

The Intelligence of Wild Things

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(Adapted story. Intermediate level)

A mother in Calcutta, India; a daughter in California on the west coast of America; and a son in Vermont in the American east. They are a family divided by time and distance, love and anger. The day comes when sister must talk to brother, when they must reconnect with the past and with each other. But where are the words that will cross that great, lonely divide?

There is grey in the sky and a strange bleeding pink I've never seen before. Or perhaps the freezing cold is confusing me. I hold a wool coat around me, a coat that is too large for me, borrowed from my brother Tarun for this boat trip. I am trying to remember how it feels to be warm. I am not quite sure why we are on this ferry, why we are attempting to cross this frozen lake. The wool has a smell of something dark and secret and close to the body, a smell that I find hard to connect with my brother, younger than me by five years, the baby of the family. How angry he used to be when I called him that! And now, this smell, as new to me as the hard adult lines of his face next to me, dark against the snow-covered banks of the lake. And just as disturbing.

It is March in Vermont, on the eastern side of the United States. The last day of my visit. Tomorrow I will return to my husband Sandeep, my two daughters and my garden in Sacramento, California, where it is so warm that purple bougainvilleas flower even in winter. I haven't done what I came here to do. I haven't found a time to tell Tarun that our mother, to whom he hasn't spoken in years, is dying in India. I haven't found a way to beg him to go to her.

The River Queen shakes under my feet as the boat makes its uneven way across the lake. I can hear ice breaking somewhere below. Perhaps there are fish down there, their thin, silver bodies broken by the ferry's steel teeth, the water slowly turning the same pink as the sky. Wrong again! my brother would say if he knew what I was thinking. The fish know they have to stay away from the boat. They have the intelligence of wild things.

Or would he say that? I'm not sure any more. I pull the coat collar further up and turn away from the wind. It's been a long time since we shared our dreams, our fears.

The first thing I noticed when I arrived at Tarun's apartment yesterday was the photograph on his bedside table. A laughing girl with fair skin and reddish-gold hair. She was wearing jeans which I thought were too tight. There was blue in the background, perhaps this same lake.

I was wrong to be angry, I knew that. He had the right to his own life. To run around with a white girl, if that's what he wanted. He had the right not to tell me. Ten years

of living in this country had taught me that. I still felt angry, though.

'Tarun, whose photo is this?'

'My girlfriend's.' He spoke in English. He'd been doing that ever since I got to Vermont, although I had spoken to him in Bengali. Was it because he had forgotten Bengali, or was it to annoy me? Perhaps it was just that, after so many years among Americans, it was an easier language for him.

'Your girlfriend!' I realized that I'd started using English, too, and was cross with myself. 'You never told me you had a girlfriend, especially a white one! What is Ma going to say when she finds out?' I sounded just like a big sister and I hated that. It wasn't what I had meant to say.

Tarun shrugged his shoulders. In the light of the bedside lamp, his face was empty of guilt or concern. 'You can have the bed if you like,' he said. 'I'll sleep on the sofa.'

In my mind, I saw the girl's red hair spread over the pillow. Her pale arms tight around my brother's brown back. 'No, no, I'll be very comfortable on the sofa,' I said quickly.

'I thought you might say that,' Tarun said. Was the look in his eyes amused, or just polite?

'Are you going to let Ma know about her?' I burst out.

It was a stupid question. Tarun hadn't written to our mother or replied to her letters ever since he came to this country. But sometimes stupidity is all we're left with.

'There's a nice movie on at the cinema tonight. Want to go?' he said. This time I had no trouble reading my brother's eyes. They were bored.

What I remember most clearly of Tarun from his childhood are his eyes. They were very bright and very black. I could see myself reflected in them, tiny and clear and more beautiful than I really was. Maybe that was why I loved him so much.

Everyone called Tarun a good boy. He never got into trouble like the neighbours' children. Coming back from school, he usually avoided the other boys' noisy games in the empty field near our house. He preferred being with mother and me. He used to help us prepare vegetables in the kitchen or make the bread. But what he liked best was listening to my mother's stories - stories her mother had told her - of kings and queens, talking animals, and jewels which opened doors to secret passages in caves.

When they came to visit, our women relatives used to congratulate Ma on bringing him up so well. (They thought I was too talkative and too interested in the foreign magazines I borrowed from wealthier friends.) 'And as a widow, you've done it all alone, too,' they used to add.

'Actually, I think he's too quiet,' Ma said, frowning. 'He spends too much time with just the two of us. I wish

he'd go out and make more friends, learn more about the world and how to feel comfortable in it. After all, I won't always be around, and his sister will get married and move away.'

'Really, Malabika!' the women told her. As they say, you don't know you've got a good thing until you lose it!'

Now, with so many things slipping away from me, I understand the truth of that saying.

If I were an artist, I would paint our past, to keep it safe for ever, and then I would be able to show it to Tarun. I would paint that dark kitchen, our own cave, with its safe smells of cooking; the small blue light from the gas cooker in the corner; three people, sitting cross-legged on the cool floor, making food for each other while the stories wrapped us in their magic.

