

be compensated for him – he'll be sixteen soon, won't he? Labour age for Rock Squatter colony boys. . . we'll see what we can do. . . it's only the first time that such a thing has happened, a Rock Squatter being upgraded to the City. . . I'm sure we can come to a very agreeable understanding." The Rat's mother must have nodded. "Yes. . . an exceptional situation but – he's an exceptional boy. Certainly turns sociogenics theory inside out. . ."

"He'll be all right with us, Mrs de Cruz," Second Voice was saying. "You needn't worry about him!"

At which point the Rat allowed himself to blackout again, this time a little more contentedly. He was certain his mother would not insist on keeping him.

## Hot Death, and Cold Soup

Twelve short stories by

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## Stains

It was a tiny mark, barely visible. Yet Mrs Kumar was holding the sheet between her thumb and forefinger as if she feared that merely to be in the presence of such a sheet might mean eternal damnation. Merely to know of the existence of such sheets.

She said, "Blood."

Sarah said, "Yes," while wondering whether she should apologize. "I'm sorry," she heard her voice say, "I – I'm sure it'll go away." She could hear herself sounding one foot tall. "I mean – I'll wash it –"

Mrs Kumar said, "Come. I will show you." She turned and left the bedroom, still carrying the sheet.

They went down two floors and into the basement. There was a sink there, deep as a well, cold, cracked and forbidding. A pipe jutted out from the wall. A pressure-valve perched at the end of it. "Here," said Mrs Kumar, "here you will wash it." She dropped the corner of the sheet that she had been holding into the sink. "Wash now," she said, "it must not become. . ." She searched for the word. "Stain. It must not become stain." There was an antique cake of laundry soap congealed into a tin soap dish on the rim of the sink. "See – there is soap –"

She glanced up at Sarah, then turned again and left. What had the glance meant, wondered Sarah. There had

been something there, something. . . She shook her head and the bushy mass of her hair shifted on the back of her neck, feeling comfortingly warm and familiar. *Get this over with*, she thought, *just get it over with and don't let's think about it just now*.

She held down the release on the valve. A stream of liquid ice gushed out, biting straight through the tender flesh of her fingers and deep into the bone. She flinched, wondering whether there was any point to wetting the whole sheet. She picked it up and scrolled through it gingerly, looking for the stain.

It wasn't easy to find, what with the all-over floral print. Faux Monet. Ersatz Klimt. But it was a blue-based design and the stain was there, finally. A single pale petal of dried, graduate-student haemoglobin amidst the heaving water-lilies. Sarah positioned the spot under the outlet and pressed the release. More arctic water. She reached for the soap tray but it had become cemented to the rim of the sink. She hauled the stain-bearing area of the sheet over to the soap-dish and scrubbed the cloth into the soap, which was rock-hard with age. It was minutes before it grudgingly yielded up its suds.

Then she held the material between her numb fingers and scissored it back and forth rapidly, to work the soap into the stain. Wetted it again, just a little, enough to see that the pétal was indeed fading. Scratched at it with her fingernail. Looked around for a brush, but there wasn't one. The fine scum from the soap was under her nail now. A faint blush of brown in the scum indicated that the stain was shifting. Minute particles of her being, her discarded corpuscles, were detaching themselves from the cotton fibres of the sheet, tearing free and riding up on the skins of soap bubbles so fine that she could only see them collectively, as scum.

She held the cloth under the stream of ice. The brown scum slid abruptly off the site of the stain onto that part of the sheet resting on the bottom of the sink. *Damn!* thought Sarah. She held the release of the valve down with one hand and tried to hold the sheet up so that the flow of water washed the scum clear of the sheet.

It was absurdly difficult. The sheet filled quickly with water, becoming heavy and unmanageable. There was a moment when she considered holding the cloth in her teeth so that the frozen lump at the end of her left arm could smooth away the traces of soap from the sheet while she held the valve open with her other hand. But she decided against it, ultimately. It would have looked ridiculous. And besides, she wasn't sure that her teeth could support the weight of the sheet, now several pounds heavier as a result of the absorbed water.

Ultimately she draped the bulk of the cloth over her right shoulder, held the valve open with her left hand and used her right to smooth away the soap. The stain itself had faded to a memory, its edges slightly darker than its center. But she rubbed it into the soap once more, flattened the cloth onto the palm of her left hand and scraped at it with the nail on her right thumb, scraped until it seemed to her that the blue of the underlying water lily was beginning to wear thin. Then, satisfied, she washed the scum away in the gelid water until all traces of soap had been obliterated from the sheet.

When she was done, she held the cloth up to look at it, stretching it between her two arms to do so. A film of water which had clung to the surface of the cotton gathered itself up into an icy rivulet which flowed straight into the warm space between her hair and her neck, down her back and into the divide of her bottom, resting only once it had reached right up to the threshold of her most

private self. It was like a cold electric finger tracing the length of her flesh, invading her warmth, violating her with its icy impertinence. Then it fell away and dropped to the floor.

She shivered. Realized that her nightie had got soaked and that she was standing in a dark, unheated basement, half-swaddled in a wet bed sheet. There was something offensive and illogical about it all which she would have to examine and understand and file away. But not just now. Later.

She went to the laundry room by the kitchen. Mrs. Kumar was already there, bending over, stuffing a damp and faintly steaming wash into the round open mouth of the dryer.

"Uh," said Sarah, "scuse me?" Mrs. Kumar did not seem to hear. "Mrs. Kumar?" The old lady straightened up slowly. "My sheet. . ." said Sarah, indicating that she'd like to include it in the load going into the dryer.

For a moment it seemed as if Mrs. Kumar hadn't understood what Sarah was saying. Then she shook her head, a quick bird-like movement. "No," she said, "no! Not here! Only down! In basement!"

Sarah said, "There's no place in the basement —" But she had been in a hurry to get away and it hadn't occurred to her to look.

"There is place," said Mrs. Kumar and bent once more to her wash.

Sarah turned and went back the way she had come. Her mind was blank. In the basement, she looked around and saw that there was a light bulb with a dangling cord. She pulled on it and in the resulting light, saw that a potential clothes-line extended across the room.

