that the woman was educated enough to understand what was wrong with him.

Despite the objection from his mother he had decided to visit a clinic with the woman. He knew, he would forever be obliged to her. He had found a job, but he could not keep it because of his addiction. He had no money. The woman paid the expenses. She introduced him to people who would understand his problem and help him deal with it. She made him join Sex Addicts Anonymous. She helped him deal with his urges. He had started to believe that sexual addiction was real. Suddenly, everything made sense. He was not a freak, he had a serious problem. He suffered from a disorder. He had the option to set things straight. He underwent Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which he benefited from. A prostitute had set him free.

He confronted his mother and made her understand. She did not. He decided to leave his house. He lived with the woman who had changed his life, but she had her limitations. She could not spend her entire life with someone like him. It was not his addiction that bothered her, she was worried about his future, worried that being with her might ruin him. He tried telling her that he was already ruined, she had saved him.

In the end, they separated. He found a place to live, he found a job he could keep. He continued visiting the group. He had finally settled but then, someone he knew in the past joined his office and hell broke loose. People started talking. Women started avoiding him. He had given up the old habits, he was 'sober' but that did not change how people looked at him, what people thought about him. He tried telling them about sexual addiction and they laughed at him.

He withdrew all the money from his bank and left the country for good. He decided to start fresh at a new place, in a remote place – a small town where people minded their own business. Place, where there would not be distractions.

And, he had ended up staying opposite to an attractive woman of his preferred age group. He was 27, he was still single and emotionally detached. He had not started dating, even though people from his group insisted that he should. Leaving them behind had been a mistake. He realized this after seeing her for the first time when she stepped out of the house to drive her daughter to school.

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## Story 111.

When he saw her for the first time getting into the car, he could not take his eyes off her; not even when she spotted him staring at her through the side-view mirror.

The first time he had seen her, he had been aroused but the next time he saw her doing 'Tulsi' puja he was mesmerized by her. She was wearing a saree and looked beautiful, with her wet hair dripping water over her shoulder. When she closed her eyes to pray she looked serene; but, when she opened her eyes he saw sadness in them.

Embarrassed on being spotted staring, he stepped back into the house. He knew it was rude and even though he should have not cared, he did. He did not know the woman, but he did not want her to have a bad impression about him. One of the reasons why he had to stay away from her, a little voice in his head reminded him.

What baffled him was the fact how his body had reacted after seeing her offering prayers. It was an unusual reaction. He had felt like a teenager again – a healthy one. The one who looked at a girl and felt butterflies in his stomach, whose heart skipped a beat on seeing the girl.

He walked over to the wash-basin and splashed some water over his face.

He walked to the kitchen to prepare meals. He had good culinary skills since he stayed alone after separating from the woman he lived with. He missed her sometimes, even now. She had played an important role in his life and he would forever be thankful to her. Had she not walked out on him, he would have perhaps preferred settling down in life with her since she knew about his problem.

Now, he was scared even to consider the possibility of dating. However, seeing this woman had given rise to a desire in him. A desire to know her better. He knew she was married, that she belonged to someone else; nevertheless, he wanted to know her. The smell of burnt vegetables brought him out of his reverie. 'Shit' he cursed as he switched off the burner and placed the pan on the kitchen platform.

He had wasted the only food he had stored in the refrigerator. A trip to grocery store was needed but he kept postponing it.

He was getting used to living like this; locked inside the house, staring at the bare walls. He did not subscribe to magazines, he did not have a TV in his house. His only source of entertainment was the game of amazons solitaire.

With the help of a spatula he took the unburnt vegetable in a bowl and scrapped off the burnt part and threw it in the garbage bin. He washed the pan before taking out a packet of paratha from the freezer. This was something he had not been able to learn. He got the dough consistency for making roti/paratha wrong every time he tried making it and so, he finally gave up and opted for the readymade kind. He hated eating it, but he had no choice.

One paratha and slightly burned vegetable was enough for breakfast. He had to do something about lunch and dinner. He could no longer postpone the grocery store visit. He finished his breakfast and cleaned the kitchen platform and the rest of the house.

He walked to his room to get ready to go to the grocery store. He put on his jeans and was about to put on his shirt when he looked out of the window and froze.

