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You Are Happy?

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 “Break her arms, break her legs,” Lakshman’s grandmother would say about her daughter-in-law, “then see how she crawls to her bottle.” What she said made sense. Lakshman’s father refused to beat his wife, though. “This is America,” he said. “I will go to jail and you will be sitting in India eating warm pakoras.” To Lakshman, it seemed unmanly of his father not to take charge.

It happened every time the family went to a party. Before they left the house, his father would wipe down his comb. He would tuck a handkerchief into his pants pocket. He would get out the notebook in which he had written down the lyrics of movie songs, because he liked to sing and hoped that somebody would ask him to.

The parties were segregated: there was the kitchen, where the women gathered, and there was the living room, where the men stood and talked about politics, investments. Lakshman’s mother was thirty-two, short, stocky, curly-haired. She would stir up trouble. Even when she said ordinary things, she sounded as if she doubted they were true. “You are happy?” she’d say to a woman as if the woman were overlooking something. The surprised person would then feel that she had to defend her happiness. The other women in the kitchen were not used to this kind of behavior. They would grow quiet and look at Lakshman’s mother as she stood silently, appearing pleased, and sipping her Scotch. The fact that his mother drank was itself unusual. Perhaps she did it to be different from the other women; perhaps she wanted to be like a man and therefore more important. When she’d got a little bit drunk, she’d go into the living room and stand among the men, drinking from a small glass and talking about stocks and the World Bank. The men treated her with condescension and irritation, not so much because she was a woman as because she was a woman pretending to know things that she did not know, and vanity and foolishness, which were tolerable in a man, were not tolerable in a woman.

Lakshman’s mother had begun drinking when he was eight. This was around the time that they’d been sent to America by his father’s parents, to expand the family’s export business. From the very start, she had behaved differently with alcohol than other people did. At most parties, tea and juice were offered first and alcohol was an afterthought. At Lakshman’s parents’ parties, his mother was the one who offered drinks. She pressed alcohol on whoever entered the house. “Whiskey, bourbon, wine,” she’d say, smoothing each word. “Tea, Coca-Cola is also there.” Sometimes the men who came over would praise her for her drinking or talk about their own, how it was only during the third drink that they began to feel happy. Whenever a man praised his mother for her drinking, Lakshman became anxious. Because of the movies he’d seen, he sensed danger when he spotted his drunken mother talking to a man. Instead of joining the other children in the basement, boys and girls his age who were running and playing and shrieking, delighted to be allowed to stay up late, he’d follow his mother around the house. Keeping an eye on her made him feel safer but also prolonged his anxiety. By the end of the night he’d be so exhausted that he wanted to cry.

The drinking overtook her quickly. By the time Lakshman was nine, she was drinking during dinner. His father, who rarely drank, protested. “Every night you have to drink?”

“I can’t have a little happiness? Is there something wrong with me that I must suffer?”

When Lakshman was eleven, she started drinking during the day. His parents’ marriage had been arranged by their parents, who did business together, and his mother and father had never really liked each other. Around that time, they stopped sleeping in the same room. To the extent that they spoke at all, it was either in shouts or in sarcasm. “Do you know what kind of people drink during the day?” his father said, shaking a finger at her. “Drunkards. You are a drunkard.”

Lakshman, coming home from school, would sniff the air near his mother to confirm what he could tell with his eyes. If she was drunk, she seemed hollow, as if she were directing her body from afar.

Lakshman’s family’s life seemed strange to him, his father mostly ignoring his mother, often refusing to be with her, getting up from the kitchen table and leaving the room when she came in.

When Lakshman was thirteen and about to graduate from eighth grade, his mother’s kidneys began to hurt. He would come home and find her standing in the kitchen, holding an ice pack against her side. The fact that she cared so little about herself seemed to indicate that she cared nothing for him or his father. He wanted to mock her and shout at her, but he was afraid that she would hit him.

His mother did occasionally try to change. Once, she went to a doctor, and though she probably lied about how much she drank, the doctor still urged her to go to Alcoholics Anonymous. She went to A.A. meetings for a week or two, then stopped.

