GRACE HOWARTH

She is Taken Lightly

Light: lilac cotton, brushing knees, shining with silver flowers embroidered across the collar.

It was light, and that was the best compliment she could muster for the dress. A beat of silence played in the changing room; outside the electric generator hum of modern life crackled on in the world's subconscious. Her mind skimmed briefly over the options: it fitted against the slim contours of her body well, the colour was fine, the embroidery a little unstitched, but it was perfectly adequate for lunch dates with girlfriends, and besides, it was *cheap*.

At home, it was tucked between other folds of fabric, the price label still hanging, curled like a hunched spine.

A hunched spine—not in prayer, but in labour—over five thousand miles away from the shop with the purple dress, was coated in a sheen of dripping sweat. She had only been working for an hour, the heat tangible, pulsing against her skin, hovering much too close. Her hands like doll's hands, tiny, delicate, easy to shatter, were wrought with scarred lacerations, ungainly calluses swelling into blisters. Between nimble fingers was a needle, and on the table before her were sheaths of violet material, onto which she was stitching countless flowers.

Her needlework was pristine—it had to be or she would not survive.

If she does not pay attention, Dipa can almost imagine it is quiet in the warehouse that stretches before her each day. After constantly

hearing the clattering clamour of movement and barked instructions for hours on end, a broken tape looping its muffled dialogue, ignoring the chaos around her had become rather effortless. Although she could dull the noise, mind relatively blank as she looped thread into the floral embellishments, she could not block it out completely. At the end of each day she left with a further heaviness on her chest; it is impossible to pretend that you aren't suffocating for long.

'It's so light!' was all she could think when the first batch of lilac fabric had appeared before them, in a rare moment of loveliness; it was a beautiful sunset shade that Dipa would have loved to wrap herself in, the cotton so soft it soothed her hands. Colour blindness set in after a mere few days, Dipa barely watching her needle as she quickly made tiny stitches that only hands as small as hers could make. Each night, after her shifts ended, she crushed her bones together, trying to stunt the growth, for if her fingers grew larger, *clumsier,* she would never work in the factory again.

The light, electric, painting the room a sterile, off-white, so bright that any flaw was immediately noticeable, whether in product or behaviour. Miss a hem or fall asleep and your wages were slashed. When your pay was cut you didn't argue; you worked more quickly and more efficiently to try and gain some of it back. Dipa was so used to the artificial brightness that even when she closed her eyes, the intensity still burned beneath her eyelids. There were plenty of things from the factory that affected her when she had left.

Her hands had never healed. Her ten-year-old palms had grown into fourteen-year-old palms: brown and slender, still, but so scarred she could not remember their smoothness. She had to mask her mouth every day, but cotton had already settled in her lungs and a hacking cough, too big for her frame, tore through her regularly. As abrupt and startling as a power shortage, her childhood had been sliced to an end—and Dipa knew it.

Her father had once been a somewhat well-off man; they could never live to excess, but the five-part family were full, carefree and content. He had taxied around important businessmen, learning of places he had never imagined, and each night, as the sun set over their small house, he used to tell Dipa, and her two younger sisters, tales of a world he hoped they would one day see.

The only thing crueller than giving someone no dreams at all is giving them dreams in abundance, then unstitching them from reality. When her father crashed his car and lost the use of both his legs, Dipa's dreams were as ruined as the wreck of the vehicle: glass and metal fragments of hopes and grand ideas to be forgotten and shelved away into impossibilities.

They lost their sweet, homely house. Her father and sisters had to move to a room five minutes from the factory. Dipa passed by every night, giving them her wages and best wishes, longing for her siblings to dream more than she had the chance to. The oldest, Neha, was nearly twelve; she had already had two years of freedom that Dipa had not.

Dipa, face disguising the burden of hundreds of sleepless nights, kissed Neha on the forehead. There were a mere two years between them, but Neha was so different, unmarked and childlike, a light in her eyes that had dampened years before in Dipa's.

"Dipa, will you stay with us tonight?" asked little Rupa, dirty faced and beaming with such joy she almost glowed. "We wanted to watch the sunset!"

Dipa glanced at their father, reclined in his chair, utter helplessness scratched all over him. He was a shipwreck of a man, broken and lost; no matter how hard Dipa searched she could not find the soul of the father she had grown up with. As their gazes met, the man could barely look his daughter in the eye. He turned away, jaw set weakly and eyes scorching with guilt.

"I'm afraid not," Dipa said, hugging her youngest sister in a tight embrace. "I am working, of course."

"You never watch the sunset with us anymore," Rupa complained, clutching tighter, leaving halfmoon crescents across Dipa's arms.

"You *know* that I have to be at work before dusk," Dipa reasoned with a rare smile, "and anyway, I always watch from my window, so I *do* watch it with you, just not here."

"Will you not stay for supper?" Neha asked, "We have dal." They always had dal, because the lentil soup was cheap and simple. Her mind skimmed briefly over the options; she could not afford to waste time getting caught in laughter with her family. She got fed at work, anyway, so she shook her head and left the day's pennies

beside her father.