She was wearing a negligee. He knew he was intruding into a private moment and he looked away. He turned his gaze back towards the window with the intention of closing it and he got the shock of his life. She saw him. She knew he had seen her in the negligee. Her instinctive reaction should have been to cover her body, but she stared at him instead; too shocked to react. He realized he was holding his breath. He closed the window of his room and exhaled.

He was expecting a specific reaction from his body, but he was pleasantly surprised to find another set of reactions. His hands were shivering, his heartbeat had quickened, he felt weak in the knees and it seemed there was a huge ball rolling around in his stomach. He laughed.

He put on his shirt and stepped out of the house. Grocery time.

As he walked from one vegetable vendor to another, selecting vegetable and buying them; he thought about her. He saw her eyes staring back at him; the look in her eyes like that of a deer looking into the headlights of a speeding car, aware that it was going to hit but too shocked to move. She was clearly embarrassed on being seen in a negligee. He would apologize to her if he ever got the chance, he thought.

He went to the medical store to get the essentials. He thought about her again. This time, he visualized her husband patting the bed with his hand, signaling her to come and sit next to him. He felt a sour taste in his mouth. His hatred for the man had taken a physical form. He felt the bile rise as the man's action kept replaying in his mind. The man clearly did not respect what he had in his life.

Had he been in the room with her instead of that man, he would have done things differently. He would have taken her to bed himself; instead of inviting her like inviting a whore.

The man at the counter in the medical store yelled at him and he looked at the man, momentarily confused. He then realized the man was waiting for the money. He took out cash from his jeans pocket and handed it over to the man.

He placed a hand over his stomach and laughed. This time the feeling in his stomach resembled a gymnast doing somersaults; but his manhood stayed put.

He walked to the grocery store and gave the man his list of items. He thought of her, this time hoping that the prick was treating her well. She deserved to be treated in a special way. He wanted to treat her in a special way.

He returned home with the groceries and before turning towards his house he looked towards hers. The window was closed and so was the main door. He felt a heaviness in his chest. What was happening to him?

He inserted the key in the keyhole and turned again to look at the window of her house, hoping to see her once before he shut himself in his self-made prison. Then, he stepped in.

He could not stop thinking about her and his pain took a physical form when he cut his finger while chopping onion. He washed his hand under running tap-water and put on a bandage. He served lunch in the plate and walked to the living room. He ate, glancing towards her house occasionally. He wanted to see her, he needed to see her. He wanted to look in her eyes and read her emotions. He could not get over his instinctive feeling that her husband did not treat her well.

He was aware that it was her personal matter and he had no say in it, he was aware that even if he knew she was unhappy, there was nothing he could do; despite all the obvious facts, he wanted to make sure she was okay and that he was wrong.

Finally, fed up of looking at her house, he got up and closed the door and the windows.

He opened them again in the evening and saw her daughter standing at the door. She rang the doorbell again and waited but the door did not open. He grew worried. He wondered what had happened, why was she not opening the door?

He was tempted to step out of the house and bang his fist on her door, demanding for it to be opened. He felt the aggression in his veins. He was being overprotective of the woman he had never interacted with and had in fact, never seen before today.

One day, it had just been one day, but it felt like eternity. The life he lived, avoiding human contact fearing being labeled as freak; it seemed like a long time ago. The man he had become in one day, wanted to step out of the house, push open someone else's door and demand answers from a stranger's husband for ill-treating her.

He saw the door being opened and immediately closed his. Being caught for the fourth time staring towards her house would have been a record of awkward. He hoped she would open the window of her bedroom; so, he kept the one in his bedroom open. He did not keep staring at it though. All he needed was a quick glance at her to know that she was okay. But her bedroom window remained closed. He took a deep breath and stepped out of his house. He did not walk straight to her house; instead he walked towards the lane to the left of her house.

That's when he saw her in the backyard with a bucket in her hand. He hid behind a tree as she kept the bucket down and started putting clothes on the clothes-line.

Her body language screamed pain. He watched as suddenly she grew restless and placed a hand on her chest. She was having difficulty breathing.

He wanted to rush to her, wanted to help her but he was helpless. He watched as she ran inside the house. He hoped her asshole husband would take care of her but, moments later he watched the man step out of the house. That's when he decided to follow the man.

Story 112.

It is none of my business, but...

He hated it when people said that. He never understood why people could not stop themselves from poking their noses in another people's business; and here he was, doing the same thing.

