

The Suitor

Meera was caught up in an elaborate fantasy again, this time in front of a lit fire. She almost hadn't noticed the beads of perspiration forming on her forehead as she was consumed by the sounds of batter sizzling on oil.

The doorbell rang and she hastily grabbed the loose end of her *dupatta* and dabbed her forehead with it. The synthetic fabric of her *kurta*, clearly unsuited for bright summer afternoons, strangely prickled her skin. But if anything thirty years of experience had taught her, it was that she had little choice about her clothes after her mother had given a verdict. She quickly untied the knot and let her long hair fall to her waist. In the past month or so, many a prospective suitor that had arrived at their house had complimented her majestic mane. She carefully brushed a single strand of hair in a way that it fell over her forehead and across her eyelid.

Something about meeting people her parents had shortlisted for her to marry, felt surreal. But it was just like all the stories that she had heard from relatives growing up. The family of the boy arrived at the girl's, and the rest, as they said, was left to fate. Her father had assured her that it would be her choice in the end, and she found herself repeating that over and over again, lest she forget.

From a distance, she could faintly hear her father greeting the guests and visualised him holding the door with a wide grin on his face. Witnessing her father greet people with an unhardened expression, was almost like watching humanoid features being painted on a clay sculpture. Her father would then offer the guests a

beverage, which would be the cue for her mother to enter the living room. The guests would be subjected to rather obvious remarks about the weather and subsequently, India's performance in the latest cricket match. Then the conversation would be subtly steered into a position from where her father could comfortably pick up on talking about the fact that Meera had been the district topper in her board exams. And then with plastic grins, the entire room would burst into exclamations about how girls were always two steps ahead of boys.

Then it would be her turn to enter the room with a plate full of awkwardly shaped fritters she had carved out of minced vegetables. Her mother had indicated that the taste of the fritters would be a major element in all their secretive assessments.

The one who was supposed to see her today was a professor of History in a renowned college in North Delhi.

"History!?" her mother had exclaimed, puckering her face in a painfully unsubtle manner. But Meera had always admired (sometimes even envied) historians, merely for the fact that they could afford to exist somewhere outside of the realities that haunted the present. Apart from the timelines and words written in fine print, so many things were subjective, so many perspectives were at play. She never really got around to study the subject, mostly because her parents seemed to think that a life in academia was too much of an investment, and simply a knowledgeable mind was too little a return.

This admiration itself served to make her anxious, for she had found that expectations were even more brittle than the fancy ceramic plates her mother saved for serving guests. In all the meetings that her parents had arranged thus far, this was the one she was most hopeful about. Preparing for her grand entrance, she carefully arranged the fritters on a heavily decorated tray, and twisted her lips in a smile in the angle her mother had taught her.

"Meera, come here darling, they want to meet you!" her father's voice called out. She leapt into attention, almost biting the insides of her cheek.

She strode into the living room with mock confidence and placed the tray on the rectangular centre table. Carefully brushing

the strand of hair off her face and tucking it behind her ear, she gracefully folded her arms in greeting.

One of the walls in their living room was decorated with a piece of maroon fabric she had embroidered with tiny bits of glass that were iridescent in the warm glow of the afternoon sun. Meera had grown up in this very house and little had changed about this room in all these years. The walls had always been painted in a sober shade of yellow, and the curtains hanging on their window were still an awkward burnt blue that cast a pall over the entire room when it was drawn shut. The wooden table, placed at the heart of the room, was aligned in a way that the longer edge of it faced the chair her father almost always occupied. In the mornings, her mother would wipe the impressions of teacups left without coasters on the table, and films of dust that gathered over the scattered newspapers. Everything was almost the same, except the large canvases that were painted by her, that now hung on the walls perhaps out of necessity to mask the yellow, slowly tarnishing into a shade of ochre. She was almost startled (a little troubled too) at the stark difference in the ambience of the room whenever they had guests over. There were coasters on the centre table, and the chairs were embellished with pieces of white fabric with convoluted designs sewed on them. But most importantly, it was always awkward to witness her father let someone else borrow his throne. With so many people in it the room certainly seemed bigger, sometimes even unrecognisable.

She caught a glimpse of the Professor from the corner of her eye. He was sitting right in between his parents, his gaze fixated downward with the same bashfulness that was otherwise expected from the bride-to-be. He had looked up for a second when she had entered the room but averted his eyes as quickly as fireflies flicker away into the night. He was dressed in a starched blue-collared shirt that was neatly tucked in, and his hair was combed with fastidious care. There were smudges on the thick glasses of his spectacles, that became quite visible in the sunlight. She noticed that his palms were wedged in between his thighs and his spine was slightly hunched. The sight of him reminded her of the time when she sat occupying a small space in between her parents when they were called to school because she had failed her math exam.

