

NAINI CLOUTIER

Searching for Mahesh

RAMA LAY STILL, HER SLIGHT BODY wrapped in a white sheet. Her foot rested lightly on the wooden globe that marked the edge of the bed. She was staring into the darkness. Her daughter's smaller, paler body lay next to her, breathing softly.

Outside, the Chowkidar slowly made his night rounds of Sariabagh colony. Rama could hear his staff rhythmically hitting the ground. It was two a.m., but Mahesh was still not back.

All night the clock ticked, sometimes so softly that Rama could barely hear it, and at other times so loudly that it pounded against her ears.

A thick yellow beam from the morning sun was pressing against the back of Rama's neck. It was six a.m.. Where could Mahesh be?

Her head cradled in her right arm, Rama lay on her side watching the heavy shadow cast by the large mahogany armoire. The armoire's doors were framed by delicate petals and flowers etched in blue.

The armoire was all Rama had been able to bring from her parents' home, and only because it contained all her clothes. Already a professor then, Mahesh had refused a dowry. He was a man of principle; in fact, it had not even bothered him that she was dark. He had scratched his bald spot thoughtfully: "Rama, don't compare yourself with the others. You are unique. Your colour is beautiful, just like the ripe fields in Gharwal." Rama had laughed, her lips stretching across her pearly white teeth.

Opposite the bed stood a low dresser, covered by an embroidered turquoise cloth. On it lay three combs, some of Sheela's bangles and Rama's two lipsticks, which she had not used in years. In the middle of the dresser, a long narrow mirror rested awkwardly against the wall. That was the only mirror in the house, for Rama and mirrors had an uneasy history. When only eight years old, she would sit for hours in front of her mother's mirror, rubbing talcum powder on her arms to make them fair. At fourteen, she had tried very hard to stretch her eyes—to make them big and wide just like Nutan's eyes when she looked through the fish nets in the film *Jaadu*. As Rama grew older, she learned to avoid mirrors.

Sheela, on the other hand, thrived on mirrors. Rama was grateful that, from her, Sheela had only the oval face, the rest was Mahesh. It was so hard to get dark girls married off; the fair ones went fast—as Rama knew only too well.

To the left, on the same wall, was a large calendar of the Goddess Saraswati, smiling from the pink lotus flower, her soft white hand gently raised in a blessing. Separating the bedroom from the hallway, a long blue and green striped curtain hung from the door. Next to it was a long rectangular window, its glass painted over by a faded forest-green colour. The window overlooked the gully between their house and the Duttas.

On Mahesh's side of the bed was a short and unstable lamp. Two dusty books lay on the cement floor: the thickest on the top, *Star Gazing for Amateurs*, and underneath it lay a slim volume, *Hindustani Musical Forms*. Many more books lined the metal bookshelves in the drawing-room. As for Rama, her only contact with these books was when she dusted them. And that was how she preferred it. She had accepted, quite happily, the edict of her grandmother: "Girls should not fill their heads with useless ideas. Otherwise, it becomes very difficult to marry them off. Twelve classes are enough."

Dutta was at it again—every house in the colony resonated with Dutta's noisy exertions as he cleared his insides of their nightly phlegm. Rama turned towards the window, her dark eyebrows creased into a frown. She could feel the sweat in her left armpit seep onto her arm. Tight, she held her stomach as she waited for the cramp to pass. The pain. And it was only the first day of her bleeding.

Rama could have lain there all day, but that would not have helped matters. Gathering all her strength, she threw the sheets off, lurched from the bed and proceeded towards the hallway. Her bare feet clapped against the hard floor. Sheela's tiny body had not even stirred.

Where could Mahesh be? An accident? But he had not taken the scooter with him. He had gone for a walk, just like any other evening. Could something have happened to him?

Left town? Gone to his parents? But why? And without telling her? They had not even fought yesterday.

Kala bazaar? Mahesh in the arms of a voluptuous whore? Rama pushed the image out. No, no, those were bad thoughts.

What to do and where to begin? She rubbed her eyes, gritty from lack of sleep, as she entered the drawing-room.

Of course, she would have to be discreet. It would not do for the colony people to find out that Professor Chand was away all night, without his wife's knowledge; Mrs. Chand did not know where her husband was. The scandal.... Her hand grazed the small walnut cabinet by the dining table. She jerked it away.

The other day Sheela had wanted to see 'Bari Amma' and Rama had unlocked the cabinet to show her the photograph.

