

## It Makes You Young!

It was in the large home in the small village of Varanasi where Jasmit first learned the difference between something remembered and something unforgettable.

She was at the age where she would shout myth! to what the grandmothers of the town called history. One of these history myths! was the village just North from their tribe. It was, according to the grandmothers, cold and white there because it never stopped snowing, but when Jasmit went to the roof of the house and squinted into the distance there was simply nothing there except land, land, and peacocks. The entrance to this fantastical village was supposed to be brutal: only the snow village's people could survive, and so when Jasmit's grandmother was engaged to a man assumed to be from her own tribe, and when an onlooker watched that fiance enter and leave the snow village like it was nothing, crossing the volcano of heat and frost of the gate with no loss to life, Jasmit's grandmother called off the wedding and cried for three days.

Her time spent on the day of her grandmother reciting that myth was nice, because on that day she got to play with a three-horned goat, then a bald bull, and she slept on the ground of a calf buffalo's hut without her mother knowing, with her head rested on the calf, not aware of the serpents and scorpions that dug through the sandy dirt day and night.

That day, when the sun set, surrounded by peacocks that threatened to charge at them with the intent to kill and goats that sounded like dogs, Jasmit drank the tea of a buffalo's milk under an orange-to-pink sky, and she and her mother and her mother's uncle and her mother's aunt and her mother's cousin and her mother's grandmother's sister recited memories at a unreliable wooden table everyone was too scared to rest their tea on.

The first memory was her mother's. She spoke of a wedding in 1980-something and so Jasmit imagined a wedding with a rusty eye-sight: red but dull, gold but dull, a horse galloping through a village with candles balanced on the heads of drunk men, but dull. She spoke of her uncles, one of which was sitting there with her, having forgotten the story she was about to tell. She had mixed mehndi that day, readying the paste for her own mother, but then her uncle came. He walked in with his terribly white hair, past the promise of rejuvenation. Then her other uncle came with the same hair. Then there was more, and Jasmit's mother baselessly promised the possibilities of the paste.

"It makes your hair dark!" Jasmit's mother said.

The uncles started to shuffle.

"It makes you young!"

They all took their own seats.

They all had the paste applied, dried, and washed off. Then, the next day, Jasmit's mother had to hide in the laddoo box, waiting for the storm of her uncles to pass, all of them with bright red hair and faces of angry creases. They attended the wedding with these lines on their skin and baseball caps on their hair.

Jasmit's mother had hid all throughout the wedding for two days, while Jasmit's grandmother slipped in small plates of food through the crease, and shoved an unbalanced brick inches from her head to let air through.

She was able to escape early, however, because in the middle of the wedding, the groom his revealed her face with frost-bitten eyebrows and icicles hanging from the tip of his nose and chin and ears as if it were

nothing, and snow slid down the heat of his face and his skin was warm with goosebumps and that was when the uncles and townsfolk realized that he, in fact, was from the snow-village.

Distracted by the ghastly origins of the groom-turned-bachelor, they didn't see Jasmit's mother walking about the house freely with no fear to face the consequences of their hideous hair.

The time worked out in her favor further, as the uncles stayed mad at the groom and the men of the groom's family until the mehndi left their hair and they didn't need their caps.

Jasmit and the family laughed at her mother's unforgettable moment, except for one person. Jasmit's mother's uncle was living over the events as Jasmit's mother had recounted them, and his fists clenched and unclenched at the thought of the snowtown's groom.

Jasmit, that night, wondered where that groom could be. She imagined an old man in a wedding salwar with his eyes frosted over and drips of icicles at the nose and ears and chin. She imagined white hair, not from age but from more frost, preserving his youthful strands in its bonds.

She turned over that night, and folded her hands behind her head and spoke to her mother.

"I want to go see it."

"See what?"

"The snowtown."

"No." the word had been spoken with disgust. "Stop thinking about that."

But the next day she didn't stop thinking about the snowtown. And so she undid her brother's bag because it was the smallest and prettiest and the only one that fit her shoulders and she stuffed her own clothing, ready for a journey to the snowtown. She didn't leave right away, however, because she kept the bag in a spider-ridden corner of the house, vulnerable to gray mice and white mice and brown mice that roamed the dust-ridden grounds to chew through and explore.

The day was spent with only one task. She walked up to one of her grandmother's siblings who lived in the past and rocked back and forth in a rocking chair with diyas in her red-stained hands making terrible designs that sold too well for its quality. Whenever Jasmit asked her anything she would answer in the present-tense, because she wasn't stuck in the past but living in it, her eyes near-gray but brown enough to point to the opposite direction of the blur of sunrise.

