

# Honour

Rochelle Potkar (<https://rochellepotkar.com/>)

## Mahalaxmi, Mumbai

White clothes had to be washed separately, and that was the catch. It was the shirts' problem if they stained. A soak, a bleach, a rinse, a double dose of detergent, more time in the sun... If the stains didn't go, there were chances Purna would have to pay for the shirt, which would be discarded by the owner and come to her.

Even now she wore an old shirt over her *sari* - the first remembrance of carelessness that she paid for with her entire month's earnings. Years ago. It had the spoils of pink color over the horizons of its yoke and hem, like the new sun enveloping rouge clouds at 6 am, glazing the citadel of drying clothes. Red, blue, white, green, with its many grey cubicles.

As the city moved around, marking the beginning of another day in four square-directions, it seemed to hold Purna at the centre - arms twisted, fabric gripped wet, her body taut, thrashing out the garment over the flogging stone in one clean sweep. Removing city grime, and sweat from two thick *saris*.

Purna stopped to look at the cars stopped at the traffic lights, as a train rattled on the other side from Mahalaxmi station. Sometimes she wondered about those cars. What if someone was watching through darkened windows? What if they knew what she was up to? Those people with books on their laps...

But she did not stop. Like the hands of a clock, she wound her seasoned arm-swings around the stone until noon, chasing detergent from linen.

When she was done, she bought a plate of rice, *roti*, *dal*, and *sabzi* from the *dhobis* who cooked at the *ghat*. She ate and quickly headed home to cook for Pakya, packing his food in a tiffin, and dropping it off at the jail. Whoever ate it, if he didn't, could go to hell.

She got back to the *ghat* at 3 pm and until 8, raced with the setting sun and the emerging moon to wrap up her work, pull clothes off entwined ropes where they had dried under the noon's crispness. She hurried to iron, fold, code, and bundle them into a sheet. Someone loaded that onto her back.

When she crossed the late-night signal, she peered through car windows again searching the faces. Someone in there surely knew.

She remembered her father beating their mother in her growing up days. Those never-ending drunken, yelling nights. Her sister Anju, brother Pakya, huddled in a dark corner - sleepy, but shivering in the humidity.

It was not surprising then that she disbelieved in marriage. At 26, all she wanted was to stand on her feet – even if they were itchy from the water, soaked in chemicals, soda, solvents, detergent, bleach and whiteners.

First, her feet got soft. The thick skin peeled. Then, the thin skin. Her feet looked misshapen like candle wax. She watched them now barefoot, trampling over the dark mud of Bombay.

She had only one pair of slippers that she wore on customer rounds. She appeared quiet to them with her topaz nose-ring that spoke more in the glint of the light than her.

As she untied sacks, gracefully handing ironed shirts, trousers, *saris* to customers, she pulled off the tag with the inked codes, relieved of her responsibility. Then, she headed to the next house.

She knew some of her customers from Baba Adam's age. And on their part, they had made their impressions of her. Some thought she was too proud, and educated because she scribbled the accounts in English with a blue refill that she dug out of her blouse or from her ponytail's scrunchy.

Purna had studied up to the X<sup>th</sup> standard. That's when their father had absconded. Anju got pregnant and had to be married off, and overnight she took to running the house. Their mother ailed in grief, heartbreak and dashed hopes in a corner, as she stopped praying to the gods kept in the bare wooden frame.

No wonder it wasn't important to possess a husband as much as savings, so if she married she would have the money to leave behind a troublesome man. That is what one needed. Life insurance against a man. Husband-protection. Gone were the days of sewing-embroidering, housekeeping and learning to cook. Now it was time to wield a knife, not just to chop onions; a stick behind the kitchen door for emergencies, jewelry for pawning for more funds.

Pakya had turned out to be an impressionable bastard, then a vagrant.

Now everywhere she went, she had to deal with it. Shameful words spreading...

