



SUMEDH JOG

Broken Branches

Everyone says Krishna is a crook. They keep telling me to get rid of him. Akka only arrived here yesterday, but she already has him figured out. Clever Akka. She crinkled her nose at him, this morning, as we sat on the porch, drinking tea. “I don’t like him,” she said in a loud whisper, “not one bit. He has that shifty look. I used to have a maid like that when we were living in Detroit. I caught her with the driver. She was out within a month.” I wanted to ask what happened to the driver but I didn’t. Akka asked me his name. I told her. “His surname.” She hissed, impatiently. I told her and I could hear the caste calculator turning inside her head. “Of course. Those people are all crafty. You can’t trust them. Take my advice and let him go. I am sure I’ll be able to find you half a dozen better gardeners in the village.” “You just relax Akka. You are back home after so long. I’ll take care of these small problems. You just show me what gifts you’ve got me from America. I have been waiting all day to see.” With that, I dragged her back inside the house.

I remember the time, twenty-five years ago, when Akka got married and went to live in America. NRI akka! Such a big deal it was in those days. My friends were all jealous. For the fifteen days that Akka used to be back here, visiting us, I was Queen Bee. Showing off the perfume that she had gotten me, the t-shirt with the New York skyline on the front. The most precious treasures were of



course the chocolates - not to be shared with any outsiders. Amma would dole them out to us like prasadam after dinner. And we would eat them with religious joy - the mountain peaks of Toblerone flecked with nougat, the modak-shaped Kisses, wrapped in silver and gold, the sacred spheres of Ferrero Rocher. Because of the way we squirrelled away the chocolates, they would last us a month or two after Akka had gone back. And all that time, Amma and Appa would continue to savour their daughter's sweet success.

Akka does not approve of my house here in Kasop. She thinks I paid too much for it. She thinks it is too difficult to get here - first the train till Ratnagiri, then the hired taxi over the up-and-down roads that make her car-sick. Besides, there is nothing to do here. It is warm and humid all year round. Even the beach is a good twenty minutes' walk away. The house itself is old and dirty. It feels crowded even when it's just the two of us inside. The paint is peeling from the walls, the roof leaks when it rains and I never check if the maid has swept under the sofa. But look outside Akka, I want to tell her. Look at that mango tree - it must be at least two hundred years old. Its trunk is so wide that if you embrace it from one side, and I embrace it from the other, our hands will not meet. Look Akka, I want to tell her. But I don't think Akka will be able to see.

I have always been jealous of Akka. I know that we are different people. She is almost ten years older than me. And a woman. My parents never made any comparisons between us. And yet, it had always seemed obvious to me that I



was a disappointment to them, the runt of the litter. But all that was such a long time ago. So, when Akka called that day to say that she was visiting, I thought that I would be able to meet her without rancour. I have felt such a generosity of spirit, living here, in this lush bounty of Kasop. But I was wrong. The moment I saw her, I felt that bitter taste rose up again, at the back of my throat. Even now her rumbling laughter, her easy chatter with the neighbours fills the little house while I slip back again into the shadows.

Don't get me wrong. She is all the family I have left after Amma passed away. My flesh and blood. And she reminds me of Amma so much, that sometimes I feel like running up to her and hugging her. Today she is making sweet rotis for

me. She is standing in front of the stove while I sit at the dining table, looking at her. She looks just like Amma when she wipes the sweat from her lips with her dupatta. There is a little window next to the kitchen platform that looks out onto the garden. Between roasting rotis, she tosses out little balls of flour to the sparrows on the ledge, speaking to them softly. "What are you telling them?" I ask. "Nothing. I am telling them to take care of my little brother when I am gone."

The rotis were beautiful. Light, flaky, just the right amount of sweet. Both Akka and I overate at lunch. I pulled out the family albums onto the dining table, and we laughed as we talked about our summer holidays. Appa has written



notes on the back of some of the photos with a pencil, in his small precise hand. “Toad Rock, Nakki Lake, Mount Abu, May 1989” “Pratap Palace Hotel, Udaypur, May 1989” “Chandrakishor Singh, Driver, May 1989”. Things were going well till she brought up Krishna again. “Your neighbour was telling me not to trust that guy. I don’t know what you see in him. Why can’t you listen to me?” “But Akka, how can I let him go for no reason? I have no complaints about his work and he seems honest enough to me.” “So you are waiting for him to rob you of everything. You will fire him after that?” “Akka, please. At least don’t shout. He is working outside.” “So now I have to be careful about not hurting the feelings of your hired help? While you go about doing as you please?” I did not reply and started clearing up the table. Akka sat sulking in the chair for some time, but then she came to help out. We did not say much to each other for the rest of the day.

