

My Mother's Saari

by Pooja Poudel

I wake up with a mouthful of crushed teeth. They have shattered into smithereens as effortlessly as stray leaves crumble noisily under the inconsiderate boots of a passerby on a sunny day in Jestha. My panicked tongue frantically moves around to assess the damage.

To my immense relief, they are all intact, all twenty-nine of them. A sense of calm washes over me and my breathing returns to its usual rhythm. I feel my teeth for a long time with my tongue, gently checking for any sign of looseness. The residual sensation of crushed teeth hasn't left my mouth. After a thorough inspection, I am satisfied. The little gap nestled between my upper two front teeth, which I have been self-conscious about for the longest time, is still well in place.

Compared to my last nightmare, this one feels less harrowing. My teeth had been ground to a powder then, filling my mouth with an unsettling texture like that of chalk dust. I tried spitting it out but my lips wouldn't come apart as if a thick layer of skin had grown over the lower part of my face. Reluctantly, I started swallowing the gritty substance, only to be awakened abruptly, choking and desperately gasping for air. The recurring nightmare has embedded itself into my sleep like a patchwork. I can't remember the last time I slept peacefully through the night.

I find myself awake for the second time. It is my mother. She shuffles into the room brushing her teeth noisily, vacating the unkept bathroom shared with two other families. I am fixated on the toothbrush which is wedged on the side of her mouth as she starts tending to her chores. The sound of the bristles against her molars is jarring in the quiet stillness of the morning. I cannot

shake off the lingering unease and her bright blue toothbrush only provokes the feeling. For a second, I question everything I thought I knew about brushing my teeth, wondering if I have been doing it all wrong.

The room smells stale. My mother turns the stand fan on, but it doesn't do anything to get rid of the stuffiness which seems to coat the already peeling paint on the walls like a film.

A month ago, when my final exams were approaching, she offered to come and help around. It was a surprise as she had never shown any interest in visiting Kathmandu in the past four years, despite my insistence. Lost in the vast expanse of unfamiliarity, pestered by suffocating dust and unfriendly neighbours, she got wary of the city pretty quickly. It really bothered her the first few days when she couldn't see the rising sun to which she had been devotedly praying every morning for all of her life. She resorted to whispering her mantras facing the east wall. She tightly clutches my arm when we cross even the narrowest streets and scrunches her thick eyebrows when roadside vendors reveal the price of wilted vegetables. Despite all this, it seems she has decided to stay. She never speaks of going back.

It strangely feels as though she arrived a long time ago. When I had gone to Kalanki to pick her up in a cab, a bulging burlap bag of litchi sat obediently at her feet. As we settled into the backseat, I wondered why she had brought so much of the fruit. Litchis were good but they weren't particularly my favourite. Once we reached my room, I tried one and didn't stop until I had a dozen more. They were brighter and sweeter than usual. I imagined her painstakingly selecting and packing the very best ones herself, plucked from the acres of litchi gardens back home. She had grown up climbing trees and even now, she could do it with her eyes closed.

I drag myself away from the thin, dilapidated mattress that has seen much better days. I brew two cups of black tea with a pinch of black pepper, hand one over to her and settle back onto the mattress with my laptop. I have been spending the past few days scouring the internet for a new job that was going to truly justify the degree I was about to receive. As soon as I secured this job, I planned to escape the stifling confines of this room where I have spent several years as a student. These are the abodes where dreams take shelter, then slowly succumb to the constraints of their low ceilings, and ultimately shrink in size to match them.

In one corner of the room, I have a makeshift kitchenette with a mini rice cooker, an electric burner stove and a kettle. Mismatched dishes and cutlery are assembled neatly in a wooden cupboard that is barely two feet tall and hangs on the wall with a tilt. It also holds a row of plastic tubs with colourful lids filled with ghiu, gundruk, maseura and mulako achar, amongst many other homemade delicacies. They are regularly refilled, dispatched from home, and entrusted to relatives for their long journeys to my cupboard.

Behind the door, a hook rail collects my everyday clothes and occasionally, damp laundry. Nearby stands the wooden cloth hanger I had gotten from an online thrift group. Small piles of books, shoes and miscellaneous items are strewn around on the cheap PVC carpet like little islands. I got the second mattress to accommodate my mother during her first week here. There is a window in the room, but it is blocked by the next building which stands inches away. I sometimes wonder why they still bother installing windows in the buildings in Kathmandu. The air isn't exactly something to be chuffed about either.

My mother approaches my mattress, moves the blanket to the side and sits across from me. She pulls out her phone and starts showing something. It's another boy. 28 years old. Looking for a bride. Details thoughtfully sent by some barely related relative of my mother's.

'This one holds an American PR,' she exclaims.

'Those entitled bastards,' I swallow my words. In the past two years, I have been shown countless pictures and profiles of men with PRs in every first-world country there is. The fascination with which people treat these obnoxious proposals baffles me. What is so appealing about a man who boasts of being a product of modern thinking but requires his parents and a parade of extended family to find him a domesticated wife?

'I have told you a thousand times, they are the worst bunch!' I chuckle and continue. 'At least this one's only 28 and not the median age of 37 for bachelor NRN men looking to marry women in their early twenties.' They used to annoy me, but I have begun to find the humour in the second-hand embarrassment they provoke.

