

The Maelstrom

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Oishee followed the nurse in the white apron and pale blue saree as she led her past the bustling general ward to the quiet row of private cabins at the end of the hallway. When she found the room, she turned to Oishee with a smile and ushered her visitor inside. “I’ll be at the front desk,” she said. “We’re low on staff today.”

A figure lay on the bed on her back; she was asleep with her mouth slightly open. Her cheeks were sunken and her skin had a greyish pallor. Oishee could barely recognise the skeletal figure with the shaved head as her mother. Suddenly, she felt guilty—was she too late? But she came as soon as possible.

Oishee took in the dark, chapped fingers that used to be fair and tapering. What had happened? And what did they do to her? She lay with her hands clasped upon her breast, and as she breathed a sharp sound whooshed out of her mouth. Oishee’s eyes stung and she heard herself gasp. Her mother Nazli opened her eyes and as her unfocused gaze fell on Oishee, she squinted and stuttered, “Keya, what are you doing here?”

Oishee held her breath. Keya was Oishee’s paternal aunt and her mother’s arch enemy. But she had died two years ago in a car accident. “I told you not to visit my house ever. Go away, go away, you little witch....” Her mother tried to sit up.

Oishee stepped closer, “Ma, I’m Oishee. I’m back. Don’t you recognise me?”

Nazli’s once clear eyes now had a reddish hue. They widened and Oishee thought that her tone softened just a little. “Oh, Oishee... why didn’t you say so? You look so much like Keya....” Her voice trailed off.

Then she added shrilly, “Where’s Samir? Why have you come alone?”

Oishee paused and inhaled deeply before replying, “Why, Amma, you know that Samir and I have been divorced for three years now.”

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The woman who hardly looked like the mother she had known stared uncomprehendingly and suddenly there were tears in her eyes. “What are you saying? How will we face the world? Girl, you have smeared our reputation with black soot....”

Oishee realised she should not have mentioned her divorce. But how would she know that her domineering matriarch of a mother had been reduced to this? And how could her mother have forgotten all about Oishee’s divorce when she was the one who had most opposed it? Was she suffering from dementia too? She had been diagnosed with cancer ten months ago, but did not want her daughter around. She had scoffed at Oishee’s offer to return home. “What do you know about cancer patients anyway? Just finish your studies. I’ll be fine. Joynub will look after me.”

Joynub was the attendant whom Oishee’s father had hired to take care of his rapidly deteriorating wife. Oishee had returned home to find him old, haggard, and helpless. One look at his face made her realise that he felt lost and hopeless.

Oishee collected herself. “Don’t cry, Amma,” she said slowly. “Please rest. I’ll be back.”

She almost ran out of the room and slumped on the chair outside the door. “Oh God! What shall I do?” she muttered to herself.

The sight of the old woman brought back a rush of memories. She recalled leaving Bangladesh and heading to the US for a doctorate six years ago. In truth, she wanted to escape the toxic atmosphere of her own home. Her mother bade her farewell as if her daughter was just going back to her husband’s apartment in Niketan. Oishee had stood awkwardly at the door wondering if she should give her mother a hug. She decided against it. Going down the stairs, she thought to herself, “O Amma, if only you had loved me a little, things would have been so different.” The words twirled and flickered in the stagnant air before finally evaporating through the ornate grill of the landing of her parents’ apartment building.

That seemed like a hundred years ago.

And now this. Once strong-willed and vigorous, her mother now seemed cadaverous, physically wasted and mentally deranged.

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For the first time in a long time, Joynub got some respite from her night duty at the hospital. She went home to sleep while Oishee stayed with her mother.

After taking soup and bread for dinner, her mother looked more like her peremptory old self.

“Why are you here?” she asked. “Joynub has been looking after me all this while.”

“She is tired, Amma,” replied Oishee in an even tone. Inside, it still hurt. She tried to reason that her mother was concerned about a daughter who had come home after a long journey.

“Hmmp!” And a little later, “I don’t pay her fifteen thousand taka for nothing. What do you mean ‘she is tired?’”

Oishee surrendered, “Okay, I wanted to stay with you. Happy now?”

Her mother closed her eyes and went silent.

“Don’t you want to go to the bathroom before you go to sleep, Amma?”

“I’ll tell you if I need anything.” Then she sniffed a little. “Why do I smell smoke? What’s burning in the kitchen?”

