Bangles

There were twelve red bangles on her right wrist and eleven on her left, and although I had not yet begun the examination, I found myself counting them twice. They were ordinary glass bangles, red with a thin gold line running around them. One was cracked but remained on the wrist, while another bore a dark smear near its edge. The woman wearing them was twenty-nine years old and had been brought to the mortuary that morning after being declared dead on arrival. According to the papers handed to me, she had been found unconscious in the bathroom at about six. Her husband said that she had slipped while bathing and struck the back of her head. There was nothing improbable about his account. People fall in bathrooms, and sometimes a wet floor is enough to turn an ordinary morning into a death.

I began the examination with the history beside me, although I had learned long ago not to let the history tell the body what it ought to contain. There was an injury over the back of the head that could have resulted from impact against a hard surface. A bluish contusion was present over one upper arm, and near the wrist there was a small abrasion that had already begun to heal. Neither finding was dramatic. What interested me was that they did not appear to belong to the same day. I dictated their positions while the internee recorded them, resisting the temptation to arrange them too early into a story.

When I stepped outside to confirm her identity from the relatives, I noticed a woman sitting against the corridor wall with her dupatta wound tightly around her fingers. She was the elder sister of the deceased and had the exhausted look of someone who had already cried somewhere private. She signed and answered the questions put to her, but as I was about to return inside, she asked whether her sister's bangles were still on her wrists. I told her that they were, thinking she was worried about the jewellery being lost. Instead of appearing reassured, she asked, “All of them?” I told her that I had not completed the examination and would confirm it later. She nodded and sat down again. When I returned to the table, I counted them once more. Twelve on the right, and eleven on the left.

The question stayed with me, and when I came outside again, I asked why the number mattered. She looked towards the lady constable at the end of the corridor before taking out her phone. The first photograph showed a broken green bangle beside a pressure cooker. The next showed two blue pieces beneath a bed. Another showed a red shard caught in a dress. There were many photographs, some blurred as though they had been taken in a hurry. Almost none contained a face. I asked what they meant, although by then I understood that they were not photographs of jewellery. “She couldn't send me pictures of herself,” the sister said. “He checked her phone.”

The photographs went back several years, and the sisters had developed a language that required no explanation. Whenever her husband hit her, the younger woman photographed a broken bangle and sent it to her sister. One broken bangle meant it had happened again. The elder sister would telephone later under some ordinary pretext and listen to her voice. She had asked her many times to leave, but the answer had always been the same: where would she go? Their parents were old, and the elder sister had a family of her own. The rest did not need explaining. We speak easily of leaving a violent home because from outside a door looks like an exit. From inside, the same door may not lead anywhere.

Before putting the phone away, the sister told me that the red bangles were new. Her sister had bought them the previous evening because it was her wedding anniversary. I asked how

many there had been, and she looked surprised before answering, “Two dozen.” I returned to the examination room already knowing what I would find. Twelve remained on the right wrist and eleven on the left. The missing bangle did not prove anything, and I reminded myself of that as I continued the examination. A glass bangle could break during a fall or while someone was being lifted from the floor. Evidence becomes dangerous when we ask it to confirm what we have already decided to believe. The body had to be allowed to speak before I decided what it was saying.

It was while separating the blood-matted hair around the injury that I noticed something reflecting the examination light. At first I thought it was dried blood, but when I moved the hair aside, a tiny curved fragment came loose. I picked it up carefully. It was red glass, no larger than the nail of my little finger, with a thin gold line along one edge. The attendant asked whether it was from a bangle, and I told him that it appeared to be. Its significance could not be decided simply because we wanted it to have one. A bangle could break during an assault. It could also break in a fall. Yet its location mattered, particularly when considered with injuries of different ages and the photographs waiting inside the sister's phone. I placed the fragment in a container, labelled it and continued the examination.

The fragment of red glass was preserved separately, and the injuries were recorded so that someone who had never stood in that room could later see what we had seen. I washed my hands and thought about the photographs on the sister's phone. For years the younger woman had been leaving a record without calling it one. Each piece of broken glass had become a message sent from one sister to another, yet the messages had remained trapped between them. Perhaps that was how violence survived for so long. It did not always need silence. Sometimes it could survive even after a woman had found a way to speak.

The sister was standing when I came out, and before I could say anything she asked whether I had found the missing bangle. There were many things I could not tell her at that stage. What we found on the examination table was only corroborative evidence, one part of a story that would have to survive an investigation and, if the case ever reached that far, a trial. We could document what the body carried, but we could not decide what would become of that evidence once it left the mortuary. Much would depend on statements yet to be made, and on whether anyone was willing to make them. I looked at the sister and wondered if she would lodge a complaint, or whether the same fears that had kept one woman inside that house would now keep another woman silent outside it. I could only answer the question she had been asking since I first saw her in the corridor, so I told her that we had found a piece that appeared to belong to the missing bangle. She closed her eyes for a few seconds and then nodded without asking anything more. The police constable called her to complete the paperwork, and she walked towards her, holding the phone that contained all those broken circles. I watched her go, wondering whether she had saved those photographs because she knew that one day someone would need to see them, or whether saving them had simply been the only thing she could do.

Outside the hospital gate, the afternoon market had begun filling the roadside, and I stopped beside a fruit cart while waiting for a vehicle to pass. A few steps away, a bangle seller had arranged his wares in cylinders of green, yellow, blue and red, their glass surfaces catching the sunlight whenever someone moved past them. A young woman stood before him choosing red ones. He lifted a set towards the afternoon light and examined each before slipping it into a paper packet. Then he noticed a hairline crack in one and held it closer to his eye. He removed it and reached for another.

“This one will break,” he told her. The woman laughed. “How can you tell?” The seller held the bangle against the sun.

“Some cracks only show when the light passes through them.”

I looked at the red circle between his fingers and thought of the woman on my table. Twelve on one wrist. Eleven on the other. For years, she had been showing someone the cracks. We had only begun counting them after she died.