

Torn at the Seams

by Anita Raj

Outside, a chilly wind kissed the gnarled, bare limbs of trees. Inside, the fireplace burned bright.

The girl loved the spindly warmth of the flames licking against the iron grate. They reminded her of the heat of her homeland – the heat of the air, of the aromatic, meaty spices, of milk fresh from a cow's udders boiling on a stovetop, of the red clay soil upon which she played with the village folk. The only reprieve from the oppressive climate was the billowing skirts they wore and starlit nights that carried breezes from the far sea. She loved it and yearned for it, a heat so miserable it became dear to her. The heat had permanently seared the memory of her childhood into her heart.

Seated on the sofa beside the girl, her grandmother worked with deft hands. Her face was comprised of weathered brown folds like the trees outside, but her eyes were as blue as clear skies. Maybe from cataracts, but the girl didn't understand this – all her life, she was taught to see the beauty in things, and only the beauty.

The grandmother held a needle strung with fine green thread as she tenderly sewed a costume for the girl. The girl moved beside her and ran her fingers along the sheer completed fabric. *Halloween* was still a foreign word on her tongue, a holiday neither her mother nor her grandmother had celebrated in their youth. But the young girl wanted to feel the thrill of this very American experience, and thus two generations of family sat together, weaving a costume.

However, the costume was much more than *a costume*. The grandmother had crafted it from her mind's eye. It was the garb of a sultan's daughter, a princess of the Arabian deserts and nights, who shared the same fiery passion as her granddaughter.

The grandmother loved this child dearly. She loved her small shoulders, rivers of inky hair, and round eyes, the color of *chai*. The curve of her parrot nose, the golden *jhumka* earrings sitting in the ears she pierced herself, and the bloodred bindi on her high forehead – the young girl reminded her of a

daughter, a husband, a land long gone. *Her blood*. No, it was not long gone. It lived on in this girl, this precious, innocent girl.

A few days later, on Halloween, the girl changed into her costume in her school bathroom stall. The fabric was so light it flowed between her fingers, and she was careful to pull each piece on. As she emerged from the stall, the clamor of her classmates was deafening. When she made for the sink to rinse her hands, someone grabbed her arm.

The suddenness of the touch startled her. She whirled around. People were pointing at the inside of her thigh and chuckling. She hesitantly glanced down, and the breath hitched in her throat.

The girl swore to her gods she had taken precautions to make sure the delicate cloth was preserved until after its purpose was served on Halloween. Her grandmother had spent countless hours on this piece. And now all that greeted her was an enormous tear — a *gash* — down the inside of her leg.

She ran from the bathroom, struggling to breathe, one hand on the torn pant leg exposing her flesh, as laughter chased her.

Like the cloth, she was too delicate for this world. One squeeze, and she tore at the seams.

She only knew the safety of her home, her hearth, and her whole heart. She did not know cruelty. Without ever having tasted this poison, she found herself anything but immune.

So when she returned home that night, a bag brimming with candy just as her eyes welled with tears, she leaped into her grandmother's arms and begged for the cold of the dead night outside to be expelled from her body. She whispered to her grandmother, "*Pati*, sing me a song of hope. My heart breaks."

The grandmother hummed in their native tongue, her steady hands now shaking as she unwrapped a piece of chocolate. They each bit one end of it, letting the sugar settle on their tongues and swell against their cheeks.

The sugar reminded them of coconuts and their soft, white bellies, of wells with water fresh enough to banish the salt of their tears, and of their people — caked with mud from the harvest, rough of body from the unrelenting sun, but with the softest of heart.

The girl and her grandmother missed the earth that bore them. But they would survive—and they would carry the heat of that holy motherland everywhere, eternally.