

Rubina

By Asma Dilawari – Bethesda, Maryland

The kettle whistled and she poured the boiling water over tea in the saucepan, recalling one of the first times she had gone through these motions, now practically muscle memory. Her shoulders tensed as she remembered the audition of sorts, older aunties watching as she brought chai¹ to them on a tray with masked confidence. They had intensely gazed at the curves in her teenage body as their sagging faces sipped chai from thin mugs she had worried about breaking. She recalled feeling so stressed about the tea preparation that she had enlisted her cousin's help, her only confidante at the time. But B. was not an orphan like Rubina. B. was in a proper family of 6, with servants to make tea and a father who would give her money to buy sweets, so she had been quite useless in this task and had only giggled with her in the kitchen. Rubina had relied on her memories, of people standing over saucepans on gas flames, of gentle tilts of milk poured onto boiling brown water, smells of cloves and cardamom, and the sparkles of sugar granules cascading generously from a box. She had not realized then how many times she would repeat those motions in the years that followed, and how easily she would learn to prepare tea for others.

That afternoon was deemed a success; she was accepted as a potential wife to her older male cousin at the age of fifteen. This man who hid behind his mother at gatherings bore no resemblance to the image of a husband she and B. had dreamed of, with Bollywood movies and magazines feeding their imaginations. When her sister-in-law had asked if she agreed to the marriage, Rubina had felt numb, staring past her face as if there were another option behind it. ...

Rubina knew what was being asked of her, that she not become a burden and find a way to live her life without being dependent on them. So, she had agreed to be married and asked only if she

could still continue going to school. Years later, she would scold herself for being so naive when her sister-in-law agreed. She hadn't realized then what the word "wife" really meant, that the tasks she would be expected to do would have no resemblance to life in a schoolyard with carefree lunches and homework; any decision about her life would be made by her husband and his mother. The lessons she had needed were not those her lovely teacher had taught her. There were no classes in school on massaging your mother-in-law's callused feet, on how to lie perfectly still and pretend to sleep, or to stifle screams from boredom while being confined to a house to wait for summons....

After her marriage, she regretted trying so hard to look attractive; her appearance had only gotten her an early marriage and squashed any hopes of continuing school. It would be decades before she got a ticket to a new life.