

## A Quilt for Mrs. Rahman's Grandson

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When Mrs. Rahman learned that her daughter-in-law, Nasreen, was pregnant with her first grandchild – a grandson, hopefully, though it was too early to tell – she stopped giving away her old saris and her husband's old *lungis* to Jarina and Abdul. She also immediately ordered the old boxes and suitcases that had been stored in the box room to be brought out, opened and their contents sunned – an exercise that she usually undertook once a year in *Bhadra*, mid-August, when the brilliantly hot sun helped dry clothes and get rid of any mites that had collected. Her mother's old white saris, woven of fine cotton no longer produced today, had been lovingly preserved as had her father's frayed old *lungis*, too worn out to be given away to servants who would tear them the day they wore them. There had really been no reason, perhaps, to keep away the old saris and *lungis* except a sentimental one. Old saris had been comfortable to wear at night, but she herself had given up wearing saris to bed since her son had brought her her first nightgown from a trip to the States. She had subsequently ordered some more from her tailor. Aarong had only recently started to stock them and she had indulged herself in six soft white ones with a touch of cotton lace at the neck. So she had had no use for her mother's saris.

Darned and patched – her mother belonged to a generation that did not believe in waste – the saris were excellent for *kanthas*. Her father's old *lungis*, too frail to be given away, were just right to provide the wadding for the *kanthas*. What better use could her mother's old saris and her father's old *lungis* be put to than this? It would be as if her dead parents, God bless their souls, were holding their eldest grandchild in their arms, protecting him – she refused to think of the baby as her – from evil spirits and the evil eye. Mrs. Rahman had started believing in the evil eye of jealous human beings since the growing prosperity of her family. When some friend or relation had exclaimed on how well Adeeb was doing, she would hastily add "Masha'Allah, thanks be to God." If she had been a Catholic, she thought, she would have crossed herself.

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Sitting on the wicker stool in the shade of the veranda, with the pedestal fan whirring at top speed, she thoughtfully sifted through the contents of the dozen odd steel trunks and leather suitcases. Every year, except in the couple of years that the rains had fallen untimely, she had had the boxes opened and sunned in Bhadra. Occasionally, a sweater or two had come out to be given to someone who needed winter wear, occasionally a few items had been brought out to contribute to collections for flood relief, otherwise the trunks and suitcases had gone back to the box room with their contents more or less intact. Mr. Rahman had laughed at his wife's habit of putting things away. If you don't use things for a year, he said, chances are that you will never use them. God bless his soul, thought Mrs. Rahman, but he was wrong. Had she not kept these saris and lungis away, how would she have made quilts for her first grandson? Her mother too had made quilts for her children out of cloth as soft as the saris and lungis she had taken out and kept aside.

After Mrs. Rahman had carefully selected a dozen old saris and lungis – which would serve to layer the old saris – she put the rest back in the trunks and suitcases and had them dispatched to the box room.

The next day she told the daily woman to leave the rooms that were not used every day and finish the rest of the rooms early so that she and Jarina could lay out the quilts. She didn't want "new-born ones," very small ones that were quite useless even for new-born babies. She wanted quilts which could be wrapped around a baby when he was small and be spread out either under or over him when he was older.

Not trusting the women to make quilts of the size she wanted, she sat on a chair in the dining room – thank God for air conditioning. Did she feel hotter these days or was this the effect of the change in the weather pattern? Ascribing it to the latter, she remembered how it used to rain in *Ashar* and how she had had to dry the nappies and quilts of Adeeb and Aziz in the kitchen over a charcoal burner. Her mother had told her that a charcoal burner not only helped dry the clothes, but that the charcoal imparted a pleasant smell to the clothes. For the last several years she could not remember such rain. Was it just that the children had grown up and dirty clothes could be kept away in the clothes hamper for a day or two for the sun to come up and didn't have to be washed and dried every day?

"Amma. *Koto boro korbo? Dui bath lomba, dui bath chavra?*" Jarina asked. "How big should I make it, Amma? Two and a half feet by three feet?"

