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# **MOUNTAIN TALES**

**Love and Loss in the Municipality of  
Castaway Belongings**

**SAUMYA ROY**

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**PROFILE BOOKS**

Farzana Ali Shaikh rummaged on a mountain clearing on a hot April afternoon. The sun warmed her head and made lurid colours swim in her eyes. The smell of rotting prawns wafted up from the mountain. She jabbed her long garbage fork to push aside translucent fish scales, crackling prawn shells, entrails and animal dung, and scooped up the broken glass jars that had just poured out on the clearing.

Smoke and heat rose up, as forklifts shovelled glass away. It blurred Farzana's view of the trash strewn around her and brought up burning smells that mingled with the stench of decaying flesh. Scavenging birds swooped low beside her, searching for entrails. Farzana kept her eye on the glass and hacked her fork into the mess, keen to retrieve it. She didn't usually work on the *jhinga* or prawn loop, as this mountain was known. It was made up of remains from the city's municipal slaughterhouse and its vast port lands. That afternoon she and her younger sister, Farha, had chased a garbage truck winding up its unsteady slope.

Farzana worked quickly, shovelling glass jars, shards and saline bags that had fallen out of the truck into the large bag she dragged along. The truck had probably come from a hospital, and its contents would fetch good money. A straggly crowd built up around her, also eager for the glass. But, at seventeen, Farzana was tall, athletic and fearless.

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Her eyes were trained to spot plastic bottles, wire, glass, German Silver – a metal alloy often used to make appliances and machinery – or cloth scraps. She snapped up her pickings before others could get to them.

She looked up to make sure that Farha was picking close by. It must nearly be time for their father to arrive with lunch, she thought. She clanked her fork into the glass heap again and, this time, brought out a heavy blue plastic bag. Farzana thought it must be filled with smaller glass bottles, which usually fetched a good price. She squatted on the warm fly-filled slope, untied the string and gently upturned the bag, expecting delicate glass vials to pour down, clinking and glinting in the sun. Instead a single large glass jar plopped onto the clearing. As she bent low to see what was inside, she could make out arms, legs, toes and tiny bald heads swimming into each other within it. She squinted, looked again and screamed. A few friends gathered to examine the jar crammed with floating limbs.

Farzana opened the lid and brought out a baby girl, a little bigger than her large, bony palm. The city sent a steady supply of dead babies, often girls, to the garbage mountains, along with its other expendables; mothers who couldn't bear to tell their families they had delivered a girl sometimes threw her in the trash instead. Farzana had occasionally unearthed them while rifling through rubbish. But as she tugged the baby girl out, two baby boys came up too, their stomachs fused to the girl's. The three had probably died together, unable to survive with or without each other, she thought. Farha said she had heard that lunar eclipses caused unborn babies to split or deform within wombs. This baby must have been born as three, she told the group.

Farzana stretched her arms out, cradling the lifeless babies. She began to make her way carefully down the wobbly slope, holding them gently. Behind her, the mountain rose like a teetering hulk, made up of Mumbai's detritus, held in place with a topping of mud.

She waited for her friends to catch up. From high up on the next peak they could see the vertiginous trash mountains curve around them and stretch out into the distance. Together, the hills curled like a long sliver of crescent moon. Trash-made homes were dug into the inside of the moon's curve, and a shimmering creek arched around the outer edge. The creek ran into the Arabian Sea, which rimmed the island city of Mumbai. Rag-pickers such as Farzana called the garbage mountains *khaadi*, the Hindi word for creek. Nobody quite knew where the name came from but, standing high on a mountain clearing, you did feel as if you were floating in an undulating and smelly sea of garbage that faded into an unending expanse of glimmering blue sea in the distance. Farzana continued her walk through the rising and ebbing trash.

When they neared the creek, Farzana's friends dug their garbage forks into soft sand where the trash slopes petered into a rivulet. A few pickers came out of houses built on stilts, which lifted them above the trash at low tide and nearly immersed them in the waves at high tide. They walked over to see the babies and helped Farzana's friends shovel sand. The tide was rising and gentle waves inched closer to them. Torn clothes and plastic bags bobbed in the water and dripped from the branches of mangrove trees. Farzana felt a gentle breeze approach through the creek. It rustled through the old trees, through the leaves and plastic that filled their branches and shivered through her.

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She lowered the babies into their shallow grave. Her friends covered them with sand and whispered prayers. They usually came this way later in the afternoons, to wade and swim in the rising tide. Farzana liked to stay until the setting sun faded behind the fetid hills, giving them a dusty pink glow, and the waves turned metallic. That was when she thought the mountains looked their best.