It was none of his business, yet he followed the man. He was not sure what he would do – confront the man? Force him to go back home to his wife and console her? Scare him and ask him to treat her better? His instinct told him to follow the man, so he did; but he was not prepared to see what was about to happen next.

He watched as the man knocked on the door of a house. Old fashioned one storey bungalow with a few steps leading to the door and a front porch. This one did not have a 'Tulsi' like hers did.

Her image of praying in front of the Tulsi flashed in front of his eyes. Beautiful and serene face, her wet hair dripping water over her shoulder. He pushed the thoughts aside and waited. He realised he was holding his breath, waiting to see who would open the door.

A young boy opened the door and called out to someone. A woman came to the door and gave some cash to the kid who happily hopped out of the house. She stepped aside, and the man walked in closing the door behind him.

It could be anything, he tried to convince himself. He wanted to go back home, wanted to see how his neighbour was doing. When he had seen her earlier she seemed disturbed. He wanted to be there for her, but he could not.

This was the second-best thing he could do for her.

He walked around the house to find an open window. He found one. He hesitated for a moment before holding on to window sill to pull himself up and peek inside.

He heard laughter and almost let go of the sill. Then he saw them, at the farthest end of the room. The man was kissing the neck of the woman, his hand reaching for her breast.

He let go of the sill, took a deep breath and climbed up again. They were on the bed now, in stage of half-undress.

Memories from the past flashed in front of his eyes - his mother and step-father entangled in coitus in the living room. He could not hold on any longer. His fingers ached, and he let go. He did not want to stand there anymore. He started to walk.

He thought he was doing the second-best thing for her, but he did not know what he would do with this knowledge. What was he supposed to do? Walk into her house and tell her that her husband was having an extra-marital affair with a woman who lived only a couple of lanes away from their house? How was this going to help her? By ruining her marriage of more than a decade? He did not have the right to think about all this, but he could not stop himself.

How long had this affair been going on? The woman had a son who was probably nine or ten, had this affair been going on that long? Was the kid his son?

He reached his house and involuntarily looked towards hers. He hoped to have a glimpse of her before stepping inside his fortress. He waited momentarily before opening the door to his house and stepping in. He did not see her.

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She knew she should have not expected him to understand. She'd hoped so many times and he disappointed her all those times; initially, it upset her but then she got used to it. However, she could not stop expecting. She was too tired to get up and get busy in the kitchen, but she had to. She stepped out of the bedroom to see her daughter in the kitchen. She had started preparations for dinner. She had washed the rice and was washing the dal under tap water. Obviously, after seeing her father step out of the house the girl had decided to help her mother.

She was thankful for having her daughter in her life. It was something that made life worth living and the relationship worth.

She walked to the kitchen and kissed her daughter's head. Thank you, she whispered. The girl smiled. They worked together in the kitchen, she kneaded dough for roti, and her daughter placed the rice and dal in pressure-cooker. Her daughter cut the vegetables, she had just placed the pan on the burner and added oil to it when the doorbell rang.

"Go" she told her daughter who rushed to her room. She switched off the burner and walked towards the door to open it.

As expected, she saw her husband standing at the door. He stepped in without looking at her and walked past her. She closed the door and went back to the kitchen to finish cooking the vegetable.

She kept the casseroles on the dining table and walked to the bedroom. She was surprised to find out that her husband was taking a shower. She laid out fresh set of clothes on the bed and stepped out.

The food was served, and her daughter was half-way through her dinner when he joined them at the dining table. He filled his own plate and started eating without saying a word. He did not look up even when his daughter finished her dinner, picked up her plate, washed it and walked back to her room.

He finished his dinner in silence and got up, his plate in his hand. She looked up at him, surprised. He threw the leftovers in the garbage bag and washed his plate. She finished her dinner and did the same. She turned around to pick up the casseroles from the dining table, but he had already done that and was on his way towards the platform.

She watched as he packed the leftovers and kept it in the refrigerator. Then, he walked past her without making eye contact.

She sat on the chair, her elbows on the dining table. She placed her head in her hands and took a deep breath. She did not want to go there but she failed to stop the thoughts.

It happened whenever he returned home from a long business trip. He had sex with her like an animal, did not help her in the chores but then, the next day or a couple of days later he helped her with the chores; like he used to, before the death of their second child. He kissed her and made love to her. But there was a huge difference between the time before the death of their second child and now; he never avoided eye contact.