She told Jasmit where the sun sets on the other side of the world that Jasmit should walk there, and when Jasmit argued that there was nothing down there Jasmit's grandmother's sister slapped her with the strength of an infant, and asked her if she ever heard of a cliff. When Jasmit said yes she slapped her again and said well, what you see when you look out to the land is you looking out to a cliff. The snow-town is deep and its entrance is dark, and the only light you'd get is a possible crystal alignments of the snowflakes, aligned in such a way that the sun hit one, then the other, then the other, the other, and on until it lit the entrance like sunlight whether night or day.

Jasmit nodded and marched towards where the sun had set the day before, but she wasn't the best at hiding as she sang *Lakadi ki Khathi* as she skipped her way there. When she heard footsteps she turned around to find three goats, eight bulls, two peacocks, her mother, her mother's uncle, her mother's aunt, her mother's cousin and her mother's grandmother's sister all following her in the distance.

So Jasmit ran, thinking that would get her there faster but then when she turned around they were still walking and close enough for her to see the lines of their faces and the clenched fists that stuck from their kurtas and salwars and saris.

So she ran faster, and, at one point, she was so out of breath that she stopped, quitting to what she knew was behind her. Exhausted, she collapsed onto the ground, and her cheek was met with wet, wet, wet.

She lifted herself up, slightly, to have her eyes meet the soaked ground of terribly cold dirt. Her eyes were stuck to the ground and she refused to look up because she was sure that, if she did, the cold groom would take his revenge on her village through herself, coming up from the frozen sand and pulling her by the ankle.

So, she stood for a moment. Then another. Then enough for her bones to chill with no sight yet of snow, enough for her sight to shrink and shrink and shrink like the closing black circle at the end of a Bugs Bunny episode, leaving her image to be pointed at her ankles and the frozen dirt around it.

Then she shivered, and became colder and colder and colder, with a wind starting to whisper then speak then shout, then she was sweating in the storm, her back blasted with fire while her front was blasted with air so iced it shot what felt like pin-point daggers.

“JASMIT!”

She turned around, then immediately fell to the ground, abandoned by the storm that just had held her up.

The air turned still, and the land behind her was empty. When she turned back around, a peacock stared at her right in the eyes with his eye, and raised his feathers, pointed his beak at her, and ruffled himself, threatening to charge.

The sun behind him was setting, and the rocks that pressed against her knees and the palms of her hand were starting to look darker and darker by the departing light. The bird was in a similar sight.

Jasmit stood up, slowly, and held her hand to the bird, who didn't back down, and only scuffled closer, its feathers and face and the every movement of its skin all shouting at her to *leave*.

So she stumbled back, falling three times before finally finding her balance, and ran back to her tribe.

Back in the house, she found her family scattered in their respective places. Her mother was singing in the bedroom, her mother's uncle folded his hands behind his back and intently watched the sabzi that boiled over the stove, her mother's aunt whipped the drying clothes with a dry clothe, her mother's cousin ran from a charging peacock and her mother's grandmother's sister threw the family dog carrots from her wheelchair in the roofless room.

That night, Jasmit's mother's aunt made chai and they sat back in the back of the house, the sun gone and a sky, streaked with white and purple and blue, scattered with stars of the galaxy, unburdened by the modern's curse of light pollution. Jasmit's family sat with their chai's, and Jasmit, her mind still stuck on the unforgettable events of the day, perplexed by the sudden arrival of night, reminded herself to remember the view that she sat under.

She would forget about the view years later, and only revisit it with the terribly taken photos of her mother's uncle's phone camera, which was smudged by a cow's lick. It was something she remembered, but not something unforgettable.

What was unforgettable was the snowtown. It was the daggering knives of the cold air, and the burning broil of the hot, mixing together to swirl around her with no sight of its existence, a storm without name or view or meaning.

And so, when Jasmit sipped her chai under the galaxy's winking sight, she thought of the town she never saw, yet she wholeheartedly believed in. She thought of the cold and hot as her mother's aunt recounted a story of a cursed flower-town where poison grew in the shape of flowers, and everyone was forced to survive within the walls. She recounted her experience of her brother almost being married to the bride of the tribe, and, when she had undid her veil at the wedding, thorns stuck from her cheeks and dripped venom on the marital fire. Jasmit watched the possibilities of other worldly life and liquid and winds swirl in the pool of the sky as her mother's uncle gripped his glass harder, shattering it at the thought of the thorn-bride's betrayal.

Jasmit looked down at the sound of shattering glass, and asked her grandmother's sister, who still sat in her rocking chair, stuck in the past, where the thorn-town was.

She lifted her arm, slowly, and pointed to where the sun had set just moments before.