Dreams

I The Day You Died.

I saw you hovering near the ceiling, facing the room from the upper corner, facing me. Your hands partly extended, held in a clawing position, your face in a grimace, contorted, awry, angry. Your hair hung loose, jet black, flowing around your face. And from your mouth, with teeth bared like Kali herself, came a shriek of anger, anguish.

I was the first to lie on your bed after you died. On the same sheets, the same pillow cover that your body had touched. I fell asleep, exhausted, jetlagged and grief-stricken, on your bed where you had lain just a few days ago before being taken to the hospital where you died in the ICU.

What do dreams mean, I have wondered. It was clear as day to me in that moment. It could only have meant two things. One, being confined to that room for months on end distressed you. Two, you were not ready to die.

I've become the archiver of your life, the chronicler of your thoughts, the teller of your stories, the keeper of dreams. You live on in my voice, my bones, my fingers, my deep-set eyes, my laugh. I am your younger child, your daughter-- not the beloved son in whom you were well-pleased, but the baby after whose birth blood clots formed in your veins, the one who weakened your body. But you loved me fiercely, protected my feelings with the intensity of your deceased spirit. Even when you did not understand me.

Before I lay down on your bed, I had just returned from the crematorium, the only woman who accompanied your body. Close male relatives carried you on a stretcher, the ends at shoulder height. Women do not usually go to the cremation grounds. But I did not intend to let you be the lone woman at your funeral. My own mother.

II Lost in Space

I remember a dream from my childhood. I hover about in space. It feels exhilarating! I see stars in every direction. I am with my family, or friends. There does not seem to be an earth to anchor us. I go off in one direction, wanting to see what lies over there, or to just experience moving through space. I look back, and see them there, my companions. I wave to them.

I go further. Then, in an undefined timeframe, the sense of exhilaration abates, and wariness takes its place. Where am I? It all still looks the same around me. I look back in the direction where I think I last saw my companions. I see no one. All around me, in the distance, stars, planets, rocks, celestial objects float and move. The wariness turns to fear, dread. Where am I? How will I get back?

I continue looking around, and the dread turns to panic. I feel lost. And then, the heavy realization. I can never go back.

III A Dream About Sugar

A recurring dream, when I was a small girl. You, your father (my grandfather) and I are enjoying a pleasant walk, and I feel happy to be with you both. I hold your hand. We walk on a wide expanse of something snow-white that stretches in every direction. A white ocean. It could be ice. We walk along on this bright, sunny day, smiling, talking. I look more closely at what we've been walking on-- a path made of small granules. I let go of your hand, pick up a handful, and look at it. Sugar. We're standing on an ocean of sugar.

I feel uneasy, and I look up at you and my grandfather. We have all stopped walking. Neither of you is smiling, and you look at me expectantly, with some foreboding. Then my grandfather speaks. "You have to eat it all. We cannot help you."

I am filled with horror. I eat some of it, and I am overwhelmed, distraught. "I cannot!" I say. And my grandfather says, "You have to. Only you can. We cannot help you."

I eat a little more of it, and my stomach churns. I retch. I wake up, and I have thrown up.

You wake up, and come to comfort me, to clean up the mess.

My body learned that I was alone. Surrounded by love, but alone. Our bodies know before our minds do.

IV Laughing on a Train

I have called to chat on the phone, as I did every week for our international calls. You excitedly say to me, "I had such a wonderful dream last night! You and I were on a train. I don't know where we were going. We sat there, laughing and laughing. I felt so happy. I did not want to wake up."

V The Man in the Boat

I am six years old, sleeping in the big bed, and across from it, you sleep in the single bed. Our heads point in opposite directions.

I have a horrible dream. A man with evil in his heart and murder on his mind starts coming down the hallway from the front door. He is in a canoe, which scrapes along the floor in steady, rhythmic moves. The sound draws closer. He holds in his hand a long, curved knife, maybe a sword. Wearing dark clothes, a sack-like cloak, he is light-skinned with long black hair and a long, wispy, unkempt beard, his eyes large and fierce, with evil intent.

Here I come, he says. You cannot hide from me.

In my dream, I hide under the bed, whimpering. But because he's sitting in the low canoe, he will soon see me! I have nowhere to go, no way to escape. I am terrified, paralyzed with fear.

Then as though from another world, I hear your voice.

