

LEFTOVERS *After Life*

L I N I S . K A D A B A

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ONE

Neena leaned over the hospital bed, both hands gripping the cold stainless-steel guardrail.

“Ma,” she said. She hesitated to say more, not wanting to wake her mother. For most of the week, she’d stayed close to her mother’s bedside at the hospice, a bland building outside Philadelphia, waiting. She slipped into the corner chair, her leg nudging aside the scuffed leather satchel straining with manuscripts on the floor. She picked up the sheaf of papers that lay on the small side table and plucked the pencil from behind her ear. She still edited the old-school way, on paper with a red pencil. She read a few more sentences, lost in her work. Minutes went by. But then something broke her train of thought. She looked up from the manuscript. Had her mother said something?

Neena stared at her mother’s small frame stretched out in the hospital bed and cocooned in a thin blanket. Her mother’s chest rose and fell to a shallow beat. No. She must have been mistaken. Her mother was still asleep. The second hand of the round clock on the wall inched toward midnight. It was late. Neena slipped the pencil into the manuscript as a bookmark and placed it on the table. She stretched and adjusted her cardigan, then gathered the

manuscript, ready to resume work, when there was a murmur. This time, Neena was sure. She sprang up, the manuscript pages dropping from her lap and floating wildly to the floor, as she quick-stepped the distance to the hospital bed.

“Ma,” Neena said, tentatively, leaning close. “What did you say?”

Her mother’s eyes fluttered open. They had a spark to them, and for a moment, Neena thought everything would be all right. Her shoulders relaxed. Then her mother spoke.

“You think I do not know? How could you?” Each word was a short burst of air, and Neena felt her eyes widen as she tightened her hold on the guardrail.

“Too much hurt,” her mother continued, her voice hoarse. “Too much.”

“Ma, what are you saying? Did someone hurt you?” Neena tried to whisper, not wanting to attract attention from the hospice attendants who walked by the cracked-open door every half-hour. But an urgency must have crept into her voice. A young man in blue scrubs poked his head inside the room.

“Everything okay in here?”

Neena flinched and looked up. She forced a half-smile and a quick nod, and after the attendant surveyed the room for a moment, casting his eyes over Neena’s mother and then Neena herself, he moved along. She stood straighter and pulled her cardigan tightly around her. She searched her mother’s face, those dark eyes and broad lips, so different from her own. A thick, white hair curled at one corner of her mother’s mouth, and Neena caught a whiff of urine. She recoiled reflexively, then swiped at her nose and leaned close, resting a hand on her mother’s arm.

“Tell me, Ma,” she said, gently. “Who hurt you?”

Her mother’s chest heaved, and her eyes shut.

“Ma—”

“You,” her mother began, but her voice trailed off, and Neena couldn’t make out the words. Her mother closed her eyes, and Neena thought she’d fallen asleep again.

Neena was about to go back to the chair, when her mother grabbed her hand, pulling her toward her.

“I know,” her mother said, with such force that Neena was startled. “Hurt. Hurt. Everything ruined. Ruined.”

“What is it, Ma?” Neena stroked her mother’s hand, trying to calm her. “What do you know?”

Her mother’s face turned paler. Her eyebrows pinched together and her lips curled.

“Bitch,” she said, fiercely.

Neena drew in her breath. Why was her mother saying that? For as long as Neena could remember, her mother had been unhappy, mostly with Neena’s father and, often, with Neena. But this was plain mean.

Her mother’s lips moved, but there was no sound.

Neena pressed closer, the bedrail creaking. “Ma? Why are you so upset? What did I do?” Neena’s eyes welled.

In that instant, a rasp escaped her mother.

“Ma!” Neena said, alarmed, rubbing her open palm up and down her mother’s arm as if somehow that would revive her. Tears streamed down Neena’s face.

“Oh, no, no,” she said, keening. “Ma, Ma.” But even as she grieved, those last words echoed in her mind.

Too much hurt . . .

I know . . .

Bitch.



T W O

Neena tucked loose strands of coarse black hair behind her ears and bent over one of the boxes that crowded her parents' condominium. She pulled out a flowery sundress and unfurled the square bit of cloth at the neck. Size seven. She must have been around second grade when she got it. She rubbed a thumb against a brown water spot at the hem, frowning as she placed the dress on the floor, next to her other excavations. After seventy-odd years, this was what two lives amounted to, more or less.

A gray velour Massage-o-Matic, minus the power cord.

A white ceramic pestle and mortar with a fine, time-blackened crack down its side.

And this green dress with yellow flowers, one petal marred by a brown water stain.

Nine months had passed since that day at the hospice, and still Neena was haunted, especially here in this condo among these belongings, by her mother's last words. *You think I do not know? Too much hurt. Hurt. Hurt. I saw. Everything ruined. Bitch.* Why would her mother say such things? She must have hated Neena. How else could her mother have found the strength to spit so much venom

at the end? Neena had kept the words locked inside her, not telling anyone, not even her husband, Jay, to whom she told everything. Or used to. Nothing was the same anymore, and these last words of her mother's seemed for her ears only—unshareable.

