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Sounds of Silence

Uma Jayaraman

Jai and the children had to catch their flight to Singapore at 1. 30 am. To fly out of Chennai was never easy. Despite rules in place, things almost always got out of hand. This was one of the reasons why Jai left for the airport several hours before the flight was due to take off.

“As if Air India ever takes off on time,” Anita whispered into the folds of her Sari’s *pallu*.

It was a turquoise blue tussar silk with Warli motifs on the pallu that Jai had bought for her during this trip to India...

No! A small correction!

Anita had liked the sari and hinted at wanting to buy it. After a week’s attempts at hinting, her husband had merely said, “of course, go ahead! After all, I earn only to buy saris for you.”

On any other occasion, Anita would have spat at the taunt. The situation was different now.

They were visiting her parents in India. Her father had just suffered a mild stroke. It was three days before Deepavali. Anita got a call from her aunt Leela, her mother’s youngest sister, at about nine in the morning. It was unusual of her aunt to call her at this hour. A landline that rang in the morning bode an emergency. If the caller was a family member from overseas, it spelt disaster! Anita’s hand slightly trembled as she picked up the receiver of her landline. Her aunt spoke in clipped sentences. The sentiment of spending her sister’s money over the international call demanded this measure. This was a common sentiment among people of her mother’s generation. But using this measure now did not help. Anita asked many questions to fill in the gaps and this extended the conversation.

The other option was to disconnect and call back. Her mother answered the phone this time. Anita could tell that her mother had been crying. “Kanna, please come to me. I don’t know what to do.” Anita hung up, changed into her jeans and kurti that she found hanging on the coatstand, got into her car and drove to Syed Alwi Road to buy an air ticket to Chennai from her agent.

It was about ten in the morning when she drove past Serangoon road to go to her agent’s office. The by lanes and alleys that merged into Serangoon Road were overflowing with people doing their last minute Deepavali shopping. Jai and Anita had prepared for this year’s Deepavali with great care as always. It was not their New Year as many people in Singapore liked to believe. “Where did they get that idea?” Anita sometimes wondered. India had too many religions, regions, and castes. Each ethnic community had its own New Year. And if there was a common New Year in India, it was the English New Year (welcome to the Empire!).

Jai and Anita celebrated Deepavali with an appropriate mixture of both tradition and frolic. Anita would buy new clothes for the entire family (that included their domestic help who had been with them for over six years), make sweets like *baadam halwa*, *gulab jamun*, and savouries such as *murukku*, and *mixture*. This last item was always a chore. This was a concoction made by mixing several savouries in certain strategic proportions to dish out a deliciously crunchy and mouth-watering snack. Her children demanded new ingredients in the mixture every year. Anita would start shopping for various items that could become part of her 'mixture', two weeks before Deepavali. On the day of Deepavali, she would wake everyone up at 4 a.m. to apply vermillion to their foreheads and oil in their hair. 'Aiyah! Mom, why do you do this every year?' This was Raghu, her eight-year-old son. Her five-year-old Nandini had just started complaining, having learnt the trick from her brother. Jai would come and sit quietly on the *kolam* drawn for the purpose and allow his wife to apply oil to his scalp. He was pleased when Anita fussed over tradition. After this, they would all be forced to have a quick shower and wear new clothes. Anita liked to talk about how she had hand-picked all the stuff after hours of walking in and out of overcrowded shops flaunting new fashion wear from Mumbai and Chennai. Then they would all head out to light sparklers. Every year, during this ritual, Jai would say, "back in India, we would have real fireworks, not this stuff." Raghu would say, "Yeah dad, we know, we know. Your good old India days." Anita chuckled at how Raghu stressed "your India" and Jai would knit his eyebrows in a way that often reminded her of the tuck shop owner across her childhood home. The middle-aged man sat fanning open jars containing brightly coloured and moist-looking sweets to keep away flies, but he would be unable to keep the children away. He would swat their tiny hands in vain as they dug into these open jars and took away fistfuls of his merchandise.

Cooling her heels at the ticket agent's office, Anita sent a quick text to all her friends. "Sorry girls, can't meet you all on Deepavali. My father has taken ill. I am off to Chennai." Fighting back a stinging teardrop, she tried to focus her mind on what needed to be packed.

...

