

THE WOMAN WITH A MAGIC LANTERN

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She got up and stood at the window. A cool breeze brushed her face. She pulled out her I-phone 3 from her pocket and looked at the time , 3.25 she confirmed and continued looking outside. She remembered the meeting that took place a few hours ago. He had held her hand in his hand, flicked a single strand of hair that had it seemed, lost its way and was trying to reach her nose, gazed determinedly in her eyes and asked her, "Do you trust me ?" and her heart had skipped a beat. She had dreaded this question from a long time, thought hours over it and had not found a satisfactory answer yet.

She took a deep breath, gazed back into his eyes and answered "Yes" knowing fully what he was asking her to do. . . to run away with her. Like she had always seen in the movies but had never thought it possible that she might face a similar situation someday. It looked so glamorous and thrilling in the movies but as of now, she was sweating. He then told her his plan and his means to accomplish it. She listened intently, swallowing every word. The cool breeze brought her back to now, and she started having second thoughts, her father doted on her, pampered her, he would be crushed on learning this, her mother also might turn hysterical, her brothers were such concerned about their reputation they might actually plan an honor killing. Ravi on the other hand was a mature, determined person. Had a job in Gurgaon, was earning a handsome salary and loved her, and she started to sweat again.

Pulling out the phone again, she confirmed the time again, 4.50. She moved away from the window and lay on the bed. The dilemma in her mind was on its peak. In such thoughts she fell asleep. Her mother came in the room and begun mumbling, " When I was your age, I got up early and did all the chores and you are sleeping at 9 o clock without a care in the world." Her words worked like an alarm clock and Kalpana swung up like a wound up doll. Her mother stared at her for a while and then resumed her task of tidying up the room. She looked at the watch and relaxed. He had called her at 5 in the evening.

Just then the bell rang. Her mother angrily stared at her and left the room. She peeked out of the window to see who was the visitor at such an unexpected time. It was her next door neighbour, Mrs. Sharma, who it seemed had come for some juicy gossip with her mother. Kalpana lay back on the bed stared at the ceiling for a while , when her phone rang. She picked it up hastily. Ravi's relaxed voice greeted her, " Did you pack then ? Take some cash and valuables too. Will prove helpful in our new life. When we will come back for forgiveness we will return them, don't worry. Okay ?" She stammered, " Bbbbuut hhhhow will I . . . ?" "You can't do this much for our new life ?? I am handling the rest no ?" "Okay" was all she could manage.

Before she could put the phone on the bed, her father's voice rang in her ears, " I don't believe this. Don't jump on conclusions before asking her, KALPANA ! COME HERE!" Kalpana started sweating, her father never shouted her name like this. "Yes father" she answered and stood like an obedient daughter before him. "Bring your phone" her father commanded. "What happened father ?" she attempted to escape. "Just do as I have told you" came the strict

reply. "I demand to know why first"she resisted. Her father got up with the swiftness of a tiger ,snatched the phone from her fingers and began looking at messages, call records. After almost five minutes he looked up at her and"BANG!" slapped her hard accross the face . "What have I not done for you ?Given you more than I could manage and this is how you repay me?" he bellowed. Kalpana stood there like a convict caught red-handed,"I was going to tell you father. "After I Die?" he screamed. Her mother started crying,"I warned you about educating her and sending her to a co-education institute but you never listen to me, your sister's daughters have become doctors does not mean ours will too." Before her father could say anything further the phone rang again. "Ravi calling." Her mother started wailing loudly now, and her father picked up the phone and literally barked into it,"Hello,who is speaking ?"and the line was cut from the other side. He stared at his daughter and angrily slammed the phone on the wall, it broke in pieces, a proven guilty object. Having done this he left the room. Her mother who thought the punishment was not enough went up to her and started slapping, and cursing her," I wish I had three sons instead of a thankless wretch like you, putting mud on your father's name, your father was calling Mrs. Sharma names, we should be thanking her" and she paused,"Let me go up to her and make a request to her to keep it a secret or who will marry you, Hey bhagwan! why did this happen to my family" and murmuring to herself she left the room.

Kalpana looked at the broken pieces of her phone helplessly. She had no idea how Mrs. Sharma knew about her plan. Numbness was getting hold of her body. Tears started falling from her eyes as she saw her dreams of a future with Ravi float away from her. She remembered Mrs. Sharma, her neighbour, a sweet-natured old woman, her striking sharp features, her cute earrings, and her eyes which were particularly bright and shiny. At her door hung an ancient lantern, which when she was a child she used to think was a magic lantern. She even had a secret wish of stealing it away one day but she forgot all about it when Mrs. Sharma cooked her delicious dishes she had never tasted before. Wiping her tears she got out of the room, and with heavy steps moved towards Mrs. Sharma's house. She had no idea why she was going over there, a part of her wanted to confront Mrs. Sharma and warn her against nosing in people's lives. Thus, with her brain running at a speed of 300 km/hr, making no sense whatsoever she reached the front of Mrs. Sharma's house and for a while gazed at the familiar lantern, she stood there and listened to the voices of her mother and Mrs. Sharma talking,"That you don't worry about Mrs. Khanna, just tell me first, is your daughter safe ? I know this man Ravi personally, two years back he was trying to convince that girl, what was her name ? Meena I think to run away with him and she had confided in her family. They called the police immediately and this scoundrel Ravi had somehow gotten wind of it and ran away to god knows where. Two weeks ago I saw him talking to your daughter in the park and your daughter, a gullible child that she is meekly agree to him and I understood what was going on. I thought of talking to her first but was not sure of her reaction I came to you." On hearing this Kalpana's mother who was till now listening very silently started to sob hysterically "Hey bhagwan! you are a god sent angel, Mrs. Sharma, I can't think what would have happened if you had not come to me."

Kalpana remembered the conversation she had with Ravi in the park which Mrs. Sharma might have overheard, when they had childishly discussed what they were planning,"what kind of house would you like to live in hmm ?"Ravi had playfully asked her and Kalpana in her usual filmy self had answered,"like that movie UP, a house on the mountain with balloons" , of course Ravi was Carl and herself Ellie. But now everything is blurry with Ravi and Meena in the foreground.

Kalpana took a deep breath, gazed at the ancient lantern for a while, and Mrs. Sharma

stepped out of her house with her mother showering blessings on Sharma aunty and her generations to come.

Sharma aunty looked at Kalpana in a motherly way, and in a manner as if she had understood something, picked up the lantern and put it on Kalpana's hand. When Kalpana looked at her, Sharma aunty gave her a broad smile and placed her hand on her shoulder and all the anger Kalpana had inside herself, vanished. She felt as if she had blossomed into a different person than she was in the morning. She knew that there might not be a "happily ever after" for her but, it was Now . .

The Happily Ever After . .

The fairy tale, her life, and she found herself smiling .