As a child, Amma, Appa and Akka were like gods to me, or like mountains or like the monsoon. Forces of nature whom I never dreamt of questioning, who, I was certain, did the right things as a matter of course. I never knew them to be anxious or uncertain or despairing. Of course, I saw the cracks as I grew up. But that image of them never crumbled away entirely. Even now, each time that I discover their fallibility, it makes me feel disjointed, like I have discovered some unnatural secret I better had not known. Last night I heard Akka crying. Our bedrooms are next to each other. It was about 2 am and she was crying softly, but I am a light sleeper, and the nights here in Kasop are very quiet. It



took me a little while to figure out what I was hearing. But even when I did, I remained frozen in bed. It was out of the question that I should go out and comfort her. I lay there making as little noise as possible, listening, waiting for her to stop crying. She stopped after some time but I still could not sleep. I realized that I barely knew her anymore. We had lost touch completely in the last few years. I had assumed that she was too embarrassed to talk to me and I had not spoken to her out of diffidence, not wanting to confront her judgement. Whatever the reason, there was now such an abyss between us, that I had been immobilized by my sister's tears.

I woke up late the next day, feeling guilty about the way I had acted. I decided to make it up to Akka, when I heard her calling to me in a sharp and angry voice. I rushed to see what was wrong. Her room was in a mess. The bedsheets had been thrown to the ground, the drawers were pulled out, the cupboard was open. "What's wrong Akka?" "My purse. I can't find my purse. Where's my purse? I have looked everywhere." "What purse Akka?" "My purse. I had kept it here under my pillow last night. When I came back after my bath in the morning, it wasn't there. Where has it gone?" "What does it look like? What did it have inside? Are you sure you left it here?" "It is a purse like any other purse. This is where I left it. And when I got back it was gone. I have been telling you. Warning you. Now see what's happened." "Please Akka. Don't shout. Let me think." "Don't shout. Don't shout. That is what you keep saying. And now see where we are. There is a thief in this house. And you want me to be quiet."



Akka's voice filled that little room and seemed to squeeze out the last breath from me. I was free here after so long, perhaps for the first time in my life. As Akka continued to scream, I could feel that freedom slipping away. Before I knew what I was doing, I turned to face her and shouted back. "Akka." My voice was quaking, my hands trembling so violently that I knew even Akka had noticed. But I took a deep breath and continued, "Akka, please go and sit in the kitchen. And stop shouting." She stood there glaring at me for a minute, but then walked away, mumbling under her breath. I began to search as soon as she left, with desperate trembling fingers. My eyes were so blurred with tears that I could barely see what I was doing at first. But I calmed myself, and began to search again, more methodically this time, starting from one corner. I found the purse after half an hour of searching. It was tucked away behind the almirah. I handed it back to Akka, she took it without a word, not looking up to meet my eyes. I had opened the purse to see what was inside, before I returned it. It had a two hundred rupee note and change. Not even enough money for the cab ride back to Ratnagiri station.

Akka stayed with me for ten more days. She went back early this morning. It rained last night - an unseasonal storm with strong winds that broke a couple of branches off the mango tree. Akka was worried about making the train in time, but the sky was clear when we woke up. I had sent Krishna away on leave for the ten days that Akka remained here. She did not bring up the subject again either. She has invited me to spend my birthday with her in



September. The colours on the trees are very beautiful there in the fall. But my garden looks overgrown even in the ten days that it has remained untended. Besides, there are the two mango branches to be disposed of. I can hear the thwack of Krishna's axe as he works on them. A pair of parrots that had settled into the coconut palm, fly off with angry squawks at the noise. It is hot and sweaty work, although the smell of wet mud from last night's rain will make it more pleasant. He will be done with the morning's work presently. Soon he will come up to the house, to wash away the mud and splinters sticking to his body. He will use the tap fitted next to the porch. The green, wet stone tiles, will feel cool and pleasant as I pour out the water from the steel bucket onto his feet. And then when he has dried himself, I will hold out my hand for him as he climbs up the stairs into my house.



BIOGRAPHY

Sumedh Jog lives and works in Mumbai. He has started writing recently and his poems have been published in *The Bombay Review*. He is a serious birder and is learning Indian classical music.