“There’s no smoke, Amma,” Oishee replied. “And there’s no kitchen here. We’re in the hospital, and this is your cabin.” She knew of her mother’s obsession with fire. When Oishee and her brother were children, Nazli used to check the gas knob in the kitchen at least five times a day. Apparently, she had burnt herself in a freak accident in the early days of her marriage. But Oishee never learnt the details. She had often asked her, but her mother was characteristically tight-lipped about it.

The night nurse came to check on the patient, administered half a dozen medicines, took some notes, and then left. They were alone again.

Oishee walked over to the extra bed on the other side of the room. It was December and there were two blankets on her bed too. She used a towel to brush off the imaginary dust and wondered if her mother would ever learn to trust her. Before turning off the lights she told her mother, “Amma, please call me if you need anything. You know I am a light sleeper.”

Her mother kept her eyes closed, but Oishee could tell by the tightness around her mouth that she was not asleep. She sighed, switched off the double tube-lights, and slid under a blanket. The automatic night light was turned on and a soft blue hue spread through the room.

But Oishee could not sleep. Her mind whirled with a million thoughts. She thought about her father and worried about how he would cope if her mother died.

Suddenly, there was a slight noise in the semi-dark room. That was surely not a mouse, Oishee hoped. She was terrified of rodents. She turned towards her mother’s bed. She saw a silhouette sitting upright. Oishee watched in horror as the shadowy figure got down from the bed and started walking unsteadily

towards the bathroom. Oishee threw aside her blanket and cried out, “Amma!” just as her mother lost her balance and fell on the floor with a dull thud.

Oishee sprang forward and tried to pick her up off the floor. But the dead weight of her body was too much and Oishee frantically pressed the calling bell for attendants.

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The hospital room was awash with bright light. Oishee looked at the leafless branches of the tree outside the window and wondered what kind of a tree it was. She turned to look at her mother asleep on her left side facing the wall. Nazli had had an early breakfast consisting of an egg and an orange, and she refused to have anything else. Oishee tried to recall the events of the previous night. In the morning light, they seemed distant like a nightmare. Why did her mother not call for her? How could she try to get up on her own when she could barely stand? Did she resent her own daughter so much that she would not even ask for her help?

When her father and Joynub, her mother’s attendant, arrived around 10 a.m., Oishee was ready to leave. She needed to take a shower and rest awhile.

Suddenly, she realised that she did not feel as jetlagged as she usually did after the 24-hour journey. Perhaps her body had realised that this was no time for jetlag.

As she was heading out, her mother, who was now awake, turned towards her. “Where are you staying?”

Oishee paused in her stride. “Home.” As Nazli stared, Oishee corrected herself. “I mean your place.”

“You didn’t ask for my permission.”

A thousand bulbs flashed in her head, but Oishee replied tonelessly, “I will be staying only as long as you are ill.”

“And then? Where will you go?” Her mother’s voice was harsh and unrelenting.

Her father tried to intervene. “Do you need to bother with household arrangements now, Nazli?” he asked weakly. “Let’s focus on getting you better....”

His wife did not even look at him. “Who will harbour a shameless girl like you?”

“I will take care of myself,” Oishee replied. Then she lost it. “If you had taken good care of yourself, this “shameless girl” wouldn’t have to come home at all.”

She strode out the stifling hospital room. Even in her terminal illness, her mother was as caustic as ever. What had made Oishee think that she would change?

On the way home, a mortified Oishee wondered if her mother had ever cradled or kissed her only daughter when she was a baby. Perhaps she had, but Oishee could not remember. It was always admonition, cautionary advice, or scolding. All of Nazli's tenderness was reserved for Oishee's brother Orion. Relatives would notice and one of her sisters once said, "Nazli, don't you have anything good to say about Oishee? She is just as good as Orion, and yet you're always complaining about her!?"

Nazli had grumbled, "She is a girl, and girls are not to be spoilt."
Oishee's eyes stung. Spoilt indeed!

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The front door was opened by Sabina, her mother's old maid who was more like a family member than a domestic helper. She took Oishee's overnight bag and said, "I thought you might want to eat early. Lunch is ready. I've cooked your favorite spinach with shrimp. Also, there is *pabda* fish curry, and fried eggplant." As Oishee nodded and headed towards her room, Sabina asked, "How's Apa doing today? Is she coming back anytime soon?"

Oishee shook her head, "Her condition is not stable. They will administer blood today. If things get better, she will have chemo tomorrow or the day after. Let's see."

