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Zia Marshall**The Secret Room**

The vibration of the mobile under her pillow woke up Sanjana. She glanced at the blue light of the digital clock by her bedside. It was 4.00 a.m. Silently she rose and slipped out of bed. Glancing at the sleeping figure of her husband on the other side of the bed, she stood still for a few minutes to make sure that he wasn't awake. A late sleeper, Subodh watched television till one, sometimes two in the night. He always joked that he got his best sleep from two to eight, so Sanjana knew that she was relatively safe from discovery.

Tiptoeing out of the room, she went into the small guest room across the landing. She dressed hurriedly and made her way downstairs. Methodically, she counted the stairs. One... two...the fifteenth stair always creaked and she adroitly she avoided it. Slipping out of the back door, she stepped into the cool early morning air. Shivering slightly, she wrapped her *dupatta* tightly around her head and walked down the road. A dog howled in the distance and she heard the crickets chirping in the trees that lined the footpath. She was used to these early morning sounds; she heard them almost every morning. She walked hurriedly, stepping in and out of the small pools of yellow-orange light cast by the streetlights lining the road.

Five minutes later, she approached a decrepit old bungalow that stood at the corner of the street. Swiftly she entered and walked down the now familiar path to the outhouse at the back of the bungalow. Fishing out her key, she opened the door and stepped inside the room. She glanced at her watch and saw that it was 4.15. She was filled with a delicious sense of anticipation. She had two whole hours. Shutting the door behind her, she disappeared into the waiting recesses of her *secret room*.

Two hours later, Sanjana emerged from the room, straightening out her clothes and tying her hair into her customary ponytail. As she was locking the door, she realized that she had forgotten her *dupatta* inside. She fetched it and draped it around her neck. Locking the door, she looked at it longingly. If only she could stay a little longer. Sighing, she swiftly made her way home.

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Entering the house, she picked up the packets of milk left on the doorstep. Hurrying into the kitchen, she emptied the milk into a steel pan and set it to boil. Her mind was still filled with thoughts of the *secret room* as she absently filled the kettle with water. The tray with the tea things was ready on the counter where she had left it the night before. Spooning out tea into the teapot, she poured boiling water over it and left it to steep. The milk hissed as it rose smoothly to the rim of the pan. Switching it off, she poured some into the milk jug and glanced at the clock above the door. It was two minutes to

seven. At exactly seven, *Papaji* would come downstairs for his tea. Hurriedly she tore open a packet of Marie biscuits and spread out a few on a plate. Then picking up the tea tray, she walked into the *verandah*.

Sanjana heaved a sigh of relief when she found the *verandah* unoccupied. Her father-in-law had not yet come downstairs. Setting the tea tray on the table, she went indoors. *Papaji* was just coming down. Hurriedly covering her head with her *dupatta*, she waited at the foot of the stairs to take his blessings, a morning ritual he insisted upon. She touched his feet. Absently blessing her with his hands, he made his way to the *verandah* calling out to her to get him the newspaper.

Entering the kitchen, she settled at the table in the corner with her mug of black coffee and the second newspaper. Her mother-in-law entered a few minutes later.

“Good morning, *Amma*,” Sanjana smiled.

“Morning, Sanjana,” *Amma* greeted in return, as she headed for the counter to make her cup of coffee.

“Let me get that for you,” Sanjana offered.

“No,” *Amma* said, “Enjoy your paper. I’ll do this. You look tired, Sanjana and there are dark circles under your eyes. Are you sleeping well?”

Startled, Sanjana glanced up from her paper. “Yes, *Amma*. I am fine,” she said.

“I wish you could get a job, Sanjana,” *Amma* sighed. “I can understand how suffocated you must be feeling, cooped up at home all day long. I wish you would put your foot down and take a stand on the matter.”

Sanjana smiled affectionately at her mother-in-law. “*Amma*,” she said, reaching out and holding her mother-in-law’s hand across the table. “Don’t worry, I am fine.”

“But are you happy? I don’t think so,” Amma said candidly. “There are some women who are perfectly content to stay at home, but you are not among them. I can sense the restlessness within you at times and it worries me. Why don’t you talk to Papaji again? Maybe this time, he will relent.”