Her father did not speak much. He hadn't participated in her life as fathers are known to be a part of their children's lives. Some of her friends in Singapore often spoke of their fathers with pride. Latha's father had raised her alone from the time she was ten after her mother succumbed to breast cancer. Shiela's father was also her best friend and had seen her through her adolescent troubles and early marital woes. Arpana's father was a conservative man but he supported her when she married out of caste. Anita couldn't remember her father in any of these ways.

He was the sole breadwinner of the family. He provided for the family. Her mother did everything else. She managed the finances. She made all the life-changing decisions. Day to day activities ran smoothly and nobody gave much thought to the arrangement. Her father always doubtfully lingered in the background of their happening lives.

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Someone called out her ticket number and Anita jumped up from her seat. She collected her ticket and walked out of the agent's office. Before heading for her car, she stepped into

'Mustafa Centre' to pick up the essentials she may need for the trip, called home to check with her domestic help if the kitchen was well stocked up for two weeks (why did she think she would be away for two weeks?), and bought all she listed out over phone. She picked up rice, wheat flour and the lentils even though the domestic help had said that there was enough stock for a month, and reached home in time for lunch. Her flight was at seven that evening.

Straight after lunch, she absently pulled out some *Salwar* suits (she couldn't wear her trousers and kurtis at her mom's place) from her meticulously collected wardrobe and dropped them into her suitcase. She added her Deepavali sari to the travel kit as an afterthought. Even though her father was ill, rituals could not be bypassed. She would wear her sari briefly and that would have to do. She lingered over her children's clothes that were kept with her sari for a moment and then put them back in the huge, ornate plastic bag that held all the other Deepavali outfits.

She snapped her suitcase shut, took a deep breath and called Raghu and Nandita to her. "Both of you must follow daddy's instructions on Deepavali day", she said seriously. The siblings nodded their heads seriously. There was a solemn look on Raghu's face as he patted his mother's arm and said, "Mom, you take care of your dad and mom and I will take care of my dad and little sis." Anita ruffled his hair absently. Her mind was already preoccupied with the food timetable she had to make for her domestic help so that she could ensure that her family add three balanced meals a day.

Drawing out an A 4 sized white paper from the printer, Anita sat down to make the time table of meals. She drew neat rows and columns on the sheet of paper and filled them up with the names of vegetables, fruits, and the number of *chapatis* that the children should have for each meal. She even made provisions for left-over food, and how these could be part of the next meal in an enticing way. So, if they had *Rajma Chawal* for dinner, they would have bread toast and rajma for breakfast the following morning. Having accomplished a time table for two weeks (why two weeks again?), she pasted it on the kitchen door and asked her domestic help to go through it, and speak up if anything was unclear. Having satisfied herself that her helper understood every bit of the instructions, she sat down with her children and spoke to them softly: "Raghu, Nandita...mummy must go for a few days. She will be back before you know that she is gone." Anita always spoke of herself in the third person to her children. It was as if she could distance the actions of this person whom she knew only too well.

Nandita held Anita's hand for a moment and then ran away to do whatever she wanted to do. Raghu held his head high and patted his mother. "Mom, never fear, Raghu's here". This was a boyish mimicry of Shahrukh Khan in his role as *abindaas* Punjabi young man in a Bollywood blockbuster. "Oh, for God's sake, Raghu", Anita said with mock anger, "that's incorrect English". And before Raghu could protest, she had whisked him into his room and sat him down to his homework.

She had two hours to leave for the airport. Jai had promised to be back by four o'clock. They had to leave by half past four so that there would be ample time to check in. There was never any issue at Changi airport but all Chennai passengers went through the 'B' channel. They had to get their cabin baggage weighed.

As Anita settled down in the flight, she felt the familiar tingling sensation in her extremities. This was a precursor to by-now-too-familiar-and-overly-tiresome panic attack. Till she left home for the airport, she had mechanically done the needful. Jai had chaperoned her at the airport and she had simply followed instructions. They had even had their ritual coffee from *Coffee Bean* before she boarded the flight. The full impact of the journey dawned on her as she fastened her seat belt before take-off. Had she actually left her little children behind in the care of her domestic help to attend to her parents? She hadn't thought twice about her decision once her mother asked her to come to her. But now, sitting in this flight to India, she wondered if this was the right thing to do.

Well, what could possibly go wrong? Jai was not ideal husband material but he was a fun father. And anyway, Kaswati would manage the kitchen and she will take good care of Nandita. Even Anita couldn't deny that her domestic help was better than her in taking care of her little girl.