"Oh, how fair and beautiful Bari Amma is! Look at her eyes, Mummy." Sheela fingered the sharp edges of the metal frame.

The eyes looked out of the photograph at Rama, laughing at her. "And so she is. But we must let Bari Amma rest now." Firmly, she locked the cabinet, which shook with the impact.

Rama had not wanted to be like the other women. Not like Auntie Lata, who had lived a life of lies; as if pretending made it so. And everyone had laughed behind her back. Rama was determined; she would never be afraid to speak of the first one, even to her own children. After all, she was dead—all ash. Poor woman. She had stopped breathing, just like that. Some said it was a nasty flu. They said, she looked so peaceful, as if she were asleep. And it would not do to speak or even think ill of the dead.

Mahesh had kept the photograph locked in the cabinet. This Rama bore with good humour. Before, when she had just married, she often opened the cabinet to look at her—at the beautiful face with the high bridged nose, at the dark almond eyes with the long curved eyelashes, at the soft lips with rose on them. Then she opened the cabinet less and less. Until dust settled, that is, except

around the handles. He never opened it, in front of her; he never even talked about her.

But it was the others; they would not let her forget. "Hai Ram. Such beautiful eyes. My poor Laxmi," Mahesh's mother had sighed as she watched Rama slyly. "She loved black chiffon. It looked so lovely on her fair skin." Or, "Laxmi used to love rain." They said it so casually. She wondered what they said behind her back.

Rama dug her nail into an old groove in the dining table. Three or four hours she could take, but a whole night? She would find out for herself. Yes, she had to. Was it not like Mahesh, that his friends knew more about him than she did? Just like the time he had told the Srivastavas about the award before he had told her. And the wives and daughters of his friends were all so pretty, intelligent, smart.... Rama grimaced. Sometimes she wondered why he had bothered to marry her, when all he needed were friends and books. Was it because he had felt sorry for her? She was dark and twenty-eight. But, then, he was a widower, with no property to speak of. And, after all, they were from the same caste.

Rama flung Mahesh's *India Today* across the dining table, and walked rapidly to the garden, the "two-foot garden" as Mahesh called it, uprooted a small bunch of coriander and tucked the end of her sari tightly around her waist. Her chest even further flattened by the tautness of the garment, she marched towards Doctor Nath's house.

Doctor Nath had never married; instead, he had 'devoted' his life to taking care of his sister, Usha, who also taught at Mahesh's university. Nearing her mid-forties, Usha had a fullness of figure that annoyed Rama. And while Mahesh and Nath had been childhood friends, Mahesh had been very careful to point out to Rama that Usha was like a sister to him. But Rama had always been uneasy about this clumsy relationship—one could never be too careful in such situations.

Rama crossed the narrow laneway, wrinkling her tiny nose as she walked past the large open field strewn with garbage—old pots, human defecation, rotting vegetables, drying bones and bloodied cloths. Filth. Everywhere filth. Rama covered her nose with the pallu of her cotton-blue sari. All night. Mahesh could have said something to her. As she entered the white gate, a spray of cool air touched her hand.

Doctor Nath was watering his daisies, his dhoti neatly tucked between his knobby knees and his hairy paunch peeping through his white vest.

The usual smirk on his face dissolved into a surprised smile. "Hello, Mrs. Chand, what made you think of us so early?"

Rama smiled coyly, "I brought some fresh coriander for Usha ji. I keep promising...."

"Ah, of course, of course. Ummm, I will get Usha for you." Doctor Nath continued watching her as he put down the watering hose.

"Please don't bother. If it is all right, I will go in and give them myself to her." Without waiting for a reply, Rama rapidly climbed the steps.

Her chest tight with apprehension, she threw a furtive glance at the rooms. All the rooms were Spartan—very white and clean, and a warm mist of perfumed shampoo infused the air. Thankfully, Usha was in the bathroom, so Rama left the coriander on the table. As Rama closed the gate, Doctor Nath's voice trailed after her, "Tell Professor Chand, tomorrow we are doing chess at Professor Gopal's place."

Rama began walking towards Steven's road, the rubber slippers hitting her tired heels. The dust had begun to rise. In hundreds, the cyclists, rickshaws and cars collided against the dust, engulfing the crowds as they rushed forward.

