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Between Us

By Jafeen Ilmudeen

Mrs. Lafir hadn't intended to visit the village that autumn. It was a strange time for visits for she and her family habitually arrived in the summer. However, her mother had been ill and she had insisted she wanted to see her daughter. Mrs. Lafir had traveled alone, leaving her children behind with her husband in Oman.

She stood 5'4" and was quite fair, like the color of seashells found only in beaches in the more touristy areas of the island down south. She had a long nose that she was quite proud of and long fingers that she carefully filed every day. She was also pleasing to look at. She looked younger than her years, as if she were thirty instead of forty. Her eyebrows were neatly shaped with perfectly constructed arches. She saw her beautician punctually four times a year and told her sister and mother so.

Every morning, Mrs. Lafir would take out her mirror, sit in the garden and watch her face, even when she had one of her particularly bad nights of sleep and even when she knew the mirror would exaggerate her defects. Looking to squash a pimple here or pull out a hair there became a need for her, almost a sense of duty and a source of accomplishment. It was no surprise that she looked so well put together when she visited her family.

Her mother was a small, frail woman in her seventies. She had had a fall and was hospitalized for a long time, arousing worry in all of her family. She lived in a small house (it had been built for her after the family home was sold), which consisted of two rooms, a living room, a kitchen and a bathroom. It was simply furnished, mostly with plastic furniture. A few of the closets, shelves and chests contained Mrs. Lafir and her sister's things.

There was a hospital across the road from her mother's house. It was a government hospital and that had its consequences. Mrs. Lafir had asked her mother to move elsewhere but her mother had refused, saying she had gotten used to the place and she preferred living near the main road.

Even according to provincial standards, the public hospital overlooking Mrs. Lafir's mother's house was one of the worst of the lot. There were almost three hundred rooms, it was reported, for admitting patients. The beds were made of cheap metal and had thin mattresses with dirty sheets. The hospital was always overbooked and her mother told her that even she avoided going there despite it being nearby. She said she was particularly disgusted by the floor, which was scattered with people's spit, phlegm, blood, and excretions. "What can we expect from these poor village people? They don't know how to behave," she would say in resignation.

There was a shortage of doctors and even nurses in the hospital. Many of the nurses were Tamil women from the town. There were a lot of Muslim doctors there, however, though

not as many as they needed. Most doctors went abroad to either finish their residency or to practice. They went to places like the U.K, Australia, even Africa.

The doctors in this hospital were poorly paid and overworked. They frequently saw terminally ill patients who had no one to turn to during the last days. The people who came to these wards with serious illnesses didn't live for very long. Thus, the hospital functioned as a hospice. The care was limited. The place stood for name only, just to confirm people's deaths and to make sure that those who admit their sick relative are comforted, knowing they've done all they could.

It was only the very poorest of the poor who couldn't afford to go to the other main hospital in Batticloa or even the private practices. They steered away from the former mainly because of the higher rate of violence there after the war. The poor could come here relatively cheaply on an auto rickshaw or even a bus.

Because of the hospital, the village near Mrs. Lafir's mother's house changed dramatically. There were too many shops and too much noise. And too many strangers. In the early years of the war, people took extra precautions, not knowing if the person they encountered was a Tamil Tiger and was to be feared. In terms of the poor Muslims, one wondered what kind of uncouth behavior one will witness if there were unknown villagers from God knows where knocking on one's door. Villagers spread gossip and were disdained.

Some strangers came to her mother for only a glass of water (for it was hard to find that in the hospital as clean water was limited and people feared contamination). Others came for some tea (the resthouse tea was expensive for them) and shorteats. Most people also came to use the bathroom and this is what most angered Mrs. Lafir. She couldn't stand that her mother had to clean up for the villagers who didn't take care to clean up properly after themselves. The toilet pit would need to be cleaned and the fresh pitcher of water needed to be refilled frequently.

"I don't understand why you just let them in like that, Mother," she remarked often.

"I can't turn them away."

"But your house is not a public bathroom!"

"You'll be more patient when you are older, dear. I am lonely and like a bit of company now and then."

"These people are not worthy of us!" she would say, infuriated with her mother's passivity, her tolerance of unknown visitors.

So the visitors kept coming. Sometimes there were "repeats" and then you learnt that the person's loved one was ill and hospitalized. It didn't quell Mrs. Lafir's doubts, however.