Almost everything about him was rather unsurprising, save for the fact that the lower half of his face was covered with a jet black mask.

“Please, do have something.” Meera pointed towards the tray on the centre table, as if trying to break into the enigma surrounding the masked man. Having feigned ignorance up until this point, he slightly glanced at her for a moment.

“Of course, did you make them?” he asked, almost straining to bend forward to wrap his fingers around a fritter.

She nodded with a grin, suddenly becoming aware that the dangling earrings that she donned, danced with her animated gestures. Over the next few seconds, Meera witnessed a grown man defeated by the misshapen croquette sitting in his palm. Something in the way he fiddled with it, told her that he was most unwilling to unfasten that mask. She found herself marvelling on the plain piece of cloth that was way too many things at once—the tool of the thief, the harbour of the aggrieved, and the purdah of the ashamed. She wondered which one of these things the hunched professor considered himself to be.

Conversation stirred as the topic of politics surreptitiously entered the room, and Meera was thankful for the awkward silence being lifted. Arguments bounced off each side, like an ill-guided table tennis match, except there could be no winner in this, and discussion would soon take the form of a snake trying to bite its tail. Politics was one subject in an Indian household, that even common ground could not be discussed without loud, eloquent speeches. In between the storm, Meera found herself torn between the two men exchanging heated anecdotes of patriotism, and the two elderly women exchanging tired looks. In the midst of this boisterous camaraderie, she caught a glimpse of the mask being unfastened.

A carmine-tinted laceration cut across his cheek and stretched to the top of his lip. He bit into the croquette cradled in his palms, and before she could even get a thorough look, the mask was back up again.

Meera was suddenly made aware of the rust-coloured *dupatta* draped over her chest that had been sitting untouched all this while. The fabric was placed against the bare skin of her neck, and it was

strangely uncomfortable in the heat. Yet, it had been a part of her wardrobe for as long as she could remember, apparently necessary for protecting her modesty. She adjusted it slightly in a way that didn't make her feel that the fabric was trying to throttle her. The burn mark on her hand from hot oil was masked with the long sleeves of her *kurta* and the dull pink of her chapped lips were painted in a vivacious scarlet. And of course, the freckles on her nose were not visible sitting under the solid layer of foundation. Only with this renewed assurance of propriety, did she allow her gaze to linger on her match for just a moment.

She wondered how the ghastly scar had made its way on his visibly docile face. Perhaps it was the result of an accident? Or the result of a gruesome fight? She studied him carefully, but nothing about him even slightly hinted towards a quarrelsome nature.

Meera noticed the Professor's eyes playing all over the room, and wondered if he had caught her name scribbled on the corner of the canvases decorating the room. His eyes fixated on the painting hung right in the centre of the wall facing him. She hadn't been particularly proud of that one, but somehow she had never wanted to sell it. A woman clad in royal attire was the centre of the foot-long frame and she held a flower with withering petals. With her eyes closed shut, the woman had somehow drifted in the aroma of a dying flower perhaps gifted by an admirer. The portrait was of someone she didn't recognise, yet it was one created by her subconscious.

For a few seconds, his unwavering gaze studied the strokes of her brush, and after a while, a softness that was a discernible smile spread to his eyes. He didn't turn towards her to praise the masterful painting as so many had done before. He kept looking at the portrait, and she wondered if he had found more layers to it than she had herself. Witnessing someone closely observe her art, watching them trying to unravel her, was a process she had always found intriguing.

As her father monologued about her achievements as an artist, and old eyes looked at her admiringly, she concluded that very little was required of her in the conversation. Her thoughts drifted again, this time to the moonlit mountains on a crisp winter evening. She was still just a girl when she had accompanied her parents on a vacation to a hill station. Dusk had fallen by the time they made the journey

and none of the snow-capped peaks they were eager to witness, were visible at that time. It was a full moon night, and for once she did not have to manoeuvre her way within large crowds. The darkness shrouded everything except for the hush hushed whispers of the few tourists lingering about. There was utter silence and it weirdly felt like she was eavesdropping on a divine conversation not meant for her. She jumped out of her reverie as her mother scrambled all over the place to see if there was any view at all for them. None, she had concluded. They left soon after, and she promised herself to return someday.