Rama thought of the poet. Lately Mahesh had spent several late evenings there. It was worth a try. The image came crisp to her: the poet's closed droopy eyes; his heavy jowls jiggling with the effort as he recited long Urdu verses in a soft rasping voice. His poetry was a lot of nonsense about lotus leaves, women reclining on lotus leaves, children turning into lotus leaves; nothing to do with the real world. And to add to her annoyance, Mahesh would actually recite some of the couplets.

The small wooden gate was ajar. Vigorously twisting the end of her sari, Rama tapped on the door. The poet's wife, a thin, delicate woman, poked her head out, her pale fingers wrapped around the iron edge of the door.

She rubbed her eyes, heavy with sleep. "Kavi ji is sleeping," she whispered.

Rama whispered back, "Bhen ji, would you have a little bit of jaag for the yoghurt? Mine has gone bad."

"Of course, do come in." The woman smoothed the wrinkles in her cheap cotton sari.

A stale spicy odour hung in the air. No class, that was what irritated Rama as she surveyed the rooms littered with dirty clothes, empty cardboard boxes, old newspapers and stray sheets of yellowing papers.

By the radio, a photograph of the poet's wife dangled from the wall. Fair skin and large dreamy eyes. Rama felt a sharp cramp grip her stomach, almost knocking the air out of her. Yes, one of these days she will throw the photograph away, the glass splintering, cutting into the soft image held in its square frame. What could Mahesh do? And then she was justified; after all, was she not the wife now?

"Rama ji, have some tea."

Rama turned around, "Oh, no, no, Sheela will be waking up soon."

The sun was higher in the sky. A trickle of sweat coursed along the back of her neck. Rama flicked it impatiently. Sheela must be wondering where she was. Rama crossed over to Main Road and then to the small lane by the hospital.

Her back felt heavy with pain. A wet stench filled her nostril, as if every orifice in her body was bleeding. All she wanted was to sit down and rest a while.

She hesitated as she passed by the brick house of the government engineer, Rawat. The engineer's slow wheezing laugh echoed in her ears. What did Mahesh see in him? For Rawat, everything revolved around alcohol: "What a beautiful evening Professor ji. The stars are shining. Come on, don't spoil it. Lets share a drink—only one drink." This continued for hours as he twisted the glass with the brown liquid in his long slim fingers—the glass, its sharp edges, reflecting the lamp on the verandah. She fought with Mahesh every time he visited the Rawats. Mahesh would say, "You don't understand. The engineer is a good man, a gem." Rama, in reply, had not visited them in months.

Rama turned on to the cobbled pathway. Lily pads covered the pond, which was surrounded by sweeping gardens and large shady trees. A boy of about twelve answered the doorbell. They had changed servants again.

"Tell Mrs. Rawat that Mrs. Chand is here." Rama glared at the servant, who quickly disappeared into the house.

Rama hurriedly glanced around, taking in the new floral sofas and the soft carpets, as she advanced towards the kitchen. On the mantelpiece was a photograph of Malikha, the youngest daughter, smiling, a scarf tied around her pert adolescent face. Malikha laughed too much, even when she was walking on the road with the other girls. And lately she had started wearing those tight tops. "Malikha, what a beautiful name," Mahesh had said. He was too nice, too naïve. He did not understand the workings of today's young minds.

Rama saw herself as a girl of fifteen, her pigtails swinging, as she skipped back home from school. The evenings were always full of excitement. She especially loved the visits with her mother to sadhus in yellow robes with ash on their forehead, or clever astrologers who could tell your future by looking at your face. Rama had a passion for the future—she could feel her heart racing when they talked about a husband for her, his profession, his colour.... Everything was different then. Her laughter had filled her father's house as her future stretched before her, unspoiled.

"Rama ji, is everything okay?" Mrs. Rawat emerged from one of the rooms. The soft flesh of her arms sagged as she straightened a brass horse on the teak table.

Rama smiled. "I was passing by and I thought I would ask if Malikha wanted some books. You know we have too many of them."

Mrs. Rawat did not look convinced: "Hai, Malikha is still asleep and it is time for her college. Chotoo, wake up baby! She is late. Do have some tea, Mrs. Chand."

"Oh, please don't bother. Maybe I will send the books over with Professor Chand." Rama turned, almost colliding with the dark statue of Buddha by the door. Mrs. Rawat was watching her from the other end of the room, her round face framed by a window.

Outside, Rama winced as she felt the fatigue in her calves and her heels. The strap on her slipper also felt dangerously loose. "Hattoo, Hattoo!" A rickshaw puller was swearing at her to move. His fat passenger mumbled, "Where do these people come from?" A paper bag with newsprint on it rustled as the wheels of the rickshaw rolled by.