She hung the sheet, turned off the light and went up two floors to the bedroom. Shut the door. She was shiver-

ing. She wrapped her arms around herself. *What's happening to me?* she asked herself. She was shivering with anger, not cold. *What am I doing here?* she thought. *What am I doing amongst . . . these people?* There. It was out. The words that had been hovering at the edge of consciousness for three days now. These people. Deep and his mother. Indians. Not-us. Foreigners. Aliens.

*But not him,* she thought. *Only his mother.*

Or was it? After all, he had lived with his mother these many years. It had to have affected him. What would he say about the sheet, for instance? Would he find some excuse, some justification for his mother's behavior? Or would he see her, Sarah's, point of view? And if he didn't — wasn't that the thing which made his foreignness a problem? The fact that, instead of automatically seeing her point of view, he would flip it over onto its back and expose its soft underbelly, expose it for just another cultural blinker. "Even you," he would say, smiling with his beautiful teeth, "have that Western bias which makes it difficult for you to see that there isn't anything intrinsically bizarre about being made to wash your bloodstain out of the bedsheet in a freezing basement sink!" And then he might cock his head to the side and say, "Remember the horse-meat?"

She bit her lip. The argument had started innocently. On their way up to Deep's home from Cornell, they had driven past a meadow dotted about with Holstein-Friesians and she had nudged him. It had been a joke, nothing else. "Wanna stop?" she had said. He had looked at her without comprehension. "You know," she had persevered, "stop by and say a prayer or — or something —" But he had still not understood. It had begun to seem too silly to explain. "Never mind," she had said, "it's not worth going into." He had insisted, however. So she had

said, "The cows, you know? We passed a meadow and it was full of cows and I thought. . . ." His expression had been so blank that she would have laughed except that she knew he got hurt easily. So she stammered painfully on. "Well, you know — I thought — since Indians worship cows —" But it had started to sound ghastly, even to her ears.

He had begun to nod in that quick tight way. "You think it's funny, don't you?" he said, finally. "Just one more laugh-riot from the cosmic joke book — the joke book in which everyone who isn't a Bible-thumping, beef-eating, baseball player is treated like a court jester. Everything we do, whatever we find sacred, is hilariously funny just because it's different. —" And then the final rebuke. "I thought you, at least, would understand."

"Deep," she had said, distressed. "You've got it wrong."

"What else can it mean?" he said. "We've talked about this. I've explained it before." He paused and she could see the muscle in his jaw tensing. "About cows."

She said, "Deep — it's just that I saw them grazing and, and I —" She stopped. What had she thought? "I thought of a cathedral. I thought that maybe for someone who worships cows, a big barn must be like a cathedral is for us —" Was that really such an insulting thought?

He had said, "We discussed it just the other day. Didn't you hear me? When I told you that it isn't just any cow? That it is *specifically* the Indian cow?"

It had been her turn to look blank. "You mean, one breed?" she had asked, astonished.

His face convulsed with annoyance. "Don't be stupid!" he said. His face worked, as he tried to compose an answer which would make sense to her. "It's not a question of breed," he said, eventually, in a calmer voice, "it's more

subtle than that. In an Indian village, cattle are the foundation of life, an integral part of the family. Here? They're just beasts! Milk dispensers! Meat!"

Sarah could feel a charge building up inside herself. *Why are we talking about cows*, she thought. *Why aren't we talking about you and me?*

"Do you understand any of this?" he had said. "I mean — you look into the eyes of one of these animals here and you see nothing. Just a dull, stupid, unreflecting stare!" His upper lip had lifted in scorn. Sarah couldn't understand why or how it could matter so much to him. Then his expression had softened. "But —" he said, "you look into the eyes of an Indian cow and there — you see it. Consciousness! An Indian cow is a developed being. She has a mind, she has a life, she is a person — no, better than a person. A sort of living manifestation of the, uh, bounty, the giving spirit of nature." He looked at her, glancingly, as if expecting very little. "For the Indian villager, the cow's milk provides food and income, its dung is used as fuel and the bullocks are a major source of draught energy. And on top of all that, they eat almost anything — they're part of the garbage disposal system!" He smiled slightly now. "Does it make sense now? Do you understand the difference?"

Sarah had nodded. "Yes," she had said, uncertainly, "yes, I think I can relate to what you're saying." She had grown up on a farm, till she was eight. She fought down a vague irritation she felt at the way he had described American cows. *How dare you insult our cows!* she had wanted to say. But instead she had said, "We have that kind of relationship too, with horses —"

That's when he had said, scornfully, "Oh yes! Horses! During the war, you used to eat horsemeat! A truly nourishing relationship, wouldn't you say?"

"That's not true!" The words had whipped out of her. It was only the French who ate horsemeat! Not Americans!! Never Americans!!! But the force of his contempt had drained her confidence. He was so often right about things like that. He seemed to store up tiny scraps of information just so that he could produce them at crucial points in an argument. "It — it's not typical behavior, what we did during the war —" Even as she said the words, there had appeared in her head a question mark. "We?"

He said, smoothly arrogant, "In India, there used to be terrible famines. But even at the depth of the famine, even when children were dying in their mothers' arms, there was never any report of cows being eaten. People were willing to die rather than eat their animals!"

"Well —" she had said, "well — I think that's stupid! It's just stupid to die rather than to eat what's there —" He had said, "Oh? So — in a famine, you'd eat your sister's flesh?"

"That's different!" But she had felt so helpless. He was implacable, when he had his teeth into an argument. "It isn't normal to eat one's own species —"

"But we've agreed that wars and famines aren't normal times —!"

It had gone on and on and on. There had been no resolution. He had grown increasingly cool and confident while she had felt her cheeks radiating a black light and had heard her voice grow shrill and incoherent. Towards the end of it, she had found herself saying that she couldn't respect a people, a culture which didn't have the sense to avoid famines. He said that a few famines were inconsequential in the face of five thousand years of civilization. She said that the ethical system to which she belonged could not view famines as inconsequential! Whereupon he had replied that he couldn't place much

confidence in an ethical system which used, as its central icon, the tortured corpse of its religious prophet.

It had taken her a few seconds to understand what he had meant by that remark and when she did, it upset her so profoundly that her eyes stung with sudden tears. So she had turned her face towards the window. She didn't know what had bothered her more — that description of Christ or her reaction to hearing it. She didn't think of herself as a believing Christian, yet it hurt her to hear that description.

They drove the last fifty miles in silence.