"These women must have all kinds of serious illnesses. They eat out of our utensils! How can you keep letting them in, unprotected?" she asked.

Her mother only said that she didn't mind. Once, Mrs. Lafir had shipped her mother some good cutlery and dinnerware so she would separate the good from the plain. But her mother never remembered to, no matter how many times she had insisted.

Sometimes, as they ate, the strangers would talk. Mrs. Lafir was often bored by their ramblings. After all, they were village women who had no way out of the village, who hadn't seen anything modern, whose lives were filled with privation and village eccentricities.

Often, when these women stayed behind and talked to her mother, she left to do her errands, such as visiting other relatives, calling her sons in Oman, tending to them if they also visited at the same time as she did, and doing the laundry, designing her latest clothes.

One day, Mrs. Lafir's mother was out of the house, visiting her distant relatives who lived two villages away. Mrs. Lafir, alone at home, had a dinner party to go to that night. She had just realized that her sari blouse needed some alterations. She opened a drawer in her dresser, one she had used since she was sixteen. There was a large mirror attached to the dresser and it had watched her through the good and bad periods of her life. It seemed to reflect key moments now: when she won a science competition in school, when her grandfather passed away, when her favorite teacher left for Zambia, when she fell in love. The drawers held some of those memories but Mrs. Lafir was careful. She only kept her sewing kit, some school folders and family photographs. The love notes were burnt long ago.

She was hemming her blouse quietly in the hot, stuffy room when she was startled by a knock on the gate. Then a woman's voice called out. *Is anyone there*? The voice sounded familiar. She thought that perhaps it was the voice of a previous visitor. Mrs. Lafir waited for the woman to leave but the knocks grew urgent and only then did she set her sewing aside. She cursed under her breath and opened the gate.

Standing outside was a little woman, whose complexion looked like dried straw. If she hadn't been exposed to the elements, as was evident, it seemed she must have been unusually fair. She had on a white sari that was dirty at the edges. Her blouse was wet for it seemed as if she had been walking for some time. Her feet seemed worn, as there were cracks in her soles as well as her slippers. She seemed frail and as if she were about to faint. Mrs. Lafir asked her to come in and walked with her to the kitchen, as her mother regularly did, so that she could feed the visitor.

The woman said nothing when asked if she was hungry. Nevertheless, Mrs. Lafir began to prepare a plate. She began setting one of the cheap china plates with food—white rice, some fish curry, and cabbage curry. She did not serve her the fried fish eggs. She gave the woman the plate and barely looked at her. The woman had a medicinal smell about her. Mrs. Lafir directed her to the plain chair, the one without a chair cushion.

"Are you her eldest daughter?"

Mrs. Lafir looked at that woman carefully for the first time. She hadn't expected a village stranger to scrutinize someone in her position like this.

"Why?"

"No reason. I was just wondering. Are you the daughter that's visiting from Oman?"

"Who told you that?"

The woman seemed a little taken aback. Her plate tilted and some of the brown gravy began to spill onto her white sari.

"Careful with that!" said Mrs. Lafir. She didn't give her the towel that was hanging near the sink.

The old woman wiped her lap with the pallu of her sari. Now there were two brown splats on her sari, marks that showed she had been in her house. As she moved her hand, the whole plate, which she had laid on the kitchen table ledge, shifted. Mrs. Lafir rushed to rescue the contents from spilling on the floor. She bent near the woman so she came face to face with her. She could smell the curry on the woman, intermingled with the hospital smell.

"Thank you, dear," the woman said. The other did not say anything but instead walked to the door. She could not eat with a stranger, especially a village woman, without prior acquaintance. She could not wait in the kitchen and watch her eat, either, as her mother often did.

"My mother should be here shortly," she said, turning to look at that woman who now had the plate in her hand and was getting ready to eat. She looked as if she had been starved.

Mrs. Lafir, from the corner of her eye, saw the woman gorging on her food. She sucked the rice, extracted the juice of the gravy, closed her eyes and swallowed. The behavior was disturbing and it both repelled and touched Mrs. Lafir.

She went back to her hemming in her room but something unsettled her. She could not forget that woman's face. It reminded her of a familiar face from her youth—the close set of the eyes and the shape of the nose were familiar. And yet, she knew she had never met this woman before.

Unsatisfied with her hemming, she undid the stitches to begin afresh. Then she put the blouse away and went to the kitchen to get a drink of water. It was nearly three in the afternoon. Her mother still hadn't returned. Mrs. Lafir half expected to find that the woman had left.