She shook her head and got up. She cleaned the dining table and walked to the bedroom to find him in bed reading a book. She went to the bathroom and changed into a night gown. She climbed into the bed and slept with her back to him. She knew what would happen next. Her husband would keep the book aside, take off his glasses, switch off the bedside lamp and slid in bed close to her, he'd put his arm around her waist and kiss her neck and then he would touch her shoulder and make her face him. He'd then kiss her again and start undressing her.

He switched off the light and slid in bed close to her. He put his arm around her waist and kissed her on the neck. Then, he placed his hand on her shoulder and made her turn towards him.

Her mother had told her several times that it was her duty as a wife to offer her body to her husband whenever he wanted but there was an exception. Tonight, was her chance to refuse her husband's advances without being rude or appearing unwilling.

He kissed her again and was about to unbutton the gown when she said, "No. I'm on my period. "

"Okay." He said.

Hearing his response to her refusal felt good. Refusing him felt very good.

She expected him to shift to his side of bed and sleep with his back to hers, but he kissed her again and then slept close to her, his arm resting on her waist.

Blame it on the hormonal changes; his actions brought tears to her eyes. She could not remember when he had held her close like this, with clothes still on, without thrusting his pelvis against hers.

Within minutes she heard him snoring and then she drifted into sleep. Her tears drying on her cheeks.

He was not in bed when she woke up the next morning. She tied her hair into a loose bun and freshened up before stepping out of the bedroom.

She was shocked to see her husband in the kitchen cooking breakfast. Their daughter was sitting at the dining table in her school uniform. She could not believe she had slept in so late and no one had bothered to wake her up.

When she stepped out her daughter looked at her and raised an eyebrow. It was a surprise for her daughter because she had not calculated the timings of the strange behaviour. She was too young for such observations. She smiled at her daughter and walked towards the platform.

"I will take it from here" she said and took the spatula from his hand. He was making pancakes, as expected. That's what he made when he cooked breakfast.

If she let him cook lunch, she knew he'd make her favourite vegetable pulao and gravy just the way she liked it.

For dinner, he would insist that he would bring pau bhaji on his way back from his walk.

She was deep in thoughts when he took the spatula back from her hand and insisted that she joined their daughter at the dining table. She walked to the dining table without saying a word. A disturbed feeling at the back of her mind. She was supposed to enjoy this attention, but she could not.

She did not notice that her husband had joined them for breakfast. She ate her breakfast in silence, her eyes glued to the plate, but she could see in her peripheral vision that her husband was glancing at her occasionally.

She looked up when her daughter got up to go. She had not heard the honking of the school-bus.

“Bye” the girl said and kissed her cheek.

She got up and walked with her daughter to the door. She waved goodbye as the girl climbed into the bus. She closed the door after the bus left and turned around to find her husband missing. The backache was killing her. She avoided painkillers during periods, but she knew she’d have to take one this time. She walked to the bedroom and found her husband in the bathroom. He had readied a bath for her. This was new. She was not sure whether to be worried or feel happy about it.

She opened the medicine cabinet and took out a painkiller.

“You do not usually take painkillers.” Her husband commented.

“I need one.” She replied

“Why don’t you take bath and then rest for some time. Maybe you will not need it later. I will take care of lunch.” He said.

“Hmmm” she said and kept the painkiller back in the bottle.

She walked to the bathroom and closed the door behind her. Then, she started crying.

Story 113.

She had been avoiding it for a long time; but now she wanted to make sure her doubts were right. She knew if she confronted her husband he would take her on a guilt trip.

She finished taking shower and walked out of the bathroom. She had to admit, it helped. Her husband was making vegetable pulao when she walked to the kitchen.

He kissed her on the forehead and asked how she felt. She told him she felt better already and would not mind taking over making lunch. He insisted that she took rest, therefore she went back to the bedroom and rested. She fell asleep.

She was awakened by the soft touch of her husband who was stroking her hair. Lunch is ready he told her and they both walked out. They finished their lunch in silence and he did the post-lunch cleaning while she watched him. A part of her wanted to enjoy the attention while the other part was desperately waiting for him to walk out of the house. She knew he would.