Deep's mother lived alone in an old two-storey building surrounded by majestic elms. She had probably been standing at the window looking out for the car, because the front door opened even as the tires purred up the driveway. Deep turned to Sarah and said, "Will you be all right?" She was relieved to see that the sarcastic stranger with whom she had been arguing had reverted to being the familiar friend and lover of the last five months. She had nodded and got down from the car.

And yet . . . Standing at the window three days later, she knew that it hadn't been all right. That stranger, that alien, who had been at the wheel of the car dressed in Deep's body, hadn't vanished entirely after all. Having once appeared, he had continued to lurk, just at the outer margin of Deep's personality. Had he been there all along?

She hugged herself tighter. Why had Deep's mother wanted her to wash her bedsheet in the basement? What could possibly be the point of it? Then she thought of something. She thought of something she had heard her own mother and aunt talking about, laughing. A long time ago. She tried to focus on it, but couldn't. It had been too long ago and she had been a child at the time. She hadn't understood what they'd been talking about.

But it triggered another area of thought. In primitive communities, menstruating women sat separately, sometimes in a special hut.

*Is that what she's doing with me?* thought Sarah. Avoiding contamination. Avoiding the unclean magic of a bleeding woman. *Unclean.* Sarah felt a current of power course through her. *That reminds me,* she thought. *Time to change.* She went to the bathroom and pulled down her panties. A scarlet streak told her that she was just in time! She reached for the kit-bag in which she stored her tampons, while in the same movement sitting down on the toilet! She reached with her right hand under herself to find the string of the tampon, wound it around her finger and tugged, feeling all the while curiously self-conscious of all her movements. As if she were performing for some invisible camera crew. Twentieth Century Woman. Removing Vaginal Insert. The tampon came out with a silky squish, and she released it, letting it drop into the toilet. Then stopped.

*Why am I looking away at nothingness?* she thought. *Why don't I ever look down when I do this? Why are all my movements so automatic?* And even as these thoughts appeared in her mind, a gush of simultaneous thoughts: *I shouldn't be thinking this way!* It was unseemly to look at one's menstrual products. It was unnecessary to think about what one was doing when one removed tampons. It wasn't proper. And yet... why not?

She wiped herself with toilet paper. Then made herself look at the results. *It's a beautiful colour,* she thought, *red and warm, like — like Burgundy.* She wanted to giggle. *Imagine being caught sitting on the toilet and looking at my own blood!* she thought, then added, with surprise. *Why do I feel so guilty? Why? Even when I'm just alone with myself?*

As if to augment this thought, she heard, from the

bedroom, the door open and Deep's voice. "Sarah?" he called. "Are you in there?"

"Yes!" she answered and quickly dropped the toilet paper out of sight.

He opened the door and said, "You're not dressed yet?" Then he caught sight of the kit bag with the tampons in it. "Oh," he said, "oh. Sorry." And shut the door. Sarah narrowed her eyes and smiled to herself. *Powerful magic, this blood!* she thought. *It can make a man apologize at ten paces, just at the sight of the equipment!*

By the time she was through with her bath Deep had already gone down. She found them, him and his mother, in the sunlit kitchen nook, with the remnants of breakfast on the Formica-top table. She didn't feel like eating anything and said so, pouring herself a mug of coffee. She could feel Deep's eyes on her but didn't look at him. He was encouraging her to eat what his mother had made, because, as he had already told her once before, it was rude to sit at the table and refuse food. *Too bad,* thought Sarah. *I'm not going to perform for him, for either of them.* If his mother could make all her meals without consulting her guests, then she, Sarah, could refuse to eat those meals without consulting anyone.

Mrs Kumar started to speak to Deep, in Indian. Deep responded, muttering. He seemed to be arguing with her, but it was hard to tell. The language sounded that way. *A bit like Klingon,* thought Sarah. Full of explosive consonants. Deep said, in English, "My mother says, it's not safe to go hungry in... your condition. She says she prepared this —" he pointed to a disgusting looking mush "— especially for you. To build you up."

Sarah turned what she hoped was a blank look in his direction. "What 'condition'?" she asked.

The corners of his mouth were twitched inward in irri-



tation. "You are bleeding heavily, she tells me. Apparently you stained the sheets."

Sarah said, "Sheet. It was one sheet. And a very small stain." She turned to Mrs. Kumar. "Mrs. Kumar, I'm sorry, but I'm not hungry just now." She spoke distinctly and slowly. "Thank you for making something special, but I really don't need it." Turned back to Deep. "If it's all right with you, I'm going for a walk just now." She smiled tightly and got up from the table, taking her mug of coffee with her and went out, walking slowly.

The front yard was fenced in with wooden palings. Sarah walked down the driveway and onto the road. There was no sidewalk. Deep's father had been a surgeon with a good practise in this small rural community in northern Pennsylvania. He had died four years ago, leaving the property and a fortune in investments for his widow and son to live on in comfort for the rest of their lives.

Sarah's breath, augmented by the heat of the coffee, steamed busily out onto the crisp air. *They do well here for themselves*, she thought to herself. *These Indians, these aliens*. She was trying to see what it felt like to view a minority group with race-hostility. She was mildly amused to see that she couldn't do it easily, that she felt guilty thinking thoughts like that. Even though, going by the typical logic of race-hostility, she had reason to feel embittered about the soft life that Deep's father had afforded for his family. Her own childhood hadn't been easy. Her father had grown up on a farm and later managed to buy himself a garage. He had struggled to put his five children through school. Only she and her sister had gone to college. Two brothers were still in school and one brother had died at eighteen, in a car accident caused by his own drunkenness. *Aliens! Aliens!* she thought, *But isn't it funny that I*

*can't even think up a cuss-word for them?* Maybe they hadn't been around for long enough to be absorbed into the vocabulary of racial abuse.

She hadn't been walking for long before she heard quick footsteps behind her. It was Deep. "What's the matter with you?" he said, panting slightly. He never wasted time with preliminaries. "You've been acting strange since this morning."

"It's your mother," said Sarah. "It's the bedsheet. I don't understand why she made me wash it like that." She would have liked to add that it was more than that. It was the horsemeat, it was the prophet-corpse, it was the revelation that there were chasms between them, which would never be bridged. She didn't think that the visit was working. She would rather leave right away and not stay for Christmas.

"You're so hung-up," said Deep, calmly, his face showing no sign of any emotion, his voice flat. "She's just an old lady. Why is it so difficult to do something different for a change? To bend yourself just a little?"