On the boat the wind pulls at my long hair. A little way from me, a group of young men are joking around, drinking from brown paper bags. From time to time they look sideways at me and my Indian clothes. I wish I were back in Sacramento, where no one stares when I walk to the shops in my salwar kameez. I hate it all, the cutting wind, the secretive looks, the way my brother seems not to care about anything - the cold, the men, his visiting sister. In his tight jeans he looks just like all the other young men on the ferry, and even the expression on his face is so completely American. How funny! Because unlike me - who had eagerly (too eagerly?) agreed to have a marriage arranged

with Sandeep mostly because he lived abroad - Tarun had never wanted to come to America.

A few weeks before Tarun arrived in Vermont, all those years ago, my mother wrote me a letter.

Today Taru and I had a terrible argument. He still refuses to go to college in America, although they've accepted him. He says he wants to stay with me. But I'm terrified to keep him here. You know how bad things are now in Calcutta. Every morning they find more bodies of young men by the road. Taru keeps telling me he's not in danger, he doesn't belong to any political party. But that means nothing. Just last week there was a murder right on our street. Remember Supriyo, that good-looking boy? He didn't belong to any party either. I heard from my neighbour that they cut his face to pieces. I reminded Taru of that. He still wouldn't listen.

Finally I told him he was a fool who lived in dreamland, hiding from the world behind his mother's sari. How could he throw away this chance, I shouted, when I'd worked so hard to bring him this far? I said he was ungrateful and causing me pain. Didn't he see that I couldn't sleep at night, worrying because he was here? You can imagine how I hated saying it - I could see the abhimaan on his face, like a wound - but it was the only thing I knew that would make him go.

She had been right. He had gone. What she hadn't realized was how final that leaving would be.

Today I am thinking about the word Ma used. Abhimaan, that mix of love and anger and hurt which lies at the heart of so many of our Indian stories, and for which there is no word in English. If Tarun pushed her away, would the redhaired girl feel abhimaan? Or can we only experience such a feeling when the language of our childhood has made it real in our mouths?

My mother's letter made me sad, but it was sadness of a peculiar, distant kind. I knew how serious the situation in Calcutta was, but somehow my own problems seemed more real than my mother's. The pain of my daughter's first teeth coming through, the bad smell in our apartment, the arguments every evening with Sandeep, which were always followed by uneasy lovemaking. A few weeks later, when Tarun arrived in Vermont and rang me, his voice over the phone line was edged with a sharp, silver need. But it belonged to that other, faraway life, and didn't touch me.

I hated this change in myself; I realized I could no longer feel for other people or understand their fears and worries. But what to do about it? Did anyone else suffer from such a disease? I was afraid to ask Sandeep, the only person I knew well enough in America to ask.

I kept my mother's letter for a long time at the bottom of my jewellery case. And then during a move to a new house, I lost the letter. By then it was too late, anyway.

The first few months after moving to this country, Tarun called me almost every day. He hated cooking for himself, hated coming home in the evenings to an empty

room. It was so cold in Vermont, he felt he was slowly freezing. I forced myself not to listen to the desperate note in his voice. Sandeep was firmly against any family - his or mine - coming to live with us. So I used to say to Tarun things like, We all went through the same thing, before you know it you'll get used to this lifestyle. It was hard to think of anything more helpful to say with the baby screaming in my ear or the rice boiling over, and Sandeep, like most husbands brought up in India, no help at all. Tarun was usually silent for a moment. Then he used to say goodbye in a quiet voice.

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For a long time I didn't know about the bad feeling between Ma and Tarun, although I wonder now whether it was more that I didn't want to know. I'd had my second baby by then, and Sandeep and I were finally falling in love. I was afraid that even one careless word could destroy our little house of kisses. So when I rang up India, and Ma said it had been a long time since she had heard from Tarun (she was too proud to say any more), could I call him and make sure he was okay, I never let myself take it seriously. Oh Ma! I used to say brightly, Stop worrying! He isn't a baby any more. Then I left a short message on Tarun's phone, telling him to write home, and adding something cheerful about his nieces. Those days, I worked hard at being cheerful, because Sandeep had told me that men disliked miserable women.

Still, one night after Ma had been more anxious than usual, I spoke to Sandeep. I waited until after lovemaking, when he was usually in a generous mood, and asked him if Tarun could stay with us for the summer holidays.

'I'm the only family he has here, after all,' I said. 'And he's always been so shy, not the kind to make lots of friends-'

Sandeep touched my face lightly. 'We're just getting to know each other. Let's give ourselves - and Tarun - a little more time alone, shall we?' When I hesitated, he sighed. 'That's the trouble with our Indian families, always worrying too much. Your brother's probably having a great time at college. For all you know, he has plenty of girlfriends and would rather you didn't keep checking on him.'

