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A Father's Son

Sandeep Kumar Mishra

The mourners were not plentiful the day of the funeral. Charvik Sharma had not been a popular man in this life, having dedicated very little time to cultivating and maintaining relationships. Sahil, his eldest, watched the people move about in respectful silence, occasionally stopping at one of his siblings or mother to offer quiet condolences while the chanters continued through their mantras. Some made their way over to him, but he had nothing to say to them in return. Everything was too fresh. Sahil wasn't sure how he felt about his father's death yet. He hadn't even seen his father for at least ten years before now, having gone off to live with his aunt while still a boy.

He looked over at his mother, his brother Ishaan, and his sister Shaleena. His mother looked sad at least, but Ishaan and Shaleena looked about as numb as he doubtless did. He wondered what the past ten years had been like for them. If their father had changed at all since failing Sahil.

He would never forget the first time his father struck him. It was a miserable, humid day, the air so wet that you could almost taste it. Charvik was home, classes having been let out, and was especially short of temper.

Sahil, still a small child at the time, refused to go outside to play. "It's too hot," he remembered protesting. "I'll melt!"

His mother had gently but firmly encouraged him to go outside anyway. "You won't melt, I promise. But you really should go outside. The sun is good for you."

"I don't want to!" His little voice rose in aggravation.

"Sahil, my darling, please go outside." His mother looked around, fear coloring her face. It was the first time Sahil

could recall seeing his mother afraid, though it would not be the last. Charvik appeared around the corner, his face an oncoming storm, and Sahil instinctively understood his mother's fear.

"What is the meaning of this noise?" It was less a question than a demand.

Sahil ventured a reply. "I don't want to go outside."

The baleful gaze Charvik leveled at his son burned into the young boy's soul. "I heard your mother tell you to go outside. Why do you stand there mewling?"

"I—"

SLAP.

"Do as you're told! If I see you in the house again before supper you will get twice as bad!" Tears ran unchecked down Sahil's face, and he bolted through the door before his father could rebuke him for those, too. Oblivious to his surroundings he fled off into town, and did not dare return home until well after dark.

"Sahil?"

Sahil glanced over to find his sister standing beside him, her previously numb expression now one of concern. "Yes, Shaleena?"

"I just... I wondered if you were alright. You've barely spoken a word since coming home." Home. This was not his home anymore, hadn't been his home since he had been sent away. "I'm fine. Just a little impatient to be done with this."

Shaleena nodded. "You and father never did get along."

Sahil gave her a glance. "You say that as though I am unique in that respect."

She shrugged slightly. "He... tried, I think, to make some small amends. He never apologized, not in as many words, but he was... softer." She hesitated, as though weighing her words. "I think he missed you."

Sahil scoffed. "I find that unlikely."

Shaleena was quiet for a long moment after that. "Well, I missed you at least. And I'm glad you came back, even if it's just for this." She briefly touched his arm, then moved back

towards their mother without further comment. He allowed his mind to wander again, passively listening to the chants and watching the dancing flames of a candle.

“I know your father was very cruel.” Sahil shook his head and looked over to where his Aunt Shashi was addressing him. “Perhaps he will be kinder in his next life.”

Sahil couldn’t reply to that. He wasn’t certain his father deserved another life.

“I am sorry you did not get to say goodbye,” his aunt ventured again. She was a kind woman, almost a second mother to Sahil, but she was too forgiving.

“I am not.” The first words Sahil had spoken since the funeral began. “We said everything we needed to say to each other a long time ago.”

A young Sahil stood nervously in his father’s cramped office. Their small house afforded little enough space for their steadily growing family, yet Charvik refused to give up this room. Sahil had no idea what it was for, he just knew that his father’s claims to it meant that he and his new brother Ishaan would be sharing a room.

“Your brother will be your responsibility,” he remembered his father saying sternly, eyes intense and hard. “I expect you to take the responsibility.”

Sahil didn’t speak. He knew by then that discussions with his father were not truly discussions, they were just brief moments when his father bothered to remember he had a child long enough to impart specific instructions. Any words on Sahil’s part would earn him a backhand, and that was if his father was in a decent mood.

“That means helping your mother feed and change him, teach him, and—”

“Keep him out of your way?”

The words were a mistake—Sahil knew that before he said them, but sometimes he couldn’t help himself. He stood defiantly as the fury entered his father’s eyes. He would feel the repercussions of that remark for a long time, and remember them even longer.