"Deep — she wanted me to wash the bedsheet in a sink, in the basement, in sub-zero water! It's not just something different! It's something so stupid and unreasonable I don't know what to do with it! I mean, I thought we'd agreed that there's enough illogic in the world without having to add crazy out-dated customs to it!"

"What I don't understand is why you stained the sheets at all," said Deep.

Sarah said, "One sheet."

"All right, one sheet, then. But why did you have to do it? It's not as if you don't know how to . . . be careful! I don't think it's at all . . . polite to do that sort of thing."

"Polite! . . ." She laughed, gusting a thunderhead of white breath. "What's polite got to do with anything! It's

not polite for your mother to sneak around looking at our sheets either, you know!"

"It's your fault for not having made the bed in time." Sarah turned on Deep. "I don't get it! Why does she have to come into our room at all? We're grown up, aren't we? I was still in my nightie, I hadn't even left the room and she was in there and making the bed!"

"Sarah —" he sighed. "My mother's just a lonely old lady. She has no-one to talk to or fuss over when I'm not here. I don't think you can see how important it is for her to be able to do things for us —"

"— for you, you mean!" said Sarah. "It's not for me she's doing it, it's for you! Her little son!"

He shrugged. "Okay, for me, then. But she's lonely — don't you see that? She needs to be needed! She needs to feel useful. Why do you make such a big deal about it? Why does it matter so much?" He was affecting to sound tired of it all. The weary male worn out by the bickering of females around him. "You're a feminist when it comes to young women and to women of your culture. But when it's my mother, who doesn't speak much English and isn't sophisticated, she's suddenly the enemy, the oppressor —"

"Deep, she's playing a power game," said Sarah. "Anyone can play it — you don't have to be a man or — or — white, or American. You won't see it like that, because she's your mother and the game works in your favour. But all these little things — the making of the beds, the not letting anyone else wash dishes or cook, she doesn't let anyone touch any of it — it's her way of maintaining control. Don't you see that?" She drew in a breath, sharply, the cold air hurting her throat. It was a hopeless discussion, because she knew he would never be able to see it her way. But she tried nevertheless. "It's clear enough to

you, when it comes to world events, when it's Russia controlling the flow of arms to Uzbekistan — or the US controlling patents in the Third World. But when it's your mother controlling the flow of my blood onto our sheet? Oh no! Then it's tradition! It's being polite!"

He said nothing for a few moments. They were walking on the grassy verge along a larger street now, up a slight incline. The cars coming over the crest of the low hill seemed to respond to the sight of the two of them by swerving sideways, like skittish horses. Sarah wondered idly what the drivers thought. *Do they see a couple walking along, she wondered, or do they see a racial statement?*

Deep said, in a quiet voice, "I thought we had something special."

Sarah waited a space before saying, "We did. We still do — I think — but —"

"But you've moved out of my reach. You're seeing me as a foreigner, as an alien."

Sarah's head was swaying from side to side. "No, Deep, no! It's not like that! Really!" Even though it was.

He said, "I'm not stupid, you know. I mean, it's interesting to me. I thought you'd be different, but you're not, really."

Don't react, thought Sarah to herself. *Be still now. He's going to say something. Hurtful. Brace yourself.*

He said, "I thought being black must mean that you're more sensitive — but that was stupid of me, huh? Another kind of racism. When it comes to the important things, you're just an American. Just a Westerner." His face was expressionless and his voice was perfectly bland. He could have been reciting the multiplication tables, for all the emotion he showed. But that was just his inscrutable-Oriental way. "I thought you of all people would understand what it means to be an outsider. To be ex-



cluded from the mainstream — but obviously, I was wrong."

He continued for a short while, during which they were passed in succession by two Corvettes, a Datsun and three battered-looking station wagons filled with dogs and children. Sarah felt like a guest at a stranger's cocktail party, listening to the conversation with comprehension but no involvement. *I should feel insulted*, she thought, *why don't I feel insulted?*

They had reached the crest of the hill now and had stopped. Deep said "What are you thinking?"

Sarah said, "I want to go back. I need to change my tampon."

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During lunch, the dull ache in Sarah's lower abdomen became a concentrated mass of pain so fierce that she found herself gasping softly to herself, hoping that she couldn't be heard. As soon as she could, she excused herself to the bedroom and lay down. It felt good to be on her back, but the pain didn't let up. It was a small hard fist of pressure, a living presence. *It's just got to do its thing*, thought Sarah, *it's not actually malicious*. She thought of the limitless inner world of her pelvis and the mute scream making its inexorable way out of the avocado-shaped muscle in which it had been held captive. *Come out*, she spoke to it, in her mind. *Don't be afraid. I won't deny your presence*. Instead of running away from the pain, she would disarm it with attention. *Come, she thought at it, let me look at you, let me understand your structure*.

It was dark, she decided, and glossy. A glossy pain. A deep, rich blue, royal in its own way. Forceful. Powerful.

She could see it as a male entity, a strong, husky bellow. *But I don't resent you*, she thought, *isn't that interesting?* It was possible to look steadily into the centre of the pain and in some undefined way, celebrate it. It was a trial by strength, a specialized type of wrestling match between her body and itself. There was no victor or loser, the struggle itself was everything. *You fill me*, she thought. *Here I lie, supine, while you, confined as you are to a passage no thicker than a pencil's lead, no longer than an AA battery, are able to irradiate my entire being so that I feel your heat from the farthest limit of my toes to the roots of my hair*. She thought of the sparking network of nerves which, moment to moment, sent in their bulletins of sensation from locations around the multiple dimensions of her existence, yet none of them could drown out the roar being broadcast from her uterus, from her cervix.

She smiled, her eyes shut, concentrating on fashioning something positive out of her pain. She didn't see Deep enter the room, walk silently around the queen-size bed and stop when he was by her side.

She opened her eyes.

"Why are you smiling?" he asked in a whisper.

She paused before she answered, not certain that it was wise to share her secret. Then she relented. "Because," she whispered back, "I'm in pain."

"Pain?" His face puckered immediately in concern. He sat down, causing the edge of the mattress to buckle under his sudden weight. "Is it serious? Have you taken anything for it?" His voice was suddenly loud.