That afternoon they walked hurriedly back across the hills to find their father, who was waiting and hungry. Hyder Ali Shaikh was standing, tall, gangly and gaunt, on a quiet slope, his face lit up in a tobacco-stained grin. They sat down to eat. Both sisters wore salwar kameezes with cotton jackets to keep the mud and trash away from their clothes, and errant strands spilled out of the scarves they wrapped around their long, loosely bundled hair. While Farzana was prickly and quiet with teenage awkwardness, Farha, at fifteen, had stayed smiling and baby-faced. Over the lunch that Hyder Ali had brought from home, she told their father about their morning adventure. Uncharacteristically terse, he asked them not to venture near the graves again. *Ye sab cheez chhodta nahi hai*, he remarked. *These things have a way of not leaving you.*

Hyder Ali had moved to live in the shade of the mountains months before Farzana was born. He had come to Mumbai in his teens, from his village in Bihar. For years he had worked as an embroiderer's assistant. He enjoyed the long, quiet hours of filling fabric, tightly stretched out on the frame, with lacelike patterns. Half-made flowers, rising vines and wingless birds made shadows on his face and limbs, when he curled up to sleep under the frame.

Then a wife, Shakimun, and nine children followed, forcing Hyder Ali to seek a life outside the embroidery room that formed his world.

He had heard of the mountains that never ran out of work – vast dumping grounds at the edge of the city, where the remnants of everything that Mumbai consumed came to die. Nothing had ever officially been composted, incinerated or recycled. Instead it lingered on at Deonar, adding to the fetid and ever-growing mountains of garbage. Hyder Ali had heard that the mountains were older than the oldest pickers who worked on them, and larger than the biggest trash hills in the country. They stretched over 326 acres<sup>1</sup> and some rose more than 120 feet,<sup>2</sup> monuments to the increasingly ephemeral desires of the city's more official residents.

Hyder Ali's friends trawled the slopes all day, selling the trash they collected to traders who would sell it on, to be remade anew. They foraged for mangled plastic that could be pressed into sheets or pulled into filament. They traded glass bottles to be refilled with new drinks, metal to be melted into fresh parts for gadgets, and cloth scraps to be stuffed into toys and quilts or sewn into clothes. Hyder Ali had heard you could earn good money on these slopes, and their edges could yield space to make a home for his growing family. He heard the mountains sustained pickers, fed them, threw up treasures that had made fortunes and fuelled rivalries and ambitions.

So in 1998 he moved his family to a spot where a drain that ran down the mountains met a lane that curved around them. Their lane was called Banjara Galli, or Gypsy Lane, after the itinerant inhabitants who had left before city drifters replaced them. Farzana was born months

later. Two more daughters and a son would follow, making it nine children who would come to fill the house they would build on these shape-shifting foothills.

At first Hyder Ali looked for embroidery commissions, while Shakimun strapped Farzana onto her back with a dupatta and waded into the township of trash hills. But finding work on his own was hard and soon he followed her into the rolling landscape of garbage. At first their rising stench made Hyder Ali throw up. His bony hands stank and, when he ate, he felt they transported the smell of garbage inside him. Hunger made him dizzy. Mountain trash swam before his eyes. He could not eat or sleep for days, whittling down his already-skeletal frame.

He developed a technique to protect his hands and appetite, clenching his toes tightly around cloth scraps while balancing himself precariously, on the wobbly slope, with his other foot. He bent his knee and lifted his leg, clinging onto the cloth, to deposit it in the bag that Shakimun held open for him. Hyder Ali often lost his balance in this acrobatic act and fell flat on his face into the muddy trash, amid a swarm of pickers. If he didn't get to something fast enough, someone else would. He had to discard his leg-curling and use his hands to work more quickly. As his hands and feet filled up with cuts and bruises from stumbling on glass and metal, he learned to dodge the stray dogs and birds that chased them for trash. Determinedly Hyder Ali, Shakimun and the children hung close to the khaki-and-orange trucks that relentlessly emptied the city's moth-eaten possessions onto the rising mountain clearings.

Hyder Ali liked to tell Farzana and her siblings that there was nothing he had not seen while trawling through

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this sprawling necropolis. Everything that gave meaning to Mumbaikars' lives – from broken cellphones, to high-heeled shoes and gangrenous and dismembered human limbs – ended up here. He, like most pickers, believed that the spirits of people and possessions that had been sent here for unceremonious burial hung around the windswept slopes. On delivering the Urdu books that he found in the trash to clerics, he heard from them that God, who made people, also made spirits, and that the evil ones among them were called Shaitans.<sup>3</sup> Unseen and unheard but never the less tangibly present, they were said to be a manifestation of people's baser nature, their rising, unending desires. They gripped people, only to lead them astray.

