

Hawaii Review



Leaving the Garden

In memory of Sher Baba, the gardener.

It is evening. As I walked to the spot where he waits, I notice the green fields. They have not changed in the last fifty years. The smells of horses, donkeys, and water buffalos still reign supreme over the fumes of tractors. The sun has nearly vanished, the nearby hill has become darker, but in the soft light I can still taste earth around me. Finally my dream will be fulfilled.

"Don't leave our house," the Begum Saab begged him. In tears she called out to her gardener. "This is your heaven."

But he could not stop. Every step took him away from the place where he had finally found refuge. He had learned how to take a seed and make it sprout. The house had become a little paradise. Roses, fruit trees, red chili, patches of tomato, and a lawn that when stepped on made one's feet melt, melt into the green, into the ground until one's entire body floated into an eternal rest.

But he did not only garden. When guests arrived, he served tea. To the children, he served lemonade. And every summer, the sons from overseas would arrive. More chairs and more people to pray for.

I was twenty when we married. She was not as beautiful as her sisters, but there was little I could offer. I am a *kami*, like my parents. No land of my own; I knew I too would live my life working for others. But in her wedding dress, she was the most beautiful girl in Punjab. We wanted children immediately, but we waited a few months until there was a bit of money saved. I worked the fields, and she sowed. She took care of me and gently touched my eyes at night, so that when I fell asleep, I imagined myself with Allah.

One day she was pregnant. The smile on her face extended throughout her body and stretched from the ground to the crescent moon above. The rains then began to fall.

When the son came home every summer, the old man would be there. The long hug never ended. True, he was merely the gardener, but he was

from their village. He thought himself to be family. The old man was always ready to serve. But mostly the son noticed the joy the gardener expressed whenever he did anything.

"Where are you going?" the old man asked.

"For a walk," the visiting son responded.

The old man smiled and breathlessly told everyone, "Young Saabjii is going for a walk. Saabjii is going for a walk."

On his return, the old man was eagerly awaiting, as if his own son was returning, to ask how the walk was.

Other days when the family returned from a visit to relatives in Pindi, the gardener would attempt a salute. But the coordination was not there, and instead of a sharp salute, he just smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand, almost as if he were trying to hit a mosquito, or as the house cook would say, to knock some sense into himself.

She was getting weaker and could no longer work. But our efforts provided us with enough *roti* and *salan* for both of us. We were thin, but not malnourished. Her stomach was huge. She gave birth. My wife and child died.

The old man came to the family from the village. No job. Old. Tired. No teeth. But village relatives said he could learn, and the family needed help in the gardens. He learned quickly.

I prayed day and night. I questioned. I was angered. I fought. But no answer from Allah. But soon I noticed that when I wanted it to rain, if I prayed long enough, it would rain. When I wanted the sun to come out, if I prayed long enough, the sun would sparkle. But the landlord still controlled my life. When the war came, there was less food. My savings were all gone, but by the end of every blistering day, I would find some food.

She stayed in my mind. Always. After decades I forgot her particular face, but her soft womanly smell remained. Then I looked for a bride again, but I had no money. I was no longer young. I could not work hard. There was nobody. When I would walk to the canal to bathe, I would look for my reflection and there was none.

The son took a photo of the old man. He showed him the photo. "Who is that?" The old man puzzled. "It's you, Sher Baba."

The old man then stood tall like a lion, just like the meaning of his name. But he could not stand tall long. The back was weak. The back was bent. The eyes sagged. When they asked him his age, he told them forty. But they knew he was at least seventy. Even at that age, the old man had only one request. Only one request that kept the heaven of that

house unfulfilled for him. He had no wife. No one to touch, to be touched, to embrace in the coolness of the evening. No rose for him to nurture. The garden was not enough.

They did not help me. None of my relatives. No one from the village. But I had saved, working for the family. Thirteen thousand rupees. With that I could find a wife. That would be enough dowry. More than enough. I can find a wife. I can find a wife.

Finally, the cook promised him a wife. While others failed, the cook promised him a wife. He took a colored picture from a movie magazine and told the old man that she wanted to marry him. But the dowry must be thirteen thousand.

How perfect, thought the old man. Exactly how much I have saved. "Allah has answered my prayers."

She was at the village waiting for him. But he should not tell the Saab and Begum Saab. They would not approve. They believed him to be too old. He was young, he told himself. He just looked old. He knew there must be silence.

Begum Saab is crying, telling me not to go. I see the roses beckoning me back. As I look one last time at the gardens, I see them weep. Do they weep for the happiness that is to be mine? The trees wave as I board the bus, but I look at the photo of my wife to be. Of my life anew.

He left in April. The garden dried up. The rains disappeared. The earth was dust again.

It is evening. I see the man approach. The cook comes with a friend. His eyes are hidden from me.

"Where is she?" I ask.

They want to see the money. I show them. Something sharp enters my back. My teeth smash the ground. In the distance, I think I see a woman, her *sari* swaying in the wind. Something pierces my skull.

The murderers confessed. And then one day, the rains came again. From above, the old man saw the rain touch the garden. And as he prayed, the roses inched up again.

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