She had not. Through the crack in the door, she saw that the woman had finished eating and her food had dried, caking on her hand. The woman seemed lost in thought. Mrs. Lafir saw that the woman was very pretty, despite her age. She must have been even more beautiful than her in her youth. She must have had such beautiful children, she thought.

The woman sniffled. Mrs. Lafir saw that she was starting to cry. It was a familiar picture. Her mother often spoke of such visitors unable to contain their grief. Perhaps this woman's loved one also was dying. Mrs. Lafir stood for a few minutes, unable to make a noise, but staring at the woman. The woman wiped her face on her sleeve, got up, walked to the sink, washed the plate and put it on the plate rack.

Perhaps it is her husband, she conjectured. Her lips tightened. Her chin became strained and trembled. She walked away to her room, her drink forgotten. She selected yet another sari to wear and was getting ready to hem another blouse when a second noise was heard at the gate.

Her mother came, tired from her long journey. At the gate, Mrs. Lafir updated her on the day's happenings: called the children in the morning, was invited to a wedding, was hemming her blouse to wear with a sari for dinner at a relative's house. Oh and one of the strangers had come. She gave a description of her.

"She must still be here, poor thing. Last week she had asked me if she could borrow some instant milk powder the next time she came. The woman didn't ask you about it? Very odd. Perhaps she was shy."

Mrs. Lafir's old irritation returned, about her mother helping strangers who take advantage of her. She followed her mother into the kitchen as the stranger was rising from the chair. Mrs. Lafir was curious to know her answers to her mother's questions about her health but it was awkward for her to wait—she who had never waited so before.

"Shall we expect to see that woman again?" she asked her mother when they were alone and she was kneading some dough to make bread later that day.

"Yes, but not for long," said her mother.

"Oh"

"Poor thing. I pray I don't have to see that."

"Then it is…. not her husband?" asked Mrs. Lafir, tentatively.

"Oh no! We never talked about him. It is her son."

Mrs. Lafir stopped kneading the flour for she suddenly felt as if she had no strength. Her arms felt flaccid. She put the bowl aside.

"This will have to wait. I am tired today."

"Why, dear? Too much sewing?"

"Probably…" She was silent as her mother took over the kneading.

"Mother, did that woman know I was your eldest daughter?"

"I don't remember. I must have mentioned that to her. How else could she have known?"

"Did you tell her I was visiting?"

"Yes. She asked me about you. She was very interested in you."

"She's not from our village, is she?"

"No. She's from Jaffna. But she could very well have friends and relatives connected to our place."

"I wish you wouldn't go around publicizing about me, Mother. I'd rather you kept it private."

"Why? I was happy you were visiting and told people."

Her mother stopped doing her work and began to weep. Mrs. Lafir didn't rush to comfort her. She said she was moody, but glanced in another direction—where the hospital lay.

The stranger's face and words haunted Mrs. Lafir. The next time she returned, her mother was away visiting her other daughter in the village. Her grandchild was ill and her daughter needed her.

Mrs. Lafir let the woman in without any hesitation and proceeded into the kitchen to get the meal ready. She prepared the portions as usual but her mind was so occupied that she took out her own plate. The novelty that day was fried chicken and she began serving it.

"Where are you from?" she asked the woman, her eyes full of suspense.

"Jaffna"

"Did you once live here?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Lafir, who was usually robust and hardy, tottered. The plate tilted, spilling some gravy on the bronze-colored floor.

"So you do know us," and before the other replied, she continued, "You know me."

The two women faced each other. One older, weary, sorrowful; the other younger, beautiful, but her face just now lined with anxiety. Both had their mouths open but no words came out.

"How is he?" asked Mrs. Lafir, hoarsely and trying to shield her face.

"The doctors say he is very bad. He hasn't got long…" and the woman raised the white folds of her sari to her face. It soon became soaked with her tears.

Mrs. Lafir reached out and touched her. It was only the slightest touch but it was a touch that was initially reflexive and now lingering.

"My son told me about you. He has never forgotten you."

Mrs. Lafir pulled her hand away, as if it was on fire. She stepped away from the woman and turned her face.

"He asked me about you when we came to this hospital. He knew your mother lived here. I said I hadn't seen you, to spare him further grief," said the woman.

