

For Martha Aunty

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From where I sit, I can see only his feet. They are old, wrinkled, unsteady. By the time I look again, they're gone. I don't know who he is, but I seem to catch glimpses only of his feet every day. It's strange that my time at the study desk and his siesta coincide so often.

He stays in the apartment block diagonally opposite mine, two floors below mine, and his bedroom – at least parts of it – is visible from my study room. Since I'm away from home most of the time, I cannot say for sure that no one else lives there. Maybe he has a day nurse. Or a maid. Or a daughter, daughter-in-law, son or son-in-law who visit him occasionally. At nights, I see various avatars of his feet on his bed – covered in blanket, clad in socks, with a trail of *lungi* shuffling at the ankles. On the rare afternoons I'm at home, I see his silhouette ambling in the rooms, behind the lace curtains that attempt in vain to shield the apartment from the gaze of lazy onlookers like me.

It had become part of the background music that formed my time with the keyboard, and it never occurred to me that I could go meet him and try to build a relationship. For all my stories where accidental meetings set in motion some brain-churning adventure or a steamy relationship or a tragic drama, my real life sought the comfort of monotony. I took his story for granted.

This morning, I woke up feeling sick. A simple cold-and-cough, but I wanted to avoid both the heat and the AC, and decided to stay at home. His feet were dangling from the cot today. I went about making myself some herbal tea, wrote a few lines, slept the whole afternoon – and the feet never moved. Late in the evening it dawned on me that neither had the feet moved all day long, but they were *dangling* from the cot – not steady, not relaxed, but sort of... dead.

I mentally made a note of the floor (fourth) and the direction of the house (facing east, so it must be flat number 403) and sprinted down to the security guard of the building.

“Dayal, who lives in 403?”

“*Chachaji*. Sharma chacha. Why *didi*?”

“Does he live alone?”

“Yes *didi*. Poor man. He's 60 years old. And there's no one to look after him. I can't imagine being so alone. His wife apparently left him twenty...”

I did not wait to hear the rest of Dayal's ramblings. I ran up the building and Dayal followed me, sensing trouble. I reached 403 and rang the bell incessantly. No one answered.

“Dayal, do you have a spare key?”

“*Didi*, what happened? You saw something?” He was still huffing and clueless.

“His feet are dangling, Dayal. Do you *have* a spare key?” I was paranoid and screaming. Dayal fumbled with his key-bunch in anxiety.

“I have one. He gave it to me long ago saying I'll need one if something happened to him...” his voice quivered as he picked out a key and tried it on the lock of *chachaji*'s house. After several attempts with three keys, the door finally opened; I ran inside, towards what I figured was the bedroom. He lay splayed on the bed, remnants of foam at his mouth, his legs dangling by the edge of the bed.

I was paralysed with fear. I felt guilty – as if I could have saved him if only my mind had registered the dangling of the feet. I stared at the man in shock – his hirsute face lay crooked against a pillow, but he could have been a handsome man once. He was dressed in a white vest

and a cream *lungi*. Next to the bed, on a small bedside table, under a pretty beige night-lamp, was a framed photograph. I walked towards it in a trance. Dayal had taken off, shrieking “police” and “ambulance”. I was arrested by the photograph in the frame. Sharma chacha, with a very beautiful woman. That woman was my step-mother.

Twenty years ago... she had walked in to my life holding my father’s hand. They had fallen in love – though she was married at the time, dad said her marriage was a wreck and she had filed for divorce a few weeks ago. Two months after she started living with us, her divorce came through. And six months later, she married dad.

I was in class eight when I attended my father’s second wedding, and like every kid, I was hostile to the concept of a step-mother. My mother’s memories were still fresh; she had died just a year ago. It made me wonder whether this relationship had begun even while my mother was alive, but I did not seek an answer, because I did not want to think that my mother was being cheated on behind her back. It also made me wonder whether dad had done everything he could to save her from the blood cancer, or had he just let her die so he could begin a new life. But I kept those thoughts to myself, and smiled sheepishly when the cousins made fun of the daughter attending the father’s wedding, and turned away when my uncles and aunts clucked their tongues in pity.

