

Of Marigolds and Men

“I wonder how long it will take for them to realize I’m missing.”

Arun is startled by the sound of his own voice. He had not meant to say it out loud.

Nervously, he checks to see if anyone has heard him, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. The family of five sharing the train compartment with Arun pays him little attention. The father is preoccupied, trying to fit the family’s luggage, directing the porter this way and that, pushing, pulling bags into a space that seems far too small for the number of bags they’ve stockpiled. The frazzled mother tries in vain to corral the two boys who look to be around six and eight, but they ricochet in, out, and around the compartment like whirling dervishes trapped in a house of mirrors. No one is paying attention to Arun except for the little girl, who has been staring at him since the family made their noisy entry into the carriage.

The little girl sits silently, holding a doll, completely impervious to the ruckus around her as if such hullabaloo was beneath the dignity of her superior stature. She and the doll are dressed in identical outfits, short, red dresses embroidered with pink and yellow flowers. The duo’s unwavering, unblinking gaze unnerves Arun. He turns his attention to the platform instead, where the train’s impending departure has whipped up quite a tempest. Tardy passengers scramble to find their carriages. Porters rush by, loaded with bags, chased by the bag owners desperately trying to keep up. Hawkers hawk their wares noisily, hoping to close a quick deal before the train leaves. “Chai garam, chai garam!” they announce, holding out steaming clay pots of fragrant, milky tea to entice the sleepy passengers. The smell of ginger and cardamom makes Arun nostalgic for Ma’s tea, but he checks himself. He is determined not to let emotions derail his plans today.

The clock on the platform reads 5:34. The train is scheduled to leave in six minutes. Ma's alarm clock will go off in twenty-six minutes. She will take a bath, and put on her pooja uniform – a crisp, white, cotton sari with a red and gold border. Arun has witnessed this scene so many times he can hear the crackling sounds her heavily starched sari makes as she bends over to prostrate herself before the collection of gods and goddesses in her little temple. He can hear the jingle-jangle of her bangles, the brassy peal of the bell she always rings at the end of the puja. From the nostalgia-lined recesses of his brain, he conjures up the smell of ghee burning in the diya, and the almost lurid scent of the nag champa flowers Ma prefers for the altar.

After the pooja, she will head to the kitchen to supervise the servants as they prepare breakfast. Papa will show up at the dining table at seven sharp. He will enjoy his tea silently, ignoring Ma while he reads today's *Gujarat Samachar* and *Times of India*, always in that order. At 7:30, Ma will send one of the servants to wake up Varun, Priya, and Arun, having indulged them with an extra thirty minutes of sleep. The servant will return to Ma, puzzled, possibly alarmed when he finds Arun's bed empty. By that time, Arun will be out of their reach, far away from Surat.

The train announces its departure with a shrill whistle, interrupting Arun's rendering of predictable morning rituals at the family home. Arun clutches his satchel with one hand, feeling inside the satchel with the other to confirm yet again that he's brought the bottle with him. He feels something cool, damp, and soft clinging to the plastic bottle he's looking for. He pulls out the mystery object, a marigold flower. It must have dropped from one of the dozens of garlands of marigold and jasmine flowers Papa had festooned around the home to celebrate Arun's engagement. He thinks about tossing the flower out of the window, but he returns it to his satchel instead, a little ashamed of himself for the nonchalance with which he was about to litter.

The train accelerates slowly, weaving past compact bungalows with tidy gardens. Past sprawling shantytowns stirring awake with the arrival of the morning sun. Arun tries taking in these familiar sights one last time, mostly to avoid, with limited success, drifting off into an interior world filled with emotional turbulence. He thinks about the engagement party last night, how enthusiastic his family was, and Reema's family too. He contrasts it with the cold dread that paralyzed him. Reema's tentative smile, shy, scared, and hopeful all at once – the memory sends him spiraling into despair. So, he shifts his focus back to the scenes unfolding outside the train. Clotheslines pinned with drying clothes seem to drape the apartment buildings in ungainly rainbows. Makeshift playgrounds host boisterous cricket games. The train slows down at a railway crossing where a mob of multicolored vehicles waits on either side, impatient for the train to move out of the way. Arun thinks about how Papa pressured him to get engaged to Reema. Papa also insisted on a grand party to mark the occasion. Reema's purple sari, how it shimmered under the party lights. Arun remembers the family photos and the forced smiles. The thought of marriage reignites the dread he felt last night. Despair and dread churn his insides and when they threaten to overwhelm him, he looks out of the window, seeing, not seeing the city fly by.

