

One Day

"Beggars can't be choosers," she told you. "You've waited long enough."

You were 25 when you came. Married after 9 days. You left warm breezes for bitter winds; banana plants for beech trees; coconuts for strawberries; sarees for full sleeves and lychees for dying leaves. "You'll have a better life there! Think of the opportunities!" "He wants to marry *you*. Isn't that a good sign?" "Time is running out. You're already twenty-five."

Twenty-five years old. You wouldn't be married that long, not even for half that time. But you didn't think of that. You thought love had betrayed you. Five years of love and lust, all dissolved to dust. Five years of everything meant nothing. What could nine days do, after just one rendezvous?

You arrived within months. Questions were asked, tears were shed yet you still went ahead. You were clever, naïve, educated, innocent. You had taught others, but the house made you want to go no further. Thank god he knew better than that. He failed you in so many ways, you recall, but for this you thank him for.

There's a picture of you, smiling, standing slender in your saree; oh so much of you in me, no matter how much you disagree. You're cooking, your favourite past time, hands hard at work and eyes eager to please. It was this picture you tried to paint, to replicate in your mother tongue, to tell them back home that nothing more was to be done. A perfect housewife in a perfect life, somewhere in between Edinburgh and Fife: no complication, no heartbreak, no strife.

You learnt to drive and drove, relearnt the ways of surgery and practiced, familiarised yourself with the accent and spoke, but still you struggled to cope - every day, a little less hope. Days and weeks, months and years went by; oh how you hoped the lack of reciprocation would die. Though now, you say it wasn't really love at all. A loveless marriage, you sighed. I couldn't agree, for there was love in your marriage, from everyone except for the two people in it: love, but for the wrong things and people. Love, for societal expectation, conformity, your parents and your children. Love, that was really an unquenched desire to please all but yourself. No, you didn't realise, you only needed love for one.

Edinburgh became well-known to you as you studied hard, its beauty more like the colonial version of Britain you grew up learning about. You were confused when you first came. Where were the green pastures, the clean streets, the high teas? Instead you saw boxes for houses, industrial complexes, your skin penetrated by the cold breeze. I now know you've become accustomed to this weather, as you say you could never now go back to an Indian Summer. "Pollution made it hotter!" you exclaimed. I never doubted your fact, but there was another reason for your reluctance, your pain.

Your first child was born, an abundance of happiness in your arms. Maybe now, you would ease his qualms? He looked happy, he carried her, boasted her beauty. But his qualms failed to be calmed, growing into a desire for more, for better. "My mother did this and never did that." In a few years you planned him, a son. Maybe that would make him happy. A boy.

It hurt me, when I first learnt that. But we both know, my pain is only a fraction of yours.

It wasn't just him who became your bane. You often said you felt looked down upon, ridiculed, told to "stay in your lane." Some people were so helpful, you say, in ways you can never repay. The rest? "Don't you know? That's how we do things in *this* country."

This country. The country that ruled yours, the land of opportunity, wealth and dreams: all in your eyes still yet to be seen.

People began to notice. Your smile was deceptively beautiful, but not everyone was fooled. Behind the pearls of white lay a lump in your throat, as you tried ever so hard to keep afloat. You'd insist in your loyal, kind voice, "I'm fine!" One by one you began to break down in front of them, open up by their side; ever so slowly, you started to confide. Get help, they said. It will get better, they said.

It did not get better. You tried, never lied, but that soon changed. Hope turned into pragmatism, as they began to tell you there was an expiration date. You should consider leaving him. You need to leave him. You *will* leave him. Your parents realised the cost of their principles: a debt paid in small instalments, the currency the prime years of your young adult life. The final instalment would be soon, but you knew you'd spend years paying interest.

He wouldn't hear of it. We have two children, he shouted. I let you drive, I let you work. He let you.

Let. What a funny verb. Nobody 'let' you study back home, nobody 'let' you work. You studied and you worked, as it was expected. It began to fall into place, why people questioned how good your English was, how well educated you were, how well read. Your own husband fell into the same trap. He knew your background, but treated you otherwise, as did everyone else. No, my parents would not have died for the opportunities I had, you thought. A businessman and a doctor, not a coal picker and his slum-dweller wife; what little they knew of your previous life.

I remember, vividly, seeing my friend's two parents kiss. "What's that?" I asked. Why did my parents never do that? I thought. You were so unhappy sometimes, and I never knew why. I even got angry, when you tried to get us to leave him without saying good-bye. How could you do such a thing? He was meant to be here, with us. Why? Because he told me so, he promised me; he would never break my trust.

The resentment resided for years within me. When I think of what I put you through, I sometimes wonder how you ever forgave, how you let it be. "You didn't know raja," you told me. No, I didn't. I'm so sorry I didn't.

You tell me how you're so proud of me. How I was prettier, cleverer and stronger than you ever were. Your oblivion is beyond me. A move between continents, years of discrimination and a loveless marriage later, you go on. Working, cooking, cleaning, reading, all with but two lines on your face, 25 years gone. You've lived half a life here but still proud to be from there, drilling in me a sense of pride for which I so long neglected and put aside. I let you down in so many ways, but you kept believing in me: if I am all those things, it's only because you made me see.

It's when I think of what you went through that I feel stronger. My anxieties and fears, restrictions and limitations, love and heartbreak will never compare to what you experienced: I pray to god it never does, because you know it takes more than just perseverance.

I think, Mum, you're starting to see in the mirror what I see in you; I hope, one day, you do too.

One day.