"No!" she whispered, lifting her head off the pillow in her earnestness, "no! I'm sort of . . . enjoying it . . ." She relaxed once more, taking his hand in hers.

Deep stared at her, frowning. "I don't understand you any more," he said. He had the kind of expression on his

face that men get when they start to ask themselves whether the woman in front of them is experiencing a mind-altering hormonal storm. "How can you enjoy pain?"

She said, "I'm trying it out. You know, an experiment I can visualize it, I can sort of imagine it as a — a — kind of —"

He said, "How do you know you're not seriously unwell?"

"I'm just bleeding. It's a normal, natural event."

He continued to look suspicious and unconvinced.

She shifted to her side. "I don't know why, but it's different this time. It's not just blood coming out, but sort of *chunks* of stuff. So — of course it hurts. The pain is from expelling solid matter, from pushing it through the narrow passage —" She saw the expression of distaste on his face and stopped. "What's the matter?" she said. "You look as if you're going to be sick!"

He turned his face away. "In India," he said, "we don't talk about such things. Women's blood. We just don't talk about it."

She allowed a spasm to pass through her before answering. "But Deep," she said. "This isn't India, this is here." She paused. "I don't mean America, either. I mean, this is Here!" She patted the surface of the bed. "The special space we make between us, the space of just our own reality! No immigration officers, no bureaucrats to tell us what to say or how to sit and stand! We're the authorities Here, we're the ones who decide what we want to talk about!"

His head was moving about, he was hunching his shoulders in discomfort. "It's not realistic," he said, "to think that way. We're private individuals as well as social entities, affected by and affecting the realities within which we live." He looked at her. "You're not just Sarah, my

girlfriend. You're also a — an American black, you have your history and your separate destiny. If I took you back with me to India, people would stare at you, they'd stare at your hair and your different race and my own relatives would reject you. Reject my choice of you — even though we're almost the same colour." He looked at her now. "I've told you this before but I don't know whether you've really understood it. I'd never be able to take you there. I'd never want to expose you to that kind of humiliation."

Sarah said, "Deep, is that how you think of me? As a Black Woman?"

He shrugged, trying to wriggle away from the simple trap she had laid for him. "I see you as Sarah. And as a woman. And as an African American." Then he turned it around. "You do it too! You see me as a foreigner, as an Indian! Admit it — the novelty is part of what attracts you!" He shook his head wearily. "We can't wipe away our colours and our bone-structures! When we try to, we risk losing things which are important, we risk becoming cultural zombies —" He swept his arms wide, indicating the whole country, perhaps the whole western hemisphere. "Isn't that what the West is suffering from? A loss of meaningful tradition?"

Sarah turned her face into the pillow and breathed a few times to suppress the giggle which she knew would upset him if he could hear it. She had had an irreverent thought and wasn't sure whether she had the energy to express it or not. Then she looked up. "We have TV," she said. "We have K Marts and Hollywood —" But he was already shaking his head. "We have Star Trek and Superman. Freeways and credit cards —"

"No!" he exploded. "It isn't the same! It isn't the same at all!"

She said, "— the only difference is, it's not old, it's not gilded with time —"

He said, "This just shows how impoverished you are!" Sarah said, "— and we haven't had generations of historians to show us how unique and precious what we have is — because we still have it! It's not lost under some ocean or sunk under centuries of poverty! It's in the Coke bottles and in the chewing gum and the neon lights and — and — all the things that you sneer at so much!"

He paused a moment. "And anyway," he said, "where do you fit, in this world of Superman and Star Trek? Those are the white man's myths — you can't claim them as your own!"

Sarah tucked a pillow into her belly and curled around it. A new fist of pain had begun to form and was forcing its way down and out of her. She would have liked to moan softly, but it would have created too much of a response in Deep. She didn't want to give him that satisfaction. She wanted to end the discussion. She closed her eyes and made her voice sleepy. "Sure I can claim them!" she said. "I'm American, right? They're part of me. . . even when I'm not a part of them." She patted his hand away. "Now leave me to sleep."

He waited a few moments to see if she meant it, then got up and left, saying nothing. She continued lying on her side for a while, thinking about their talk and about the pain inside her, wondering whether it was abnormal after all and at what point she should seek medical help. She asked herself what she had liked about Deep in all these months. He had seemed gentle, she decided, that was what had attracted her. He wasn't a big burly jock. He didn't come on strong. He was cool, soft-spoken and always thoughtful. His colour was. . . well it was there, an added factor, but it was only colour, nothing else. It didn't

go deep. She smiled at the pun on his nickname. Deep, short for Deepak. He said his name meant "light". A tiny flickering flame. When he had asked her what her name meant, she had said she didn't know. He had teased her and at the time she had thought nothing about it. But now she realized, it must have been of consequence to him, one more sign of her inferiority on the scale of traditional values.

Something he had told her long ago returned to her mind. He had been speaking about his parents, how his father had come to the US. He had come as a student, stayed to become a citizen, set up his practice and then, when he had a respectable income, had gone home to India to have a bride selected for him. He had married Deep's mother after having met her once, formally, surrounded by all their relatives, unable to exchange more than two words of conversation. "Tea?" she had asked him and he had answered, "Yes."

It had bothered Sarah, that story. She had asked Deep what he thought about it, whether he thought it was right for two complete strangers to get married. He had shrugged and said that they weren't really strangers. They both came from similar families, with similar customs and similar food. Aside from the detail of personality, they were very much alike.

Sarah had laughed at that phrase "detail of personality" — "But personality's *everything!*" she had exclaimed, "not just a detail!" Deep had got offended then and said that every culture had its traditions and it wasn't right to laugh at his. She had asked him if he would get married like that. And he had said, shuddering, "No! Never!"

But she wondered about that now. He's American, she thought to herself, he's a citizen and yet it's only on the surface. Inside, he's this other thing. He had explained

once that to be born into a strong tradition was to know the steps to an intricate dance which started with birth and ended with death. "When you know all the steps, by heart, you don't have to think any more. — you are the dancer and the dance," he had said and she had loved the mystery, the poetry of it. It hadn't occurred to her to ask him what happened when a dancer found himself alone on the floor of a different tradition. Could the steps of one dance fit the music of another? Could classical ballet perform to rap?

