

Jasmine Days

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Benyamin

Translated from Malayalam by
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 juggernaut

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*Dedicated to those who were defeated,
in life and in revolution*

Allah will not change the condition of a people
till they change their own condition.

Quran, Ar-Ra'd 11

We must wash our eyes with darkness
to see what we want to see.

Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*



Jasmine Days

Sameera Parvin



Translated by Benjamin
from the original in Arabic titled
A Spring without Fragrance

To my baba

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Part 1

Orange Radio

RJ

I sat again in front of the microphone for my beloved live programme, Rush Hour. It had been three months since I was in the studio.

No one had expected me to go live as soon as I returned, or for that matter, even return. Maybe that is why our programme manager, Imthiaz sir, told me, 'You don't have to go live if you are not up for it, just record something.' He was trying to be kind, but it made me sadder.

To not go live? Is that why I returned to the studio even though taya and my chachas told me not to? Is that why I asked the studio to announce my return even when they were hesitant? Does Sameera give in that easily?

For the last one week, the studio had been airing ads announcing my return. Since then listeners had been calling and texting and emailing the studio to express their delight. I could not disappoint them. They are my strength. My grief is my own secret. But in public, I am RJ Sameera. I pour happy words into my audience's ears, ask nonsense questions and listen to sweet nothings. That's the Sameera

whose return they are looking forward to. And that is what made me get back into the live studio.

Still, I didn't like my intros to the first two songs. It was as if that old Sameera who turned into a river of talk in front of the microphone had run aground. I stumbled over some words and misspoke some names. I even asked Kapil bhai at the keyboard if he would write a couple of sentences for the next song. But bhai was confident. 'Don't worry, you will be fine by the next song.' He knew that I never prepped my intros. I would just listen to the song and improvise. That was my style. And that's why even two years after my programme began, Rush Hour still had excellent ratings.

Kapil bhai was right. By the third song I was back on track. My listeners were eating out of my hands. They welcomed me back happily. Some of them reproached me for taking such a long holiday. Others wanted to know if I had a fun vacation. Yet others wanted to know where I had gone on my holiday. I gave them answers they loved. I laughed with them, played with them, flirted with them. The hour-long show was about to wind up. Just then a live listener asked, 'So what news at home? Are your baba and mama doing well?' 'Yes, yes, they are well, very well,' I said, choking down a wild scream.

Each listener is different. It's hard to guess what might come out of which mouth. They all have demands that go beyond radio time. Some want my cellphone number. Others want to chat by email. Some ask for a photo. Some want to meet in person. Of course, there are always those who are looking for a romance. And the ones who want to marry me. And the ones who want nothing less than my

body. I still remember one of my listeners; he always sent SMSs to my programme. Then he started calling regularly. Poor guy. He was a security guard at a construction site, somewhere far away from the city. My songs and chatter kept him going through his lonely days. I always had words of comfort for him. One day, during a live show, he started crying. He said he loved me and could no longer live without me. For a moment, I was tongue-tied. Then I took a deep breath and told him that he must love me like a daughter. My words calmed him and that day, in the office, as well as outside, many compliments came my way for my level-headed answer.

A good RJ never loses her cool whatever the provocation during a live show. I had always passed that test with A+. And yet today, I was taken aback by a standard question. The truth is, it shook me. Even though my listener kept talking, I couldn't respond. Kapil bhai was gesturing at me from beyond the glass wall to say something, anything. There was silence for a brief while. Radio is not like TV; a moment's silence can seem as long as a century. Kapil bhai put a song on to cover up. I couldn't stay in the studio any longer. I took off my headphones and left, not bothering to even finish the programme.

There was nobody else in the studio at that time. The station was to air a recorded programme for the next two hours. The morning programme was over and most of the staff had finished for the day. The rest were in the canteen. I sat down and closed my eyes. It's best to be alone when you are sad. I wanted to be by myself and feel my strength slowly seeping back into me.