Sanjana glanced at her mother-in-law affectionately. Amma wanted her to have all the things that she had never had. She was the one who had first broached the subject of Sanjana working. But Papaji would not hear of it. A man’s place is behind the desk and a woman’s behind the stove. That’s how it has been in our family for generations and it’s not about to change now, he had said. And there was no point in pleading or coaxing. He didn’t hold with these new fangled ideas of women going out to work, he had said with a finality that brooked no further argument.

“If only Subodh would support you,” Amma was saying. “But he won’t go against Papaji. And it’s not his fault. That’s the way I have raised him. That’s how we were taught to raise our children.”

Sanjana put down her paper with a sigh. Amma was in one of her moods and she would have to distract her before she started nagging Papaji, she realized. Sanjana didn’t feel up to coping with any unpleasantness this morning.

“Amma,” she said. “There a new film that’s just been released and I don’t think either Papaji or Subodh would want to watch it. Why don’t we go this afternoon, after lunch?”

Amma’s eyes brightened at the prospect. She loved watching movies. She enjoyed losing herself for a few hours in another world that was as far removed as possible from her own.

“Let’s go,” she said, and Sanjana couldn’t help smiling at the enthusiasm she heard in Amma’s voice.

“Maybe we can stop at the bookstore on the way,” Amma said. “There’s a new book by Nandita Das that I want to buy.”

“You really like this writer, don’t you,” Sanjana observed.

“Yes,” Amma replied. “There are some writers who have a powerful knack of sucking you into a story till the characters’ experiences become your own. It’s almost like you have entered another world,” Amma was explaining enthusiastically.

Sanjana smiled. “Yes, I like Nandita Das too.” Glancing at the clock, she exclaimed, “Look at the time. Here we have been chatting away and *Papaji* will expect his breakfast soon.”

The two women busied themselves with the household chores, working in a long established rhythm that had been honed to perfection by the passing years. *Amma* washed and chopped the vegetables for lunch, while Sanjana busied herself with breakfast, setting the *idlis* in the cooker, stirring the *sambhar* that was boiling on the stove, and grinding the *chutney*.

Then she went to wake up Subodh. Standing at the door, she looked at the sleeping form of her husband and smiled. He had claimed most of the bed, as he usually did after she had left it. Shaking him awake, she tousled his hair and placed the cup of coffee by his bed. Sleepily, he yawned and opened his eyes, smiling and pulling her towards him. They snuggled in bed for a few minutes, Subodh holding her close to him while he sipped his coffee.

“I have to go,” Sanjana said. “*Papaji* will want his breakfast soon.”

Reluctantly he released her and she went back downstairs glancing at the clock. Her life seemed to be ruled by the clock since she had married Subodh, she reflected. Tea at seven, breakfast at nine, lunch at one, and so it went on through the day. *Papaji* was a stickler for timing and god forbid if things didn't go according to his strictly laid out timetable. Sanjana had accepted the dictum and lived by it for the last five years. But lately she found herself chaffing against the rules that governed her life. She felt that her days were whizzing by in a blur of meaningless household chores – cooking, shopping for groceries on Wednesdays, ironing on Mondays and Fridays, the routine never varied. She wished she could break free, but then there was Subodh, always there was Subodh holding her back from the unfettered freedom, the passion, the natural beauty and joy that she knew was waiting to claim her in her *secret room*.

That evening, Sanjana and *Amma* sat in the living room. *Amma* was absorbed in her new book, and Sanjana sat beside her watching a film on television. *Papaji* walked into the room.

“Sanjana, I'd like a cup of tea.”

Sanjana rose and was walking towards the kitchen when she heard *Papaji* asking *Amma*, “What are you reading? Nandita Das? Haven't I told you not to read such trash?”

“It's not trash *ji*. She's a fine writer. You should try reading her sometime,” *Amma* replied softly.



Sanjana couldn't bear it any longer. Papaji had always been dominating, but lately she felt that his controlling nature was beyond anything she could endure.

"Why won't you let *Amma* read what she likes, *Papaji*?" she demanded, storming into the room and staring at him in anger.