The pain, having reached a peak, began to subside. She fell into a light sleep, awakening to dampness which demanded immediate attention. She rolled over the side of the bed to avoid bringing her bottom into contact with the bed and went to the bathroom. Blood darkened the crotch surfaces of her panties, her panty-hose, her jeans. It took her twenty minutes to wash away all traces of it. She started to hang the clothes up in the bathroom, then stopped.

Deep's mother might well come in here and find the clothes. She'd know at once what they meant. It was highly likely that she would demand that all Sarah's clothes be washed by hand, by Sarah, in the basement. *Once you entered the logic of clean and unclean blood, you could find your way around the maze fairly easily*, thought Sarah. The bleeding woman is penalized for being in that "state". The correct condition, of course, is to be pregnant or nursing. Older women, like Deep's mother, had the loss of their own fertility as an added reason for wanting to punish younger women.

Sarah wrung her clothes out carefully and packed them into plastic bags. She started packing the bags into her backpack and then, without really thinking about it or planning anything, packed her other stuff as well.

Downstairs, the house was silent. Deep's car was not in the driveway. Maybe he had gone shopping with his mother. Sarah let herself out the front door, checking behind her to make sure that it was locked. Then she set off. Overhead the sky was grey. There were random snowflakes gusting about, but no storm had been forecast. Within an hour she had boarded a bus and was on her way back to Cornell.

It was evening by the time she got back to the apartment she shared with three other women. There was a message on the answering machine for her from Deep. "Call me," he said, "as soon as you hear this. I need to speak to you. Are you all right?"

So she called him.

"Why did you leave?" he asked in his direct way. "My mother was very upset. She said it was bad for you to travel while you were bleeding like that. She says you might get very sick. You don't understand her at all. She's really concerned for you."

"Tell her," said Sarah, "that I'm all right. Tell her I like to bleed and that I especially like to travel when I'm bleeding. Tell her that I got stains all over the seat of the bus and that everyone knew, by the end of the trip, that I was bleeding because I had to stop so often to get off and change my tampon. Will you tell her all of that?"

Deep said, "She asked me if I was going to marry you."

Sarah said, "Oh yeah?" and there was a silence.

Deep said, "She told me that it was all right if I wanted to, that she liked you, that she felt you were right for me." There was another silence. "Sarah," he said, "what's the matter with you? Did I say something wrong?"

"No," said Sarah, shutting her eyes.

"Look, Sarah —" said Deep. "You know what I said? About not taking you to India? Well, I was thinking about

it, you know and I can see now that it could be all right too: I mean things have changed, even in India. My mother accepts you and that's a big thing. I think it could be different. It *would* be, I'm sure of that, perhaps."

Sarah said, "Do they wear tampons there? In India?" There was a pause before Deep said, "Sarah, I don't think you realize yet what a powerful statement we can make by being together —"

Sarah said, "You didn't answer my question."

He asked her to repeat her question and she did. He said, his voice sounding stiff, "I don't know. I don't know about those things."

Sarah said, "Well, how about your mother then: did she wear tampons?"

Deep said, "Sarah, I don't think these are proper questions."

Sarah said, "...or Maxi Pads? You could tell her that I'm thinking of changing from tampons to pads because I no longer want to hide my blood from myself."

Deep said, "Sarah, you *know* these are not proper subjects for discussion."

"I don't know anything," said Sarah, "just now, except that it matters very much to me to have answers to these very things. Because — you know what? I've decided that the only level of culture I care about is the kind which makes my own life reasonable and intelligent. Listening to music and hanging paintings on the wall is all very well, but if at the end of the day someone wants me to hide my blood underground and to behave like an invalid — forget it, you know? If that's what tradition means, then I say, take it off the shelf. Leave it out. My packet of ultrathin, E-Z wrap pads and what it represents to me about the journey my generation of women has made, is all the tradition I need."

"Sarah," said Deep, "are you comparing five thousand years of civilization to..." he choked on the words "...feminine hygiene products?"

"Yes," said Sarah and put the phone down.

## Sepia Tones

By

Usha K R

*Sepia Tones won the Katha Award for Creative Fiction in English, 1995, and was published in the Katha Prize Stories Volume 5.*

### 1

When I come out of the kitchen, the verandah is empty. The plantain leaves have been removed and the place cleared of the remains of the meal. My husband is seeing off the last guests at the gate. I stand still, looking aimlessly across the garden. Not a leaf stirs. The sunlight is harsh, the gulmohurs fringing the compound a blaze of red. If I stand under them I know I will hear the continuous chirring of the cicadas.

On a dhurrie on the floor, in the coolest part of the verandah, my son lies asleep, his fine limbs flung out, one fist curled tight, his mouth making involuntary sucking motions. The first son of an only son, it is his first birthday, my first major social event... so many firsts... and it has been a success. I can tell from the warm looks of approbation that have been resting on me throughout the day. The meal was faultless. I was generous in my gifts to all the sumangalis and even the sternest of them had smiled approval. I had been certified fit for matronhood by all those who mattered. Fledgelings would now seek my approval and I could cut them down with the merest lift of an eyebrow. I should be glowing, replete...

The sound of laughter floats up from the gate. I rest my head against one of the cool smooth pillars. A figure at the far end of the verandah catches my eye. It is Rama Rao Mama, his patrician head in profile, hands reposing on the knob of his walking stick. Is it some kind of bitter-sweet irony that he should be the last guest to leave? Some desideratum just about eludes my mind and grasp. All I feel is a vague sort of incompleteness. Perhaps it is just the emptiness that overcomes you briefly after an event that you have been preparing feverishly for, goes off well.... Yet, this seems deeper, more vital. Rama Rao Mama stirs as I approach. "Ah!" he says, "It was a splendid lunch, truly splendid !" His voice is thick with nostalgia.

"Here, Mama, have another beeda." I smile. He demurs a little and then watches in silence as I fold one for him.

"The holiges were wonderful. Just the way they should be. Crisp on the outside but soft and succulent when you break off a piece. I had two." He nods with satisfaction. "Much before we sat down for lunch, I could tell from the aroma that came from the kitchen that they would be excellent."



I would have been surprised if the holiges had been anything but excellent, considering the way Nayana, Amma and I had sweated over them the whole morning. I had lost count of the number of little balls of dough we rolled out, stuffing each with coconut or jackfruit or banana filling, patting them into shape on banana leaves to finally cook on greased tavas. Anyway, we had had the satisfaction of seeing batch after batch of golden brown holiges disappear into the verandah, as the tottering pile in the kitchen diminished.