The aircraft had begun taxiing to the runway and the airhostess got ready to dumb charade the location of toilets, exit points, the lifejacket, how to fasten the seatbelt, lock the seat upright, and even clip back the multipurpose tray in position. Anita particularly hated this part of the take-off procedure. The air hostess moved her arms all around her upper body enacting the instructions on how to wear the seat belt, use the oxygen mask if it should drop down in case of emergency, how one was supposed to attend to oneself before attending to one's children, how to evacuate the aircraft if it landed on water, how to get into the life jacket, and worst of all, attract attention to self by blowing the whistle in the event of landing in water. Who would remember any of these instructions in case of emergency? If you find yourself in mid-sea supported by a mere life jacket, what would you do? Anita had a fleeting vision of Leonardo DeCaprio and Kate Winslet in *Titanic*, with the ardent lover letting his lady love use the renegade debris from the ship to stay afloat while he hung by the side and froze to his death in the icy waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

Anita picked up the shopping guide to brush these depressing thoughts aside. Browsing the Asian range of lipsticks, jewellery, hair and face creams, watches, cuff-links, pens, charm bracelets and handbags had a calming effect on her but triggered thoughts about the vanity of human wishes. She was not someone who sought after brands, but again, it was nice to pamper oneself once in a while. She had just received her pay cheque and a bit of indulgence always protected a woman from a wrinkle or two.

Three and a half hours into the journey, Anita had read, eaten, watched bits and pieces of several shows, shopped, and slept. There was nothing more to do! Just as she was impatient to get off the flight, the captain's voice spluttered through the microphone. He mechanically announced that they would be landing into Anna International Airport shortly; he made note of the temperature outside, and local time. He hoped that everyone had had a comfortable trip and he signed off by inviting everyone to fly Air India again!

As the metal gates of the aircraft lazily slid open to let the well-fed (well...almost!) and well-entertained (again... almost!) load of passengers out, and Anita stepped into the airport, she could not help twitching her nose at the strong whiff of Indian air that greeted her in the

corridor. Airport staff waited with measured smiles and wheelchair to assist identified passengers. An elderly couple who had bravely made their journey across the Indian Ocean were now efficiently wheeled off to the immigration. Anita had noticed them during the flight. They hadn't said a word to one another but knew exactly what they had to do for each other at every point. The old lady would ring the bell for attendance even as the old man looked in her direction. The old man would pull out a tissue from his pocket and hurriedly hand it to the lady just in time to check a nasty sneeze. They had asked for a special meal, which unsurprisingly, hadn't been recorded. They were offered various other options in its place, but well....

Anita waved doubtfully in their direction as they sat stiffly on their respective wheelchairs and almost laughed out loud when the old man winked at her. The old lady slapped him on his back and gave a toothless smile to Anita.

Just as she got off the escalator and walked towards the immigration counter, she noticed that her heart was beating faster than usual. She attributed this initially to the change in atmospheric pressure which sometimes annoyed her with a prolonged ear ache. But no, the rapid heartbeat refused to subside. Many years ago, when her mother had gone to visit her very sick grandfather, her mother's heart had palpitated when the train entered Madras Central Railway Station. Her grandfather had passed away three days after her mother arrived to see him. Breathing in deeply to calm herself, Anita walked past the immigration, collected her baggage which had been collected and put on one side (She was grateful for this!), and one of the airport helpers placed her luggage on the trolley for her. She was pleasantly surprised when he walked away without waiting to be tipped.

Her mother had sent the driver to pick her up. For the first time in nineteen years of her stay abroad, her father hadn't come to pick her up. As she stepped out into the sea-moistened night air of Chennai, she remembered how her father would stand leaning over the temporary metal barricades that were stationed to make way for the passengers to exit the airport in an orderly fashion. He would stand there beaming generally at everyone, say a quick hello to his daughter, and walk ahead with her suitcase. Anita would walk behind him, answering mundane questions like, "did you watch any movies on the flight?" "What time is it in Singapore now?" "Would Hanuman and Jangiri (this was Raghu and Nandini) have gone to sleep?" Anita would gurgle all the prepared answers, eager to ask him about other things. But he would sit in the front seat with the driver and turn on the radio, signalling the end of conversation.

The driver had put her small suitcase in the boot (she had not packed for two weeks), politely waited till she sat down in the backseat, shut the door after her and got into the car. "How is appa, Cheenu?" Anita asked. "The same, madam", he said looking at her in the rear view mirror. Having asked this, there was nothing else but to wait. Few minutes into the drive, she noticed that he was not going home. When asked, he said that he had instructions to bring her to the hospital.