Mrs. Lafir found she could barely stand. She clutched the door handle for balance then settled on her cushion-lined chair. She didn't say anything. She did not need to. Her face was

no longer its previous exquisite stoniness but now showed her as a weary middle-aged housewife, as if defeated.

"I have watched you, even those other times when I came here but we didn't talk. I came here with the hope of seeing you. I came here for my son."

Mrs. Lafir could not quite understand this woman who now seemed to exhibit animal feelings, in the tone of her voice, the loss of respect for her betters, for her hosts, loss of her deference. And yet, Mrs. Lafir knew that the woman was acting out of instinct—maternal feelings for her dying son. Death removed rules.

"I want my son to have some joy now, in his last days. He's had a very hard life and he has changed so much. Fortune has been cruel to him, who had so much potential. Everything was lost when he lost you. I pray you don't have to watch this happen to your children."

The mention of her children made Mrs. Lafir start. Until that moment she had not thought of them. Mrs. Lafir started crying but it was not visible to the other woman as the room was dark. She rose from her chair.

"Your food is getting cold. You must eat."

As she moved near the door, the woman rose and came to her. She took both her wrists in her hands so that Mrs. Lafir felt like she was handcuffed, being punished for something that was long overdue.

"This may be my only chance. Please. Please see my son."

Later, the woman's words rung in her ears like some sort of chant. Yet outwardly, she did not exhibit any symptoms of inner torment. Her hair was combed and put into a habitual bun. She spoke and said little, as was usual.

Mrs. Lafir's boys phoned her and told her about their cricket practice and new video games. They forgot to ask her how she was. "We miss you, Mummy," they said, before hanging up. Mrs. Lafir went to her sari cupboard. There hung her wedding sari. It was beautiful and expensive even sixteen years ago. She touched it. It was cold and prickly, just as it was when she had first worn it. She stowed it away again.

She looked out the window. It was dark. The hospital looked busy as usual, with people moving in and out, boys carrying dinner parcels, the resthouses playing loud Tamil film music. She knew that inside the hospital was the battle for life and death. And for one in particular it was nearing the end. She stopped herself from picturing any further but the woman's request did not leave her.

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Her friend Razia had been surprised when she told her that she was going to be married a month after the end of their A-Levels. Razia was the only one who knew of her affair. They had met through Razia's brother, who was a mutual friend. He had attended the all boys' school, St. Paul's, which was the brother school to the one she, Fareena, had attended.

He was a new resident in the village, having moved there when his father relocated his grocery business to the town. Before that, he had lived in Jaffna, a beautiful but politically volatile town up North. His family was neither rich nor well connected and his father, it was said, drank on occasions. Thus, many villagers stayed away from that family.

They had gotten to know each other more in tuition class, when they were assigned group problem sets for physics. He had been impressed with her, the only girl in the class, solving the problems before the boys. They often met behind the church at the convent. He showed her for the first and only time, the romance she wanted: letters smuggled under

notebooks, of private winks exchanged, of roses for Valentine's Day and handmade friendship bands. He had asked her to marry him when they both graduated. She told him she would, if her parents approved. She knew, however, that she was going to have to battle with them. A man from a lower village and one with no connections or little prospects would not have done for her family. She couldn't bear to anger her elders and was terrified of being poor.

When the other proposal came and the arranged marriage was set, she had ended her affair abruptly. She told him her parents wanted her married, begged him to not spread rumors. He had acted as she had requested. He finished his A-Levels and had left the town. She had married and moved away. She had not heard about him again.

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Mrs. Lafir spent the next few days looking for the woman but she did not come. She would start every time there was a knock on the gate. She tried to get her alterations for her clothes done in preparation for her many dinners and weddings but she was not happy with the result or she soon tired of it. She tried to cook to spend the time but the kitchen oppressed her with visions of the woman. Her mother thought she was bored in the village.

"Cheer up, dear. At least be happy when you are here with us. Why don't you visit your sister Sarah?"

Mrs. Lafir did so but found no relief. Her sister barely listened to her.

"What do you think of the hospital people who come to Mother's house, the ones who ask to use the restroom?"

"Nothing! They aren't worth thinking about. There are much better things to think about, Fareena. Tell me about the latest hijab fashions in Oman. We are so outdated here."

"Sarah, you aren't listening to me!"