I wanted to tell Sandeep, who was an only child, about those afternoons in Calcutta, the smell of cooking, the way, when Tarun entered the kitchen, a certain seriousness in his face fell away. But Sandeep was yawning, and in a moment he would remind me he had to get up early and go to work.

Why didn't I argue or threaten? Sandeep needed a wife as much as I needed a husband. He feared aloneness as much as I did. But in those early days I was too unsure of myself, too much in love with being in love. It was easier to tell myself, as I lay against the warm curve of his back, in the sweet tiredness after lovemaking, that I would have a real heart-to-heart talk with Tarun next weekend.

But something always happened next weekend, and the one after, and the one after, until Tarun's calls became shorter and less frequent, and his pauses were longer than all his words put together. But I wasn't listening. Let me tell you what we did yesterday, I used to say brightly into the silence, into the years that hurried past us.

Then I came back from seeing our mother in India, and called him to say I had to come and see him immediately. He replied in a carefully polite voice, 'Sure, come if you like.'

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It hasn't been easy to talk to Tarun here. When I reminded him of past times in the kitchen in Calcutta, he suddenly remembered something he had to do, and went out.

Left alone in his apartment, I sat in front of the TV, looking at its empty black face. I thought of the intelligence of wild things. Birds, insects. How they could communicate without words, without sound. The sudden movement of a wing, the waving of a tail. Food. Home. This way danger lies. I wanted to touch my brother's fingers and feed into his body all the feelings that were jumping around inside mine.

The trip I took last month to Calcutta to see my mother was my first since I had left as a new bride ten years before. As soon as I saw her at the airport, where she had come against the doctor's advice, I knew that she was

dying. It was the look in her eyes, the way she stared past me for a moment when I came out of the arrivals area. She seemed not to recognize me, and I thought she was looking beyond me for someone else.

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I am on the boat, looking out blindly, counting on my frozen fingers the people I love. Sandeep, my daughters, my mother, my brother. It is a pitifully short list, and does not cheer me up at all. My mother is dying - perhaps she is already dead. How much of my husband's fondness for me is simply daily habit? In how many ways will my daughters and I disappoint each other as they grow up? And my brother? Is he as anxious for me to go as I am to leave?

Don't cry, I order myself. Make yourself smile. You did your best. You're going home tomorrow.

'Look!' Tarun is pointing to something white on a nearby piece of floating ice. I hope my eyes haven't turned red, and try to show some interest. Will this miserable boat trip never end? 'Look!' It's some sort of large bird, with thin red legs. As the boat gets closer, it spreads its white wings and looks calmly at us. I've seen a bird like this somewhere before. 'Didi, doesn't it look like a sharash?' Yes, indeed, it does. But I am more surprised by the Bengali name for the bird, so unexpected in my brother's mouth. And the childhood name for me, which he hasn't used for years. Didi. A small word of love, like a magic jewel from one of my mother's stories.

* * *

I remember when we last saw sharash. It is soon after my father's death. I am eight, my brother three. My mother has sent us to stay at Third Uncle's house, out in the country. We are homesick and miserable, and do not get on with our cousins, who know how to milk cows and swim across the river. We hurt ourselves trying to climb trees with them, and they laugh at us when we cry.

But one day, after a morning filled with rain, the sun comes out, and Tarun and I run across the fields. We get muddy from head to toe, but we don't care. Perhaps we can reach the railway, jump on a passing train, and make our way back to our mother in Calcutta? Then suddenly we see them, fifteen or twenty sharash feeding in the flooded rice fields. My brother lifts his delighted hands, Look, Didi! as the birds fly up, a speeding cloud of silver light. For a moment the sky is full of wings. Whiteness and possibility. We stand with our arms around each other until they disappear.

The ferry is closer now, and everyone is looking at the bird. Even the noisy young men are quiet. The bird's eyes shine. It looks back at us, at me. I am sure of this. It has flown all the way from Bengal, out of the old stories, to bring me a message that will save us - if only I can hear it.

Some dreams are essential. We need them to live by.

Before I returned to the United States, I begged my mother to come and live with me. She refused.

I want to die in the house where your father died, where you were born, you and Taru.

What can I do for you, Mother? What will make you happy?

Seeing my children before I die.

But I am here, Mother.

Seeing my children before I die. Seeing my children...

All of us in dark caves, our fingers painful from scratching at the stone, searching for that tiny crack in the rock, the edge of a door opening into love.

Suddenly I am glad about the girl with the red-gold hair.

The bird rises into the air, beating its strong wings, wheeling confidently over our heads. I'm certain my brother doesn't remember that long-ago day in the countryside. Still, I step closer, touch his arm. At first I think he's going to move away. Then he puts his arm round my shoulders and holds me tight for a moment.

Tonight I will tell my brother a story. Once there was a widow-woman who had two children. I'll tell it the way the old stories were told, without guilt or blame, out of sadness and hope, to keep memory alive. Maybe he won't listen, and maybe he will.

We stand side by side, shoulders touching. The wind blows through us, a wild, intelligent wind. The white bird flies directly into the sun.

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- THE END -

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