In fact, my father had a long talk with me before he got her home – he told me frankly that he was in love, and he would not be using any excuses such as ‘Riya needs a mother’ to let the marriage happen. He told me I was free to feel angry, disgusted, violated – but he hoped I wouldn’t give his new wife any more trouble than an average adolescent would. That was my first experience of being treated as an adult – when my mother died, I was treated as the baby who lost everything, pitied and fussed over. But now, my father was treating me as an equal – as one who he understood, as one who he expected would understand him. He left me defenceless.

Since I figured that whatever emotion I felt would be understood by my father, and hence pointless, I decided not to react. I chose to use my dumb smile on things that did not concern me and ignore the things I resented. She wasn’t mean to me, but she wasn’t my mother and I made sure she understood it. She took the message with equanimity. I told her so the first time she tried to force me to have dinner when I wanted none. “It’s okay aunty. No one expects you to be my mother. You can conserve your energies to be my father’s wife.” She just smiled and nodded her head. It was annoying how neither of them granted me the pleasure of confrontation. If it was my mother, she would have slapped me and given me a reason to throw a tantrum. But with my father and step-mother, I got no chance to be a child. It was frustrating.

My step-mother – oh, her name is Martha, by the way – was a non-intrusive lady otherwise. She let me be, she let my father be, and she was happy to potter around the house doing this and that. She was not needy, she did not crib or nag, she always smiled no matter what you said, she was immensely patient with my father’s workaholicism. I never understood why someone so self-effacing would have a problem in their previous marriage.

Over the years I got used to Martha aunty. We even developed a silent camaraderie. She always came to my PTA meetings, she was there for my graduation ceremonies, she helped me get admission to the creative writing course in the UK that I was keen on, she helped me pack and leave, she soothed me when I was homesick. We respected each other. Dad was happy with her too, as far as I could see.

And then dad decided to end his life. I was in Kolkata teaching Writing in Practice at the Jadavpur University at the time – eight years ago. I couldn't believe that my dad would kill himself. What had happened in the seven years I hadn't been living with them?

When I reached home, grief hung thick in the air like the smell of coral jasmine in the mornings. There was a small gathering of relatives I'd never seen in my life, and a few uncles and aunts seemed to be gliding through the rooms. His body, stiff and cold like the marble stones he had insisted on flooring the house with during its construction, was laid out in a coffin to the east of the living room. I'd cried so much during the journey that my eyes were pink and puffy. I looked around the room for Martha aunty but she wasn't there. I looked askance at everyone in general until I found Martha aunty's sister Agatha sitting quietly in a corner. I went up to her and kneeled before her.

"Agatha aunty, where is Martha aunty?" She looked up at me and looked down in what seemed like guilt.

"Agatha aunty, where is my step-mother?" I stressed on the title for emphasis, and Agatha aunty looked up sharply. "I don't know," she murmured.

I couldn't believe my ears. "Where. Is. She?" I had lost it. I screamed, "Where the hell is that fucking woman?!" All the eyes in the room were on me, while Agatha aunty quivered like an Asopalav tree, a tear trickling down her right cheek. "I do not know, Riya. She's missing since day before yesterday. I got a call from Gregory [she sobbed heavily at the mention of my father's name] on Thursday saying they had a fight over something trifle. I offered to come and give them some moral support, plus cook dinner. But he said it's all right, he just wanted me to know. But the next morning, when I tried to call her cell phone, it was switched off. Gregory's phone kept ringing and no one picked up. I panicked and came here. I found the doors open and Gregory foaming at the mouth. Martha wasn't here. I tried calling her again, but it was still switched off. I thought she might come to my house, but she didn't. I don't know where she is." She launched into an inconsolable moan.

I totally lost it. I wailed on until a couple of my cousins took me to the next room and tried to calm me. After a lot of crying and sobbing, I calmed down and wondered what to do. What was the fight about? It couldn't have been trifle if Martha aunty had to lose her cool. Dad always lost his composure when having an argument – he hated to lose. I picked up my mobile phone and dialed Martha aunty's number. It rang. I wondered what I should say if she picks up, but she did not pick up. I returned to the hall to find Agatha aunty sobbing into her *dupatta*.

"Agatha aunty," I called softly and she looked at me, pain and concern written all over her features. "Did you try calling her again?" I sat next to her trying in vain to avoid the eavesdropping relatives.

"I called every day, every hour, *beta*. The phone rang a few times but she never picked." She sobbed again, her eyes seeking sympathy.

I nodded in support. "Did you leave her a message?"