Once the train is safely past the industrial outskirts of Surat, Arun gets up from his seat, swaying and staggering to the rhythm of the fast-moving train as he makes his way to the washroom at the end of the carriage. He locks himself in there, carefully avoiding the puddle on the floor. He looks around. The walls are clad in cheap-looking panels that are supposed to imitate marble. The yellowed edges where the paneling is coming apart reveal a rusted layer of metal underneath. Arun tries to ignore the strong stench of urine as he looks for a place to brace himself against the rocking motion of the train. In the spotted mirror, he is startled to see his face.

He looks pale and gaunt, cheeks like deep saucers, with dark circles ringing his eyes. He examines his face as if it were someone else's. The face in the mirror betrays none of the emotions roiling his insides.

For months Ma and the rest of the family hounded him. *Get married. You have to get married. Must get married. Beta, it's high time you find a wife.* They harangued him. Pleaded with him. Threatened him. Constant pressure, slow torture, what he thinks waterboarding might feel like, until one day he broke down. Agreed to an arranged marriage. He even started to believe he could go through with it but this was a fantasy built on a flimsy foundation of wishes and prayers. The idea of marrying Reema gave him panic attacks. He had never been with a woman. The very idea of a physical relationship with a woman filled him with fear, horror, and revulsion. He tried to get out of it, the day before the engagement, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. He was upbraided for being fickle, for threatening to bring shame and dishonor on the family, for not respecting his parents and their wishes, for not being a good son, and on and on until he relented once again. He could run away and he's thought about it, but exile and excommunication from his family and loved ones seem like a fate worse than death. Realistically, he sees only one way out. He just has to make sure he executes this exit plan. Today.

Arun takes a deep breath and looks away from the mirror. He opens the bottle of pills he had stashed in the satchel, sleeping pills that he has procured from multiple chemists to avoid suspicion. He pours out pink pills into his clammy hand, five at a time, forcing them down the throat with the water from a Bisleri bottle. The water is warm and tastes like plastic, but he doesn't hesitate as he takes each set of five pills, waiting just long enough to allow the previous batch to make its way down. The last three pills, he flushes away because he doesn't want to

disrupt the beautiful symmetry of the pattern of fives that is to be his last conscious act. When he returns to his seat by the window, the little girl and her doll resume their silent vigil, but now Arun finds himself strangely comforted by this unlikely pair of guardian angels.

The train's clackety-clack, clack-clack sound stands in for a lullaby as the pills start to kick in. Arun feels drowsy. Sleep arrives in dizzying waves, each wave getting progressively stronger as if the tide is rising. He can barely keep his eyes open, so he gives in to the temptation to rest his weary eyes. Just for a second. Maybe two. His head rolls one way and then the other, snapping back with decreasing urgency as if it were held up by slack springs. Left. Right. Bob. Bob. Left. Right. Left. He no longer has the strength to open his eyes.

Behind the leaden eyelids now shut tight, Arun finds that the little girl and her doll have followed him. They've made themselves at home in the flesh-colored, flickering world. "What's your name, little girl?" Arun asks, but he receives no response. Instead, the girl and her doppelganger beckon him, holding his hands as they leave this ruddy, quivering, winking world to march lockstep through a valley of fog. Fog here. Fog there. Clouds. Mist. Gray. Wisps. White. Blue. Blue-gray. Fog here. Fog there. The ground under his feet feels soft and springy to the touch. Squish. Squish. Soft. The trio prances and skips through the fog with childlike glee and freedom.

When the fog lifts—the wispy whites disappearing suddenly as if in the old black-and-white movies Ma and Papa prefer—Arun sees that he is walking barefoot on a carpet of flowers. Marigolds as far as the eye can see, a sea of gold and orange, punctuated every so

often by clusters of sweet-smelling jasmine flowers. The ground feels softer by the minute until Arun finds himself sinking into this fuzzily fragrant, floral quicksand. The flowers swallow him gradually, first up to the ankles, then the calves. Now he's waist-deep and then up to his shoulders. He tries to resist, panicking, clawing at the edges of orange and gold, but he is no match for the ravenous flowers and their insatiable appetite. He keeps sinking until he's finally submerged, completely.