As expected, he asked her to go to the bedroom and rest. He switched on the television and she slid into the bed pretending to sleep; waiting for her husband to walk out of the house. Instead, he walked to the bedroom and sat on the bed close to her. He ran his hand through her hair and she opened her eyes. He brought his face closer to hers and kissed her on the mouth. It was a pleasant surprise. She kissed him back. She felt the warmth of his palm on her neck as he slowly eased out of the kiss. Rest, he said. I need to run some errands, will be back soon, he added.

She had hoped he would not leave. She would have loved spending the time in bed with him. Kissing him and snuggling close to him.

He kissed her again and got up to go. On his way out, he closed the bedroom door. She sat up straight in bed the moment she heard the main door closing. She climbed out of bed and watched him through the bedroom window. Then, she stepped out of the bedroom, walked out of the main door and followed her husband.

The last he had seen her was in the backyard of the house. He had hoped to see her before going to bed but he had been disappointed. He was sure he would see her in the morning as she did Tulsi Puja, but she did not step out of the house. Her daughter went to school on time in school bus. There was no sign of her. He grew worried and was tired of waiting to have a glimpse of her. He decided to check on her the way he had done the earlier evening. He watched as her husband stepped out of the house; no doubt to visit the other woman in his life. He stepped out of the house and was about to cross the road when he saw her stepping out of the house. There was a determined look on her face, and she started walking in the same direction her husband had gone in. He knew, she knew.

He watched as she followed her husband. He knew she would do the exact same thing he had done, would find a way around the house. He knew she would be shattered when she saw what he had seen; he knew she would need someone to be there for her. He decided to be that someone.

He started his bike and followed her, maintaining distance. He switched off the ignition of the bike and watched as she surveyed the house. He saw her walk to the back of the house. He dragged the bike closer to the house and towards the back. She froze the moment she saw him. Their eyes met and then there was no need for words. She knew why he was there. She did not admit to a stranger, but she was glad he was there.

He hesitated for a moment, not sure what was the right thing to do. Should he convince her to not look in through the window? After a moments consideration he parked the bike closer to the window and offered his hand. She understood.

She took his hand in hers and climbed on the bike. She heard the noises before she looked in through the window.

She knew what she would see but she was not completely prepared for it. Seeing her husband naked and atop another woman, thrusting like an animal was too much for her to take in. She lost her balance and fell back into the arms of the stranger who had helped her spy on her husband.

He steadied her – his hands on her waist, her body against his. He felt his body react to the warmth of her body, his heart beat faster, and he felt the tingling feeling in his stomach.

She moved away from him. There were tears in her eyes, which she tried to hide from the stranger. He did not look directly at her, but he knew she was crying. He started to drag the bike away from the house and waited for her to follow. When they were on the main road, he started the bike and waited. She followed and sat on the bike as if it was routine.

They rode in silence. He stopped the bike at some distance from her house so that no one would spot them together. Anyways, all the doors and windows were closed for the afternoon. The neighbours were all asleep; unaware that someone's world had just been turned upside down.

She got down from the bike and walked to her house and collapsed on the steps. He put the bike on stand and rushed towards her. He put his arm on her shoulder and she started shaking. The silent sobs turned to loud crying. He looked around, there was no one on the road. Still, he was uncomfortable with the public display of emotions. He had never been in this position of consoling someone.

"Let's go inside your house." He said, and she looked at him

"I have locked myself out of the house." She said and continued crying.

"Shit." He whispered.

"Is there anywhere else you can go?" he asked. She shook her head. It should have been obvious. There was no place she could go to, in this condition. She would never want her neighbours to know what had happened.

There was only one thing to do, only one place to go.

"Let's go to my house" he said after a moment's hesitation. He held her by her arms and helped her to stand up. She stood up awkwardly. He realized the reason for the awkwardness when he saw the blood stain on her saree.

She was embarrassed, she wanted to get away from the stranger but there was nowhere to go. She had always insisted on keeping a spare key with the neighbour, but her husband had refused. Not that it mattered, she was not in the state to knock on the door of her neighbour. She was not friendly enough with any neighbour to say "hey, I was following my husband because I suspected he was having an affair and accidentally locked myself out of my house, also there's a blood stain on my saree because I fell from a stranger's bike as I tried to watch my husband having sex with another woman. Can I please change in your house?"

It was an awkward situation but there was only one thing she could do. She continued clinging onto the stranger who was supporting her in her distraught state.