"I will see you in the morning," Dipa promised. "When you watch as the sun sets, wish for more light tomorrow."

Dipa had another sibling, a little brother just four months old, but his father was not hers; her mother did not know who had fathered Tamanna. He lived with their mother, in her work room, fussed over by the women and Dipa, who worked there at night.

"Hello, sweet boy," Dipa said softly, letting his infant fingers tangle in the edges of her hair.

He was so incredibly light, limbs willow branches, hair dark and wispy, eyes *alight*.

Her mother swept him away, pausing to kiss her forehead. "You have to hurry. I have a client in ten minutes." She placed Tamanna in his corner, trying to rock him to sleep as she painted her lips red. Dipa smiled a farewell and weaved her way through the warren of narrow corridors to her own room.

It was her room at night and another girl's during the day. They both kept it tidy, through an unspoken agreement. A nicer room meant better business.

She was quite lucky she thought to herself, painting black streaks across her eyes, a smudge on her forehead, blotting her lips with pink: she had meals, a place to sleep, siblings she adored, *and* she wasn't confined to the shabby walls of her workplace.

Her mother lived in her room, forbidden to leave, for she had sold all of her rights to send money back to her husband. Dipa already had found work in the factory, and volunteered herself to work alongside her mother. It was better paid than the factory, but full days of it stretching into weeks and years would have broken her. Yes, *lucky,* she thought, luckier than most.

She put her comb down on her desk, reaching for the packet beside it. She slit through the foil compression and threw the lentil-sized pill down her throat. In the first week she had worked there, another girl had pointed them out in the tearooms.

"Take them," she instructed, "it will hide your bones." At that point, her skin had barely clung to her frame, all hollows and craters of ribs and collarbones. The drug had done as the girl had promised, Dipa bloomed outwards in a way she never had before, growing into

the shape of a woman much older than fourteen. She had heard that the pills were to fatten cattle for slaughter, but when she had tried to stop she had fallen so ill that she couldn't work, headaches splitting through her skull and ugly, violently red rashes tarring her skin.

Besides, she could not lose her weight, for there was no greater sin, in her workplace—the brothel—than to be light in someone's arms.

The routine was mechanical. Dipa lingered outside, staunchly ignoring the younger children that played together in the gutters. As the sun set, she danced in the sky's ochre, crimson bloodshed, offering her child's hand to men as they walked by in the hundreds. Sometimes it did not work the first time, but most times it did. She was pretty, she looked healthy, she was young, and her skin was lighter than most of the girls around her. The light-skinned girls usually had lines outside their door, while their darker counterparts were forced to scramble for the dregs. Dipa could not make any fault, or the word would tarnish her room, attracting only the poorest, the angriest, and the richest—supposedly too worthy to pay, the men who wouldn't leave, the men who wouldn't stop, and the men who slit your throat and left you to bleed out until the next girl needed the room.

The light was low in her shack, but never low enough. She could always see the faces so clearly before her, their empty eyes, every bead of sweat, much too close, filling her whole view. Most of the time she closed her eyes.

Behind her eyelids she dreamed of the sunset and of light and vast open spaces. She dreamed of vibrant colours that she could wear, laughter, of Neha, Rupa and Tamanna, of someone who could take her in their comforting arms lightly, but not take her lightly in their mind. Of her father, running alongside her, eyes free from their chains of guilt, telling stories of other worlds. Of her mother, braiding her hair and dancing with her to the songs they used to sing, passed down from generations before.

Of light—she dreamed of light! She dreamed of the sun, the stars and the moon, of all sorts of radiance bathing her in warmth and brightness. Her name *meant* light; 'Dipa' *meant light!* Her mother used to cradle her first born child, both of them innocent

to the life they would have to lead, and call her *'my bringer of light';* she had never known that her heart could feel so full, and yet so feather-light.

Dipa awoke, a kernel of sun piercing through the hole in the roof.

Some say light is a sign of new beginnings, but for Dipa it just meant that she had survived one more night.

From the pockets of four men, five hundred Taka was tucked under Dipa's pillow. It wasn't even worth five pounds.

"Lucy! Oh my goodness!" said a girl, walking into a coffee shop halfway across the world from Dipa. "I absolutely *adore* your dress!"

Lucy twirled slightly, the lilac cotton grazing her thighs. "Thanks, babe—I got it yesterday. You'll never guess what...it was under a fiver!"

"Under a fiver!" the other girl repeated, pink-painted lips pulled into a glossy pout, "What a bargain!" She ordered a coffee and sat down. "And the embroidery is lovely, too!" she added. "So...what's been going on with you? Is the boyfriend still messing you around?"

"You know...the usual... I think he's still in love with his ex—I don't think my life could get any worse!"

Drowning in fields of violet fabric, Dipa dreamed of sunlight and began to sew.