In the past, Lakshman’s father had travelled to India four or five times a year. As Lakshman’s mother’s drinking worsened, he began going more often. Lakshman felt strange being alone at home with his mother, sitting at the kitchen table, doing his homework, while his mother drank upstairs. The silence in the house was so intense it hummed.

When Lakshman was fourteen and his father was in India on one of his business trips, his mother decided that she was going to stay in bed and drink.

Her room was large and had a cream-colored carpet and a king-size bed. There was a picture window behind the bed and, to the side of the room, another window, which looked out onto a neighbor’s roof. Lakshman stood in the doorway and watched his mother’s preparations. She seemed cheerful as she moved around the room. She opened the windows completely, although it was winter. She put two cases of wine on the carpeted floor beside the bed. She put several jugs of water on the carpet, too, and, by the head of the bed, a white plastic bucket to vomit into.

“Daddy won’t like this,” Lakshman murmured.

“Let him die,” she replied happily. She put some large bags of potato chips on the nightstand. Lakshman, watching his mother, felt that what she was planning was so bizarre that it could not possibly happen. With the windows open, the room quickly became icy. His mother got under the quilt and picked up a glass of white wine.

The next day, Lakshman telephoned India. He gripped the phone and spoke in a soft, tight voice. “Mommy says she is going to stay in bed and drink.” Even as he was speaking, he knew that his father would find some way to make light of what was happening. His father said, “What else does she do anyway?” Lakshman repeated what he had said, that his mother had got into bed and had been drinking for twenty-four hours. He felt detached from himself, like when he was taking a difficult math test and he was frightened but his pencil began to hop over the sheet of paper on its own, writing numbers.

His father didn’t say anything. Lakshman knew the silence meant that his father could later pretend that what he had said had not been said. He repeated it for a third time. “What can be done?” his father answered in irritation.

For her first day or two in bed, Lakshman’s mother sipped from a wineglass and ate potato chips and smiled confusedly at the TV playing in a corner. When she had to, she got up and stumbled to the bathroom at the end of the hall near his father’s room. After a few days, though, she began shitting and pissing in the bucket.

Because of Lakshman’s calls, his father flew back. He stood in the bedroom doorway and screamed, “Die! At last there is nothing else to do!” He shouted this, but he also phoned the county’s central A.A. office.

Two women came to the front door of the house and rang the bell. One was blond and short and looked to be in her early twenties. The other was much older and had very white, dusty-looking skin. Lakshman’s father, unshaven, exhausted from the eleven-hour flight from Delhi, and so dazed that he had a slipper on one foot while the other was bare, asked them to come in. Before entering, the women stood on the cement porch in front of the open door and prayed. They held hands and bowed their heads.

The older woman walked in first. As she passed Lakshman and his father, she mentioned that she liked Indian food. They went up the stairs. His mother’s room was at the end of the hall and its white wooden door was closed.

When they pushed it open, the room was freezing and full of light. To Lakshman, the light seemed unearthly, as if they were all above the clouds, where it wasn’t possible to survive. There was the light and there was the stench. The smell of vomit, urine, and shit was such that it seemed unthinkable that a human being ate there, slept there.

“You want to go to a detox?” the older woman asked Lakshman’s mother. His mother was half-sitting, with her head against the headboard. She appeared stupefied. On her chin and down the front of her purple kameez were strings of dried vomit. It was embarrassing to have strangers see his mother this way. But he also felt a thin, eager hope that these two women could fix her, that they were capable of doing something simple that would suddenly make everything all right.

The young woman picked up the bucket. Leaning to one side, she passed Lakshman and his father by the doorway and took it down the hall to the bathroom.

“If you don’t go to a detox, you are going to die,” the older woman said. She spoke loudly and clearly.

The two women helped his mother stand. They held her on both sides and walked her down the hall. She was not wearing the pajama bottom under her long shirt, and to see her yellow, hairy legs was awful. In the bathroom, she stepped into the tub with her kameez still on.

