

Excerpt from *Overwinter* by Ratika Kapur

Neera is outside the guest bedroom--Deepak's new quarters--with Ketaki at her side again. She grips the doorknob, her knuckles growing pale with the exercise. This might be the eleventh attempt she has made to see her husband since they brought him home two days earlier. Gopal Singh, long-standing factotum at the Sood household, stands behind, galvanizing her. He says nothing, but there is a palpable persuasion in his nearness.

She turns the knob, opens the door, and stops. She looks to her right at the new medical bed. A table with a lopsided lamp sits to one side of it, the tea trolley from the dining room is placed by the other. In front of her is the small sofa-set and the aspirant coffee table that have been repositioned under the large grilled window through which the gulmohar tree pushes its way in.

After examining the room Neera comes through the doorway and inches towards the bed. 'He looks quite good,' she says to Ketaki.

The scene is almost certainly less tragic than her aunt could have imagined. Except for the single tube vanishing into his stomach, her husband glows like a lady recently returned from Mrs Petal Chopra's Spa. Deepak's hands are arranged elegantly on his stomach, fingers carefully interlocked. His face has been massaged to a soft shine, his hair is parted with precision and combed neatly to each side. This is how they try to fashion dignity in a vegetable.

‘He looks quite good,’ she says again. Then, as if she were in fear that this might change, that on further study her husband might betray the suffering she had expected him to display, Neera retreats from the bed and joins Ketaki on the sofa. ‘I didn’t order the gloves,’ she says.

‘They should be here in half an hour,’ Ketaki says. ‘I called for them in the morning.’

‘All right. Where is the sister?’

‘I’ve told her she can sit in the study when we’re with him.’

‘But she should be here. What has one paid her for?’

‘It’s okay, Masi. She needs a break too.’

Neera is quiet now, quiet and restless. Perhaps she had rehearsed for another show and now doesn’t know what to do. She gets up, attempts to straighten the bedside lamp, walks across to the bathroom door, turns around, and comes back to the sofa. She pauses, then starts to pace up and down between the bathroom at one end of the room and the window at the other, casting frequent, unfinished looks at her husband. ‘We should have dinner now,’ she says. ‘It’ll get late for Thomas.’

‘It’s only seven,’ Ketaki says.

Neera turns to Gopal Singh. ‘Bring the chair here,’ she says, pointing at the bed.

He lifts the single-seater near the window and sets it down by Deepak’s side.

‘No, here,’ she says, tapping the end of the bed.

He drags it towards the bottom of the bed and steps back.

Neera sits down. ‘Thank you,’ she says.

‘We need to give Deepak Uncle the prasad,’ Ketaki says.

‘Pardon?’

‘The prasad from the temple. We promised O. P.’

‘What about it?’ Neera says.

‘We need to give him some,’ Ketaki says. She looks to Gopal Singh, who sits on his haunches by the window, for her next move. His short nod speaks to her, and she picks up the polythene bag that carries Baba’s blessings and moves towards the inaction.

Deepak’s eyes come open.

Ketaki takes a step back. ‘Masi,’ she says.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Neera says. ‘We can’t give him anything.’

‘No, it’s his eyes. His eyes are open.’

Neera holds the arm of her chair, then rises.

Deepak presents them with a pair of eyes proclaiming life in a body that has otherwise shut itself to it.

Ketaki brings her hand to his face and lightly runs her fingers up his left cheek.

Neera cannot touch her husband, so she tries to talk to him: ‘Deep?’ she whispers. ‘Deepak?’

Deepak is quiet.

‘I think we should give him the prasad,’ Ketaki says. ‘We could, through the gast--gastotomy tube,’ Ketaki says.

‘Gastrostomy tube,’ her aunt says.

‘Yes. We could through the--the tube. Or just put a bit up a nostril.’

‘What?’

‘Well, he breathes, doesn’t he? He could just breathe it in.’

‘Ask the sister.’

The nurse is summoned and she flounces in with toe-curling alacrity. ‘Yes, what is it my dears?’ Sister Elizabeth asks.

‘We’d like to give him a bit of this prasad,’ Ketaki says.

‘Prasad?’ Sister Elizabeth says, shaking her small round head at the heathen others. ‘So what is the matter then? Give it to him. Put it in his mouth then.’

No one moves.

‘Oh ho, you all are scared? Now what should we do then? It is not my religion, you know, but I will do it only because you want me to do it.’

‘I’ll do it,’ Ketaki says, stepping forward.

‘No, no,’ Sister Elizabeth says, pushing Ketaki aside. ‘I will, I will. You can’t.’

‘I said I will do it,’ Ketaki says.

The nurse looks at Neera and Gopal Singh for support, but none is tendered. She about-turns and leaves the room.

Ketaki takes a pinch of the prasad with her right hand. Gently pushing Deepak’s mouth open, she sprinkles the offering on his tongue. Before her fingers are able to leave him, Deepak’s lips shut around her thumb and forefinger. Gopal Singh squats by the window, too far from the moment, and Neera winces from behind her. Ketaki will prize that instant forever.