Sahil wasted no time after the traditional ten day mourn-

ing period to get back to his life. The fact that he even had to take ten whole days off irritated him, and he was unreasonably short with his family because of it. He wanted to leave this house and its memories, wanted to get back to his own wife and child and job, and wanted to burn the past away just as the body had been burned. On the tenth day his brother found him alone and sat beside him. Sahil looked over skeptically; he and his brother had never been close and disagreed often, and had hardly spoken to each other these past days.

“I assume you plan to leave with the sun,” Ishaan began, not looking over.

“Before the sun, if I can manage it. I have a long ride home and the earlier I start the earlier I am back where I belong.”

Ishaan shook his head. “You never cared for home.”

“You make it sound like I chose to leave in the first place,” Sahil countered, frowning.

“Perhaps not. But you did choose not to come back.”

“Father—”

“Damn it, Sahil, this isn’t about Father!” Ishaan stood suddenly with this outburst, spinning so he looked down at Sahil. “You left more than Father behind! You left Shaleena and Mother too, or did you think being sent away to school freed you from your responsibilities as eldest?”

“I checked in when I could. Everything was under control, and Father didn’t want me back besides.”

Ishaan threw his arms in the air. “Typical Sahil. Always running from Father. If you only gave him the respect he deserved, perhaps—”

“You want to talk to me about respect?” Sahil was standing now. “You call abusive behaviors worthy of respect?”

“He was our father. He deserved your respect regardless.” Ishaan began to head back inside, but paused in the doorway. “But I don’t see you’ll listen to me. You’ll just run, like you always have.”

By sunrise on the eleventh day he was packed and ready to go, not even staying for breakfast. He had nothing more

to say to his mother or siblings, and they had lived the past ten years without him; there was no reason to stay here any longer. So he quickly and quietly slipped out of the home of his childhood to catch the first train of the day and refused to look back.

As he walked, his thoughts wandered. He looked forward to home, hoped the train was running on time, hoped his wife Viha had set aside some dinner for him, and a thousand other thoughts like these—anything to get his mind off where he was and what had just happened and get him moving forward. He was so focused on putting the past behind him that he didn't notice the football until it was almost too late.

With a small yelp he bobbed his head to the side, narrowly avoiding a head-on collision with the flying ball. He shook his head, startled and confused, and looked around for the ball's owner. He spotted them easily enough, a young boy—who was smiling apologetically—and his father—who was laughing—just down the road. The father jogged towards Sahil.

“My apologies,” he began, still laughing a little. “My son and I like to come out for a little game before I have to go to work, and we are unaccustomed to sharing the road so early.”

Sahil took a moment to gather his wits before answering. “Ah... it is alright. I was not hit, so no harm.” His eyes drifted back to the boy. “You two do this... often?”

The father nodded. “Most mornings. I work long hours, so I cherish the moments I can. Surely you can understand this?”

Sahil looked back at the father. Such genuine happiness, speaking about his son, was something Sahil did not understand at all.

“Sahil, why does father never come out to play with us?”

Sahil didn't turn to look at his little sister. Shaleena was barely five, but already she was noticing that their house was not like the houses of some of her friends. Her father was practically a stranger to her, only seen at meals and on

holidays. No great loss there, Sihla thought with no small measure of distaste.

“Because he is too busy,” Ishaan said when it was obvious that Sahil had nothing to say.

“Busy with what?”

Ishaan paused. “Work, I guess.”

Shaleena clearly didn’t understand, but filed the information away nonetheless and pressed on to her next question.

“And why is he so sad?”

This got Sahil to speak. “You think he’s sad?” Shaleena nodded and Sahil scoffed. “Why do you think this?”

“Because he never smiles. Sad people don’t smile.”

It made sense, in a little kid logic sort of way, but Sahil had trouble picturing his father’s constantly sour expression as anything but angry.

“He isn’t sad,” Sahil said finally, frowning at the football by his feet. “I don’t know what he is, but he isn’t sad.”

This confused the little girl more but Sahil chose that moment to kick the ball and she took off after it, screaming with joy. Ishaan looked at Sahil and frowned. “Don’t speak of our father like that.”

Sahil rolled his eyes and watched Shaleena run. “Why not? It isn’t like he’s around to hear us, and even if he was he never listens to anything we say.”

“But—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Ishaan. Come on, let’s catch up to Shaleena.”