"Why hadn't he asked her?"

The driver walked her to the hospital room that my father was in and withdrew politely. Anita breathed in deeply three times before opening the door. The room was quite dark. The curtains were drawn despite the fact that it was night. Her mother was sitting on the sofa next to the window. Her widowed aunt who had come down to keep her brother and sister-in-law company, sat scribbling something in a notebook. Anita mechanically thought that she must be writing, “*SriRamaJayam*”(Victory to God Rama). This was her preferred mode of worship. She wrote God Rama’s name several times in a notebook kept exclusively for that purpose, and once all the pages were filled, she would give it to a temple. She believed that they would lay down these books in places where foundations were laid for temples.

Anita’s mom looked up at her and smiled weakly. “For God’s sake *amma*”, Anita thought, “*appa* is going to be fine, surely”.

Her father lay on the hospital bed. He was swaddled in a hospital comforter from waist down. There was a drip connected to his reedy left hand. His veins had discoloured due to the needle that had been fixed into the nerve to facilitate medication from the time he arrived at the hospital with a high blood pressure. The left side of the face was paralyzed. His lips were misaligned because his mouth had pulled to the right. His eyes were partly closed – probably because of sedatives. He had grown a shabby salt and pepper beard because he hadn’t been able to shave.

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When Anita was eleven, her mother had let her into the kitchen to boil some water. After she warmed the water, she poured it into a stainless steel bowl, placed the bowl on a plate and handed it to Anita saying, “take this to your father. He is preparing to shave”. Anita sat by her father watching him shave. He put the water into a bowl which was used exclusively to hold water for shaving. He squeezed some shaving cream onto a brush, dipped it slightly in this bowl of warm water, and lathered his cheeks and chin. Just as Anita waited for him to wipe off the lather to reveal a smooth and silky facial skin, her father had picked up a razor. She shut her eyes tightly with her two tiny hands. When she heard her father laugh, she parted her fingers a little to watch him. He was humming softly to himself while running the razor on his cheeks. In a few minutes, her father’s face had escaped unscathed by the razor. He sat there with a boyish smile on his clean-shaven face. “Appa”, Anita squealed, “your skin is so smooth”. “Can I touch?” Her father took her tiny hand in his and gently ran it over his cheek. “Appa”, “will it be like this tomorrow?” “No, I must shave again tomorrow.”

...

Walking up to her father’s hospital bed, Anita touched his face. The three days stubble had roughened her father’s smooth cheeks. Her father gently opened his eyes, “Anita...when did you *fome*? Did you *fome* alone? Tell feenu *fo pufy* your suitcase in a safe place. Did you go home or *nof*? Have you *eafen*?” Tears stung Anita’s eyes when she noticed how her father had lost his ‘c’s and ‘t’s. Before she could answer, he had drifted into sleep.

There was nothing much to do then. Anita went home to rest a bit, promising her mother to return to the hospital early in the morning. She woke up early to make coffee for her mother.

Her mother would always say, “In these fifty-two years of married life, I have made coffee every morning for all of us.” Anita wanted to see that much forgotten smile on her mother’s careworn face when she would pour out the coffee for her in the hospital. As she handed the stainless steel tumbler and bowl just wide enough to hold the tumbler, she beamed at her mother. Her mother absently took the concoction and poured it down her throat without a word. She put the tumbler and the bowl on the table nearby, and turning to Anita, said, “The doctor will come in at 9 O’clock. Please speak to her and explain to me clearly what appa’s condition is.”

Anita nodded and moved to sit by her father.

Her father was awake. He had managed to rinse his mouth into a basin that Cheenu held up to his chin. He wasn’t hungry but amma forced him to have a few sips of coffee. “Always adamant like this. I don’t know when all this will end”, Anita’s father muttered under his breath. The gaunt aunt who had spent the night by their side, stirred. Anita’s mother looked at her sister-in-law’s fragile figure and decided not to respond to her husband. Anita could not help but smile at this curious relationship that existed amongst her parents’ generation. She knew that no love was lost between her mother and aunt, but they had always stood by each other.