All the customers now spoke about him. To her. She, who had never spoken about herself. Now they knew he had raped and killed a girl. And that the girl was 16, and Pakya had stalked her. And when she was alone, barged into her house, into the dank weirdness of his own darkness.

She felt the itch on her feet as she deposited the last of the clothes to the last customer, the following morning. Years ago, washing was only the work of the hands. Today, there were machines. When the machines came in, many *dhobis* had to take on more work. The machines took over the work of 10 men.

She liked the drying machines best that extracted water off 30 pieces of clothing at a time.

Before sleeping each night, Purna obsessively opened the stinking sack of dirty clothes and examined them for stains and damages. That was her habit. As much as it was removing lice from their kids' hair, for the other neighbours.

The days after Pakya was jailed, she continued to prepare lunch for him, taking it to him at the jail, and returning at 3 to soak heavy linen, wringing them clean under the sun.

Because the girl had screamed, and retaliated, it had gone really bad. Pakya had battered her, after she hit his head with something heavy. He killed her. Once rage enters a person... it intermingles with fear. She knew that from her father. She knew that of herself.

Then the bastard had absconded, with a commingling of blood on his clothes –of his, of that girl's, with so many eye-witnesses around. He was caught by the police and taken into custody, hammered to a pulp every day.

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Now that he was in jail, their mother nagged Purna to go meet him. There was always love mixed with regret, mixed with helplessness.

"We cannot ignore him," her mother said in a scratchy, coughing voice, "Go meet him. Take some food for him."

And so after delivering ironed clothes the next week, Purna collected dirty linen, made a jaunt to the *ghat*, washed, ironed, and made a dash to jail.

She avoided Pakya's gaze. They had beaten him up so that his face was purple, and swollen. "*Very good,*" she mumbled. "You are turning out like father. How could you...?!"

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But if that wasn't enough, Pakya was now on TV. All her customers, *dhobis* and *dhobans* from the *ghat*, the neighbours knew about him. They would ask her:

Did he really do it?

Was he in love with that girl?

Will he be released?

When will he be released?

When is the hearing?

Is the verdict out?

Is he your real brother?

Did you always know he was a rapist?

Her peace shattered, her plans for the future turned dim. Each day carrying clothes up and down seemed like a mammoth task. Many-a-times, she dumped her bundles to the side of the road, squatted, and wailed.

When she reached home, she searched for the wooden stick behind the door. She rolled it in her palms, tears trickling down her face.

The next day, she left all her bundles by the house door. She spent hours cooking and using up all the spice from the paper packet. Her mother tossed and turned in bed. "Is today a feast or someone's birthday? *Sevai? Kheer? Biryani?* I want to eat today, even if I vomit later."

So she kept food for her mother, and then headed out.

In the night, when she returned, news of Pakya's death had reached everywhere like dirty detergent water draining off a cubicle floor.

They would come for her. Somebody from the city.

On the shaky TV, she watched the news at 10. Yesterday, it was about an acid attack. Today, about a couple who were hacked to death for marrying outside their caste.

Pakya had to have a post-mortem done on him.

She went back to the jail and cried. She blamed the police for sabotage. She wailed and protested, making herself unreasonable. They shushed her and asked her to go.

She let Pakya go.

They may have been poor, but their family name had improved after their father's disappearance, up until now.

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Slowly the questions stopped coming in. She stopped squatting on the margins of the road. Who really cared for the death or the murder of a rapist?

Today foreigners hanging around the parapet nearby, descended to click pictures. She did not look at them, but her heart beat like torrential rain on tin roof. They pointed their cameras as she swung thick curtains on the stone. In a betrayal of what she had no name for, they zoomed out their elephant-trunk-like lens to her face and splashed and splashed light on her.

She scrunched her face and continued working.

Clean, well-ironed linen delivered on time was all the world wanted.

Now with the TV set in grey silence like a toy without its battery or key, Purna ran her hands over her shins that bore permanent purple marks from bumping over different stones all these years at the *ghat*.

Some stains would never go.

This story was longlisted at the DNA-Out of Print special feature, 2017.