Enda molay? Enda karayane? Why are you crying?

Peydi avanoo. Swapnam kandoo. I am scared. I had a dream.

Saram illa, you reply. It's OK.

You lie down next to me. And in a little while, I sleep, comforted by your warmth.

VI The Queen's Bedroom

A recent dream, from the past year. I am in a house, in a large living room with stairs at the corner. A relative appears, dressed in white, with sandalwood paste in horizontal lines across his forehead. Either his head is shaved or his hair is very short. Also in the room are his wife, quite busy and rushing around as usual, as well as his mother.

A sudden urge: I have to go to the bathroom. I close the door to the living room, then go into the bathroom in the corner and close the door. I have some privacy. I look around and see that the bathroom is a mess. There is stuff everywhere. Oddly, there are two or three commodes. One is portable. Another may be fixed. Some equipment is stacked in front of them, which I move aside. Suddenly, an unsettling thought strikes me: is there no plumbing here? Are these chamber pots that someone has to empty? I sit down with these darkening thoughts, eager to relieve myself. And then I see some movement ahead. A pig! A large, gray one with a pink snout, sniffing at something. And there, to the side, another one! I get up. Unbearable! I go out of the bathroom, planning to go to the upstairs bathroom, near the room where I am staying.

I open the door to the living room and I see you standing there, tall, stately, smiling, regal yet warm, in a sari draped around your shoulders. It was pink, or perhaps a dusty rose, synthetic and a little thick – not the transparent Garden variety. My heart lifts on seeing you. "Come with me," you say with a smile, beckoning and pointing outside. "I want to talk to you." In English.

OK, I say, but I have to go to the bathroom first. You nod and I go up one set of stairs to a landing. I must go up a second set of stairs to get to the bathroom. As I walk in that direction, I see some work is being done - the carpet has been pulled out. I near the stairwell, and see men working on it: the stairs are blocked. I can't go to this bathroom.

I come back downstairs and it dawns on me. I could use your bathroom, attached to the bedroom where you are staying. The Queen's bathroom! My heart lifts, and I am suffused by warmth. I feel so privileged. I feel comfortable, at home. Home is where you are. I go towards the bathroom and the dream ends.

VII The Storm

A dream from a few years ago. I decided to go for a walk on a sunny day, warm, but not too warm. As a pleasant breeze blew, I walked towards what appeared to be a large lake, and saw a strip of land extending into it, long like a pier. How perfect, I thought to myself in my dream. That would be a nice walk. A few feet of water separated this promontory from where I stood. I jumped over and started walking, with not a single other person in sight Smiling in my dream, I enjoyed the view of land and water, the warmth of the sun and the light breeze.

Then, as I walked, the sky grew cloudy and gray. I kept walking, hoping it would clear before long. It did not. The sky grew darker and the wind picked up. Then it started to rain! I looked around, astonished at this abrupt change, and had a sinking feeling. The wind grew in force, and the rain came at a 45° angle. It felt like sleet, sharp and cold. I realized, as my heart sank further, that I was quite defenseless in the face of nature's power. All around me was the ocean. I could see no land, except the narrow stretch on which I stood.

And then a big wave came and knocked me down. Prostate on the ground, I spread my arms above my head and clung to land. The only way I would survive was by lying prone to avoid being knocked down by the wind and rain, by inching backwards bit by bit, keeping my arms and body on the land. If I fell off, no one would know.

I slid back slowly, barely able to see, aware of only gray and brown around me. The water had drenched me as it kept coming relentlessly, and continued to blind me.

Though filled with terror, I knew I had to keep moving, slowly but surely. If the storm continued at this force, the strip of land would be submerged, and with it, me.

I did not have a sense of how much time had passed. I had to be in the moment, each and every moment, to survive this. Unable to see, I felt with my feet to sense if I had reached the edge that I had jumped onto. Finally, I felt it. How would I jump across, I wondered and then decided that I would try to turn around and would figure it out when I was facing where I wanted to reach. To my horror, the strip of water that I had jumped over had now turned into a river, with water gushing through.

As I considered what to do next, a wave of water knocked me off the land I clung to. I felt a wave of panic, unmoored for some moments. Then I closed my eyes, put my head down, stretched my hands out and kicked towards what I thought was the shore.