The women had come in a blue minivan and they drove her to a detox center. Lakshman and his father followed in the family’s Toyota, with Lakshman clutching his mother’s passport and insurance card. He wondered what a detox facility looked like. He imagined that it resembled a grand bank.

It was a bright Sunday morning. They took surface roads so that the two vehicles wouldn’t lose track of each other. The stores they passed were closed and their windows flashed sun. Lakshman began to feel relief. The flashes of light were like blasts of music. The occasional person crossing a road seemed like a sign that life was going on, that life was always going to go on, and so somewhere there was the possibility of things being different and happiness existing.

In India, on farms, pretty young women are as common as rabbits. It is easy to have sex with girls who are fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. These girls have nothing to trade other than sex and physical labor, and often they are raped. On farms, if a girl goes into the fields in the early morning to defecate there is a strong chance that she will be assaulted.

Lakshman had been going back to India every summer since he came to America. When he was there, he went with his uncles to the farm that his father’s family owned. He liked the farm, liked throwing rocks into a field, causing grasshoppers to shoot up by the dozen. He liked the step well, walking down it to take a bath, the temperature dropping, the air turning sweet, and then squatting on the bottom step and splashing a bucket in the water to clear the tadpoles and weeds, before beginning to soap himself.

On the farm, each uncle had his favorite girl. The girls would bring his uncles tea in the morning and then disappear into their rooms for a half hour or more. Usually, only the men of the family went to the farm. A few times a year, for religious events at particular temples, the women of the family also came. These wives, aunts, and daughters screamed at the girls and chased them with sticks, and the farm girls urinated in the buckets of water used to wash the family temples. Lakshman did not think about this much. It seemed funny to him, like a television sitcom.

One summer evening when he was still fourteen, after his mother had gone to the detox center and come back and started drinking again, Lakshman was standing by a sugarcane press near an irrigation channel. A girl who was perhaps nineteen came up to him. She was tall for a villager and barefoot, with a long skirt that had fingernail-size silver bells sewn onto it. Attaching a “*ji*” to his name, as though he were the older one, she asked him in their regional dialect what months it rained in America. She asked this almost as if she had already heard the answer and wanted to confirm that she wasn’t being lied to. “Every month,” Lakshman said. “Every month it rains.”

“Does ice fall, too?”

“In winter.”

“I had heard that,” the girl said mysteriously and then stood there for a moment as if she wanted to be remembered. She had a beautiful oval face and small breasts, and she appeared very confident.

The next day the girl came up to Lakshman again. This time it was early morning and his father’s oldest brother, bald and with a mustache, was standing nearby chewing a tooth-cleaning twig. She thrust a little knotted rag into Lakshman’s hand. “Some sweets,” she said and stared at him again. “How many air-conditioners does your house have?”

“Run, girl,” his uncle said quietly. “There is nobody here for you.”

Later, Lakshman would think that it was probably falling in love with this girl that had caused his father to decide to have Lakshman’s mother murdered. There was nothing else to explain the change. His mother was no different from how she had been for years, drunk—quietly drunk sometimes, alarmingly erratic at others. So there must have been something about falling in love that had made his father think that life was short and he should not stay with this woman who appeared to care about no one.

At the time, though, all Lakshman knew was that something had changed for his father. His father’s room was next to his. Sometimes Lakshman would be awakened at two or three in the morning by the sound of his father on the phone. His father would be laughing in a cheerful, relaxed way, and when he spoke he used their regional dialect. Lakshman’s uncles in India gave their girls phones, and he guessed that his father had done the same. Now, during the day, his father was more laid-back. The anger that had lived beneath his voice vanished. This was a relief, but his not being unhappy also felt like a betrayal to Lakshman.

One fall afternoon when everything smelled wet, Lakshman came home from school and had to turn on the kitchen lights, although it was only four o’clock. The house was quiet, except for the soft sound of the TV in his mother’s room, where she was probably drinking. He saw that the answering-machine light was blinking red. He pressed Play and there it was, the young woman’s voice. “Listen,” she said, and then there was some splashing. “That is my feet in water.” She laughed and hung up. Lakshman was furious. It was vulgar for her to leave a message. And she was a farm girl. She should know her place. He deleted the message. As soon as he did, he became scared that his father would find out.

