

Rinds

by Ajay Vishwanathan

I miss Mother gentling the small of my back.

She has forgotten me. Her little girl. Whose thumb she fussed over when a rose thorn scratched it and blood spilled like a secret. Whose smile she said was her morning sunshine, whose hug was incense. I yearn for her lips that lingered over my eye then another, in a long kiss, warmth filling the hollows.

I sit in a corner diddling a dead switch, watching Mother groan again as she holds her belly and squirms on the charpoy, the fan whirling ineptly from the ceiling as it fights heat and age and decades of unanswered dust. Father stares at her as if she is dead already. He is a big man and usually speaks in a loud voice but even the slightest signs of sickness send him scurrying feebly into the fields. He stays away until the women have dealt with it.

Grandma had been telling me stories about the baby boy inside Mother so why is that bare-chested priest coming home to pray for a boy? He murmurs and stares at the sky and the idols and the burning tinder. The clench of his lean muscles and dour in his voice scare me to many hours under the bed. He looked at me warily the other day as he bent down to say hi, his fist closing around my hand, bubbles of aqua on his ring pressing into my hip. Then there is that old woman, her skin crumpled like kitchen cloth, who whispers hymns in Mother's ears.

I hate boys. Four of them play behind my house and harass me as I hopscotch alone. They also seem silly. I giggled under the blanket one afternoon when I overheard them saying that rubbing orange peels under armpits can turn girls into boys. Who would want to become them, I thought, snot-nosed, muddy-faced, slippers smelling of cow dung?

The late drafts of March stirs the hibiscus to frenzy. When the day finally comes, no one is talking, the boys behind my house are shooed away. Father is missing again. The baby is stillborn. A boy.

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NOTE:

This story has been truncated; it will be published in my forthcoming collection of short stories, ***From a Tilted Pail*** (Queen's Ferry Press; late Spring 2014) Do check the book out if you get a chance.

