A Cup Full of Jasmine Oil

Sunny Singh


They lived next door, Anu-di and Vibha-di. Elder sisters! That’s what everyone called them, from the vegetable-seller who brought his push cart full of greens and reds and whites every morning to the students at university who gathered in the evenings on their verandah to drink endless cups of tea and discuss politics and writers with odd sounding names.

Vibha-di always wore crisp saris, starched and ironed to perfection. But Anu-di wore churidar-kameez, looking for all the world like a school-girl with her hair pulled back in two thick plaits. I was fascinated by the didis, the sisters. That they lived by themselves, that they seemed to need no one else but each other; that no family ever visited them; that students from the university seemed to inhabit their house and then disappeared into the world beyond. All invitations, for weddings and engagements, births and pregnancies, would be sent to both of them – Anu-di and Vibha-di. There were never any last names on the envelopes.

Often they would stand at the low wall between our houses to talk to my grandmother, sharing I am not quite sure what. After all, they taught at the nearby university, while my grandmother had never even stepped inside a classroom. Even now, when I look back, I wonder what they spoke about, standing on two sides of the low brick wall.

And on bright winter afternoons, they would bask in the sunshine in the aangan at the back. I would clamber over the low wall and help them shell bags full of fresh green peas, watching as the mounds of shiny verdure grew mountainous. There was laughter then – even from my usually grim grandmother who sometimes came out to join us – as Anu-di would sing songs and Vibha-di would tell stories, from books, from the university, from days that she had lived in a big city.

Then inevitably Anu-di would begin. “Look at this hair,” she would ruffle my short-snipped curls. “Behenji, this one has beautiful hair. She must oil it regularly,” she would sigh. My grandmother would grin at me, “If you can make her sit still long enough to oil her hair, you can do it. Why do you think it is cut that short? This one was meant to be a boy.”

The comment would make all three of them go into paroxysms of laughter, leaving me bewildered and more than slightly annoyed.
“Come beta, sit here,” Anu-di would insist, drawing me between her knees so my shoulders rested against her legs. “Vibha, get some oil,” she would request, her voice suddenly turning soft and husky. “The jasmine one, if you please.”

I would want to protest, knowing what was to follow, but something always held me back. There was something compelling in Anu-di’s voice, something dangerous in the soft pressure of her fingers on my shoulders. She would tilt up my head, her fingers cool on my chin. Her eyes would laugh down at me for a moment, dark with something strange and mysterious. Powerful. Just enough to make me slump against her legs.

Vibha-di would bring a shiny brass cup, wide and fluted, with viscous glowing oil. Always jasmine. I would shudder as the fragrance floated up to my nostrils. Sweet, heavy, dark. Slightly decayed like something beautiful that had died long ago. Something frightening and secret. “What, you don’t like the smell?” Vibha-di would laugh. “When you wear wreathes of it in your hair every night, you will begin to like it.” And again the women would burst in to laughter, giggling at some arcane secret that was barred to me.

The first drip of the oil on my crown would make me shiver slightly. Anu-di would just tip the bowl, letting the oil stream down, spreading slowly, stickily through my hair, cool against my scalp. The dreaded scent would wind down to my nose, this time from my own skin. She would begin by tapping the top of my skull with the flat of her hand, like a tabla player preparing for concert. The oil would squelch and slither, muffling the sharp cracks. I would hold my breath, waiting half-anxious, half-excited.

Then Anu-di’s hands would begin to move through my hair, gently pressing and massaging the scalp, caressing the oil out to the tips of the curls. Her palms would firmly knead the sides of my head, moving determinedly down my neck in long, even strokes. I would feel drugged, drowsy with the scent of jasmine, with her soft voice humming, the feel of her hands lulling me to oblivion. Slowly her finger tips would massage my temples, moving steadily to the back of my ears. She would caress the whorls of my ear with the tips of her ring finger, ending always with a sharp tug on the lobes.