Given the early hour the train station was thankfully quiet, and Sihla managed to purchase his ticket and board with minimal wait. He also had his choice of seats for the long ride ahead of him. Settling his luggage above him, he sat heavily and sighed, thankful to be on the way home at last. The rest of his day promised to be an easy one, as it was nothing more tedious than waiting until he reached his stop that evening, then getting a cab to take him home. Comforted by these thoughts, he drifted into a light nap as the train began to move.

When he stirred a few hours later, he noticed the car was

significantly more crowded than it had been, with nearly all the seats outside of the one directly beside him taken. He also noticed a lone man who, noticing that Sahil was awake, headed his way.

“A thousand apologies, sir, but is that seat taken?” He indicated the seat beside Sahil.

“No. Please, sit.” The man nodded his thanks and situated his own luggage, pulling out a well-worn book before stashing the bags, and settled into the seat. Sahil’s eyes were instantly drawn to the cover.

The man noticed Sahil’s attention and held the book up for better inspection. “I take it you are familiar with ‘Songs of Kabir’?”

Sahil startled at the man’s question as though shocked. “Oh, ah, not as such. Or rather I have not taken the time to read that particular collection myself. Someone... I knew, they did. Spoke of it very highly.”

The man nodded understandingly and began flipping through the pages. “It is a good book. If you have any love of poetry, I highly recommend it.”

“I... shall keep that in mind.”

“Are you a student of poetry?”

“I teach a high school literature class and occasionally write my own pieces. Nothing worth publishing, but....”

The man nodded. “It’s nice to put thought to paper?”

“Exactly. And poetry has always been special to my family.”

“What are you reading?”

Sahil looked up from his own perch across the room from the conversation, watching where Shaleena had approached their father’s armchair and interrupted his reading with her question. He instinctively tensed, waiting for the cold dismissal or fiery rage at being disturbed; the first would cause Shaleena to run away hurt and Sahil to follow so he could calm her down, and the second would be directed at Sahil for not keeping her distracted in the first place. Either way it was about to become Sahil’s problem.

Yet Charvik did neither. Instead, he looked up slowly

and studied his daughter for a moment, as though trying to remember who she was and how he should react. Then he closed—actually closed—his book in order to show her the cover. “This is a book of poems. Can you read the title?”

Shaleena squinted at the letters. “Songs of Kabir?” She spoke slowly, careful to get every word correct. Sahil couldn’t help but be a little impressed. He hadn’t realized her reading skills had progressed so far.

Charvik smiled at her, and Sahil frowned in confusion. “That’s right,” their father said, sounding pleased. “Would you like to read some poems with me?”

Sahil looked back down to his own book, but he couldn’t focus on the words anymore. That was the kindest he’d ever seen his father behave towards anyone outside of their mother. He watched and listened as Charvik read to Shaleena, poem after poem after poem. He didn’t seem to grow tired, or annoyed, but rather he seemed almost... happy.

“Are any of these by you, dad?”

Charvik paused at that question. “No. I have written poems, but I have not been so blessed as to have them published.”

“Maybe someday?”

“Yes,” he said, a wistful look in his eyes. “Maybe someday.”

Hailing a taxi to take him from the train station to his home didn’t take long, thankfully. It was already much later than Sahil had hoped to arrive home, as a scheduling mixup with a different train had caused a delay of nearly two hours, and he was now more anxious than ever for the comfort of his wife and bed. As he was driven across the city, the driver made occasional attempts at small talk, most of which Sahil answered with polite but short replies, doing his best to avoid a protracted conversation. One comment, however, caused him to pay attention.

“Are you excited for the start of Onam tomorrow?”

Sahil blinked. “That’s tomorrow?”

The driver nodded. “I love Onam, personally. Well, specifically the Onasadya Feast, but the entire festival is fun.”

Sahil glanced at the driver's bulky figure and guessed that the man did not save feasting for the festival alone. "Do you participate?"

"Hurry, Sahil! Father wants us to be among the first visitors to the temple!"

Sahil groaned, stretched, and tried to rub the sleep from his eyes. "The... temple?"

"Yes, the temple!" Shaleena was entirely too excited and loud for this early hour. "It's the first day of Onam!"

Sahil shook himself more fully away and swung his legs over the side of his bed. Onam... he smiled a little as Shaleena scampered off, her mission accomplished. Father was always in high spirits during religious festivals and holy days, his usual dour expression lightened and stormy mood calmed. He might even be persuaded to give his children treats, so long as all the proper observances are met. "It is a holy day first and a festival second," he would solemnly intone. "Be respectful of that."

