

novel extract

Martha

Rajee Seth

Rajee Seth, Hindi poet, critic and fiction writer, is currently a Fellow at IAS, Shimla. Author of ten books, she has translated into Hindi two collections of Rilke's letters. We carry below an extract from her novel Nishkavach. Raji Narasimhan's English translation of this novel, Unarmed, has just been released by Macmillan India Limited under their Modern Indian Novels In Translation series.

I hadn't been able to tell even Martha how I had been washed ashore to her doors. Day and night I had felt a voracious hole spreading in the dead centre of my belly, opening its maw wider and wider. To come to its full circumference it was pushing at my ribs. It would rest only after crushing my bones.

Often, on the verge of sleep, I'd feel I was about to be strangled, that even a scream wouldn't escape me. That I'd be left mewling. And who'd hear even if I did scream?

Heaven knows if it was Martha who found me or I who found her. It was eleven o'clock in the morning when she left me in the dungeon-like basement that she'd found for me and that passed for home.

Immediately on opening the door she had pointed at the ventilator above and said, 'There's snow out there. You can look at the snow from where you are lying.'

How could she know that not just the beauty of snow, but beauty of any kind, was not for me at that time. If pressed, I could have just about managed to express gratitude to her.

The night before, passing through the subway, a huge black had come straight up to me and given me a blow on the tip of my nose. I had hardly recovered from the twanging that ran all through my body when he snapped his fingers in front of my eyes and shouted, 'Take out all you have, pig.'

Not his twisted speech but his action brought his meaning to me. Tottering against the wall and trying to stay on my feet, I emptied my pockets. The subway exit coin was all that fell down, ringing with a hollow peal. Now he stretched out his arm and picked me up by the collar of my windbreaker. With his steel-heavy arm he hoisted me up in the air and flung me down. 'You bloody swine,' he swore and hicked my face with the tip of his boot and walked off.

When I opened my eyes I found myself at Zenith Photographers. Martha told me later that her partner

had carried me on his back to the studio. Carried me on his back? I was surprised. It was against my experience here. Whatever happened on the road, murder, killing, robbery, rape, the passer-by stuck to his job of passing by. Kindness? And to a coloured at that? Impossible.

Later Martha told me that the reward for an empty pocket was a bash up, like this. Best to keep something in the pocket always, to shut these dogs up. This was a new lesson to me in the uses of money. But whether for giving or living, money remained my immediate problem.

Seeing me open my eyes, Martha put aside the prints she had in her hand and bent over me.

'Are you O.K.?'

'Yes.'

A customer came in for prints. Through with him, she asked, 'You have work?'

'No.' I shook my head. The motion set off a clanging all along my veins. Why did Martha's presence seem like an infliction to me?

I just wanted to beat my head and cry, just soothe my inflamed pores.

'You have a home?' She asked gently.

'Not really.'

'Coffee?'

'Yes, please.'

This time I tried to say a few more words through my swollen lips.

Martha brought in black coffee from the trolley outside. I didn't want her help getting up, but she extended it.

'You work here?' It was my turn to ask questions now.

'No. Fifty-fifty partnership. I am half owner.'

'Half,' or 'haynph' as she said it, tilting the 'a' in her accent, was the famous American word for the nuances and gradations of many relationships: haynph mother, haynph father, ... son or sister.

'Keep sitting till I finish.' She said to me after drinking coffee.

Defly she moved from studio to darkroom, from darkroom to studio, totally unselfconscious in my

presence.

I kept sitting, silent, mute. There was nothing. Nothing within and nothing without. A vacuum surrounded and pressed against me, and in its centre a heap – my body. Beyond this, no sensation.

When about to close the studio, Martha shook me awake. Sometime before she had put me on the long settee outside, used for taking photographs. I must have slept heavily. That afternoon Martha had turned away all customers. She told me some days later.

She just worked at the counter.

Dropping the shutter of the studio, she said, 'If you want, you can get work here.'

'How will I work here? I stay far away in New Jersey. Under the bridge, in the slum area. It's far off.'

'If you work here you can live here too.'

That night I slept in Martha's apartment. The next day, before leaving for the studio she took me to the 'abode with kitchen and bathroom' that she found for me. Around eleven o'clock in the noon, pointing with her finger at the view outside the skylight she said, 'Look, just lying here, without stirring, you can see the snow.'

* * *

Avoiding Martha's eye, I took stock of the 'abode with kitchen and bathroom.'

A very low ceiling. Joined to the stained sink a small platform. Two shelves rising up as high as the ceiling. A battered fridge. Swarms and swarms of cockroaches. Some utensils scattered, their rims daubed with the remains of meals eaten by God knows who, when. From the ancient carpet on the floor rose a smell of fried eggs that seemed woven into it.

Martha was impatient to be off, now. Her impatience broke my survey work. When she left I sank into the sofa. If I kept standing, I felt, the ceiling that almost touched my head would crush me. Lying down flat seemed safer.