She hates it when I do this. Defensively, she begins her narration of all the girls from back home who were married off to PR-riddled men and how happy they are settled in their pretty foreign houses with manicured backyards. The centerpiece of her narrative is my cousin, Aastha, who my mother believes, leads a life of dreams in America. Little does she know that Aastha juggles a toddler, a full-time job, untreated depression, and a man-child husband. All of this while living in a place that will never be home completely, while desperately counting down the days till their fortnight vacation to Nepal every five years, while wishing their frozen pizzas and McDonald's were steaming plates of momo.

‘If you have such a problem with these men, we will find you a nice husband here and you will have no choice but to marry him,’ she attempts to sound stern.

A nice husband. Where do you find these nice husbands? How do you measure their niceness? And how do you tell the nice ones apart from the not-so-nice ones? I know plenty of nice husbands who do some really messed up stuff. When Pramila, my former next-door neighbour, was getting married to Ravi, I bet everyone told her how nice of a husband he was going to be. The muffled screams that seeped through their walls at night and the bluish-yellow bruises that appeared on her jaw and collarbone the next morning told a much different tale. Once when the police were called to intervene, they merely referred to him as a nice man who had simply made a mistake. Apparently, it was also incredibly nice of him to hold his ears and apologise to his wife as a group of voyeuristic neighbours and strangers bore witness. Later that night, she ran out of their room bleeding from everywhere.

I don’t tell her this story. She knows it and many other stories like it. She even has some of her own to share perhaps. But they never come up in conversations the way the gossipy narratives of abroad-settled grooms, glamorous receptions and opulent gold jewellery do.

Recently, I have been noticing a relentless urgency in my mother’s rigorous quest to find me a husband. It was as if an invisible force was pushing her to persuade me. Her appeals trailed an ominous echo which had travelled all the way from home, gotten with her on the bus, and sat snugly on her lap like a pampered cat. She is growing more persistent every day and there seems to be an exorbitant number of new proposals lately. One day in a moment of unguarded honesty,

she confided in me how she could finally rest peacefully if only I would tie the knot. She had found and put a price on her peace of mind, which I was expected to pay.

Enveloped in darkness, I find myself floating weightlessly. I immediately know I want to stay here. I don't try to decipher where I am. The answer might take me back to where I came from. My limbs move with the gentlest of motions as if they are being guided by a breeze too soft to feel. My eyes are closed but my mouth is half open; I have completely surrendered myself to this space when I feel something stir inside my mouth and come out. I see a single tooth slowly floating away from me, untethered from my gums. One by one, other teeth follow suit. Plucked out from my mouth with ease just as overripe berries get blown to the ground by the wind, they fall away to hover around me in zero gravity.

Relief floods through me as my habitual teeth clenching vanishes, leaving behind a sensation free from the perpetual discomfort of a sore jaw. My gums feel supple and velvety. The feeling doesn't last long. A half-asleep consciousness takes over and fills me with the shame of waking up a hideous, completely toothless person. How long would it take to fix it? I can't go out till then. I can't let anybody see me like this. Terrified, I find myself lunging after each escaping tooth. But my arms move sluggishly, hindered by the weightlessness of my surroundings. Every movement feels laborious. The seconds stretch into eternity as I catch each tooth and my right palm finally closes around them. I thrust the handful of teeth back into my mouth, hoping beyond hope that they would somehow find their way back to their rightful places. I wish for the skin to grow back over my mouth so they can no longer escape.

Somebody violently shakes me back to reality.

‘Kanchhi, thank God you are awake! You were choking in your sleep, barely breathing’ my mother gasps, her voice thick with fear and concern.

But even as she speaks, a deep sadness grips and drowns me as if my head is being held underwater. I collapse into her lap, tears streaming down my face endlessly. Her arms wrap around me, holding me tight, but I cannot bear to look into her eyes. The weightlessness of before has been replaced by a crushing weight, a burden so heavy that I can barely move a muscle.

‘I won’t marry anyone,’ I scream, my voice raw with emotion. ‘Not now, not anytime soon.’

My words echo through the room, bouncing off the walls, a defiant declaration of my refusal. I keep saying it until my throat burns like acid.

‘You don’t have to,’ she whispers finally, trying to conceal the doubt in her voice.

I wake up to find her gone. The blue plaid duffel bag she arrived with is no longer at the foot of her mattress. Did I upset her so much that she left so abruptly in the middle of the night? My heart feels as though it is peeling off in splinters. I call my brother and ask him if she talked to him about going back home. There is a long pause before he speaks, his words laced with dread and deep sadness.

‘Are you alright, Kanchhi? She...passed away two months ago. Do you not remember it at all?’

‘What are you talking about? She was here with me until last night. She has been here the whole past month. Did she tell you where she was going last night?’ I am worried.

‘You are speaking nonsense. How can you not remember it? The litchi tree in our backyard? You found her.’ His voice softens, ‘Come home, you are not well.’

Then, what had happened two months ago dawns on me like a bolt of thunder.

I am back home. As the first rays of sunshine pierce through the foliage, I quietly slip away to the colossal litchi tree. I have always been told that fruits plucked in the mornings lack flavour and turn sour. But the plump pink litchis dangling from the branches I see from my window are irresistible. The tree itself looks like a bride in a crimson veil. As I approach it, I scan the tree for the most vibrant clusters of branches. That's where the sweetest and juiciest litchis are going to be. And then I see it - a deep red that stands out amidst the sea of pink and red hues. It is not scattered like other clusters, but bold and structured, almost like a large piece of fabric draped elegantly over the branches. I am right underneath it when I recognise the patterns of my mother's saari.