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Memorabilia

**A small wooden box unlocks the secret that has been kept
for many years. A story by Shashi Deshpande.**

As children, this had been a magical place for us, the room in which we'd transformed ourselves into exciting other beings – almost always queens and princesses. There were never any kings or princes, I remember, in our games. I think it was the finery that fascinated us four sisters. Old saris, bits of brocade, beads and bangles – why would we turn our backs on these to become men?

Now, looking at the box room, my only thought is; how quickly can I get through sorting all this stuff? I am worried that my mother will be reluctant to let go of things, apprehensive of a struggle with her. But to my surprise, she lets me do what I want with most of it, putting aside only the box of old photographs and her sewing machine. She's been this way ever since I told her about our decision – a disguised ultimatum, really – that it was time she gave up this home and lived with each of us in turn.

'Don't let her wriggle out of it,' my sisters warned me, but her ready acquiescences put an end to all my carefully rehearsed arguments. And we were left with a silence between us, a silence that to my guilty mind was dense with unspoken words: our impatience with her demands, our squabbles about whose turn it was to visit her; our complaints – 'for God's sake, doesn't she realize I have my home, my family, my life?'

Worse than her silence was her total passivity; she seemed to be waiting for me to tell her what to do next, like I had once done, holding out my hand, as it were, for instructions on what I was to do with my day. It was unnerving, but I had hardened myself. Pushing my advantage, I suggested that we start clearing things straight away.

So here we are in the box-room, surrounded by what she has so carefully stored over the years, treasures which have suddenly become trash. My murmurs have been met by her studious silence and suddenly I am exhausted by this behaviour, which seems so much like my adolescent daughter's mutinous non-cooperation.

'Let's complete this tomorrow,' I say and like a student released from an unwelcome task, she gets up. And then her eyes fall on something. 'Oh, but I want that,' she says with the urgent passion of a child. 'That' is a wooden kumkum box, which women once used for their combs and pins and the kumkum with which they mark their foreheads. It is in a sorry state, the wood discoloured, the lid in two pieces and the mirror, held precariously by one of the pieces, so spotted that it reflects nothing. But my mother, sitting down, props up the mirror with some difficulty and looks into it with the earnestness of a woman making up her face. Then, with infinite gentleness she puts the mirror face-down and says: 'This was my mother's.'

I know my mother lost her own mother when she was a child. She has never spoken of her, perhaps because she was never part of her life. But now, sitting in the box-room, in the midst of the memorabilia of her life, she tells me the story of her mother's death.

‘She died in childbirth,’ she begins. ‘I was only seven when she died.’

As she retrieves her memories, I can see that these are things she has not thought about for years: the memories emerge with a child’s focus, a child’s directness. When she speaks of visiting her grandparents’ home, I sense the joy of a town child in the freedom and open spaces of a large village.

Sometimes the memories seem to be revelations even to her. When she speaks of a day when she went out to play with the older children, leaving her little sister crying for her at home, I see on her face the child’s fear at her mother’s rage, the puzzled, resentful ‘What have I done wrong?’ look.



But, except for this once, she does not speak of her mother at first. And yet I am aware of her constant consciousness of her presence. I get the sense of a woman who has retreated from everything, even her children, absorbed in the child to be born, preparing for the task of giving birth.

And then she comes to the days the pains began. My mother had four younger siblings and at home women were constantly having babies; so the child knew in a hazy kind of way what was happening behind the closed doors. The muffled cries, the bustle, the women rushing in and out – none of these were strange or frightening for her.

‘But by night things had changed. We went to sleep as usual, but we were left to ourselves. My sister kept crying and I tried to soothe her, but it was impossible. We must both have fallen asleep some time and when they woke me up I thought it was morning. I went out into the backyard to relieve myself and I could see that the stars were shining bright and the cattle were still in the shed. So it was still night after all.’

She pauses for the first time since she began and in the silence I see the child squatting in the starlight listening to the rustle of cattle in the straw, unaware that these are, for her, the last few moments of her mother’s life.

‘I went back into the house. I must have been very confused because I went straight to the room my mother was in. They were lifting something – it looked like a bundle of old clothes. Then I saw the long hair streaming down almost to the floor and knew it was my mother. Somebody noticed me and said ‘What are you doing here?’ and shut the door on me. But not before I saw the blood – it was everywhere. She must have died just then. She bled to death. The baby was born dead.’

She stops again before going on. ‘We went back home then and for a while they made much of us. But such things happened often: women died, men married again and children grew up somehow. Like we did. There were enough women at home to look after us and after some time we scarcely felt her absence. She seemed to be forgotten. They rarely spoke of her and the few times they did, it was as if they were blaming her for her death.

“She was so stubborn,” I heard the women say. “She wouldn’t listen to anyone.”

I felt guilty when I heard them, as if I were associated with my mother’s wrong, whatever it was. And I was puzzled too. Why was it her fault?

‘Years later, when I was having my first child...’ Her eyes, fixed in an unseeing stare on my face, don’t seem to take it in that I am that first child. ‘...I realized that women went to their parents’ home only for their first baby. Why did my mother go home each time, and to a place where there was no other help than a village midwife? I

asked my aunt – my mother’s sister – about it. And I heard then what my mother had said. “If I’m here,” she insisted, “I may have a little more time between babies.” That last time she was really desperate, my aunt told me.

‘My sister was a strong woman, but what choice did she have?’

I haven’t noticed my mother’s tears until now when she gives a gulping sob like a child recharging herself with her grief.

‘That was her seventh child. And she was scarcely thirty. Six living children and God knows how many dead. Who counted the dead ones in those days?’

Unable to sleep that night, I hear the grandfather clock tick the minutes, chime the hours. Sounds that have kept my mother company in the years since my father died. What will we do with the clock? Can we find a place for it on our walls? Or for her photographs and sewing machine in our homes? My mother and I have never been very close. Yet today, in the room where my sisters and I had transformed ourselves into exciting other selves, my mother has revealed her true self to me. I can remember her holding a shell to my ear, saying ‘Listen, can you hear the sea?’ And in a while I thought I heard it, the distant boom boom of the waves. Now, in the forgotten tragedy of her angry, desperate mother’s death, it seems to me I have heard the resonances of her own life as well. ‘What choice did she have?’ Repeating her aunt’s words to me, she had added: ‘I understood what she meant when I was expecting my fourth child. Another girl, but I was luckier. I didn’t have to try again.’

The plan my sisters and I had so carefully plotted lies in shards all about me. I can no longer be part of it. I have to tell my sisters. I can imagine the expostulations, the reproaches, the angry cries that will greet my decision. ‘Why?’ they will ask me. ‘What has happened?’

I don’t know. My mother is still the same person, ageing, isolated, friendless, incapable of living alone yet reluctant to give up her home. I know that there will still be those periodic cries for our visits, the reproach if we don’t comply. No, nothing has changed. And yet everything has. I can’t explain to them, but if I tell my sisters the words ‘What choice did she have?’, will they understand?

Shashi Deshpande is an Indian writer and novelist. She has written five novels including *The Long Silence*.

