

Munni mousi

By Rachna Bisht-Rawat (India)

The house Radhika lived in had a bamboo door. The floor was mud, however, which made it difficult to spot the occasional snake that would slither in with the monsoon rain despite the wire mesh on the kitchen drain.

She had loved the feel of mud under her toes but Radhika was not walking barefoot anymore. A lot had changed after Munni mousi died. The snakes had their holes flooded with water. The baby started kicking in her stomach. And Manoj walked for five days to reach Tame Chung Chung, the Mountain of Poisonous Snakes, from where he had not returned yet. Now, alone in her bamboo home, Radhika spent the day retching into the sink, and the night listening for the tap on the window that meant Munni mousi had her face pressed against the thin glass and was trying to get in. Radhika would reach for the rosary under her pillow and shut her eyes to the aunt she had loved all her life.

She had stopped using the toilet after dark, scared that she would walk into Munni mousi – seeing her plump legs straddling the white commode, cotton nightie with the blue ikat pattern hitched up, grey hair untidily bunched at the neck. Instead, Radhika would cradle her bulging stomach, contract her pelvic muscles and wait for morning to empty the bladder threatening to burst.

She would think of the baby that had come after two years of painful infertility treatment. And Munni mousi by her side. In her starched sari. Driving her to the hospital, slipping the car keys into her leather purse, cracking jokes to ease the pain, telling her that if nothing worked there was always adoption. And, kulfi-falooda! They would laugh and later walk down to the pavement bookseller to sneer at Fantasy, Delhi's bold new magazine with nude pictures and quirky letters.

Someone so full of life had just collapsed one day. And was now lonely and looking for company. Radhika wanted to hide but Munni mousi had found her, thousands of miles from Delhi, and her delicate brown hand with the oval nails and two gold bangles was trying to unlatch the bedroom window. The nocturnal visits, the loo sharing, the clattering pan in the kitchen (Munni mousi cooking her sour buttermilk kadhi) were slowly driving her mad.

This had to end, she decided finally, feeling her sunken cheeks and dry skin. When the tap came on the window that night Radhika parted the curtains, and stared into the darkness. There was nothing there. She closed her eyes and went back to the flat where tuberose rested in a terracotta vase and Kala Moti the black Lhasa apso growled from under the dining table. She stepped on the green FabIndia durrie she had once helped select and felt the coarse yellow floor cushion she had sunk into so many times. She heard the curry leaves crackling in the kitchen, saw the crushed newspaper on the bed, the reading glasses beside it and the hairpins on the side table.

She looked in the lift, the lawns where mogra flowers bloomed and even amongst the papaya-sellers on the street. Finally, she ran into Munki Mousi at the Crossword bookshop - reclining in space above the Indian authors rack, an Upamanyu Chatterjee in her hands. "These days I spend all my time here. The air-conditioning is good and I can read the hard covers," she said, "I'm at peace Radhika, just let me go." Radhika rubbed the tears out of her eyes, turned the pillow around to keep her head off the wet fabric and slept undisturbed after many nights.