Anita’s aunt, her father’s only sister, had lost her husband four years ago in a freak incident. He had gone out for a walk in the evening by the park, and had briefly stopped to watch a crowd demonstrating angst at the compromised safety of women in the city. This had followed the rape crimes rampant in the capital. Over the afternoon, the crowd had become violent, somewhat owing to the passion for the protest. But it seemed that protesters were also playing to the crowd that had gathered to watch. A mobile ice-cream van had pulled up within the precincts, and the vendor walked around selling his ‘cool’ ice-cream flavours to the heated protesters. In a while, a small crowd gathered around the ice-cream vendor who continued to call out to the onlookers. Anita’s uncle also walked to the vendor to buy himself an ice-cream. He took the vanilla cone that he had ordered and dug into his shirt pocket. His wallet was missing. He distinctly remembered shoving his wallet into his shirt pocket. The new circumstances made the ice-cream more desirable. The vendor smiled and said, “Uncle, this one’s for you. Like they say in big hotels- on the House.”

Thrilled at the generosity from this unexpected quarters, the unsuspecting man was walking off with his vanilla cone when the police arrived to tear gas the crowd away. The crowd ran amok. A young mother had come to the demonstration with her nine-month old baby. As the crowd jostled its way out to safety, the young mother tripped, and her baby was flung out of her arms. Someone gave her a hand which she gratefully took and pulled herself up. A young man stood in front of her. He had this sneer on his face that was characteristic of young men of high station. This was the “I-can-do-what-I –want-to do to you-look”. She tried to step away quickly to look for her child but he caught her in his arms. As she struggled to free herself, he forced himself upon her. She screamed for help but the police as well as the crowd were busy dispersing the crowd that had gathered to protest against abuse of women.

Anita's uncle aghast at the sudden commotion was inches away from the screaming woman. Holding his melting ice-cream in his left hand, he shuffled up to the young man and tried to pull him away. The latter wildly swung his arm at him which sent the old man reeling backwards. The vanilla cone flew from his hand and landed on one of the helmeted policemen. The old man's head hit the cement pavement, a rare structure in this part of the city, as he reeled back. For a minute, he saw bright light. Then all was dark.

The next day's paper had gory images of the incident. This was four years ago. Anita shunned crowded areas for more than a year after this incident. She took to wearing several layers of clothes when she went out. Moving to Singapore had calmed her down. But while getting into closed spaces—a lift, a taxi, or even the cinema—she received the spectacle of that day would send shivers down her spine.

...

The nurse sauntered in to check on the patient. Anita's mother sprang up from the bed to shoot questions at her. "Where is the doctor?" The nurse checked the yellow pad of notes that hung from the metal hook that held the glucose bottle. "Oh, this patient..." Her hesitation convinced Anita's mother that the night nurse had committed a blunder of some sort and that her husband was in dire trouble. "What? What? What happened?" The nurse nonchalantly looked at her and said: "yes, what is it?"

Anita's mother pushed her aside and stumbled out of the ward. She dashed to the doctor's office and walked in unceremoniously. Thankfully, the doctor was on his morning rounds to see his patients and a startled nurse looked up from the quick eyebrow makeover she was giving herself in the doctor's well-lit and well-endowed office.

"What is it, aunty?" she snapped at Anita's distraught mother. "How can you barge into the doctor's office without knocking? Go back and wait for him. He is on his rounds."

After this, she returned to the task of plucking a tiny hair that clung adamantly to the central part of her brow where her skin was somewhat inflamed. An exaggerated and a vain "ouch" escaped her slightly parted lips as she put the clipper back into her bag and walked out of the office leaving a shocked old lady behind in the makeshift beauty parlour.

"What kind of a nurse are you, girl? How can you stand here threading your brows when my husband is dying?" Anita, who had run after her mother to keep her out of trouble, reached the doctor's office just as her mother had concluded a harangue on how a doctor was next to God but all nurses were supplied by the Devil's salon. Whisking her mother away from raised eyebrows and wagging tongues, Anita almost carried her mother across the corridor to her father's ward.

The doctor had just finished examining her father. "Aunty", he addressed my mother in a soft voice. "Uncle's condition is stable now. We will monitor him for a few days, do a few tests before he can be discharged. Ok?" Anita's mother nodded absently and sat down by the only window in the room. Anita's aunt was scribbling in her notebook.