Neena settled herself on the floor and sat cross-legged on the matted beige carpet, avoiding the faint yellow stain next to where the double bed once stood, the stubborn depression of four posts the only reminder.

“What did you see, Ma?” she said aloud. This talking to her dead mother was a habit she'd fallen into over the past two weeks while she rooted through these belongings, alone a couple of hours a day, here and there, and disposed of the furniture or listed it for sale. “How did I hurt you?”

No answer came, of course. Neena shook her head. She didn't like to think about that day her mother slipped away, those words. Yet, they ate at her. For the most part over these months, she'd avoided the condo. It held too many memories, too many ghosts—and she wasn't ready to face it all. Each time she thought about this place where her mother and father (who'd died fourteen months earlier) had lived after the downsize from the rancher in Georgia to near Neena in Bryn Mawr, outside Philly, a wave of memories would wash over her, and a spot in the center of her chest would tighten—and for one more day, she would stay away. It was a Pavlovian reaction. Condo. *Bitch*. Staying away, though, hadn't meant she could forget. She thought often of her mother. Now that Ma was gone, Neena missed her enormously, even her short temper. That's how grief worked sometimes.

Now, Neena was here, committed to trying to sort everything. There was also a practical aspect. After nine months of next to

nothing happening to clear out the condo, Jay's patience was wearing thin. They argued constantly over Neena's lack of progress and the rapidly dwindling days before the spring house-selling season. She knew he wondered what exactly she did all day, now that she'd taken an extended leave of absence from her editing job at a publishing house. He needled her over the condo fees, accumulating month after month, and the property taxes, and pointed out that the money could be better spent on the rising school fees for their daughter, Tara. Neena didn't understand why he got so worked up about it all. The cost wasn't going to bankrupt them or anything. Even without her income for a year, Jay made good money, and she'd inherited a nice nest egg from her parents. Still, she was trying. She was tired of the bickering. Each time they fought, it diminished them. She was tired of the weight of this place on her, on them, even on Tara, who surely overheard her parents' squabbles. The child recently complained that Neena was *always* at the condo. Neena had argued with Tara that it wasn't true. Still, she wanted to be done with it. She did, but it wasn't easy for her.

Neena glanced at the sundress. The last time she saw it, she'd been helping her mother clean out the basement of her childhood home in preparation for the move to the condo. Her mother was furious that Neena wanted to discard it, this old, stained dress. Neena could almost hear her mother's teeth grinding. She pictured her vividly, this woman, whose four-foot-ten frame wasn't big enough to contain her continent of opinions, sitting on a wooden chair in the basement of the rancher outside Atlanta. The memory of the battle royale—and Neena's decision, in the end, to relent—made her smile. That grief again.

Sitting here on the floor of the condo, among her parents' belongings and her childhood things, Neena was bombarded by memories. Her eyes rested on a family photograph atop the dresser. It was taken in a studio, of the three of them. Her mother wore a fine silk sari of jade green and a contrasting orange blouse. Her father was in a dark suit, an ochre shirt, and dark, snug tie. Neena, standing stiffly with a hand on her father's shoulder, wore a frilly yellow maxi with a giant bow at her waist. She must have been ten or eleven years old. Her mother smiled broadly, showing off big teeth. Her father also smiled, but it was more subdued, mouth closed. The photograph captured Neena's lips parted a smidgen, shy as ever. Looking at the picture now, Neena was struck by how ordinary they seemed, like any other happy family. It wasn't how Neena remembered her childhood. She wondered if she would ever understand her parents' relationship, the distance between her mother and father, her mother's constant disapproval of her father and so often of Neena, too. She studied her mother's face in that photo. The grin looked forced, something about her mother's eyes, full of simmering anger. *I saw. Ruined. Bitch.*

Neena hugged herself, suddenly chilly, and scanned the bedroom. A dozen or so boxes pressed against the far wall, its once-promising coat of green paint dulled by the sun's insistence. Even more boxes were crammed into the storage room, a lifetime of accumulation. All this stuff. She would be at it for a while. So much of it seemed insignificant at first glance, but even seemingly trivial things that she'd found over the moments here called up bits and pieces of memories—and questions, so many questions. As she weighed her mother's final words, a notion formed. Perhaps there was something among her parents' belongings that would offer a clue, explain her

mother's hurt, what she saw, the anger toward Neena. A part of her wasn't sure she wanted to know the answers. But surely, she told herself, knowing was better than wondering. Her only real chance was here, among these remnants. No one was left to ask. Her mother's sister, Deepa, lived in New Delhi with her daughter, Leela. But her aunty's dementia made conversation difficult. Neena spoke to her after her mother's death, and she still wasn't sure her aunt had comprehended her youngest sister's passing. She kept saying, "Where has Sathya gone?" and a gibberish of words that sounded to her like "Knit? Knee? Knit? Knee?" Since then, Neena called her once a month, like her mother had, keeping up the family ritual. But the conversations were stilted, perfunctory. *How are you, Aunty? How is Uncle? And Leela?* The answers came in short, sometimes incoherent, bursts. Really, Neena was on her own, to discover whatever she could.