And they were. They were quiet and respectful, said the correct chants to the best of their abilities, and answered every question Charvik had for them about the origin of Onam. Then, finally, the religious observances were finished and it was time to decorate.

Their house was never so clean as it was during Onam. Everything practically sparkled with the effort put into cleaning. And between Shaleena and Charvik it was harder to find a house more thoroughly decorated, either. A veritable hillside's worth of flowers were braided together and hung on every door frame and window. Sahil looked at the flowers and frowned. What was it about flowers and a stupid festival that suddenly made his father so cheerful? Why couldn't he always be like this?

He wanted to tear all the flowers down.

Sahil slipped quietly into his home, unsure if his wife was still awake and knowing their infant son was not. He paused just inside, seeing the flower decorations all prepared for Onam. A frown tugged briefly at his lips, but he shook it away; the holiday had never done him any harm. Setting his

luggage down in the entryway and taking off his shoes to make as little noise as possible, he made a quick walk of the house.

Everything was spotless. His wife had done an excellent job keeping up with the cleaning, even with the added responsibility of their newborn. He smiled slightly as he paused by the dining room table, laying a hand on their son's highchair. She is a good woman. I hope I am a good husband to her. He wondered briefly if his father ever had the same concern.

He moved into his office and saw everything was just as he had left it. It was, by agreement, the only room she didn't routinely clean, as Sahil had his own method to the seeming madness. He knew where everything was and that was the important part. He looked over his papers, his bookshelf, the grading pens and the half-finished poems, and he frowned. It looked remarkably like how he remembered his father's office being laid out. How had he never noticed that before? "Am I becoming my father...?" The question was asked quietly, barely even whispered, as though Sahil was afraid of the answer. In a way he was; were not all men their fathers' sons? What hope did he have to build a better life for himself when he mirrored his father in even this tiny detail? In what other ways had he shaped himself after a man he... he what?

He missed. Here, in the darkness and the silence, he could admit it. He missed his father. Or, perhaps put better, he missed the idea of his father. He missed the connection he saw so often, even just coming home from the funeral. Someone he could talk to, someone he could play ball with, someone who led by example and listened to the worries of his children. Charvik had never been any of those things for Sahil, but he'd seen glimpses of that man in the way Shaleena interacted with him, and wondered if he had changed at all after Sahil had left. If he really had missed his son as much as his son now missed him, as Shaleena had suggested.

"It's too late for regrets," Sahil told his ghosts, trying to

push them away. “He’s dead. Whatever that may mean for him, it means to me that he is beyond reach.” Forgiveness and healing were beyond Sahil’s reach; there was no saving Charvik’s memory or salvaging the relationship. The abuse, the neglect, and the fear were all Sahil had to remember his father by, were Charvik’s only legacy to his son. But Sahil was more than his father’s legacy, more than the abuse and neglect and regret. He would prove that, to himself and to his family.

Sahil left his office and its ghosts and headed up the stairs. He paused midway up to look at the pictures hanging from the wall—him and his wife on vacation, on their wedding day, on the day they brought their son home for the first time. They were happy in those pictures. Sahil knew true joy in every moment captured and it showed. He thought back to pictures of his father; Charvik had rarely smiled in person and never for the camera. Even in the oldest photos he looked serious and stoic, never expressing joy in his life. “I am not you,” he whispered, wondering if Charvik’s spirit could hear him from wherever it had gone. “I will not be you.”

He finished climbing the stairs, bypassing his own bedroom to check on his son. The child was sleeping soundly, completely oblivious to the presence of his father, and Sahil smiled down at the small bundle. Resting a hand on the side of the crib and nearly crying for reasons he couldn’t explain, he made his son a promise. “I’ll do better. I swear, I will do better.”

The floor creaked softly, and Sahil looked over his shoulder to see his wife, wrapped in her dressing robe, squinting sleepily at him. “Sahil?” Her voice was barely audible, and he quietly crept over to her after a final look at his son. “I didn’t hear you come in.” She squinted at him again, then reached out and touched his face, concern taking over her expression. “You’re crying! What’s wrong?”

Sahil cupped her hand and smiled. “Nothing. Come, let us go back to bed. I am ready for today to end and tomorrow to begin.”