"Na, na. *Arbai bath chavra, teen bath lomba.* Three feet wide and four and a half feet long," said Mrs. Rahman. In the past, she remembered, the English too used to measure by hand-lengths. No one used cubits now though in the West. But how convenient *bath* was. One didn't need a tape measure; one could just measure from elbow to finger tip. She held up a piece of cloth and folded it as if she were swaddling a child. Yes, that would be just right. The close stitching

would make it somewhat smaller. Later it would be large enough to use as a sheet or a coverlet.

The soft cloth tore easily as Jarina and Rokun went about their work. Strange how people named their children. Rokun's mother, wizened, toothless, grey and balding, went by the name of Champa, while her attractive young daughter – who, Jarina muttered when she was angry, had been misnamed and should have been named Champa instead because she attracted men to her the way the *champa* flower attracts bees – had been named Rokun. Putting these thoughts away, Mrs. Rahman concentrated on measuring and tearing the cloth. *Arbai bath* meant that there would be little waste. She could get two kanthas out of one sari, using a piece from a lungi for the inner layer.

“Aren't three layers too thin?” asked Jarina. “Maybe four would be better.”

Mrs. Rahman thought that if there were incessant rain as there was sure to be with a new child, three layers would dry faster than four. But Jarina suggested that they could use one layer of a lungi and one layer from another sari. The kantha would be better padded, soak up wetness and wouldn't take much longer to dry than a kantha with three layers.

Mrs. Rahman gave in. So four layers it was.

As Jarina and Rokun carefully tore the sari borders and rolled them up, Mrs. Rahman said, “Use what you need for the borders of the quilt, but don't waste any. Any *par* that you don't use, give it back to me. These old borders are no longer made, so I don't want them wasted.”

In the past, yarn had been drawn from sari borders to do the quilting, but there was no need to do so any more. She would get them white thread for the quilting and skeins of DMC for the coloured motifs. Aarong and Kumudini used shiny rayon yarn for *naksbi kanthas* these days, but she much preferred DMC.

“*Chhoto chotto phor nibe*. You must remember to take small stitches,” she cautioned Rokun. “*Ar ekta shudhu parbe*. And just stitch the edges of one and take large stitches to keep the layers of cloth together. I would like to quilt one kantha myself.”

Rokun and Jarina layered the six quilts that they had prepared. They laid weights on the edges and then folded the edges and took large stitches to hold the edges down. To hold the four layers down, they took large stitches lengthwise across the kanthas. Then Rokun folded up five kanthas into a neat bundle. The sixth she folded up for Mrs. Rahman to stitch herself.

The next day, Mrs. Rahman drew butterflies and flowers, a toy train, rabbits and fat baby elephants all around the kantha. On one side she drew a laughing sun and on the other a smiling crescent moon. For the next four months, whenever Mrs. Rahman sat down to watch television, she took out her kantha and embroidered the motifs. Kantha motifs didn't need satin stitches,

just the plain running stitch, so Mrs. Rahman's kantha proceeded fairly swiftly. By the time she had finished with the motifs, she didn't have the energy to quilt around the motifs, so she gave the kantha to Rokun, after asking her how much longer it would take for her to finish doing the ones she was doing.

Rokun promised that she would bring all six back next week. She did, but Mrs. Rahman was horrified at how soiled the pieces were.

Rokun apologised. She used dried leaves and sticks for her *chula* and some of the smoke got into the hut. But she would soak them in Jet and they would come out nice and clean. After she had finished the rest of her work, she washed the kanthas which had been soaking for an hour and put them out to dry in the hot sun.

Jarina brought the kanthas down in the evening. Abdul ironed them and then Mrs. Rahman folded them and put them away till it was time to give the kanthas to Nasreen. She kept the one she had embroidered herself on top. Yes, the motifs were really pretty and Rokun had taken small quilting stitches.

When Nasreen had just entered her seventh month, one evening she and Adeeb were having dinner with Mrs. Rahman. Unlike many women her age, Mrs. Rahman believed that for a good relationship between a married son and his mother, it was also better to stay separately, so Mrs. Rahman stayed on in the old house where she had lived with her husband and where the children had grown up and Adeeb stayed with Nasreen in an apartment they had bought with Mr. Rahman's insurance money.