She stood on a side step of the Chandini Bazaar, playing distractedly with her sari, as if unaware of the noise surrounding

her. One, two, three, she stepped down and started to walk with a slow graceful cadence.

The big roads of the middle-class neighbourhoods and the minarets were left far behind. The paths here were narrow and the huts of white clay. The glare from the clay hurt her eyes. Naked children played in the dirt and the gutters. They watched her as she walked by.

Rama crossed the railway tracks which wound around the huts, extended over the humped field, then disappeared behind the bushes at the other end.

She continued on the dusty road, passing an occasional clay hut. By a tall eucalyptus tree, a faded sign read "LOVERS PARK" and a gravel path led into what looked like a forest. So this is where it was. Seema, her neighbour, had once mentioned to her that about twenty years ago this had been a favourite park of the British. Rama had imagined tall, white women dressed in lace, escorted by handsome Indian princes, the women's pretty shoes with pink bows powdered by dust, their white skins glistening in the shade of fragrant trees. But no one even talked about it any more—the squatters had moved in and the forest had claimed it.

The gravel path ended where the grass was overgrown and the forest began. Rama trod carefully, lifting branches. In a dream, she moved, her hips swaying and her shoulders curving around the trunks. Her blue sari sometimes catching on snags. Suddenly, she was at the edge of the swamp, which was covered with lotus flowers—thousands of them. Their shiny greenness and pink blossoms filling every hole, every corner, spreading all the way to the other edge, which was marked by silent clumps of trees.

And then she saw a figure on the distant edge, sitting in the dark shadow of a tree, his chin resting on his knees, his head bowed down. Mahesh. She was quite sure of it. A glint caught her eye. He was staring down. The photograph.

She sank to the hard wet ground and looked away. A transparent fly darted from leaf to leaf, up and down, sometimes skimming the water below, leaving a thin trail of its flight. A deep scream filled her insides. One tear followed another and dropped onto the lotus leaves, slowly rolling over onto the mud.

And he sat, wrapped in his sorrow. In his hand, he held the image he loved. It could do no wrong. She was his first love, when

his adolescent hunger had fed on her hunger, and they had risen as one from it.

He had never forgotten. Now she saw it clearly—the hand prints on the cabinet. She wondered how often he had opened it. Every day? Once? Twice?

“What was she like, Mahesh?” Rama had once asked him.

“Who?”

“You know, the first one?”

“Uhhh. That was in the past. We should build our lives together.”

Then there was the time when they had that fight over the trip to Delhi and she had not slept with him for a week.

“Would you have talked to the first one in the same way?”

“Don’t drag her into it.” Mahesh had walked out of the room.

Dressed in her mother’s jewels, clothed in red, Rama, the shy bride, had stepped quietly into his house. And he had held her hand and put bright vermilion on the narrow part in her dark hair.

Rama touched her breast, where it hurt the most. Betrayal, betrayal, her heart cried. Her opponent was wily. How was she to fight her? How does one fight the memory of the dead?

Rama did not know how long she sat there. Her head was hot from the sun, which was now directly over her. Slowly, she stood up, her back stiff. She had to buy vegetables for lunch. Sheela must be hungry. Poor Sheela. She had to take care of Sheela.

Not a bird stirred, not a leaf moved, as Rama waded through the tall grass, her sorrow clinging to the loose threads of her sari.

Rama heard the fan whirring as she stepped into the drawing-room. Mahesh’s head jerked up from behind the *Hindustan Times*. “Rama, where were you? I was starting to worry.” His face was shiny from dried-up sweat.

“Who has worried whom?” Rama asked wearily.

Mahesh laughed: “You think too much, Rama. Did you know what happened to me? I fell asleep in the city library. That saala chowkidar said he did not see me. In the morning he was grinning, as he held a cup of tea ‘Chai sir’—saala.” Mahesh shook his head and rustled the large newspaper sheets.

Illusions. Was life an illusion? Rama struggled with the idea while the long white arms of the ceiling-fan continued to slice the

stuffy midday heat. She stood in the middle of the room, silent, her hand resting on the jute back of the sofa.

And then Rama turned away, removed the bunch of silver keys hanging from her waist, and unlocked the cabinet. The coolness of the metal frame sent a shiver through her. Rama held the photograph out to Mahesh and said quietly, "She will not stay in my house."