

Black Sky

by Sowmya Rajendran

When the pandemic struck, it pushed all of us into a space where the price for one small mistake could be too heavy to bear. Every time we heard of someone testing positive, beneath the sympathy and concern, there was also resentment and the need to blame them for being 'irresponsible' and inadvertently putting others at risk. Radha and Bharat are like people I know, people I live with, people I see in the mirror. People who may never get closure but must go on. Their grief may never recede but I hope that within the darkness, they find a way back to each other despite the many stumbles it will take.

Sowmya Rajendran

One step at a time.

I'm holding the ladder.

One step at a time.

Trust me.

Radha can hear Bharat calling her, over the anchor who is shouting on TV. She can't make out what her husband is saying but she doesn't have to hear the words to know what he wants. Coffee. It is always coffee. The thought of having to get up from the chair yet again makes her unreasonably angry. Her knees hurt more these days, and she has to limp for a few steps before she can walk properly. She can pretend for a few more minutes that she hasn't heard him. He will have to get up and come to the room then. And he may decide he doesn't want the coffee after all. The trick has worked in the past.

Radha keeps her head down and stares at the magazine. It's a quiz on mental wellness with four options for each question. The whole world is grappling with depression these days. She must remember not to say these things aloud. Three months ago, when Krithika called and told her about her colleague who'd had a panic attack at work because he was going to propose to his girlfriend (or was it

that his girlfriend had proposed to him? Radha couldn't remember), she'd said something "very inappropriate".

Radha had joked that people in her generation were obsessed with dental health while people in Krithika's generation were obsessed with mental health. Radha was thinking about Swarna who'd recently had two of her molars replaced (she had told Radha all about it in great detail). But Krithika had become really angry. She told her mother that she was being very insensitive and that her "boomer" generation just liked to act that there are no problems even when the problems are giant-sized and parading down the drawing room.

She should have known better than to argue, but Radha had asked Krithika for an example. She could hear her daughter take a deep breath like a dragon rearing its head back before exhaling a stream of fire. And then she said, "What about your marriage?" and hung up abruptly after that.

It was Krithika's longstanding view that her mother should divorce her father - her husband of 32 years. She found him "triggering", she said. Krithika had strong emotions about a lot of things. In Radha's view, you couldn't go through life being so emphatic about everything. Krithika was 30, lived alone, was on a Keto diet, dressed in black always and had quit her high paying corporate job because of "ethics" and joined an NGO that worked with migrant workers in Tamil Nadu. That was another thing she hated. Radha using quotes for the words she used though she learnt the habit from her.

"I use quotes to make a point," she said. "You just use it to mock me."

Radha told her that she used quotes because this was not her language. She used quotes because she was literally quoting Krithika. Isn't that why people started using quotes? That only made Krithika angrier.

Thinking about it now, Radha smiles. Then, she remembers that she will never be able to fight with Krithika again. It is alarming how she keeps forgetting that her daughter is no more. How could someone so vibrant, so *alive*, just die like that? They couldn't even see her because they hadn't recovered from the virus themselves. It should have been me, Radha kept telling the doctors. It made no

sense that she, at 54, and her husband, at 58, should have only mild symptoms while Krithika's lungs had given up.

Bharat blamed it on Krithika's colleagues. Asking her to do relief work in the middle of a pandemic. But it was Bharat who'd first tested positive. Bharat who had gone to his elder brother's 60th birthday despite Radha's appeals not to. Bharat who had fought with her for trying to dissuade him from going. Bharat who wore his mask on the chin always.

But it was Radha who had invited Krithika for dinner that weekend. Radha who should have waited to see if Bharat developed any symptoms after the party before calling over their daughter. Radha who'd started a stupid fight at dinner, asking Krithika why she couldn't wear anything other than black and meet some boys. Radha who...

She sighs. This is a pointless exercise. She will only spiral into an endless cycle of guilt, grief and anger - to the point that she won't be able to look at Bharat's face any more. She knows that he is grieving too; he has lost weight and she's heard him sobbing in the bathroom a few times when she was right outside, clearing the laundry basket.

There was a time when the two of them, despite their differences, could tell each other anything and everything. Their darkest fears and outrageous desires. A glue that held them together through the storms that life threw at them. Lakhs tumble down the drain in an internet scam. Her mother's breast cancer. Krithika's tumble down an entire flight of stairs at age seven. But now...she cannot bear to listen to him talk about yoga, positive vibes, and 'life must go on'. Why must it go on?

She can hear Bharat shuffling towards their room now. Coffee. Coffee. Coffee. "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons," Radha whispers, imagining herself as a guest at a dreary party in TS Eliot's world. She has a bad memory for faces (men, especially...unless they were extraordinarily handsome, they all looked the same and their clothes were the same too), but odd lines of poetry from her college days that were still stuck to her brain floated in and out, momentarily transforming her into the girl that she once was. An innocent-idiot-brilliant girl, like all of them were back then. Sometimes, she is shocked by the

face in the mirror. The shadows under her eyes. The thinning hair. The way the corners of her lips sink, as if she is forever grimacing. The wart that had emerged two years ago on her neck.

But it isn't coffee that Bharat wants. "That cat is miaowing outside the door again," he says, looking at her expectantly. What is Radha supposed to do about it? Can't he ignore it? Chase it away? How can he even hear it above the insufferable volume of the television? Why is it her job to get up and do something about it? Bharat hasn't bothered to shave today. He is in shorts and a vest, his usual costume. A mild paunch leaping over the elastic waistband. He used to wear only lungis at home earlier but after their first trip abroad, accompanying Krithika to university in the UK, he'd changed to shorts permanently. It was an upgrade in their status.