"I did, I did. She never replied!" I pitied Agatha aunty for a moment, but I felt like there was something to this that I was unaware of.

"Aunty, did she have any psychological problem? From her first marriage? Or from earlier? Why did she leave her first husband?" I realised I should not be asking this in public, but I needed to know more than I needed to hide it from the public. Agatha aunty started sobbing uncontrollably. I patted her back mechanically, anger simmering within me. I was starting to feel

cheated, not only for myself, but on behalf of dad too. Did he know? Did he kill himself because he found out?

I waited for Agatha aunty's grief and shame to subside. She looked at me, searching for some pity in my eyes, but I'm sure she found none. She hung her head, and I repeated my question.

Not raising her head, she said, "Yes. She was bipolar. She was on medication." I don't think it surprised me. It suddenly explained why she was so neutral and composed, why she never bothered. The medication must have been keeping her drowsy and numb. Agatha aunty looked up to see how I was taking it, and my blank face might have encouraged her to go on talking. "I think she had run out of her medicines the night they had the fight."

"What was the fight about?" I was surprised at the acerbity of my tone.

Agatha aunty hesitated for a few seconds but gave in when my eyes bored into hers. "It was about the disorder. Gregory knew she wasn't well, but he never asked what the illness was. He thought it must be one of our usual geriatric problem, like BP or diabetes. When he went to the medical store to get her medicine it was a new boy at the counter and he asked Gregory to walk over to counter number four for psychiatric medicines. That's how he found out. He came home and questioned her. She lost her temper. She never liked to be asked about her bipolar condition. She hated the hallucinations and mood swings as much as the others. She liked to pretend to have a happy, normal life." Aunty started sobbing again. I noticed with a lot of discomfort that the entire room was listening to us, the people hanging around in the foyer and outside the house also having barged in shamelessly to watch the family's skeleton closet being opened. But I did not care at the moment. I wanted to know.

"The first marriage?"

"It failed partly because of the disorder and partly because of the man she had married. Theirs was a love marriage and he knew Martha was mentally unstable, but he was not supportive. He goaded her about the illness every time she made a mistake at home. He attributed all her weaknesses and mistakes to the illness. She attempted suicide three times during their six-year-old marriage. She hated existing at the time. We used to bring her home so often at the time. It was awful.

"It was after her last suicide bid that she met your father, in the hospital she was in. He had just lost his wife, and he was looking for comfort. She was so sick of her husband knowing about her illness, that in front of your father she pretended to be a visitor to the hospital and not a patient. There was no reason for them not to fall in love, because she put on her best behaviour. It was also a very good therapy for her disorder, because being loved made her feel good and reduced her anxiety considerably.

"Your father loved and supported her a lot. She never had a relapse of suicidal tendencies after that. But she had to be on constant medication to avoid slipping into depressive or aggressive phases. And that day she must have got agitated because she had run out of her medicine, and argued back at Gregory. You know your father cannot cope with an argument. One thing must have led to another and she must have completely lost it. I don't know, *beta*. I am scared for her. I... I think she might have killed herself already. I don't know," she started wailing in my arms. I patted her absent-mindedly. It still did not explain why my father killed himself.

I became strangely quiet after hearing Martha aunty's story: I could not help sympathising with her, but I had lost my father, and I was unsure how to react, what to feel. Agatha aunty told me she had already filed a missing person complaint at the police station, when the suicide was reported. The police was investigating both the cases side by side. My relatives differed on whether to wait for her before conducting the funeral or not, but I insisted that we go on with the funeral on the fourth day of death, which was the day the police had given clearance for. I also had to go through a lot of grilling on the possible reason for suicide – he had consumed enormous amounts of rat poison. The police personnel were kind but probing. I volunteered as much information as I could, including the fact that my step-mother might not be mentally stable.

After the funeral, I was resting on my dad's favourite easy chair, working myself up to finally cry for my father, when our landline phone rang.

"This is from the police station. This is about a missing person complaint registered by Agatha D'Cruz about Martha Mathias, aged 47." I sat up sharply, hitting my knee on the table.

"Yes?"

"We have found the person. She is currently in a mental health care centre. Please come to the station for more details."