Anita's father came home on Monday, three days after she arrived in Chennai. Her mother fussed over him from the time he arrived at the doorstep in his wheelchair. She prepared the customary welcome tray of the *aarati*, a bright red concoction of calcium and turmeric, moved the tray three times clockwise and three times anticlockwise in big circles around her husband's frailframe before allowing him to be wheeled in. After he was wheeled in, she poured the liquid on the *kolam* drawn with rice flour at the entrance of her house. Even though she drew a simple pattern every morning, she had drawn an elaborate one today to commemorate her husband's escape from what she thought as near-death experience.

When Anita was growing up, the red concoction reminded her of blood. She associated the ritual of *aarati* with the demonic. It was as if the tray caught all the demons in the air during its perambulations and thrashed them on the floor in the centre of the intricate white patterns that absorbed the liquid and changed into a dull brown paste on the floor.

In Singapore, Anita made *kolam* everyday at the entrance of her flat. She always kept the size of these *kolams* small. "I don't have enough time today, let me make a small one", she would tell herself every morning. On special occasions like Deepavali, she would make larger *kolams* but she was not comfortable doing this. On such occasions, she would wear an apologetic look on her face if she happened to meet one of her neighbours in the lift landing.

When the family moved into this flat four years ago, she began making huge *kolams* every morning. A week into her stay in the flat, she noticed that her neighbour had laid a dust trapping mat at the entrance of her flat. Even as Anita stood there wondering why they needed a dust trap there, the neighbour's mother walked out of the lift. She smiled at Anita and said, "Oh, my grandson has allergy. You make this thing outside your door. Afraid he will sneeze. Don't tell my daughter I told you. She will be angry with me." Before Anita could form a suitable expression on her face, the old lady had walked into her flat and closed the door after her.

...

Anita's father had been transferred to his bed and fed some soup by the time she washed up and changed into a clean salwar kameez free of the odour that was peculiar to hospitals. Anita put some food in a plate for her mother and aunt which they ate gratefully. She made herself some coffee and walked into her father's room. His eyes were closed. His face looked peaceful. The muscles had regained their mobility. His lips were still chapped but did not hang apart as they had when she first saw him in the hospital bed. As she sat on a low chair beside her father's bed sipping her coffee, she felt a strange sense of calmness. Her father smiled in his sleep. He was probably dreaming. She got up as gently as she could and turned to leave when she felt a tug in her little finger. She turned to see how her father limply held her little finger.

...

When she was seven, they lived in Delhi, the most fashionable city of India then. Her uncle's children from Chennai loved to spend the June holidays with them. It was a time of uncompromised fun when they came. It was play time all the time. Food, sleep, rest, wash

up...and other mundane demands of life had to wait. They didn't care if the Delhi heat left its mark on them. Sunburns, prickly heat and fear of heat stroke did not trouble them then as they do now. But this time, a bout of measles broke out amongst the three children. Anita was the last one to contract the infection. Measles is something that one- get- all- get infection-unless you have already had it before or have been vaccinated against it. Her mother was duty bound to look after the two visiting children. She was too exhausted with that effort. Measles is the toughest to handle when the rashes begin to dry up. The skin becomes so itchy that there is no point telling the child not to scratch. On one such day, Anita began to cry because she couldn't take the tingling anymore. Suddenly, she felt a gentle movement on her face, arms and legs –it was as comforting as the caress of silk on a smooth surface. She slightly opened her tear-swollen eyes and saw that her father sat by her side and gently ran a small bunch of *neem* leaves over her face, arms and legs. She clutched his little finger in her tiny hand and fell asleep!

...

Her father opened his eyes with difficulty. He was still on painkillers that made him drowsy. “Anita, have you eaten? Did Jai call? Are they all coming here?” She answered in the affirmative for all but her father had drifted into sleep again. Unwilling to pull out her little finger from his grasp, she sat down by his side.

Jai and the children arrived the following Monday. He had a business meeting and the children refused to be left behind without mum and dad. So he brought them along. After the initial niceties exchanged between the son-in-law and the parents-in-law, there was nothing much to say or do. So Jai left for his meeting. Anita's mother locked herself up in the kitchen cooking an elaborate meal for her son-in-law. “He will eat shamelessly, no doubt”, thought Anita, “as if he hasn't eaten for days in row”. Raghu and Nandita claimed her attention for the rest of the week. She grudgingly gave them her attention. Why should she grudge it now? Didn't she love doing it back home in Singapore?

Their flight back to Singapore was at 1.30 am. After an early dinner at 8 pm, Jai rushed the children to get ready to leave for the airport. He locked their suitcase that Anita had hurriedly packed in the afternoon, locked it and checked the name and address on it. He told the children to finish their small jobs and big jobs at home because he did not want them to use the toilets at the airport, or the flight for that matter... “Oh God! He can't really mean it now”, Anita thought.