To have an alcoholic woman murdered, her husband must send her to her parents and tell them that she is a drunkard and not to be trusted and that he does not want her back. Until he does this, she is under his protection and she won’t be killed, because she belongs to his family and not to her father’s. But, once she is returned in this way, her family will kill her, because the shame of having a daughter or a sister who’s an alcoholic is staggering. It is even worse than having one who is promiscuous. With a promiscuous woman, you know to kill her right away; with an alcoholic, the shame lasts longer because you hesitate.

Lakshman did not understand what was going on, other than that his father seemed to be in love with a farm girl and was complaining more than usual. He started calling Lakshman’s grandmother. “What kind of life is this?” he would ask. “What did you do to me when you got me a wife like this?” Much later, Lakshman understood that his grandmother had to be consulted because, since his mother belonged to a family with which his father’s family did business, there would be financial consequences if his mother was sent back.

He sensed that there was a crisis building. His mother rarely went to India. Nobody wanted her there, and so she went only if a close relative was getting married and even then only for a week or two. But now his other grandmother, the one on his mother’s side, began calling, too. She wheedled Lakshman’s mother, pressing her to visit, even though there was no wedding coming up.

It was strange to hear his grandmother’s voice on the phone. “Baby boy, go get your mother,” his grandmother would say when he picked up. Calls and more calls added to a sense of eeriness. It seemed to Lakshman that something was being worked out but that his mother was too drunk to realize that the situation around her was changing.

Talking to her mother made Lakshman’s mother giddy. Sometimes, after a call, she would stay downstairs and eat regular food, instead of going back to her room and drinking wine and eating potato chips. Lakshman would then get nostalgic for the time when she drank only at parties.

About two months after Lakshman’s maternal grandmother began calling, his mother left for India. Three days after that, barely enough time for her to land in Delhi, take the plane to Jaipur, and unpack, Lakshman was standing at the stove making tea when his father came into the kitchen and said, “Your mother has died of dengue. She died in a hospital last night.”

Lakshman felt as if he were dreaming. He didn’t turn off the stove, as tradition required after a death. Instead, he continued making tea. His father had a round, dark face and he stared at Lakshman nervously, as if waiting to see if he would be believed.

“Your mother died last night,” he repeated.

“In reality?” Lakshman asked.

“Yes. In reality.” His father opened the refrigerator and took out a carton of eggs.

Lakshman felt a sense of relief. It was as if he had come into a room that had been crowded with furniture but now stood empty. The space seemed smaller and plainer, but also less stressful. He didn’t feel sadness, at first, because a part of him didn’t believe that his mother was dead. If she were dead, he thought, they wouldn’t be preparing food. It would be improper to do so.

He went to school. He didn’t tell anyone what his father had said. After classes, he attended track practice. Running in the cold moist air, he remembered when his mother had come back from her first detox, the one that the two women from A.A. had taken her to. She had been gone for four weeks. She returned home at eleven in the morning, and that afternoon she and he and his father went for a walk. Their street did not have sidewalks, so they walked on the road itself, the snow squeaking under their feet, the trees in the yards dark with moisture. “Manuji,” his mother said to his father with a bashful half smile. “I am not going to drink. I don’t know why, but I am certain.” Her eyes were inwardly focussed, as if she were looking at something within that comforted her and gave her confidence. His father listened but did not speak. He walked with his head down, and he appeared frustrated, as if he knew he was being lied to and yet could not protest the lie.

Lakshman remembered this and remembered when his mother had had two black eyes because she had fallen down the stairs. The black eyes made her look vulnerable and young. He remembered also when his mother had taken his father around the house and shown him where she had hidden bottles of alcohol. She had stood watching as his father put the bottles in a trash can and she had shaken her hands as if they were on fire and she was trying to put them out. As Lakshman ran, tears slid down his face.

That night he lay awake listening, but his father did not talk on the phone to his lover. The next night he did, quietly. And the third night he was laughing as he always had. Lakshman was revolted by him.