"What? What's special about Mother's visitors from the hospital? They smell and shouldn't come there in the first place. I try not to take my babies to Mother's house for fear of them! God knows what diseases they can spread. Now, tell me about more about your little ones. You know my kids keep asking for them…" and she went on rambling about the children, clothes, and weddings, and Mrs. Lafir gave up trying to tell her about the strange woman who was oddly not a stranger.

She became restless. She lost her appetite, and the village, with its mediocrity, its lifelessness, weighed her down. She longed to get away. She even wished to return to Oman but knew her husband would not pay the nominal fee to get her an earlier ticket. He was very particular about plans. She sighed. There was no point in trying to change.

Yet she could not forget the woman or her request. She had never been to the hospital and had never intended to go. Ceding to the woman's request would mean she was acknowledging the past. But what she feared the most was opening up old wounds. That this was his mother she had no doubt. That the man who lay dying was her old lover she had no doubt. That he might already be dying with each minute drew her to delirium. She turned to her mother to find some calm.

"Mother, what happened to that woman?"

"Which?"

"Oh…you know, that small woman from Jaffna, the fair one with grey eyes."

"Oh, I don't know, dear."

"You mean you don't care that she hasn't shown up?"

"Hmm?" said her mother, "Dear, I can't remember every woman who comes here."

"But surely you must remember this one. She's been here a few times. And she said she loved your food…"

"Yes, I know who you mean. Poor thing. Maybe her son died."

"No!" Mrs. Lafir's voice screeched. "How can you be so crass?"

"What? Since when did you get soft for these people? I was merely stating facts. That is most probable as we haven't seen her for days now."

"Yes…but to speak of death so lightly…it is cruel, Mother!"

"I am not speaking cruelly of death. It is best to welcome it…"

"Mother stop! For Heaven's sake, stop." Her voice was sharp and loud. Her mother saw her and pitied her, thinking she was crying for her.

"Poor dear, I am not going to die for a while yet," she said, putting her arms around her.

When her mother was called away by her sister the next day, Mrs. Lafir paced frantically in her room. She didn't eat the breakfast her mother had put on her plate for her before she left.

She knew she would burst if she didn't go now. After searching through her cupboard and her mother's she found an abaya that she had sent her mother a long time ago from Oman. It was a plain black cloak embroidered with geometric patterns on the seams and sleeves. Mrs. Lafir wore the abaya and then covered her hair and face with a shawl so that only her eyes were visible. She slipped on her plain rubber slippers. Then she opened the gate and stepped out.

Her feet were wobbly as she walked in the direction of the hospital, which was twenty feet away. It was midday and hardly anyone was in sight on her street. The neighbors' doors appeared to be locked. She didn't notice people staring at her until she reached the main road and the hospital was a footstep away from her. A group of women—one of which carried a child in her arms—scrutinized her, inching near her while the baby touched her abaya. Mrs. Lafir cowered and her eyes rested on the elder of the women. The woman's stare was fixed on Mrs. Lafir and she began whispering something to the other woman. They both looked at her and then looked in the direction of Mrs. Lafir's house.

Mrs. Lafir began to fear that these were people who knew her. She imagined she saw her neighbors' heads peeking above their walls. When she turned to her right, where a resthouse lay, the shop boys looked at her as they served their customers. Mrs. Lafir felt more exposed in her abaya than she had ever been when she wore one of her beautiful transparent saris with a sleeveless blouse that showed much of her midriff. As she neared the hospital a terrible stench arrested her. A man was crouched, his knees bent. He was vomiting furiously, his arms flailing and then lying limp. He wore a sarong and tank top on his emaciated frame.

She became dizzy. The images of the spectators spun in her head. She heard the ringing of their voices—voices telling her they recognized her, that they chastised her. Mrs. Lafir's body shook and she held on to the hospital's gate for support. Her eyes became blurry and the heat of the sun made her eyes tear. Her breathing grew raspy and she began to run but suddenly felt leaden. A woman came towards her but she only closed her eyes, too weak to shove her away.

"Go away. Go away and leave me alone," she said, her voice rising.

"Ma'am, do you need help? You seem like you could use a hand," the woman said. Mrs. Lafir eventually allowed the woman to help her stand up straight and lead her.

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Mrs. Lafir left the village as planned, two weeks later. She never asked her mother about what happened to the stranger with grey eyes from Jaffna. But Mrs. Lafir never forgot her, or that day when she dressed in her mother's abaya and walked to the hospital. She had never made it inside.

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