I stretched out, but the platform near the sink seemed to roll onto my chest. So near was it that the right turn of the sofa bed scraped it in its spread outward. By the side of the platform was a boiler. From it, two huge pipes tore through the ceiling, passing into the floor above. They seemed to be for warmth and hot water for the people in the major portion of the house.

Sharing the room with this stream of fire, sweat oozed out of me. In these winter days of snow and ice. I tried to steal the cold of the snow that Martha had pointed out to me. From

the sofa on which I lay, I caught sight of two rows of barbed wire cutting the piece of sky visible through the ventilator. It was hard to imagine, trapped in the room, that outside the door, it was so open that drifts of snow formed on the ground continually.

When and how long I slept I did not know. A din woke me.

Martha. She had come in with the help of the spare key, pushing the door open. A very cold draught and scissorings of vermilion coloured neon lighting entered the pitch dark room with her.

She turned on the light the moment she came in and threw her overcoat on the back of the chair. The kettle stood on the cold gas ring.

I remembered.

Some time ago, in the effort to be up and about a bit, I'd put the kettle of water on the gas, and not finding a lighter, had stretched out again on the sofa.

Martha's switching on the light meant 'get up.' But I wasn't able to. I felt ants were crawling all over me. My head was so heavy and dense that I wondered if my shoulders could bear its weight if it sank.

'Lazy bum. Get up. Still sleeping.' She flung away the bag on her shoulder and tried to pull me up from the hollow of the sofa.

Her effort went wide, so she curled up near me and ran her fingers over my brows.

I sat up with a jerk. I thought she was giving me an unwanted view of some private part of herself.

She got up too. Taking out her purse from her bag she said, 'Here's your forty dollars. Sold a jacket.'

'To whom?'

'How does it matter to whom? If you wish you can keep the rest of the jackets in the studio. They'll sell,' she said it all in dry, matter-of-fact tones.

Now she took out a brush from her purse and hurriedly ran it through her hair. Then a mirror with a small handle. She put a new coating of colour on her lips. Then she tied a scarf round her head. It was preparation for meeting the cold icy wind outside.

I panicked.

Martha was about to go. Martha would go away. I would be left. Here. Squeezed by the low ceiling and the hot pipes.

'Like to go somewhere? Out? Let us celebrate... Just today,' I cajoled. I pushed towards her the money lying on the sofa. It was bait for making her stay, otherwise I'd have clutched the notes in my hand and thrust them into my breast pocket.

'N-n-n-no. Not today.' She faltered

a bit. 'Someone is waiting. I have to get home.'

A small but hard blow. On the chest. Not at her going. At my being left alone. Buffeted by the blind winds of ill luck. Shoreless. Alone. Terror sprang awake.

Still sitting I caught between my fingers the hem of her skirt and pulled. A weak, faint persuading. I put it in words too. 'Sit for a while. You can go afterwards.'

She turned.

'You don't have anyone?'

'No.' A bubble caught in my throat.

She sat down, but was on her feet mentally. A stiff, put on courtesy. My panic returned. The tremor in my nerves threw up a question on my lips.

'Listen. Have you ever left your country and gone somewhere else?'

'We don't have to leave our country. Others come to our country. So vast it is.'

She spread her hands wide to show vastness and from below the cut sleeves of her jacket two tufts of hair peeped out. The sight made me sick.

'Then how can you know what it's like?'

'What is it like?'

She tried to fold my body in the circle of her arms.

I backed out of her stockading arms. How would she know that there was a pair of scales within me? One side of the scales was made fast to truths beyond the seven seas. On the other side were piled up me, geography, chasm, darkness, and now, Martha. If I left it to the natural justice of the scales it would tilt towards the heavy. Mass would win.

It looked as if Martha had changed her mind about going. She began kissing me. I jumped off the sofa and sat on the floor leaning against the wall. How warm the room was, how chill the wall.

'So you are serious about your question. And sick.'

'Didn't I tell you that you wouldn't understand?'

'Come. Let me try to understand.'

Seating herself before me she cradled her cheeks in her hands and looked at me fixedly. A small flame glowed in each eye.

'No. It's impossible for you to understand. The little things which the mind craves for. Familiar things — shops, signboards, roads, the colour of the sky, voices, children and old people, the colour of faces. It misses everything. Everything. But do you know what it gets instead? From all directions? Difference. Unending difference. For some time it's inter-

esting. But then emptiness squeezes you. Each minute I feel I'm somewhere else, somewhere outside, alone.'

'What's all this nonsense? I thought you'd talk about your parents and your grandma.'

'Didn't I say you wouldn't understand? Do you understand distance? And what it is to feel distance between your ribs? You feel that if you call, the sound will reach late. If I walk I feel I'll reach home late. If a letter is sent it'll reach late. Anything can happen, any day, any time. I feel I'll get stuck somewhere, anywhere, everywhere. All that I see in this country — its wealth and poverty, pomp and show, friendship and hostility — nothing touches me. Nothing seems mine.'

Bored, she said I was crazy. A sentimental fool. Ever ready to hallucinate. And then, coyly, she said it was because I didn't love. If I loved, this rubbish I talked...