He did not say a word as he helped her walk towards his house. He opened the house with his keys and helped her inside the house. He had never thought, not even in his wildest dreams that he would bring a woman to this house. This woman, out of all.

He watched her as she looked around the house, which was devoid of the essentials according to normal standards.

He did not know how he was supposed to help here. There was no woman's clothing in his house. He did not know anyone who would spare the same. After a moment's thought he said, "I will be right back, stay here and lock the door" and he stepped out of the house, leaving a woman alone in his house.

She watched as the stranger stepped out of the house asking her to wait in his house and lock the door. She locked the door and looked around the house. She walked room to room, taking in the dull interior.

She found the restroom and went in. It felt weird walking into a stranger's bathroom. She needed change of sanitary pad and looked around for any make-do alternatives. It was tough to find a sanitary napkin in a bachelor's house that was sure; toilet paper would have sufficed but there was none.

She heard the doorbell and froze. Was he expecting someone or was it he who was at the door. She peeked through the peep-hole. He was back. She opened the door for him. He held out a carry-bag for her.

I bought some stuff, he said.

She took the bag from him and looked inside. He had bought a packet of sanitary napkin for her. She looked at him, but she thought about her husband. Her husband had never bought sanitary napkins for her in the whole duration of their married life. Not even when she needed them after delivery. She had packed all the essentials well before in time.

"I bought a change of clothes as well." His words brought her back to the moment.

She took the other bag from him. There was a saree and a petticoat inside.

"Thanks" she said.

He looked awkwardly at her and told her where the bathroom was and then walked to the kitchen, aware that she did not want to expose her blood-stained saree to him again.

He made tea as she changed into fresh set of clothes.

A day before he had not known about the existence of this woman and now, she was in his house changing her clothes. He ran his hand through his hair. She was here because she was helpless and not because she wanted to be here, but it did not matter. She was with him; that mattered. He hoped he had something to talk about, something to take her mind away from the awkward position she was in, or most importantly to take her mind off the fact that she had just witnessed her husband cheating on her.

He was deep in thoughts when she stepped out of the bathroom. She had changed into fresh clothes and stuffed the old ones in the carry bag.

The immediate issue had been taken care of but there were others to deal with.

How was she going to get into the house? If she could not get into the house, how would she explain to her husband about getting locked out?

There might be a way, he said as if reading her thoughts. He should have thought about it earlier, he told himself. Or maybe, he wanted to bring her home.

“I might be able to get into your house from the backyard” He offered and then added, “If it is okay with you.”

The relief on her face was evident. He nodded.

They walked out of the house together. She waited at the front door whilst he walked around the house towards the backyard. He climbed up the wall and jumped into the backyard of the woman he had started having feelings for, the woman who was married to someone else, the woman whose husband was cheating on her, the woman who had just spent time in his house.

He tried to open the door, but it was locked from inside. He tried to open it forcibly but could not. He tried the window, it was open. He climbed through it, landing on the bed. He walked out of the bedroom and opened the main door for her.

She stepped in and thanked him. She was relieved to be home. He nodded and stepped out of the house. He crossed the road and walked past the gate of his house and turned around to look at her. That’s when he saw him. Her husband was back after satiating his sexual hunger.

She was still standing at the door, watching the stranger walk to his house when she saw him – her husband, walking back to his dull married life after his sexual adventure.

She looked towards the stranger’s house and saw that he had seen her husband too. He then looked at her. Their eyes met and they both smiled.

They shared a secret together and that felt oddly intimate.

## Story 114.

The smile warmed his heart, but he did not read too much into it. He knew it was a smile of relief, because she had managed to get back home in time; it also had a touch of awkwardness, because of the circumstances in which they had met, the time they had spent in his house. Last but not the least – it was a smile that said thank you. He never knew a simple smile could mean so many things at once and mean nothing at all. One moment, there she was, smiling at him and the next moment she closed the door and was gone.

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She closed the door immediately and rushed to the bedroom, hoping that her husband had not seen her standing at the door. Most importantly, she hoped he had not seen her looking at the stranger across the street.

Her husband was the one who was cheating on her and she was worried about him finding out that she had been sharing a glance with the stranger. She shook her head as she started to take off the saree the stranger had given her. She knew her husband would know that it was new; he had access to her wardrobe and knew all the clothing she owned.