“Off you go,” she would laugh, her voice full of mischief. I would clamber back over the wall, bewildered and uncertain, sure that I hated the scent of jasmine oil, keen to find the next occasion Anu-di would offer to oil my hair. My grandmother would briefly glance at me with sharp, keen eyes, then shoo me off for a bath, as if delaying for another day something she needed to tell me.

I still do not know why those visits over the walls stopped. I do remember that it was just after my twelfth birthday. Vibha-di must have been away, at work or perhaps travelling as she always did in the hot plains summers.

The inside of the house was dark and cool, smelling lightly of khas from the mats that covered the windows. It was also, I remember, full of strangely feminine things. Lace and glass, soft colours and frills. All things that would never have survived in our own more practical household, full of rough-and-tumble childish games.
“Come inside, I will get you some nimbu-paani,” Anu-di told me, when she found me reading half way up the mango tree. The lemonade was too sweet, even for my childish tongue, but it had a lot of ice cubes. I can’t remember what we spoke of that day, or indeed if we spoke of anything at all but I have a clear memory of holding my mouth against the cloudy liquid, letting my lip go numb against the cold.

Anu-di had just gotten the bowl of oil for my hair, gleaming green and jewel-like in the golden fluted bowl. She had asked me to sit on the floor before her, pulling me back to lean against her knees.

Then my grandmother arrived, her sari slightly askew and trailing off her head as if she had not paused to put it right, slightly out of breath, with beads of sweat gathered on her brow. “You! Didn’t I ask you to stay in the house! Get back home now.” The commands to me came fast and harsh, sounding strange on the lips of my usually gentle grandmother.

Bewildered by this sudden rage, I looked up to Anu-di for help. But she wasn’t looking at me. Her eyes were on my grandmother, an enigmatic half-smile on her lips. “Behenji…” she began.

“No, not today, Anu.” My grandmother’s rage seemed to be slowly turning inwards, making her eyes glow, her shoulders rigid with some nameless effort. I got slowly to my feet, watching my grandmother and Anu stare at each other, communicating in some strange language that remained unknown to me. I thought there was a plea, sorrow, even a hint of anger on Anu-di’s face. “Go. Go, beta,” she murmured, pushing me gently towards my grandmother.

I walked slowly, trying to make sense of all that remained unspoken in that room. In my grandmother’s face there had been suspicion and anger; now there remained an odd sadness and, may be, could it be, embarrassment? She reached out to me as I neared, pulling me close for a brief rare hug. “Chalo, lets go.”

Nothing more was spoken that day. Or indeed for many more days. Grandmother’s command had broken some magical spell, and I didn’t go over the wall any more. Anu-di and Vibha-di also seemed to stop coming over to our house. My grandmother insisted on oiling my hair, with coconut oil, once a week. I was too afraid to resist when she called me

Then as the summer bled into winter, grandmother thawed a little. Not enough to begin visiting, but just enough to send over some lemon pickle and fresh jaggery. The didis responded too, pausing to talk at the low wall, occasionally waving at me from the verandah. But they never asked me to come over the wall to visit. So there were no more long afternoons of shelling peas and gossip, no more lemonade with masses of ice. No more jasmine scent lingering in my hair and on my pillow even after I had washed the sticky oil out of my hair. It was as if something had been snapped. But what had snapped, no one could tell me.

I saw them recently, the didis. At my wedding. They still lived in that old house next door. The house had grown shabby, shrunken with age somehow. They too were much older and greyer, not so glamorous, but perhaps that is the inevitable fate of all our childhood heroes. Vibha-di came to apply mehndi on my hands, her sari as crisply starched as ever.
And when I was being dressed for the wedding, Anu-di – still in her girly churidaar-kameez – brought a heavy garland of fresh jasmine. She smiled at me, only half-mischievously, in the mirror as she pinned the flowers to my hair. “Now that you are grown up, you’ll know the scent is an aphrodisiac.”