Throwing a sidelong glance at me, she sank her hands under my arms. Slowly she dragged me away from the wall, and lay me on the floor and covered me with the full length of her body.

Again, everything shrouded over. Within me flashed into view the steps that came down to different terminals. Outside, my body did its job.

Martha was gratified. She began to make coffee. She put on the kettle and went into the bathroom. The gurgle of the kettle echoed in my stomach. She brought out the coffee, and first put the mug against my lips.

'Where's your mug?'

'My mug?' She laughed vivaciously. She took a sip from my mug and offered it back to me. Now she, now I. In the middle, a big heavy fluted mug.

A killing sadness descended into me. I wanted to shout, 'You are not my answer, Martha, not any answer. You are a leaf of no tree shimmying its way into my lap.'

But I did not shout. I did not say anything. If she knew why I stayed with my head buried into her shoulders, she would have just picked up her stuff and gone away. Or maybe not. It was nice to feel that one was wanted. It went with the culture here.

In the studio there were Robert, Martha and I. There was a perceptible hierarchy here. Robert was both owner and manager. He sat on a chair kept apart and meant only for him. He handled the cash.

Martha looked after everything inside and outside the studio. I was mostly in the darkroom. General help.

Robert had suggested paying me one hundred and ten dollars a week. I had sulked. Martha pressed my toe with her foot. She had the pay hiked by twenty dollars. I waited for a fuller explanation from her for pressing my foot. She knew my plight. Two instalments of the rent arrears left by Prashant were still pending.

When Robert left she asked me, 'What do your problems mean to others? How can anyone pay you more? You don't have a green card. The first thing any employer will think is "spend money teaching the sod the job and run the risk of his running off."'

Martha didn't know the many things that kept hissing into me continually, 'go back!' And I, paralyzed. The roads were open, but how frozen my feet.

I knew only too well that a green card was a trump card, a winner's card. As long as I didn't have it 'cheap labour' would be stamped on my forehead. My self respect, what I had left of it, would be getting more sullied.

Martha comforted me, seeing my limp face. Don't worry, she said, in a few days she would get me a raise of fifty dollars. She would also pay the two remaining instalments of the rent. She would take it back from me later.

I should have realized that she would realize her money's worth, certainly realize it.

One day, sometime later.

We were dipping negatives in hypo solution when Martha seized my hands, sopping wet in the water tray, and whispered into my ear: 'I like Indians. They are so faithful.'

I had no ready answer. I just thought what about that other one, that someone who was waiting for her the other day? Had he gone? Ditched her?

I tried to read the answer on her face. In the faint red glow of the darkroom her face couldn't be seen. But even in the tray of cold water I could feel her quick hands darting like fish.

And right then, raising herself on her toes, she kissed my ear lobe. My skin flamed. But I was determined not to react.

She wasn't discouraged. Stealing up on me from behind, she brought both her arms around my sides and locked them over my chest. Squeezed. And then sprang away and out of the studio. Lucky she went out. My back was on fire. My tension eased with her going.

Leaving the prints I went up to a high stool against the wall and sat on it. Leaning against the wall I

closed my eyes and bathed my hands in the thin shafts of air in the studio. I tried my best to reach out to some place away from the studio. Somewhere out, far out, in the other land where bells reverberated.

But it was quiet there.

Dead quiet. Or perhaps my antennae had grown weak? Was I dizzy? Why was my call not heard?

Martha came into the studio. She must have kicked open the door of the darkroom. For she had a big packet in her left hand and in the right two long bars of chocolate.

Something broke within me with a clatter. I didn't know what.

The smell of hot hamburgers escaped from the brown packet and ran amuck in the narrow confines of the studio. MacDonald's hamburger — beef, most likely. Beef, that is, the meat of the cow. If you called it beef it didn't seem like cow's meat. There was no recoil.

Martha opened the wrapper and thrust an icecream into my mouth. And then she picked up my hand from my lap and wound my fingers round the stem of the icecream.

'Let's eat the icecream first. It'll melt otherwise,' she said. She opened the second wrapper, sat down on her stool, and began eating her icecream, dangling her legs. A very bright and vivacious look played on her face.

From then on a certain something began to be enacted upon me. I had been selected. Without me doing the selecting. I had begun to take it, suffer it.

Why wasn't I able to tell Martha that I didn't want it? Or was it that I did?

'Where are you? Be here. At least as long as you are here.'

Mother sounds sore. Could be a carryover of our last talk. She still seems unhappy at my silence about my 'early days there.'

In the times before I left, she'd never have initiated a conversation.

She would have waited for a move from me, first. She could wait. Now she cannot. She is hungry to sift and store into herself my presence here, shred by shred, fibre by fibre. A consuming hunger for me, her second son, and last born, has stayed in Maa's life. With everyone else my relationship has been stored away in a cupboard, like clothes.

'You are right. Just give me a shouting when I begin to look blank.'

'But where were you? Over there?' She steers clear of mentioning Martha by name.

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