"It will go away after a while," Radha says. But he stands there, watching her.

"I think that lady isn't around to feed it."

He's still talking though she hasn't replied to anything he's said in the last five minutes. But Bharat is like the radio. He doesn't need anyone to respond for him to keep going. "Maybe it's pregnant. Its tummy looked really big the last time I saw it. Can you give it some milk?"

Radha stifles a snort. "Krithika said cats are lactose intolerant, remember? And you told her that cats have been drinking milk for centuries in India and that she doesn't know anything? When she came for dinner the last time and you asked her why she was talking to Saima? The very last time?"

Bharat stares. He pretends he can't see the tears threatening to spill out of Radha's eyes. It will ruin his positive vibes.

"Why don't *you* give it some milk then?" asks Radha.

Bharat is surprised. As if it's physically impossible for him to accomplish such a task. That he can walk all the way to the fridge, exert his muscles and pull it open, search for the milk, put it in a bowl, and take it to the cat. How can he, an able-bodied man, be expected to perform such a complicated act?

"I'm not well," Radha says. There's nothing wrong with her but if she doesn't lie, Bharat will just stand there all day, gaping.

"Ok. Maybe we should just ignore it then. It may keep coming to our door if we feed it once," he says. As an afterthought, he adds, "Take rest, you'll feel fine soon."

The cat is a stray fed by Saima, their Muslim neighbour. That is Bharat's problem really. It also helps that she's a single woman and has maroon hair. "What sort of doctor has *maroon* hair?" he is fond of asking, expecting Radha to agree with him. There was a time when Radha did that, just to please him. Smile and nod along with his opinions though in her heart, she didn't agree with him at all.

But of late, she has taken to challenging him and Bharat always looks confused when she does that. The good thing is that he doesn't know how to react to it and just leaves the scene, mumbling inaudibly.

Radha leans back against the chair and allows her mind to drift.

When she wakes up, Bharat is nowhere around. She wanders around the house, calling out to him. She gets recurring nightmares about Bharat getting a heart attack in the toilet and dying there while she remains oblivious. But he's not in the toilet.

Why is the front door open?

She puts on her mask and steps out. The corridor is empty. She calls his phone but it rings in the drawing room. Why did he leave it here? It is almost attached to his hand, like a sixth finger.

She doesn't know what to do. Should she knock on Saima's door and ask for help? Would she even be at home?

She hears it then. The cat. It's miaowing. Radha doesn't know why but she follows the sound, her heart thudding. It's coming from the terrace. She goes up the stairs, feeling slightly foolish. What is she doing searching for the cat when her husband is missing?

When she sees him, her mind cannot comprehend what she's looking at. Bharat is hanging from the structure that holds up the overhead water tank. The rusty iron ladder leading up to the tank is too far for him to reach. The cat is on the lid of the water tank, its body hunched, hissing and miaowing at him in turn.



Illustration: Samia Singh

“Radha, thank god! I thought I was going to die!” shouts Bharat when he sees her.

“What...what are you doing here?” Radha says.

“The cat...I couldn’t...get me a ladder!” he shouts.

What ladder? They don't have a ladder at home. How was she to produce a ladder out of thin air?

"Can you try jumping down?" she asks, knowing before the words leave her mouth that it is futile. His knees won't hold.

She rushes downstairs to grab her phone and call the security.

"Is everything ok?"

Radha turns around wildly when she hears the voice. It's Saima. Her eyes, kohl-lined above the mask, are concerned. She seems to have just come back from work.

"It's-it's my husband," Radha says. "He's hanging from the terrace, on the overhead tank."

She giggles a little as she says it. It sounds ridiculous. But Saima doesn't wait. Quickly, she opens the door of her flat. She's out with a steel ladder before Radha can process what's happening.

"Hurry!" she says, carrying the ladder with ease.

Bharat is embarrassed, Radha can tell. She knows that the first thought in his head is *Now everyone will know*. Saima places the ladder below his bare, dangling legs. Radha feels a stab of irritation that he'd not bothered to dress properly before running out of the house. Bharat hesitates, unwilling to let go of the grip on the concrete.

But in her 'doctor' voice, Saima takes charge. *One step at a time. I'm holding the ladder. One step at a time. Trust me.* Bharat is on firm ground again, his face red with the sun and humiliation.

“The cat was miaowing for a long time and I...”

“She had kittens three days ago,” Saima says. “I got delayed at the hospital and missed her feed time.”

“There are four kittens. I saw them...they’re on the other side of the tank,” says Bharat.

Saima nods. “Yes, I wanted to keep them indoors but she keeps miaowing to go out, and there won’t be anyone at home to let her in again.”

“I tried to pick them up but she got angry and scratched me,” says Bharat, pointing to the thin line of blood on his leg.

Radha giggles though she knows she mustn’t. Saima smiles suddenly.

“I didn’t know you liked cats,” she tells Bharat. “You should adopt a kitten from the litter.”

Saima must be nearly forty, Radha thinks. But there’s not a strand of grey in her maroon hair.

“There’s one that’s fully black,” Bharat says. “Can we take it?”

He’s talking to Saima but his eyes are on Radha. She looks up at the orange-pink sky. So beautiful, so full of colour. “Yes,” she says, “We will take the black one if that’s all right with you, Saima.”