Somehow my fingers touched land. I felt what seemed like a worn strip of wood that appeared to be holding back the shore. Odd, I thought even in that desperate moment, I hadn't noticed it when I was starting my walk. I got my hands around it and somehow heaved myself onto land.

That is where my dream ended.

Nobody was there. Nobody knew the danger I had encountered. You were not there to comfort me this time. I pulled myself out of it. Somehow.

VIII The Man in the Tree

I am six or seven years old, sleeping in the big bed, my brother in the twin bed across from me.

Our heads point in opposite directions. He lifts a corner of the curtain by his bed to let in fresh air. A light glowing in some shop on G.T. Road hits me in the eye. It irritates me immensely. I tell him to put the curtain down. He refuses. We argue about this every night. I am the pesky younger sister.

I fall asleep. The foot of the bed adjoins a pair of large windows, through which a large tree is visible outside: Radha Chura, with a wide canopy of leaves, casting a big umbrella of shade. In daylight, the yellow flowers look bright and cheerful against the dark green leaves. At night, the tree is not inviting, just foreboding. Even sinister.

I fall asleep, and a man appears by the tree, as tall as the tree itself. He can look right into the bedroom. In my dream, I try to quietly draw the curtains, but he can see through them. I can see you, he says, laughing demonically. You cannot hide from me! I am terrified, paralyzed. He draws closer. I wake up with my heart pounding. I cannot make a sound.

IX The Missing Sink

You died some years ago. My marriage is slowly disintegrating. I keep myself madly busy with work. I continue with life as though nothing is wrong. And one night, a dream.

I go to the kitchen to put away some dishes, and feel something is off. The stainless-steel sink looks white. On looking more carefully, I see that the sink area seems covered with some paper. Over to the side of the kitchen on the floor sits a bathtub with legs. I look more closely at the sink, as I want to rinse out the cup or bowl I am holding. Then, the horror of it becomes apparent. The sink has been filled; what had seemed to be a cover was a counter where the sink had been. My heart drops into my belly. I call out agitatedly to my husband exclaiming what is this, what is this, why did you fill the sink. He shrugs and walks away, pointing to the tub as the place to rinse things now. Now completely distraught, I start weeping. I reach for the phone and call a friend to whom I tell many of my dreams. "Can you help me? Can you help me, please? I can't live here anymore!" And in my dream, she replies "No, I can't help you, I'm out of the country." I feel abandoned.

X The Body Bag

An unfamiliar room, upstairs, with an open window, and a four-poster bed between the window and where my husband stands. A garment bag hangs from one of the tall bed posts, and he zips it up. I see there is a man inside it. A dead man. My stomach turns. I start screaming what is this, what is this. He keeps zipping and unzipping the bag, glancing periodically out of the window. I too glance out of the window, to see if anyone is walking by, looking in. In a low voice, I say what are you doing, someone may see you with this body. I go to draw the curtain.

XI Sick on a Plane

Several years ago, a few days before I was to return to the US after a visit to India, I got the worst food poisoning of my life. We had visited some relatives who offered us fresh watermelon juice. Within two hours, my daughter had a fever. On the drive back home, she threw up. It was late evening. The driver would not let me clean up the car. A kind man, he looked very concerned. Please take her to the hospital, he said. I did not know the local hospitals. My father pointed out that one of the neighbors in the building was a doctor. We took her to the doctor's house. He, kind elderly gentlemen, had his son take us

in his car to their hospital. She was given Tylenol suppositories to reduce the fever, and in a day, she was well again. In another day, I became sick. I couldn't remember being so sick. No food or drink would stay in me. My insides ached from the vomiting. I felt exhausted, dizzy.

The time came to go back to the US, my daughter, her father and I. Weak, and filled with trepidation, I boarded the plane. I sent out fervent messages into the ether to anyone who might be listening to help me through the flight.

As I dozed in and out of consciousness, I remained afraid…what if my insides start heaving? How quickly could I get to the restroom? Would I get there in time? I sat in an aisle seat with my family next to me, and in the row behind us sat a man and a woman, with an empty seat between them. Then, as I drifted in and out, I sensed a shadowy figure in that middle seat, silent, leaning forward vigilantly, somehow there for me. It was you, wasn't it, dropping in from the ether to watch over me and to see me safely through? I made it, yet again, because of you.

