The Key Stays With Me

By Adwita Pandey

I was woken by my husband's groaning which in our house does the job of a rooster. My arms throbbed from yesterday's boulders, and my brain went from a state of confusion to relief, today Rinchen was leaving for his temporary labour in Shimla.

If living in Choglamsar (a village in the outskirts of Leh, Ladakh) had taught me something, it was to never trust mountains or men.

I packed Dolma's lunch, last night's leftover skew, into a plastic bag and tied the knot. Every knot reminded me of the day she begged for a tiffin. Even the cheapest one, Ama-ly, Please. She is nine now and no longer asks. She has learned that in our house, wishes are rationed like firewood in January.

I have three jobs. Mornings, I sweep the floors of the army cantonment quarters. Evenings, I break boulders with BRO so that the army can have roads to drive on. And nights, I do my third job, which is guarding my husband from spending my hard earned money on bottles of booze. Of the three, the boulders are the most cooperative.

My Abi-ly used to say that in Ladakh the house belongs to the eldest child, and the key belongs to the woman who keeps it. She ruled our old khang with a wooden ladle and a face that could curdle butter tea. When a visiting uncle once suggested that a man should decide where the barley is sown, she handed him a spade and said, "Show me." He lasted ten minutes and left with blisters and a lot of new respect.

I think of Abi often, mostly while looking at my husband.

At the bus stand, Rinchen swayed gently, like a prayer flag with a hangover. He promised to send money from Shimla. I promised to send him a prayer. We were both equally likely to deliver.

"Ama-ly," said Dolma, tugging my sleeve as the bus coughed away, "Aba-ly forgot his bag"

"Good," I said, "Then he will have to come back for it."

"Will he?"

"No"

She laughed so hard she snorted, and that, I decided, was the best sound in the valley.

At the work site, the women were already hammering. There were twelve of us, in scarves and old army jackets, with hammers older than our marriages. Each woman names her boulders. Mine that morning was Rinchen's Excuse Number Forty, the one about how the bottle fell into his mouth by accident. I hit it until it surrendered.

"Angmo-ly," laughed Dechen, wiping her forehead, "is your husband gone?"

"Gone"

"Then why are you hitting that rock like it owes you money?"

"It does," I said. "It is wearing his face."

We laughed until the supervisor came and pretended he had not heard us. He has a wife, too. He knows.

During the tea break, Dechen cleared her throat in the way that means a plan is coming. Ladakhi women do not hold meetings. We hold tea, butter tea infact and decisions come out of it like steam.

"We are twelve women," she said. "Every week, each of us puts one hundred rupees in a pot. One woman takes the whole pot each month. No husband knows. No bank asks questions."

"A committee," said Tsering, who had once visited Delhi and never let us forget it.

"Not a committee," said Dechen. "A rebellion with a schedule."

I did the sums on my fingers. A hundred rupees was a bottle of Rinchen's 3-day stock of booze, only this time it would go somewhere useful.

So I joined. Every Saturday I tucked my hundred into a tin of tea leaves, because no drunkard in history has ever looked inside a tea tin voluntarily.

The months went by in boulders and sweeping. Rinchen sent no money from Shimla.

In the fourth month, the pot came to me.

I did not buy a gold coin or a new shawl. I took Dolma by the hand to the Leh bazaar, past the shops selling pashmina and plastic, and stopped at a small stall where steel tiffins stood in rows, shining like little silver temples.

"Which one?" I asked.

She stared at me as if I had grown a second head. "Ama... which one what?"

"Which tiffin. Pick one."

She touched them one by one, afraid they would vanish. At last she chose a three-layered steel one with a blue lid and held it against her chest the whole way home, even though it was empty.

"Why three layers?" she asked.

"One for thukpa," I said. "One for skew. And one for whatever your teacher says you cannot do. You will fill it with proof that you can."

That night I made apricot tea, the tin of tea leaves was still half full, and I did the most radical thing I have ever done. I sat down. I watched my daughter eat from her own tiffin, and I did not count anything.

Rinchen returned in winter, thinner, quieter, wearing a woollen monkey cap from Shimla and carrying nothing else. He stood at the door as if waiting to be invited into a house he used to own.

I looked at him for a long time. Then I took the key from my belt, the same key Abi had worn, and the one her mother had worn before her, and held it up.

"This," I said, "does not move. If you want to stay, you carry water, split wood, and keep away from the bottle. The roof is mine, the key is mine, and so is the last word. Understood?"

He nodded so quickly that the monkey cap slipped over his eyes.

"Good," I said. "Dolma, give your father some tea."

I have resigned from my third job. Let the mountains guard him now.
The next morning, I woke before the rooster, my husband, and for once he did not groan. I packed Dolma's lunch into her blue-lidded tiffin and walked her to the school gate, a mountain stood behind us, grey and enormous and perfectly silent.
Then I smiled. Abi-ly had been right all along.