

White Woman

by Ajay Nair

Her skin was a deep, dark, shining brown organism — as if someone had taken fresh, wet mud, kneaded it together into a smooth cake, and then sliced off flat slivers of it and rubbed it all over her. It was the colour of health and of beauty, but all she ever wanted to be was fair, to have white skin, skin the women from the city had, and she dreamed of having.

She was a single mother; widowed by a cleaved liver caused by drink. She didn't mind that — her husband was not someone she chose or loved and once she'd given birth, her baby was the undisputed centre of her universe, a tiny little sun that burned inside her.

She had a compulsion to organize things according to their size or colour or according to some other abstruse algorithm that clicked through her mind. She didn't know that this was OCD — living in a village in India meant she was not exposed to the technicalities of her condition. If she were an American girl or perhaps European, she might have let her OCD define her personality — clutching at its convenience and crippled by it at the same time; instead, she just thought that this was life.

Her baby hardly ever cried when she was near her; so when she screamed while her mother was being gang-raped by four inebriated youths, you could ascribe her crying to some intuitive connection between the child and the mother. But perhaps, she was just really hungry.

It was not clear whose idea it was to set her on fire. The fire didn't care as it ate her up. But before she was charred, for a brief few moments, she burned white, a hot, hot white, and if she could have seen herself in the mirror, she would have realised that her

dark complexion suited her sharp beauty much better than the white she desired.