She rolled the saree in her hand and threw it under the bed for time being. She pulled out another saree from the wardrobe and put it on. By that time, her husband had rung the doorbell twice.

She rushed to open the door, preparing an answer for the delay in opening the door but when she opened the door, her husband walked straight inside the house without looking at her. He did not ask for an explanation and she did not offer. She looked involuntarily across the street before closing the door. The stranger was gone, as if he had never been there. The door was closed and so were the windows. She thought about the interior of his house. Who could live like this? Maybe he had his own reasons for keeping it simple. She wondered what that reason could be, would he tell her? Would they meet again, ever? Would they get a chance to talk or would it be limited to glances through windows and rear-view mirrors?

She wanted to find out more about the stranger; his name, to begin with. Anything that did not make him a stranger anymore would be enough.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. There were bigger issues to deal with, right now. What was she supposed to do with the information she had gained access to through the window of a strange woman's house? She visualised her husband and the woman together and she felt the bile rising in her throat.

Her husband, as expected, was taking a shower. She knew he would be expecting a fresh set of clothes on bed when he walked out. She decided to deny him the little things that were taken for granted when given but did not go unnoticed when denied.

She walked to her daughter's room and climbed into the bed. Tears rolled down her cheek as she realized how helpless she was. She'd been brought up differently, she'd been taught by her mother to never say no to her husband. She'd been taught everything a normal housewife should know, but her mother had not taught her how to handle this kind of situation. What was she supposed to do when she found out that her husband was cheating on her? How was she supposed to react?

She would have loved asking these questions to her mother had the woman been alive. The woman thought she knew everything and had passed on the knowledge to her daughter, but that woman knew nothing outside the four walls of her house. She did not hate her mother; but she disliked her views about life, she'd never had the courage to go against her mother's wishes, she followed her instructions all her life, even though unwillingly.

She would never be that kind of mother to her daughter. She would teach her daughter to be independent. Would teach her daughter to face the facts of life and not try to shield her from it. If only she knew how to efficiently handle this kind of situation; she'd love to teach the same to her daughter.

Her daughter had to know that she had the right to say no to someone. She had the right to her body, and no one owned her. She had the right to fight against the wrong, even if it meant standing up against her husband.

Her daughter, she realized, had the right to know that her father was cheating on his wife.

"What are you doing here?" Her husband's voice put an end to the train of thoughts. She looked up at him without getting up. This was the moment. She had to get up and confront him. Tell him that she had seen him with another woman, but she could not move. She felt the strength leaving her body. She was paralysed.

"Are you okay?" he asked moving closer and sitting next to her on the bed. He felt her skin with the back of his hand. His hand felt cold.

She moved away from him and sat up straight in bed. She remembered where that hand had been earlier in the day. Before she realized, she threw up on him - on his fresh clothes, on his face. It was close enough to spitting on him, she thought.

“It’s alright” he said assuming she would apologize for what had happened. He did not even realize she had not said a word since he had stepped into the house. He walked back to the room to change his clothes and she got up to clean her daughter’s room. By the time both were done, the doorbell rang. Their daughter was back home from school.

She opened the door to her daughter.

“Mom! You look terrible” her daughter said the moment she entered the house.

I feel terrible, she wanted to tell her daughter, but she could not utter a word. The room started to spin and then all went dark.

When she opened her eyes she was in bed, their family doctor was feeling her pulse and she could smell cologne. She felt the cologne water strip on her forehead, she felt the warmth of her daughter’s hand in hers. Her husband was standing at the foot of the bed, a worried look on his face. Did her really care about her or was it all pretend?

I have prescribed some medicines, you should feel better soon. Until then, try and rest, the doctor said as he let go of her hand.

He stood up to go and her husband walked out with him. Her daughter was still in the room with her. She needed to know about her father, had the right to know that he was a cheater. She called out her daughter’s name, but her tongue felt heavier and her mouth closed and so did her eyes.

There was no one in the room when she woke up. The strips on her forehead were gone. The room was dark, and she could hear noises outside the room. Not noises, it was laughter. She got up from the bed and managed to reach the bedroom door. The laughter was coming from the kitchen. She froze at the kitchen door – there they were, cooking together. Laughing, sharing a joke while she lay in bed sick. The laughter stopped, they could not laugh with their tongues down each another’s throat. They were kissing, making weird noises.