The children were sitting with their grandfather. The grandfather tucked neatly under layers of bedsheets was a curious spectacle for them. They had never seen their grandfather like this before! But he could be fun like this too. Nandita patted him on a fake belly she had created around her grandfather's stomach by pulling up some of the bedsheets. Raghu sat played candy crush on his father's iPhone. Jai sat in the hall trying to send out emails that could not be sent out during the day due to wifi issues.

Anita was in the kitchen doing nothing in particular. Suddenly, there was a scream from the bedroom. Anita rushed to the room and saw a sight that she would never forget. Her mother leaned over her father and was calling to him. “Aenna (this is how she called him)

aenna?’ Even though she called him in a controlled voice, Anita could see the tremor in her hands. She sat down beside her father who seemed to be in some kind of pain.

He gripped his chest with his right hand. “Appa, are you having chest pain? Does your left arm ache? Talk to me. Appa, appa”. Her father could not speak. He gestured with his right hand. Anita could vaguely see that he was calling to Nandita but the child was too scared to go to him.

Just then, Anita noticed that her mother had walked away from the bed. She was looking at her husband in a certain way. Her hands trembled a little. She gripped the backrest of a chair to steady herself. The tightness of her grip made her hands tremble even more. What did all this mean? Was it the fear of losing him?

Anita had seen that expression only once in her mother’s eyes. Many years ago, seated next to the inert figure of her dying father on the hospital bed, Anita’s mother had looked at him just as she looked at her husband now. The look frightened those around her- a look that blamed and loved, cursed and pleaded. Anita tried to recollect where her grandmother had been at that time. She was surprised that she remembered exactly where she was seated in the hospital room. On a chair next to the window, counting the beads in her rosary. Her eyes were closed but Anita remembered (or was it a thought that impressed her mind today?) how the fine wrinkles around her closed eyes were beaded with tears.

A slight rustle of a cotton sari jolted Anita out of her reverie. She saw her mother walking out of the room. There was a strange calmness in her walk. It was slow and measured. She held her head in a way that Anita was very familiar with. This was the way she held her head when she was about to share some important information with her family. She tried to follow her mother. Her father held her little finger.

When her mother returned, she had a jewel case in her hands. She sat down calmly next to her husband and opened the case. It contained a beautiful red necklace, a family heirloom that had been passed down in the family from her great grandmother’s time. Her mother’s hands were not trembling anymore. She calmly picked up the necklace and held it before her husband. His hand trembled as he raised it to touch the necklace. His left hand lay motionless by his side. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. He seemed to be breathing hard.

Jai had already called the doctor. The doctor was on his way. Anita was telling her father to cough- she had read somewhere that coughing would keep the heart beating till help arrived. Her mother told her to calm down. She sat Anita down beside her father and clasped the red necklace around her elegant neck.

Irritated with her mother’s calmness, Anita pushed her hand away. Tears threatened to betray her fear. Several thoughts came rushing to her mind now. Anita had seen the red necklace the first time when her mother wore it for their tenth marriage anniversary. Her grandmother had given the necklace to her mother on her deathbed. Anita had fallen in love with the necklace at first sight. She had longed to wear it on several occasions after that- her prom night, her first outing with Jai, even her wedding day. But her mother had ignored her.

On the eve of her wedding, walking to her parents' room to borrow the phone, she had stopped in her tracks when she heard her father say, "Why not give it to her today? You don't have to follow your mother's decision, surely." From where Anita stood, she could not see her father's face but her mother stood facing her. Her mother's face had darkened. She knitted her eyebrows that brought a deep fold to the spot where the 'third eye' is said to be. This was an expression that every family member was familiar with-an expression which always preceded a firm decision. When she spoke, it was only to say, "there are few things that I can call mine in this house. The necklace is one of them." Anita had run away to her room and burst into tears. She did not know why.

Ignoring the gush of tears that had escaped her impish eyes, she held her father's hand and said, "appa, cough, cough. The doctor will be here any moment." Nandita hid behind her mother and peeped a little to see her transformed grandfather. He smiled at her and pointed to the red necklace. Nandita smiled.

The grandmother walked out of the room.

The grandfather closed his eyes.

Anita wept. Jai and Raghu stood behind her.

The Air India flight left on time.