XII Bats

In my dream, I am in my bed and sense something flying around in the living room. My daughter, then 10 years old, comes to my door and closes it, keeping whatever it was from me. I get out of bed and walk to the door. I open it and step into the living room area. It is filled with flying creatures. They range in size from small to big, and in color from brownish to light beige. The smaller ones look like moths, but the largest one stops by a wall, and I realize it is a bat with almost white underwings. Horrified and afraid, I stand still. My daughter is not afraid.

Fast forward a few years. She has turned 16. She goes out the back door to put something in the garbage bin.

"Amma!" she exclaims, "a bat flew away when I opened the door."

"Yikes," I say.

Then I ask her, "Are you protecting me from bats again?" She looks at me, puzzled.

"Did I not tell you the dream I had some years back? About how you closed the door…"

"Oh ya," she interjects casually, "that one."

XIII Shopping

In my dream, I am planning a dinner gathering for my father's birthday with friends. My mother appears! She is standing, even walking, and seeing her floods me with a feeling of comfort.

I go to speak with her. All these people are coming. What am I going to make? Shall I make Mathanga Erisseri? She replies, yes, that would be good. I need to go shopping, I say. Why don't you come? She agrees.

It had been many months since her last visit, and I had missed her. For a spirit, she appears remarkably grounded in her presence.

XIV Chitty Chitty Bang Bang

As the dream continues, I sit in a car, my daughter in the driver's seat. I can't recall if we were driving to the airport, or to some other location. It was important that we get there on time. Suddenly, somehow, the car just slowly veers off to the left of the road and flies through the air like Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. I look down and hundreds of feet below, lined by rocks, I see a grassy plain. Bright green grass.

Oh my God, I say. Now we're never going to get there on time. As the car slowly moves downwards, a feeling of dread strikes me. We could die. And then the car lands on all four wheels, miraculously, on the grassy plain, away from the rocks. It shakes and shudders and keeps moving for several feet before coming to a stop.

We survive. We are not going to get to our destination on time, but we are alive. I am not distressed, and that surprises me. I am filled with wonder at the beauty and peacefulness of the grassy plain.

XV Driving

My father is driving a car. He's going to and fro, and just when I think he will stop, he turns around and keeps going. He seems confused and does not know how to just stop at the curb. I run over to the side of the road along which he will be driving after he turns around yet again. It is still day, yet somewhat dark, and gloomy. As I wait, the car reverses 90° into some lane so it can turn, then I lose sight of it. Where is it? Where is he?

XVI Dogmatix

A group of people, me among them, is hanging out, talking. Sometime later, I and some others find ourselves in a car. The car moves along, but no one is driving it. A yellow labrador runs alongside the car, with a bone in its mouth. I somehow stop the car, so the dog can get in. I step out and beckon to the dog. He shakes his head and smiles, then touches his mouth to my forehead in a kiss. "Oh Dogmatix," I say, "I love you so much." The car moves on slowly, and the dog runs happily behind.

Dogmatix is a character in a novel I am writing. In real life, he is a brown stuffed cocker spaniel puppy (not a yellow lab) who lives on my nightstand on a pile of books. It has been a while since I have written his stories. When I wake up, I am relieved that he did not seem upset with me.

XV Before Dawn Breaks

The time before dawn breaks remains the most magical. And the most fraught. In those hours, the departed come to you in dreams. They speak, they smile, they walk about as usual. Here they are, your sleeping mind tells you with joy. Who said they went anywhere? They are right here. The feeling of contentment, of happiness, pervades you. They are not lost to you.

The warmth in your heart spreads. You know once again the comfort of their presence, the strength they give you, the laughter they bring. Here they are, drinking life to the lees.

Dawn breaks, and the spell is threatened. The dream begins to dissolve. The mind slowly adjusts, and starts recognizing reality. Through sleep-heavy eyes, you look out into the world, seeking the loved one who was just there in the dream. But she is not there. And then, the tightening around the heart. She is dead, gone from this world.

And then you close your eyes. In your mind's eye, you see her again, as you saw her in the still-dissolving dream. There you are. Let me stay with you a while. Let my tired, aching heart be soothed by you.

Stay. Stay with me. Stay a little longer. I miss you so much. I love you so much. Your throat tightens. Your glance goes to the photograph on the desk. You are always with me, in my heart. And you feel the tears stinging your eyes.

You take a deep breath. Maybe you say a prayer. It's time to get up.

- Raji Pillai

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