After taking a long hot shower, Oishee felt a little better. While eating she asked, "Why didn't anyone tell me how she actually is, Sabina Auntie? Even Orion didn't...." Oishee became unmindful as she thought of her brother stuck in Malaysia. He had come for two months, but he was working on an important project and had gone back the previous month. That was when Oishee's father finally admitted to her how bad things really were.

Sabina remained quiet. What was there to say? Oishee knew, too, that they wanted her to finish her degree. But her mother was so unrelenting towards her daughter that it hurt. "I've done my duty towards you. Now move along," she would say.

Duty. Taking a sip of water, Oishee gulped down the word.

Duty. Was that why she was here, too? To take care of the dying woman who had given birth to her and raised her in the same house where she raised a son? A son whom she showered with love? And the daughter. . .?

The daughter shook her head.

She set the alarm for 3 o'clock. She would relieve her father and Joynub in the afternoon. And then Joynub would go back around 9 p.m. and Oishee would come home to sleep. They would do hospital duty on alternate nights. But Oishee had doubts about herself. As she closed her eyes, the only thought that swirled in her mind was how she would survive this.

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The girl was dressing her dolly in a pretty blue dress and combing its hair. "Now Ranu, sit quietly," she said to the doll. "Let me brush your hair. You'll see it will shine like gold." She mimicked the words she had heard her Aunt Keya telling her daughter replacing "black" with "gold." A beautiful woman in a purple saree was sitting not too far away, shelling peas. She laughed out, "You're talking like Keya, I see. You have curly hair like her and you have her eyes. If you take after your father's sister in other ways too, I'll have to kill myself before you're old enough to have children."

Later that afternoon, the girl's mother discovered her in the bathroom with a pair of scissors in her small hands, ruthlessly clipping away her bangs. At the sight of her mother she cried, "Do I still look like Keya Auntie? My curls are gone now."

Her mother stood dumbfounded.

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Oishee sat up at the sound of sirens ringing somewhere. Where was she? Her gaze fell on the small table clock. It was only the alarm. She reached out and patted the clock on the top. It was time to go to the hospital again.

Joynub was waiting at the hospital with tearful eyes. Oishee's mother had been given two bags of blood. And saline too. As soon as she regained strength, however, she started screaming. She got mad at Joynub and slapped her for no apparent reason. Oishee's father did his best to appease both.

Oishee entered the room with trepidation and her mother hissed, "I know what you're up to. They are all bubbling with happiness because you're home. I tell you I won't let you or anyone take my place. You're all conspirators."

"Nazli, don't say these things," said Oishee's father, trying to soothe her. "We all want you to get well and come home."

"I know what you want. You want me dead," shouted his wife. "That's why she is here too, I know. She will set my bed on fire! Or drown me!" She laughed hoarsely, pointing at Oishee.

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After another week, Nazli was well enough to be released from the hospital. They brought her home. Oishee stood by the medicine table while Sabina bustled around Nazli trying to make her comfortable. Oishee felt helpless. The doctors had been polite, but firm: with end-stage cancer, it was just a matter of time. The night nurse took Oishee aside and said, "Ask your relatives to visit her. She will feel better."

Feel better? She could not even stand the thought of people looking at her shaved head.

A feeling of unreality, of being inside a nightmare, came back to Oishee.

She had been away from home for six years. Except for summer vacations, she had never actually come home. Or even when she did, she did not stay at her parents' house. But now she did not have a choice.

"Open the almirah," Nazli ordered suddenly.

Sabina did as she was asked. "Where's Oishee?"

Oishee turned around, "Yes, Amma?"

Nazli dismissed the maid and beckoned to her daughter. "There's a large wooden box. Take it out."

Oishee knew the sandalwood box well. She had seen it in her mother's possession since she was little. Taking it out Oishee placed it before her mother.

The elderly woman opened it. She was old-fashioned and never kept her jewelry in a bank locker. "These are yours." Oishee noted with surprise that her mother was pointing to the larger of the two velvet pouches inside her wooden box. She had stopped expecting anything from her mother a long time ago.

"I don't want anything, Amma," she said. "You can keep it all for Orion's bride."

"What nonsense!" her mother barked. "Orion's wife will get her share when he gets married." She pointed to the other pouch. "This goes to her. All newly made except for the necklace set that I got from your father. Don't you touch anything in there. I have never worn anything but gold, but I don't think an unknown girl will value my jewelry." She paused for breath and continued, "You may not love me, but you're *my* daughter. And I leave these to you." She paused and added, "I know I am dying. At least, let me die in peace, all right?"