Raising his head, the old man looked at her in surprise. Sanjana never questioned him; she quietly did what was asked of her.

"Because Nandita Das is a trashy writer who talks about woman's liberation and all this new fangled nonsense, filling her readers' heads with rubbish. That's why I don't want either you or *Amma* reading her books."

"Well both *Amma* and I think she's a fine writer and what's more we should be allowed to have our own opinion on the matter, *Papaji*. You rule most aspects of our lives but telling us what to read – well I think that's taking things a bit too far."

Amma stared at Sanjana in surprise. She had never raised her voice before; she had never questioned *Papaji*, in the five years that she had been married to Subodh. Where was all this coming from, *Amma* wondered?

"How dare you speak to me like that," *Papaji* thundered. "You, a chit of a girl, what do you know about life or of things that are important? You have no idea what goes on in this world beyond these four walls."

"And whose fault is that?" Sanjana cried. "You won't let me go anywhere, you won't let me do anything."

"Do something? What exactly are you capable of doing anyway?"

"I am sure there's a lot more I can do with my life than be Subodh's wife and your daughter-in-law."

"Quiet girl!" *Papaji* thundered. "How dare you question my decisions? It's women like you who are responsible for the mess that society is in. Look around you."

Picking up a newspaper, *Papaji* flung it at Sanjana. She flinched but refused to step back. She listened quietly as she heard *Papaji* raving about teenage sex and violence, about drugs and crime. And she heard him attributing it to the fact that women worked. They had defied the law of nature, he shouted, wearing trousers and trying to enter a man's world, leaving their children to muddle along on their own. With a growing sense of numbness, Sanjana heard her father-in-law's relentless tirade. She knew it was a hopeless situation. And she couldn't even blame *Papaji*. The world had changed; *Papaji* had not changed with it. It was as simple as that, or as complicated, depending on how you looked at it. Subodh walked in just then.

"I think you should teach your wife some manners," *Papaji* shouted, glaring at Sanjana.

Nodding silently, Subodh took Sanjana's hand and led her upstairs. And in their room, he held her while her body was wracked with silent sobs. Then, quietly he patted her on her back and told her to wash her face.

Returning from the bathroom, Sanjana tried once more to make Subodh see reason. "Things have changed, Subodh. Look around you. We are in the 21st century. You have to make *Papaji* understand that I need more from life than just cooking and looking after the house."

Subodh looked at his wife helplessly. "He'll never agree, Sanjana."

"But can't you at least try?" she coaxed.

He shook his head. "Why Subodh?" she asked. "Why won't you try? Is it the money? Is it because *Papaji* controls the business?" she asked candidly.

Subodh stared at his wife in surprise. Sanjana was normally not so outspoken. What had come over her today, he wondered.

"No it's not that," he said. "Well partly it is, I suppose. If he were to ask us to leave where would we go? What would we do? But it is

much more than that, Sanjana. Asking him to let you work would make him very unhappy, and I don't want to do that."

What about the fact that I am unhappy, Sanjana wanted to ask. Or doesn't that count for anything, she wondered. She stared at Subodh, pitying him for his weakness and hating herself for acquiescing to the role that *Papaji* and people like him seemed to be thrusting upon her.

And then Subodh asked for the impossible. "I want you to apologize to *Papaji*," he said.

Sanjana stared at him in disbelief. Would it always be this way, she wondered.



"Sanjana," Subodh was saying gently. "I know you haven't done anything wrong, but if you don't apologize he will make life miserable for everyone at home. Please, for my sake," he pleaded.

Silently, she nodded. She would do as he asked; but something inside her died in that moment. She had always held on to the hope that Subodh would stand up to his father. She had believed that one day he would find the courage to say what he really felt, instead of going along with his father's wishes. She now realized that this was not likely to happen. The years seemed to stretch ahead of her in an endless monotony of household routine. If it weren't for the few

stolen hours of pleasure she snatched every morning in her *secret room*, she wasn't sure how she could have continued.

The next morning, as usual, Sanjana crept out of her bedroom at 4 a.m. She hadn't slept very well and was tired. But her need to go to the *secret room* was too great and hurriedly she climbed down the stairs, forgetting all about the fifteenth stair that creaked. The sound made her stop in her tracks. She was being overtly cautious, she chided herself. Everyone was fast asleep. Slipping out of the house, she made her way to her *secret room*.