"You have not had lunch yet?" It is part query, part statement. "It's a pity that even the last platter of holiges went back empty. We seem to have finished them all." He shakes his head. I'm a little surprised and quite touched by his consideration. I did not think he had noticed.

"That is of no consequence." I rise to the occasion. "You have enjoyed the meal and that is enough for us."

"Ah! You speak just like your mami. I'm the woman of the house, Vasuki would always say with a smile." He gazes across the verandah ... into a distant past. "Who hosts the passing guest and waits for more, Will be hosted by the gods..." he murmurs. "Truly, she was Annapoorna Devi incarnate..."

He stops short. I suspect he is close to tears. Amma says he was very attached to his wife. He blows his nose and pats me on the shoulder. "There never was a festival without a feast in our house," he says, half to himself. "And what holiges your aunt used to make! Do you remember, child? I haven't come across anyone who can make them better." His chin drops to his chest.

Vasuki Mami and her holiges. How can I forget? Now, after almost half a lifetime, I have come full circle.

Vasuki, handpicked bride for the budding young advocate, Rama Rao. He had insisted on an educated girl and she had studied up to the fifth form in nothing less than an English medium missionary school, a rare and remarkable achievement for her time. Vasuki, the bearer of an eponymous name. Her father, imaginative enough to let literary allusions colour his life, had named his daughter after the poet Thiruvalluvar's wife, who throughout her married life did not question her husband's strange habit of placing a small bowl of water and a needle by the side of his leaf as he sat down to his meal every day. Finally, on her death-bed, she asked him. I had kept those to pick up any grains of rice that you may accidentally drop outside my leaf while serving, he explained. And did I ever drop any? No, he replied, I never had occasion to use them. Reassured, she died a happy woman. Vasuki, beloved wife of the poet Valluvar. And Vasuki, beloved wife of my ordinary, uncelebrated Rama Rao Mama.

My grandfather and his brother -- Vasuki's father -- lived side by side in Kolar. Their children had a shared childhood. Much older than my mother, Vasuki was considered some sort of a guiding light for the girls in the family. Amma and her sisters had grown up constantly hearing, "Look at Vasuki!" Fair, in a houseful of dark girls, slim, with almond-shaped eyes -- I can see Amma gesticulate as she describes her cousin -- "Her name should have been Nagaveni, her plait was as thick and as long as a snake! She walked like a gazelle ... her feet had such arched insteps!" She was the first girl in the family to go to school and what a catch she had made in Rama Rao Mama!

When Amma got married and moved to Mysore, Rama Rao Mama already had a flourishing law practice there. Amma was stepping out of Kolar, out of the shelter of her large family, for the first time in her life. And Vasuki, her children almost as old as Amma, had taken my mother under her wing, for which Amma always remained grateful. My brother and I practically grew up in Vasuki Mami's house.

Vasuki Mami and Rama Rao Mama lived in a large house in Cubbonpet which had a sprawling, unkempt garden. The compound wall had collapsed in many places and cows were always wandering in. Someone from the house would make half-hearted attempts to drive them out. The house itself was oddly disjointed. One room seemed unconnected with another, as if each had a mind of its own and the builder had just frozen them in the act of straying. The drawing room, with its plump sofa covered with shiny rexine, off which we were forever sliding, and its plastic flowers arranged on teapots, was the only room which knew its place. At one end of the room was a large showcase crowded with silver cups -- it was never clear who had won them -- gilt ornaments and a few genuinely good pieces of china which Rama Rao Mama had picked up during a trip abroad. His office was in a separate wing and strictly out of bounds. Otherwise, we had the run of that house.

I remember the house always overflowing with people -- children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, relatives, clients and hangers-on. Rama Rao Mama, famous for his hospitality, prided himself on keeping an open house. When Mama's grandchildren came for the holidays, I spent days at a stretch in their house. We had put up a rope-swing on the mango tree. While the girls spent the afternoon on it, the boys played lagori and cricket. When it grew too hot to stay outdoors, we would play House in the inner courtyard or sing songs.

There is a photograph of Vasuki Mami in Amma's album -- contented, matronly, in a fluid Mysore crepe silk saree, holding a bare-bottomed child on her knee, a gentle smile playing about her lips -- much like a Ravi Varma painting. But the Vasuki of real life had cavernous eyes and gnarled hands. She always seemed to be hurrying from one room to another with a preoccupied, slightly anxious expression as if she had just dealt with one crisis and was on her way to confront another. Amma often talked of Vasuki, of her beauty, the adventurous streak in her. She used to describe the great escapade when Vasuki and her sister had stolen off one morning on two buffaloes tethered in the yard,

startling the people of Kolar out of their wits. But I could see Vasuki Mami only in the eternal present, in the gloomy kitchen, its gloom underscored by the dully gleaming brass vessels, in the dark passageway where damp clothes forever flapped in your face, in the wet bathroom paved with ugly grey stones and, lined along its wall, coconut shells full of ash and tamarind pulp used for scouring vessels. I don't think she ever went out of the house. In fact, I wonder if she had ever ventured round the whole house of which she was mistress. Her ambit was the kitchen, the passage leading from it, the bathroom, the inner courtyard where she went to do the washing and to hang clothes, and the two rooms downstairs where her daughters were housed, when they came for their confinements.

Which brings me to the children. Vasuki Mami always had an infant on her hip, and one or two older children trailing her. She could calm the worst of tantrums without raising her voice. I can see her stirring things over the fire with the ladle in her right hand while her left patted to sleep a tiny form draped over her shoulder. As we wove in and out of the courtyard during the course of our games, "Here," she would call out and, wiping her hands on her saree, thrust a mysore pak into a willing hand. I can distinctly feel her warm, slightly damp touch. Her hand, smelling of asafoetida and coriander leaves, would caress the back of my head and come to rest heavily at the nape of my neck.

Truly, she was miraculous with children. Of course, she had a lot of practice. By the time she had set the last of her nine children on his feet, her eldest daughter had come for her first confinement. The other five followed. The older ones had their second and third babies even before the younger ones could have their first. At one time, there were three children born in the space of a month. The two dark rooms downstairs, their curtains always drawn, the air thick with an overpowering resinous odour which I have come to associate with sickness, was where the women, wan and swathed in mufflers, padded around in socks and slippers, speaking in whispers.