Shaitans lived in filthy recesses and rose from smokeless fires, the clerics had told Hyder Ali. Fires simmered, furtively and constantly, within the mountains' layers of decaying trash. He had seen smoke that rose from fires burning within the mountains, and flames that danced without smoke. At other times, flames erupted and moved like lightning across the hills, letting off swirling smoke, the two dancing together. Hyder Ali had nearly been encircled and trapped in these travelling fires. The Shaitans were bound to appear on the mountains – a dizzying accumulation of partly sated aspirations wreathed in fires and smoke, pickers believed. Shaitans arose from them and lay in wait for new homes and younger people to inhabit, they believed.

Hyder Ali had heard of friends who had been tripped on mountain slopes when they crossed the path of lurking Shaitans. Others warned him to stay away from certain hill slopes, or claimed they had encountered the tall, floating spirits known as Khabees in Islamic mythology, in their

shrunken plastic-and-cloth-scrap homes on the edges of trash foothills, where they demanded rent. Hyder Ali's friend, Moharram Ali Siddique, had told him he heard a woman call out to him every time he neared the pile of white cloth scraps that he had collected on a slope, asking him to return her shroud from his neatly folded stack.

Hyder Ali knew that, of all his children, Farzana loved being on the mountains the most. She was the first of them to be born at their feet and had learned to walk on the gentle incline of trash foothills. As soon as she could make the short walk from their home, she had come wobbling over to them and it had been a losing battle to keep her away from them ever since. Shakimun sent him to get Farzana back, worrying she would get buried under the garbage showers that erupted from the emptying trucks. She had heard of children being mauled by dogs, of toddlers falling off garbage cliffs or tumbling down mountain slopes. Hyder Ali often found Farzana swinging from abandoned car fenders or digging for toys buried in the trash. He delivered her home, crying, and returned to work on the slopes. Farzana soon followed him back.

For months Farha and Farzana would remember the day they buried the babies as the day they got thrashed. When they arrived home, their eldest brother Jehangir was waiting for them, his face filled with rage. *Mardaani ho gayi hai? Bache gaad rahi hai?* he asked, his voice rising. *You think you've turned into men? Burying other people's babies?* Without waiting for their answer, Jehangir, who was eight years older than Farzana, slapped her and then Farha. He asked why they hadn't called him. He was at a clearing nearby that afternoon, he said. He would have taken care

of it, or asked the municipal officials to. Don't get into these messes, he shouted. Nothing good ever comes out of these things.

Farzana couldn't answer. Tears choked her. Besides, fighting with Jehangir was never a good idea. Everyone at home knew that the anger of their wiry and intense brother was explosive.

In that long summer that stretched between her and adulthood, Farzana worked through the smoke that drifted over the slopes, the constantly burning fires, their sharp smell, the heat that turned humid as rain clouds approached, the new security guards who had arrived to patrol the hilly townships' hazy rim.

It would all end soon, she told Hyder Ali coolly. The baking sun would give way to Mumbai's long season of torrential rains, which would soak their burning township and quench the fires. That year the summer would also end in the holy month of Ramzan (known elsewhere as Ramadan), filled with day-long fasts and feasts that would occupy much of the night. And three days before the first fast, on 2 June 2016, Farzana would turn eighteen.

Hyder Ali later came to believe that it was in this long and boiling summer of waiting – the summer when Farzana found the glass jar filled with the lifeless babies – that the mountain spirits had entered his daughter, though at the time they did not know it.

## 2

The shadow of the Deonar mountains was longer than Hyder Ali knew, and breaking out of it was harder than he had thought. He had often asked Vitabai Kamble, who lived a few houses down the lane, for help in escaping it. He had first seen Vitabai as a rolling cloud of grey on the hills, draped in jewel-coloured sarees, chasing the arriving trash. Pickers said that she was among the oldest on the slopes, that she had seen the mountains before they were mountains. She herself spoke of the legends that floated in the mountains' halo, which said that they were older than the oldest pickers. Like most legends, some parts were true and others were not.

'On the morning of July 6 1896 there was a strong smell, as if sulphurated oxygen was generated over the north of the island and especially from the salt channels across Matunga and the vacant ground to the north. The smell seemed strongest furthest to the north,' Dr T. S. Weir, Bombay's health officer, wrote in the assiduously compiled administration report that the municipal commissioner sent to London every year.<sup>1</sup>

At this time, a migration of rats had been observed across Sewree, and I believe the smell was due to the decomposition of dead rats, for a number of bodies