Arun's lungs fill up with scented oils and he exhales luminescent bubbles filled with golden-orange vapors. Somewhere along the way, he's lost the little girl and her doll. As he sinks further, the orange and gold turn to crimson, then maroon and brown. In this maroon-brown murkiness, he sees a vision of the four-armed Kali Mata, the goddess of death and destruction. In popular depictions, her skin is the color of a blue-black night sky, but up close Arun sees that her skin is the color of almonds and honey. Regardless of the avatar, she is a frightening presence with wild tresses and eyes brimming with fire. She thunders and roars, sending bolts of lightning down Arun's spine. He looks in awe at the garland of human skulls she wears around her neck, the garland rattling violently as it swings, mimicking her frenetic dance. She is close enough that Arun can smell the burning coals on her breath, feel the static current rising from her tiger-skin robe, and taste her acrid rage. She picks him up effortlessly and throws him from one hand to the second, then to the third and fourth, and back and forth like a flimsy rag-doll, generating swells and surges of nausea and bile. Up. Down. Up again. Sideways. Just when he's about to give up, overwhelmed by the loss of equilibrium and control, she tosses him off to the side leaving him convulsing, dizzy and dazed.

Another pair of hands appears now. These hands are soft and gentle. They pull him from the maroon-brown murkiness to a blue-gray world where dolphins splish and splash in groups of five. Five splishes to the left, then five splashes to the right. Five dolphins here and five there. The dolphins sing to him, sweet melancholy ballads of love and loss. Arun, guided by the pair of gentle hands, swims in the warm water, racing towards the dull orb of silvery light that must be the moon. He doesn't know whose hands he follows but he feels safe in their care. The dolphins splish and splash excitedly, bringing their song to its mournful crescendo.

“Are you okay?” asks Ravi's voice, filled with so much love and tenderness it brings tears to Arun's eyes. Arun didn't think he'd ever hear from Ravi again, not after the abrupt manner in which Arun broke up with him, but it is surely Ravi's voice. Arun cries orange and gold tears of relief as he swims toward the moon, accompanied by five groups of splish-splashing dolphins. The gentle hands are Ravi's hands, Arun realizes, and instantly he feels lighter, and more at ease.

“Arun, beta, can you hear me?”

Ma holds Arun's hand, willing him to open his eyes, tears streaming down her face when too many collect for her eyes to store. She watches him, alert for the slightest movement or change, rejecting any offers from her husband or the others to take over the watch so that she can rest. The lonely vigil is part of her penance. She doesn't know what would cause her son to take

such a drastic step but is convinced that it must be a result of some fundamental flaw in her mothering. She is generous with the blame, heaping it on herself indiscriminately as she waits for her baby boy to open his eyes.

Arun swims vigorously, eager to rise to the surface and escape this watery prison. His lungs ache for air, his chest filled tightly with fragrant oils. Ripples of silver and blinding white, concentric circles of glowing lights spread around Arun as he rises towards the moon. The dolphins cheer him on. Ravi too, as he swims beside Arun, shimmering in his gloriously brown skin. Arun turns his head so that he can watch Ravi, beautiful Ravi who swims like a gazelle that was born to the seas. Ravi's muscles are taut, the torso tapered, a gleaming *David* forged out of copper and bronze, floating through this blue-gray world with intolerable grace. Arun watches, mesmerized. He wants to pause for a moment, just long enough to kiss Ravi and his gloriously brown skin, but Ravi slips away, covering himself in a short, red dress embroidered with pink and yellow flowers. The moon comes closer and closer still, alarming Arun with the intensity of its burning light. So bright is the light, it burns his eyes, sending searing, shooting spasms of pain straight to his brain. His head hurts from the cranial tectonic torture and he feels like he's swallowed a fire-breathing magician and his sword. Arun longs to go back to the blue-gray world where dolphins splish-splash in groups of five and Ravi swims like a sea gazelle in his gloriously brown skin.

Ma ruminates on the nature of need. When the boys were young, both of them but mostly Arun would use nightmares, real and feigned, as an excuse to insist she sleep in their room. She would hold their hands or stroke their foreheads until sleep took over. If she had to describe heaven, this was it. The boys were her sun and her moon, they were her universe, and all the love she had, she spent it on them. As they got older, they needed her less and less. They were content to lock themselves in their now-separate rooms, begging to be left alone with video games or friends. Lately, she had mostly begun to feel like a nuisance, nagging them to eat, drink, wake up, and whatnot. It felt good to be needed again.