After a while – I lost track of time – I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Fathima Syed, the head of advertising.

She had been absent during the morning commotion, I remembered then. The moment I had stepped into the studio in the morning, everyone had crowded around me. They engulfed me with sympathy and love. Some stood nearby silently, hands folded across their torso. Others offered words of consolation. Some expressed their sorrow. Yet others were angry on my behalf. Philip Mathew sir, who went by the nickname Sheela Garments in office, patted my head as if I were his daughter. Everyone got a pale smile from me in return. Our station manager John Maschinas offered me a formal condolence and returned to his cabin. I appreciated that. Not much else was necessary after all. All those other gestures of sympathy seemed a little melodramatic to me. My loss was mine and only mine. For the others, it was just a matter of words.

Fathima madam pulled a chair and sat with me for a long time, with my hand in hers. Then she started sobbing. And just like that, I began to cry as well.

Fathima madam is one of the strictest managers in our office. I have never seen her be tender with anyone. We radio artistes tremble when we hear her name. If we are late in inserting ads or God forbid, miss an ad during the programme, she turns the office upside down. As far as she is concerned, the station exists to broadcast ads. News and other programmes are filler items.

What is more, our office has a strict rule banning any non-professional relationship between management and

artistes. And now, without paying heed to any of this, she was sobbing loudly in front of me. So there I was, stuck, trying to comfort someone who had come to comfort me. When she finished crying, she opened her bag and showed me a strip of pills.

‘This is what keeps me alive these days, Sameera. Some day, without this, I might die,’ she said, her face red. I had no idea what was wrong with her. Did she have some mental illness? She understood my confusion.

‘Sameera, all this happened when you were away. One day when I left the station, a taxi started following my car. It was parked right outside our main gates, as if waiting for me. The driver tracked me closely, always keeping two or three cars between us. I didn’t think it was a big deal at first. But after the taxi missed a couple of opportunities to overtake me, I noticed it and was struck by a lightning bolt of suspicion. When I saw that the taxi was still behind me after I stopped at a bakery and then at a cafeteria to buy sandwiches for my children, I couldn’t ignore it any more. Just to make sure I was not being paranoid, I went out of my way into a couple of galis. I took a U-turn at a signal and drove back the way I had just come and then went around a roundabout and got back on my route. The taxi was still behind me. I started sweating. My legs were trembling. I pressed down on the accelerator. The taxi speeded to keep up with me. I slowed down and so did the taxi. I cut through two red lights to escape. But the taxi followed me through the red lights. It followed me all the way home.

‘When I got out of the car to open the garage, an

enormous man got out of that taxi and approached me. That's the last thing I remember. When I opened my eyes, I was lying in bed. Syed's mother and sisters were sitting by my bedside. They told me that some passers-by had found me lying unconscious on the street, and brought me home. I have never been so scared in my life, Sameera.

'I saw that taxi driver again and again. On the street, in the bazaar, at the park. And many other places. Wherever I look, he is there. Sometimes just beyond the window, sometimes on the roof of the opposite building. I hear the doorbell ring and run to look through the peephole and he is in the corridor. Or I hear a movement in the bathroom and when I check, he is hiding behind the door. When I walk on the streets, I can hear his careful footsteps. In the supermarket, I can see his shadow looming two aisles away.

'I told myself it was my imagination but I didn't believe myself. I didn't know what was real any more – the reality of my mind or the reality in which everyone else lived. My fears reached the point where my baba took me to a psychologist. When I take the pills the doctor has given me, I feel better. And that is how I am surviving now. Not just me. My father, mother and even my son, who is in the fifth standard, we are all on these pills now. You know Sameera, it was on the third day after that man followed me home, that Syed went missing . . .'

Fathima madam went back to her seat, her breath heavy with exhaustion. I continued to sit there, numb, not knowing what to say or think.

Javed, that was the day I got your letter.