When I went to the police station, the sub-inspector himself took me to the hospital, mouthing platitudes about mental illnesses and mother-daughter relationships and social problems and suicides. I let him talk on, nodding at intervals, but not really registering anything. I was wondering how I should respond to Martha aunty. I hadn't decided if I wanted to blame her for my father's suicide. The sub-inspector put me in touch with a kind-looking psychiatrist, who explained to me that my step-mother had been spotted by a few people trying to jump off the Ravindra Mhatre bridge into the Mula river and had been taken to Poona Hospital, from where she was referred to the mental health care centre because she was delirious and violent.

The psychiatrist told me she had been given strong antidepressants and sedatives and was sleeping. I asked her if it was okay to wait by Martha aunty's bedside until she woke up. She said she was happy to see I was very affectionate towards the patient and said she'd definitely recommend being at her bedside. I thanked her and walked into the room she pointed out.

Martha aunty lay on the bed with her hands and legs shackled lightly to the bed post. I was shocked for a moment, but I remembered the doctor say that she had been violent. A nurse looked askance at me and I explained to her that I was the patient's daughter and that I had the doctor's permission to sit next to her until she woke up. She looked relieved to get out of the room.

Martha aunty looked spent. There were bruises on her hands and legs that spoke of violent behaviour, attempts to injure herself and others. I finally broke into sobs and cried my heart out as I waited for her to wake up.

I didn't remember how long I'd nodded off, but I awoke at a touch on my head. It was Martha aunty, smiling at me indulgently. I blinked a few times before deciding to return the smile.

"Baba, don't worry. You're all right. You were a good friend to me. I am sorry. I shouldn't have done it, but I couldn't help it. He was making me angry," she blubbered. I looked at her uncomprehendingly.

"What, aunty? What did you do?" Panic rose in me.

“Rat poison. What else could I do? He asked for tea. Then he slept. I made curry with the poison. I woke him up in the evening and gave him tea with rat poison. He said it tasted funny and I said the milk is funny these days. He tried to be polite. He said sorry. But he knew. He knew. Now he was going to reprehend me about the illness all the time. Just like him. He shouldn't have known. I spread rat poison on his bread. You know how many types of rat poison we have at home? Jam, sugar cubes, powder, spray... It was too easy. He was writhing with stomach pain by night and I cut off the landline and hid his cell phone. He started frothing when that Mahadev serial started. I couldn't see it. I walked out of the house...”

My mind went numb again. Her confession did not come as a surprise because I had already thought of the possibility of Martha aunty killing dad in her state of mind, but I did not want to suggest it to anyone. I wanted to hear it from her, I think. I wanted to know. She rambled on, not even noticing that I had walked out of the room.

I peered into the doctor's chamber. “Doctor, she has woken up. She thinks she killed my father. But he committed suicide.”

The doctor looked confused for a moment. “Yes, she's been rambling about rat poison.”

“Did you tell the police about her ramblings?”

“No. We have to submit the case report to them tomorrow. I asked for a day's time.”

“Good. Please tell them she's rambling, but do not mention the rat poison. My father consumed that to kill himself. She thinks she did it, but it's just her hallucination.” The doctor looked shrewdly at me, finally getting my drift. “It is her hallucination, isn't it, doc?” I hoped she understood my implication.

She nodded slightly. “Yes. I appreciate your concern for her illness. Thank you Riya.”

“And doc, please ensure that she is here with you as long as needs to be. I will visit her once a month, and pay for all the necessary treatments. I hope that is okay?” The doctor nodded again. “We will discuss this later, Riya. Let's settle with the police first.”

The police and paramedical staff barged into the room, with a doctor following dignifiedly behind. I was still clutching the framed photograph. Someone walked up to me and cleared their throat. I looked up at a well built man in khakis.

“Do you know him, ma'am?”

“Huh?”

“Do you know this man?” The police inspector pointed to Sharma chacha who was being taken out of the room by paramedics.

I blinked. “Nah... no inspector, I don't know him. I'm sorry I'm in shock.”

“I see. I would need you to give me a statement of how you found him please. Preliminary examination says it was a heart attack. We have already got the watchman's version....”

“Yes, sure inspector. I'm okay now. I'll come with you.”

I thought of the delirious Martha aunty still rambling in the hospital and stopped feeling guilty about the dangling feet.

Glossary:

beta: child

chachaji: paternal uncle in Hindi. Also a common term of endearment used in northern India

didi: sister in Hindi

dupatta: A long piece of cloth, part of the Indian attire called salwar-kameez, used to drape over the woman's torso

lungi: a garment worn around the lower half of the body