Weeks passed. The door to his mother’s room remained closed. They told no one of her death. By this time in America they had stopped socializing, so people knew them only tangentially and there were few to tell. Finally, his father informed an acquaintance or two and somehow the news got to school. There Lakshman was pulled out of class by his guidance counsellor and asked how he was doing. Talking to a white person in authority was frightening, and Lakshman said he was fine.

After perhaps a month, his father opened the door to his mother’s room. In keeping with tradition, all the linens and clothes were going to be thrown away. Lakshman stood in his mother’s room as his father opened the drawers and dumped the red, gold, and peacock saris into black garbage bags. “I miss Mommy,” Lakshman said.

“You should. She was your mother.” His father studied him for a moment before returning to work.

“Do you miss her?”

“Of course.”

Later, the garbage bags sat slumped at the end of the driveway. It rained before the garbagemen came, and the creases on the bags filled with water.

When Lakshman went to India the summer after his mother’s death, his father’s family complained regularly about not receiving help from his mother’s relatives. He still did not understand that his mother had been murdered and, to him, her family’s no longer helping meant a fraying of relations and reminded him that his mother was dead.

“Just because Aarti is gone shouldn’t mean the relationship is finished,” his grandmother said. “These relationships go from generation to generation.”

“What can one do with a family that raises a drunk?” his father’s second-oldest brother, skinny and with a scraggly beard, answered. “They are all crazy.”

“They are not so crazy when it comes to their own interests,” his grandmother spat in the weird conspiratorial way that she sometimes spoke.

Often, these conversations occurred in the afternoon, after the family woke from the midday nap. They would all be groggy and irritable, and their words were like the bitterness in their mouths.

For a while, Lakshman’s uncle, the second-oldest brother, tried hinting at what had happened. “They are scary people. Nobody owns seventy trucks without committing crimes,” he told Lakshman. Late in the summer, Lakshman realized what his uncle was suggesting. But his grandmother and his uncle often said strange accusatory things. They complained that the local milkman diluted his milk with water, and that once there had been a fish in the milk. It was hard, therefore, to take what his uncle said seriously.

“Who dies from dengue after one day?” his uncle insisted one afternoon.

“Keep quiet, idiot,” Lakshman’s grandmother said.

In Jaipur at the start of summer, he had visited his mother’s family, and his grandmother on that side had grabbed him and hugged him tightly and sobbed. He could recall the exact sensation of his grandmother’s arms around him, the boniness of her chest, the sharpness of her arms. All this seemed to cut through his uncle’s hinted accusations.

But slowly, as the weeks passed and the monsoon came and people ran laughing through the streets and then God Krishna’s birthday arrived, a nervousness overtook Lakshman. He started to have a hard time sleeping at night. The street dogs barking at two or three in the morning would wake him and he would become wild with panic. His grandmother’s sighing as she made her way to the toilet through the darkened house would pitch him into misery.

He went to the farm as he always did. Some Gypsies were passing through the area, and at night there were puppet shows and men singing in front of the main house. In the morning, there were the girls visiting his uncles. Once, he was walking through a field and he thought he saw the girl his father loved, sitting beneath a tree talking to another girl. He walked toward her in the shimmering heat. As he did, the girl got up quickly and hurried away. Later that day, he asked the farm manager about the girl and the man said that he would have her called. Lakshman told the man no and headed back to the house. As he did, as he crossed the yellowed grass, sadness filled him. It seemed awful that his mother had died, that his father seemed to have forgotten her, that this girl was still living her life.

That night, he couldn’t sleep at all. The crickets were screaming, and he sat up in bed and thought of his mother and how on her nightstand she sometimes had books from A.A., how when she was going into a detox center she’d become frightened at the thought of being away from home and start crying, how for a while she had continued to phone the old white woman with the dusty skin who had taken her to the first detox.

Around four, the crows started cawing, and soon the smaller birds were chattering, as if they had dreams they were eager to share. At five, the girls arrived on the veranda, their bare feet going past his room and teacups rattling on saucers. Lakshman sat and listened and felt certain that he would never come back to the farm again, that whatever happened he could never come back. ♦

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