Oishee gaped at her mother who stared back at her. No love, compassion, or tenderness in that dark gaze. Oishee could not tolerate its burning intensity and closed her eyes.

"I don't want your gold. Don't you love me even a little?" whispered the little girl somewhere inside her.

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At the dinner table that evening, Oishee and her father ate in silence. After a while, he asked, "So, you're not going to live here?"

Oishee looked up, "You know how things are, Abba. I don't know how you're able to take all this, but I can't." She took a forkful of chow mein and took her time with it. At length she replied, "I'm not the only divorced woman in our family. Two of her own nieces are divorced. I can't understand why it's always *me* who is shameless and sinful in her eyes." She almost choked on her words.

Her father looked strained. "She's ill, sweetheart. You also know that she has delusions and hallucinations. She was not always like this."

Oishee shook her head. "She was always this way with me. I don't remember anything else. I don't have a single good memory. I will stay as long as you need my help looking after her."

She did not notice the look of intense pain that flickered across her father's face. He sat like a failed man.

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Oishee could not sleep at night. After turning this way and that for a while, she got up to check on her mother in the next room. Nazli was only sixty-six, certainly not old enough to die. But she was against the treatment, fighting every inch of the way like a ferocious cat. Oishee heard from Sabina how she had smashed the looking glass when she first started losing her hair because of chemo. As she stood before the door of her mother's bedroom, she heard a faint cry. Oishee rushed in. In the half-lit room, she placed a cool palm against a sweaty, warm forehead. "What's it, Amma? Are you afraid? Are you in pain?" she asked. The woman lying in the bed clung to her and said in a hoarse whisper, "Do you know I treated my little girl so badly that she left me? She went away to the other side of the world and lived there alone for six years. How can I be afraid? How can I be in pain when I hurt my own child so much?"

Oishee froze momentarily. Slowly, she sat down on her mother's bed and held her hand. "It will be okay, Amma," she said after a while. She patted the bony hand with loosened skin and repeated herself, "It will be okay."

Nazli kept on weeping. Even when she went off to sleep, Oishee could hear her whimper. She did not know what maelstrom had engulfed her mother in her lifetime that she had such difficulties in accepting her daughter. "Go to sleep, Amma," Oishee whispered. "I am here."

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Joynub tended to her mistress carefully, wiping down her limbs with a damp cloth. Afterwards, Nazli lay on her back with the trace of a smug smile. She was dressed in green today. These days, she only wanted green and lilac. She would tear off anything else. Oishee could not understand where she got all that strength from.

She sat by the bed and looked at her mother wearily. She had screamed and yelled through the time Joynub dressed her. It was obvious she had no memory of the previous night. She was being her usual self—headstrong, willful, and belligerent. Oishee had often wondered if one can un-love one's mother. She had always thought that she hated her mother, but when she heard that she was dying, she came home without a second thought. She had also hoped for some kind of closure. At least, she deserved to know why her mother hated her. But can a mother really hate her child? she tried to recall Keya Auntie's face. What did she do to Nazli that she refused to even allow her inside her house? She had once asked her aunt, but got no clear answer except a mumbling reply that her sister-in-law was crazy. Then Keya died and Oishee did not know if there was anybody else she could talk to about all the confusion and nagging questions she had.

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As days passed, Nazli's condition worsened. She could not get up anymore and was delirious most of the time. Sometimes, she called out for her long-dead mother. She could not stand her husband. He would wait in the corridor and sometimes go out for a walk.

"Ma, ma, please don't make me go back to that house. They'll kill me. Keya.... I loved her like my sister and look what she tried to do. Amma... please...." Oishee and her two helpers tried to comfort and reassure Nazli, but to no avail.

Finally, they decided to call the hospice since her journey was almost over. They informed Orion. He would arrive any day.

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She was stuck inside a dark box-like chamber. There was smoke in the room and she could hardly breathe. She coughed and her eyes stung. Was she back in that kitchen? They said that Keya had saved her, but Nazli knew that the story was

different. She had seen the truth in the girl's eyes. So much hatred for her sister-in-law in someone so young! It's only because Keya's courage had failed at the last minute that she called people in to save Nazli.

But what was this box? Was this the end? The room flooded with a pale yellow light. And she saw that the walls were gone. In the dying light of afternoon, an endless field opened up in front of Nazli.

It was such a long time ago. She should have let go. Life had flourished to its fullest and she did not even see.

She promised she would tell Oishee tomorrow. She was sure tomorrow would be different.