Later, when she returned, she saw *Papaji* sitting on the *verandah* waiting for her. She glanced at her watch. It was just six o'clock. Why was he awake, she wondered, "I'll get your tea, *Papaji*," she said. She didn't try to explain where she had been; she didn't want to lie. "Get Subodh," *Papaji* said quietly.

Instinctively she knew, he knew about the *secret room*. Well the secret was out now, she thought. Mentally, she steeled herself for the questions that she knew would follow. *What did she do in the room? Why did she go there?* She framed the answers in her mind, mentally rehearsing them as she went upstairs. But I won't give up the room, she told herself. I won't allow *Papaji* to take even that away from me.

Shaking Subodh awake, she made him come downstairs. And with shock she heard *Papaji* telling Subodh, "Your wife has a lover."

Too dumbfounded to defend herself, she heard him describing how he had followed Sanjana that morning, how she went to the decrepit house down the road and locked herself in the outhouse with her lover.

"This is why she wants her freedom," *Papaji* shouted. "This is why she wants to go out to work. So that she can meet her lover during the day as well."

She listened to the old man's tirade in silent disbelief. Overcome with rage, she clenched her fists by her sides, trying to control her emotions. How dare *Papaji* hurl such accusations at her! He had no

right! Well, she'd show him! She opened her mouth to defend herself. She wanted to explain what she had been doing in the *secret room*. Just then, Sanjana saw Subodh watching her. Shocked, she saw the anger and repulsion on his face as he stared at her. Subodh believed *Papaji's* hurtful allegations. Sanjana couldn't bear it! Her Subodh believed she was capable of stooping so low. Did he have such little faith in her love, in the relationship they had shared for the past five years? Realizing the futility of further explanations, Sanjana quietly said with an air of finality, "I think it's best if I leave."

For a long moment, she paused and looked at Subodh willing him to say something in her defense. Subodh, however, remained silent and he made no move to stop Sanjana. Well the old man had won after all, she thought, and bowing her head to hide her tears, she left the room.



Two weeks later

Amma walked into the sitting room. "Sanjana's lawyer just brought the divorce papers," she said.

"I don't want that cheat's name mentioned in this house," *Papaji* replied.

“I don’t believe that Sanjana did anything wrong,” *Amma* said, defiantly. “There must have been a good reason why she was going to that room. You didn’t give her a chance to explain.”

“You are welcome to listen to her lies and explanations,” *Papaji* said. “Subodh and I don’t want any part of it. It’s time we started looking for a girl for Subodh. As soon as his divorce is through, we’ll arrange his marriage. I suppose we should be grateful that there were no children from Sanjana.”

Sighing, *Amma* lowered herself on the sofa beside her husband. “Nandita Das’s interview is on *Star One*. This is the first time she is appearing in public. She’s always been a bit of a recluse. Can I watch it, please,” *Amma* asked timidly without much hope.

Glancing at the sadness and tiredness etched on his wife’s face, the old man relented, switching the channel. The familiar image of Sanjana filled the television screen. *Papaji* sat up straight and stared at the screen in disbelief. He couldn’t quite take it in when he heard his erstwhile daughter-in-law explaining how she had written three novels sitting in an outhouse belonging to her aunt’s bungalow at 4.00 a.m. every morning under the pen name of Nandita Das. So the old man stared at the screen, while *Amma* stared at the old man’s face, at the guilt she saw etched there. And then with joy, she turned toward the television when she heard the anchor congratulating Nandita Das for the *Booker* she had been nominated for.



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Zia (PhD in English Literature), is a Learning Designer and Communication Specialist skilled in performance and competency development for personal and professional growth. She has created context-sensitive, solution-oriented e-learning, blended learning, and mobile learning programs for corporate houses like Wipro, Infosys, HCL, DHL, IIT, Macmillan and also for the education sector. Her short stories have been featured in Adelaide Literary Magazine, the Quarterly Literary Review of Singapore, Contemporary Literary Journal of India and the Scarlet Leaf Review.



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