Meera never managed to make the trip to a hillside again. But at that moment, a fleeting image of her standing on a moonlit valley, grabbing an arm dressed in blue cotton, made her forget about the slanting rays of the sun that illuminated her living room. Whenever she would turn to look at his face in the night, it would be softly lit with the moonlight, and his eyes would be studying the stars in the sky with the same curiosity he studied her painting with. Even in the soft twilight glow, she'd be able to trace the scar on his face.

No, she'd never be ashamed of the scar, nor any remarks made by nosy passers-by. She would make him believe that there was nothing about him he shouldn't be proud of, just like she had taught herself how to accept all the imperfections about herself. She would remind him night and day how the gash on his face was nothing but a splash of colour to her. After all, she had made a livelihood out of turning blank sheets into objects of fascination. No, she would never let him hide behind the mask again.

"I see you are interested in history as well." The suitor smiled at her, catching her off guard for a moment. He had been studying her paintings set against elaborate *durbars* and monuments all this while.

"Oh well." She cleared her throat. "But I am not as well informed about it as you."

Perhaps this was supposed to be the beginning of a conversation, but he went back into the silent examination. But she was positive that there was a smile behind that mask, even though she wasn't sure if she could see it in his eyes. She desperately wanted to continue the conversation but reminded herself to be patient. 'Perhaps, in

the next meeting,' she thought. 'Well, if there is a next meeting,' she hastily corrected.

The wooden frame on which her painting was mounted had a very noticeable fissure on its bottom right corner. She had spotted the frame in a roadside market in Old Delhi. There were delicate carvings on its fine ebony surface that were almost invisible from afar. While trying to mount it on the wall, a corner had chipped off. The idea of hanging a broken showpiece on her drawing room wall had been repulsive to her mother, and in any other meeting, even Meera would have prayed for the guest to not notice her carelessness. But this once, with the man dressed in humble blue, she had known that the painting mattered more than the frame.

She watched him answer questions thrown at him by her parents. For the first time in all her meetings, the answers were not mechanical, as if scripted by someone else. His words were muffled by the mask drawn across his face and he kept feeling the need to tighten the drawstrings behind his ear now and then. He was as timid as she had once been, apparently petrified that his answers about himself could be wrong.

He was thirty-two, just a year older than her, but the number lay more heavily against her than it would ever be for him. At twenty-eight, her parents had started pestering her to settle down, which she tactfully ignored. But at thirty they stopped being fooled by her carefully constructed evasions. On the eve of her thirty-first birthday, her mother had thrown a fit.

Meera was most definitely not against the idea of marriage, even if it was one arranged for her by someone else. She had always been fascinated by the grand wedding ceremonies she had grown up seeing. But somewhere between spending her evenings spinning whimsical tales, and cocky men blindly praising her artwork without any understanding, she had given up on the idea of signing a different surname on her paintings. If it were not for the fact that life to her had been pretty much about meeting deadlines, and uncertainty always looming at the prospect of a missed deadline, she would never have agreed to these meetings.

Eighteen meetings with prospective grooms made the future appear more uncertain than ever. Yet the nineteenth saw her lost in

daydreams yet again.

Perhaps weddings were not just about commitments and ownerships. Perhaps somewhere hidden in the small crevices of blind traditions and laws, it was about her palms adorned with intricately woven patterns of *henna*. Perhaps it was also about taking silent strolls with someone after long days of work and discussing art and history. Someone would silently study and marvel at her skilful embroideries and appreciate her otherwise useless knowledge of weaving patterns. Maybe marriage wasn't just about being accepted and rejected by someone else, but also just a little bit about wholeheartedly accepting oneself.

She still yearned for a conversation with the professor, best without the interventions and mindless cackles by senior citizens. She wondered if he had liked the fritter he was eating, for she had somehow lost track.

Two days later Meera was caught up painting a sixteenth-century bazaar, when her father heard back from the suitor. He stealthily entered the room and his voice had a perceptible hint of concern.

“You know professors earn too little?” he scoffed. “Moreover, he was way too awkward wasn't he?”

Meera looked at him, perplexed. But it all made sense to her when she realised that the cold man's cynicism was just to protect her.

The professor had rejected her because she was a little too plump for his liking. She let out a soft chuckle. It had all been her fault. She laughed like she had tasted sour grapes on her tongue. Her fault, for even thinking about unmasking him.

The nineteen meetings seemed like nothing but distant daydreams. But this ludicrous fantasy had left her utterly fatigued. As far as the future was concerned, she was certain about just two things: One, that there would be no twentieth, and the other, that she would take a trip by herself to a hillside, on a moonlit night. Just this much certainty would suffice for now.