She realized she was the one making noises. “Mom” her daughter whispered, and she opened her eyes. She had been dreaming. Her husband was already visiting that woman at her house, now that woman was in her head, in this house as a part of her thoughts.

He took care of her during her sick days. She was happy, not because her husband took care of her, she was happy because he did not get a chance to go and fuck the other woman. She wanted to laugh and tell him how she felt. How happy she was that he was stuck here with her, whether he liked it or not.

Her resolve to confront her husband had weakened long back but she did not want to accept it. She had resigned to the fact that she was not mentally equipped to do it. She could confront him, but she was not prepared for the

after-effect of it. She did not have the means to support her daughter. She was not going to ruin her daughter's future. She was not a selfish mother.

Then, it struck her hard. She remembered – memories, voices from the past. Her father and mother, quarrelling. She remembered watching through half-open eyes, her father slapping her mother and then her eyes had closed.

Another memory – she'd returned home with her mother after spending days with her mother's parents. She could hear sounds of laboured breathing and laughter coming from her parent's room. Her mother had rushed her to her room and closed the door from outside. She remembered trying to listen, her ears close to the door. There was silence. The silence of death – a relationship had died that day, her parents'.

She had blocked the memory, or her mother had made sure she had. Her parents behaved like a happy couple till the end, till her father died. Then, her mother had taken over the responsibilities, had hardened herself to face life and shield her daughter from the harsh facts of life.

Now, being in the situation she was in; she wished her mother had not done that. She wished her mother had dealt with the situation differently. She wished her mother had taught her to do the right thing, to confront her husband if he was wrong. While attempting to shield her from the pain, her mother had made her weak.

She hated to admit, she was so much like her mother.

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He'd been worried about her since the day her husband had walked into the house that day. Had she confronted her husband? Told him that she knew about the affair? There was no way to know. He did not know her well enough to figure out what must have happened inside that house, but he knew about the women in India, the one's who lived in the kind of town they lived in, those who were married to men a decade elder to them, he knew what happened when there was a child in the picture; it was enough for him to know what must have happened – or rather what must have not happened.

He did not like it, did not agree with it but it was not his life; it was her life and he did not blame her for the decision she had taken. The decision, he had assumed, she had taken.

He did not dare to peek inside the house through the backyard for the fear of being caught. He did not want to complicate her life further. He did not want

to give the man a chance to raise a finger at her. He knew that's how guilty men reacted. To conceal their faults and their guilt they sniffed around trying to find fault in another. As if that would minimise the damage.

He waited for her husband to step out of the house; even if it was to have sex with another woman. He wanted the man to leave so he could walk across the road and get the chance to talk to the woman he had started to care for; the woman who aroused him in a totally different way.

He had never been in a normal relationship. What he had with the prostitute was not normal though it was sort of a relationship. He could never think of any woman beyond what they had to offer in bed. He felt differently for this woman. Yes, he wanted to bed her. He wanted to make love to her, feel the softness of her skin against his, if she would have him; but, more than anything and everything that mattered, he wanted what was best for her. He was willing to accept every decision she made. He wanted to be there for her, even if it meant supporting her decision of forgiving her husband. He would forever hate that bastard, but he would not expect her to hate the man if it meant jeopardizing her and her daughter's future.

The man never stepped out. She never stepped out. He had been counting days, she should have stepped out, at least for Tulsi puja but she did not. Her daughter went to school regularly; but that's it, there was nothing else he could find out. That bothered him. He spent most of the time at the window, hoping to get a glimpse of her. The window to her room was always shut. He was becoming addicted to her. That scared him a lot. He did not want her to be the reason for his life being undone, but that's what was happening. He wanted to act out, to hell with sobriety. He wanted to fuck and ruin the woman who had ruined the life of the woman he loved; he wanted to make that woman feel like a whore that she was, throw a wad of cash after he was done; just for the sake of revenge.

He got up from the bed and picked up the bike keys; that's when he saw her. The beautiful face, the face that had changed him forever. She looked tired, she looked lifeless. He walked closer to the window, she saw him, and he thought he saw light in her eyes, but it was gone; she turned around and walked away from the window leaving it open.

Her threw the bike keys on the floor and sat on the bed, holding his head in his hands. He was in love and he hated the feeling.

... to be continued.