Nasreen casually said, "Adeeb will be going to China next Monday. He always goes through Bangkok. I'll be going with him, but I'll stay back in Bangkok. He'll join me and then come to Dhaka for a few days. But as he'll be travelling to China more frequently, we thought it would be better to move to Bangkok till the baby is born."

Mrs. Rahman was silent for a moment. That is why Nasreen hadn't really bothered with deciding on which hospital she would go to. She herself had recommended Ma O Shishu Clinic because of the gynaecologist there or Holy Family Red Crescent Hospital – originally just Holy Family Hospital, and then after Liberation Holy Family Red Crescent Hospital – where the former Prime Minister's daughter-in-law had gone to have her babies. Nasreen had instead chosen to go to a doctor on Road 7, Dhanmondi. Her explanation had been that she didn't have to wait to be attended to. Mrs. Rahman realised that Nasreen had never had any intention of having her baby in Dhaka.

Nasreen had been lucky. She had had an easy pregnancy – after the initial morning sickness, she had had no problems. But having a baby in Bangkok! Mrs. Rahman had expected that Nasreen would move to her mother's place for the last couple of months and perhaps stay there till after the baby was born. But she had not expected that she would leave the country to have her baby abroad.

“How will you manage on your own? Who will cook and clean?”

“We’ll be in a service apartment. It’s almost like a hotel. There are people who come in to clean. There’s also a kitchen there, but I doubt we’ll do more than prepare breakfast. No one eats at home in Bangkok.”

“But you’ll be alone. Here you have your maid. I know you’ve been interviewing for an *aya*. How will you manage the baby all alone there?”

“People do have babies abroad, Ma,” Adeeb said.

Neither Nasreen nor Adeeb had said anything about expecting her to join them in Bangkok. Did they expect her to?

Almost as if in answer to her question, Nasreen said, “My mother has promised to come as soon as the baby is born. There are flights everyday to Bangkok so that will not be a problem.”

Mrs. Rahman made a neat packet of the quilts that Rokun had made and the special one she had embroidered. She also put in a few pieces of soft old cloth to wipe the baby with. A new-born baby’s skin was too tender to wipe even with the softest of towels.

On February 10, two months before the baby was due, Nasreen and Adeeb left for Bangkok. Nasreen’s mother would follow after two months unless there was an emergency and she had to go earlier. Mrs. Rahman would have liked to go to Bangkok. She had heard so much about it. But Nasreen and Adeeb had not suggested that she accompany them. Anyway, a girl was always more comfortable with her mother than with her mother-in-law. And four people would be too many in an apartment. So Mrs. Rahman reconciled herself to seeing her first grandson forty days after he was born when he came to Dhaka. He would have to get a passport to do so, wouldn’t he? How long did it take to get a passport abroad, she wondered.

Mrs. Rahman returned from the airport. Rokun had not cleaned Adeeb’s room, Jarina said. If Khalamma opened the room, she would clean and tidy it up.

Nasreen was nothing if not neat. The bed had been done up, the dirty clothes put in the clothes hamper, the wet towels spread across the shower curtain rails to be washed later. In that neat room it was hard to miss the sight of Mrs. Rahman’s neat little bundle lying on the chest of drawers.

Mrs. Rahman’s heart skipped a beat. Had Nasreen forgotten the packet? Had she taken a couple of things and left the rest behind? She opened the packet. No, everything was there – all six kanthas and the old cloth.

The next evening Adeeb called, saying that they had reached safely and giving his mother the name of the place they were staying and their apartment number.

“Is everything all right with Nasreen?”

“Yes, she’s fine. The trip was just two hours so she felt no discomfort. Earlier this morning we met the doctor who is going to deliver the baby.”

Then Nasreen came on the phone.

“You forgot the kanthas,” Mrs. Rahman said.

“No, Ma, I won't be needing the kanthas and please stop calling the baby him. According the doctor, she's going to be girl. We've decided to name her...”

Mrs. Rahman didn't wait to hear what Adeeb and Nasreen had decided to name the child. She put down the phone. She told Jarina that she wasn't feeling well and wouldn't be having her dinner.

In May when Rokun asked for leave for her fourth baby, Mrs. Rahman gave her five hundred taka extra and the neatly wrapped bundle of kanthas.