I could never quite make out how Vasuki Mami attended to the ceaseless flow of visitors as efficiently and with as much genuine interest as she did. "Mama wants coffee in the office!" was a constant refrain and she would hasten trayfuls of wobbly steel tumblers with the first person she came across. Relatives and close friends were pulled into the dining room and sat upon a stool in the corner. How are the children? Is Chandu's cough any better? Padma's baby must be three months old now. Has it started turning over yet? I hope she remembers the betel leaf and castor oil treatment for its constipation. Nothing else is as effective. How is the rock-salt poultice working on your father's knee? A pity about Pathamma. I hear she is sinking and her elder sister in Coimbatore still going strong. Of course, it is all as He wishes.... Before I forget, tell your mother as soon as you get home to drop that Belgaum alliance for your sister. I met Gauramma at Chalu's son's upanayanam ceremony and the things she told me! The boy's father had once come to her place and coughed from beginning to end. And such a racking cough it was, too. One can never tell...

Birth, marriage, illness, death – with celebrations thrown in for relief. Any excuse would do for a feast – a festival, a child's birthday, a tithi. We were part of the family, so an integral part of such occasions. I have fattened on Vasuki Mami's lunches.

The huge brass cauldrons would be out in the courtyard. The women, resplendent in silk, faces glowing as they paused between stirring one bubbling vessel and throwing a handful of something into another, for a snatch of conversation here, a query there. Is this your Gowri puja saree? I haven't seen it before.... Full six yards and you won't believe how little I paid for it. Of course, I got it from Kanchipuram... What? You want the coconuts? Ask Girija. She has the key to the store.

Vasuki Mami herself would be here, there and everywhere, her saree with the broadest jari border easily, at least a six-inch one -- Rama Rao Mama always did the right thing by her, but she lumped the pleats about her waist and tucked the pallu mercilessly as if it were any old saree. We would be darting in and out of the kitchen, trying to sneak off with handfuls of things, aware that the custodians of the kitchen had lowered their guard. We were in the thick of life and the moment was everything.

Then lunch would be served. First the children. Then, the men. Next, the women guests and in the end, the women of the household. Vasuki would supervise each round herself. What grand meals they were! The plantain leaf edged with curries, kosambari and gojju. The meal would begin with the twin combination of tauvve and majjige huli followed by the more mundane saaru, but even that seemed magically transformed into a delicacy. Then the sweets -- payasa and laadus for starters and last, the much awaited holiges.

Vasuki Mami's were out of this world. She would insist that guests have at least two each, especially the men, even if they held their hands over their leaves and made little demurring noises. And she made the holiges all by herself, with little assistance from the other women of the house. I remember her now sitting on the kitchen floor, perspiring profusely, dangerously close to the huge hissing tavas. She would work her deft fingers across the lump of dough, part it into shape, and then toss it expertly on to the waiting tavas.

And the variety of holiges she could make! White, wafer-thin sugar holiges that just melted in the mouth but were the very devil to make, which gourmets rate the highest. Next in order were the ones with pulse or coconut filling and finally, my favourites, the seasonals, with banana and jackfruit filling, which surprisingly, the adults never thought much of.

I remember one day well -- her grandson's birthday. It was the height of the jackfruit season. The yard was heaped with the thick, prickly skin of the jackfruit. The golden pulp was being cooked in a cauldron. A sweet, pungent smell hung in the air and filled our nostrils. Vasuki Mami was in her element, seeing to it personally that everyone had their fill. The holiges had never come out better and we demolished them with gusto.

The meal was over. All the guests had left. Even the servants had cleared up and gone. We were to leave later in the evening. Amma and her cousins had rolled out their mats in the rooms downstairs and were preparing to lie down. I was all ready to curl up near them, listening to their talk, when Lakshmi Mami called me, to take a message to Vasuki Mami who was still in the kitchen.

I was almost fifteen then, so a little piqued that I should be shaken out of my post-prandial stupor for such a trivial thing when there were so many small children about. I remember walking sullenly to the kitchen door.

And there, on her haunches on the floor, engulfed in a flame of colour – for she was sitting directly in the way of the dazzling shaft of light bursting in from the only skylight in the room – was Vasuki Mami, in her brand new brick-red, gold-edged saree, searching among the remains of the large, almost empty, holige platter. I caught her eye just as she was pushing a fistful into her mouth, her chin dusted with the fine, yellow pollen of the crumbs. The act itself may have gone unnoticed if it had not been for the look on her face -- that startled, shamefaced, slightly cringing, pitifully human expression, as if I had suddenly caught her naked, in all the flabby ugliness of late middle age.

I don't remember whether I delivered my message or not.

The memory of Vasuki Mami scrounging among the crumbs in the kitchen should have faded like an old sepia print but I have kept it alive through deliberate recall. Refracted through the prism of my mind, it has acquired various hues – sometimes monstrous and exaggerated, sometimes pitiable, even tragic, or pathetically funny, sometimes matter-of-fact, but always disturbing.

3

I become aware of Nayana and my mother-in-law standing on either side of me. Rama Rao Mama is silent, his head bowed. My son turns over on his side, whimpers and settles down again. Amma is asking about Rama Rao Mama's health. He murmurs his thanks and takes leave of us. Amma and I walk down to the gate with him. He has a slow, deliberate gait, suggestive of gravity, of self-consequence. After a protracted leave-taking we walk back quietly to the house. My calves and thighs tug sharply. I realize how tired and hungry I am.

Impatient with us, Nayana, my sister-in-law, has laid three places and served the side dishes. She reaches for the holige vessel and her face crumples with disappointment. I walk to the corner of the kitchen and reach out for the round steel dabba, which I had pushed out of sight on the topmost shelf. I open the box and breathe deeply. They are a little damp, the holiges, but still warm and firm. I put out two on each of our leaves. Nayana and Amma like theirs with milk. I pour a generous libation of ghee on mine. I

break off a piece and push it to the edge of the leaf. That is for Vasuki. Then we put our heads down and eat with singleminded concentration.

#### Notes

Who hosts ... Quotation from Thiruvalluvar's Kural, taken from P S Sundaram's translation : Thirukural, Penguin India, 1990.

Thiruvalluvar: The most honoured poet of classical Tamil literature, he probably lived and wrote sometime between the second century BC and the eighth century AD.

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