She picked up the sundress, holding it out in front of her. Her eyes squeezed shut, a dam against tears, and her arms collapsed against her chest as she clutched the dress tight. The morning sun vanished behind a cloud, darkening the room.

"I can't keep it, Ma," she said.

Neena placed the dress atop a pile designated for charity. She removed her glasses and wiped the lenses with the edge of her T-shirt. The room dissolved into soft focus, blurry, no sharp edges, the boxes against the wall a single sheet of brown. Why hadn't she forced her mother to get rid of all this stuff back in Georgia, when she could have decided for herself, instead of shipping it here, to this dollhouse condominium? Of late, Neena had asked herself that question often. When she and her mother had sifted the past in Georgia, it seemed reasonable enough to ship here what they

couldn't get to before the impending closing on the rancher. Once the boxes showed up at the condo, they were crammed inside the storage room until they reached the ceiling, the movers leaving only a narrow runway to maneuver. Neena agreed to accept the overflow, sentencing it to a back corner of her basement—one more shuffle of these boxes since her father's string of early jobs, before she was a whisper and her parents settled in Smyrna, Georgia. The condo wasn't even half a mile from Neena's home, and she thought, in time, she could help her mother cull; she even let herself imagine some mother–daughter bonding over the contents.

That never happened. As Neena weighed the worn-down, half-broken, mismatched freight, she knew why. Her mother would never have agreed to dispose of any of this. Not in Georgia. Not here. Not anywhere. For whatever reason, these items meant something to her mother. Since the day Neena decided to tackle the storage room, three seasons had passed, and the tree that the unit overlooked burst with red maple leaves. Neena had stared up at the stacks of boxes. One tower teetered when she brushed against it, and she almost ran away. Since then, she steeled herself each time she entered what felt like a sepulcher. That's how she'd come to think of the space.

Neena also disliked her role in all this. She didn't want to be the one to assess this hodgepodge, like some *Antiques Roadshow* expert. She worried she would get it wrong, even though the only person who really knew the value—or who valued any of this—was dead. What if she made a mistake, she worried, and threw out something important, ruined everything like her mother had said? At times, she resented her mother and her last words enough that she did consider throwing it all out. It would serve her mother right. But Neena could never bring herself to actually do that. She

felt compelled to consider each and every piece, a daughter's last duty. Maybe, she thought, she could redeem herself by getting this right and properly exhuming the past. It was as if, somehow, her mother would know, and the universe would reward or punish her depending on the care she took with these remainders. The Sisyphean task plodded along, items like that damn dress dredging up memories. *Your memories make you who you are.* The line had stuck in Neena's head ever since she saw a TV ad for a dementia drug and wondered if it might have helped her mother. It always morphed into a corollary in her mind: *Other people's memories are who you remain long after you're gone.* These paltry pieces—this dress—attested to some proof of her mother's existence, bolstered by all sorts of associations.

Neena had adored this dress—the frock, as her mother called it. She'd wanted to wear it every day that summer in Georgia when she was seven years old, especially to play tea party with the girl across the street, Lizzie. Lizzie Holmes—no, it was Holt: Lizzie Holt—her best friend for a while. Neena wondered if her mother had thought of that summer when she smoothed this dress across her knees in Georgia, of her daughter's love for the dress that she'd selected.

“Ma, was that why it mattered so much?” Neena retrieved the dress from the charity pile and draped it across her knees, smoothed the wrinkles.

“It doesn't make any sense to keep it,” she said.

Neena meant the dress, but the statement could apply to any of the items. She studied the faded colors and ran her hand up and down the fabric. That calmed her. She considered whether the stain would come out. Perhaps, she thought, brightening for a moment, Tara would want to wear this dress. Neena immediately dismissed

the notion. The child preferred leggings and tops. Besides, she was already two inches taller than Neena had been at that age, and the little princess would turn up her nose at a hand-me-down from her mother.

A thought popped into Neena's head. She placed the sundress on the floor and sat up on her knees to look through the box at her side. It was stuffed with more childhood dresses and whatnots, a casket of miscellany. A mustiness emanated from the items, and she wrinkled her nose, long like her father's. She arranged the retro-stylish jumpers, skirts, and blouses from high-end children's boutiques on the carpet, the flowery dress at the center, and reached for her cellphone. She took a picture of the fashion montage of her youth. Then, hunched over the centerpiece, she pulled back just enough to blur the stain and tapped the screen. Now, she had a record.

"That's fair. Can we make peace now, Ma?"

Even as Neena folded the outfits, the flowery dress last, and placed them in the stack for charity, she knew what her mother's answer would be. No peace. The thought transported her back to the last time the two of them had battled over the dress.