Ma banishes this thought as quickly as it enters her mind, knowing that she would never trade the safety of her children to feel needed once again. Oh, what she wouldn't give up to ensure their happiness and well-being. She offers the gods alms in addition to her prayers. She pleads with them for mercy, pledging to make seven holy pilgrimages every year if they save Arun's life. She vows she will never eat sweets again. She promises to fast on Tuesdays. She offers her own life in return for Arun's recovery. She doesn't care about the personal costs of her promised sacrifices. All she wants is for her children to be happy. She doesn't have cause to worry about Varun. He is doing well with the family business. He seems happy in his marriage. Priya is a good wife and daughter-in-law. Arun, on the other hand, has always been different: more sensitive, more fragile, and yet so full of love. Arun's engagement and eventual marriage to Reema is a step in the right direction, Ma is convinced. It is time for Arun to settle down now.

There is a singularity and selflessness to her goals that allows Ma to feel confident in her motives and methods. She has been around longer than her children, she knows what it takes to be successful in this world. Yet, underneath this certainty lies a niggling doubt that she rarely

allows to surface. About a year ago, she came across a bundle of letters while straightening Arun's room. The letters—handwritten, florid—contained passionate declarations of love and longing. They were all from Ravi. She recoiled as she read a couple of them, her disgust growing with every word. There was nothing in her frame of reference to provide context for such abominable and unnatural thoughts, feelings, and relations. Her world turned upside down in an instant. Arun had found her distraught and in disbelief; weeping, beating her chest, livid. He lied at first, denying it all. Then he confessed, sobbing inconsolably and pleading with her not to disown him. In the end, he promised he'd break it off with Ravi. He vowed never to see him again, never think these dirty thoughts again, never, never, never. Arun's suicide attempt has dislodged the repressed memory of the incident and it rattles, rumbles, and resurfaces without warning now. Ma pushes it away with steely determination, refusing to believe there is any connection between the events. She remains committed to the idea that the ill-fated affair was a mistake, an acting out, a temporary phase that could have never resulted in a meaningful life.

The night nurse breaks her train of thought when she comes in to check on Arun. On her way out she offers to switch off the fluorescent, overhead lights so Ma can get some rest. Ma asks her to leave them on. She doesn't want to miss anything, recording every twitch and tremor in her diary to report to Doctor Uncle when he comes by for his rounds in the morning.

Arun yearns to hear the song of the dolphins one more time. Just one more time. He feels a desperate need to hold Ravi's soft and gentle hands again. *Please, Ravi. Please. Just one more time.* He reaches out, stretching, squirming, swimming to reach Ravi, but Ravi recedes further

away, the pink and yellow flowers on his too-small dress disappearing in the distance. He watches helplessly as Ravi swims away, fast as only a sea gazelle chased by a tiger-skin-wearing goddess can. Far away from Arun and his outstretched arms.

Arun feels tired, too tired to open his eyes. His eyelids are so heavy, and the light feels too bright, hurting his eyes when he cracks them open for a split-second, a split-second too long. He feels caught between a polychromatic world populated by dolphins and goddesses and a bright moonlit one where someone is calling his name. That someone takes his hand in theirs, calling him by his name again. They are not Ravi's hands. It isn't Ravi's voice; he knows this much. He feels the loss to his core, wanting to return to the multi-hued world where Ravi swam with him, beautiful Ravi, whom he loved so much.

Papa comes and goes, too impatient to stay in the room, unlike his silent, sentinel wife. He is angry and disappointed, completely at a loss to explain why Arun would do something so selfish and thoughtless. He searches for clues in their conversations and their interactions, unable to find anything noteworthy. He doesn't think to blame himself, unlike his wife. He watches his son with impotent rage, willing him to open his eyes.

"Ma, where am I?" Arun whispers. His throat is hoarse and his mouth so dry, as if lined with broken glass, sawdust, and sand.

“You are safe, beta. Don’t worry, just rest for now.”

Varun and Priya show up dutifully twice a day. She brings a tiffin for Ma even though Ma barely touches the food. The couple comes into the room to check on Arun, fidgeting nervously, but mostly they leave Ma alone with her sentry duties since she’s made it clear she won’t share them with others. They sit outside the room on the hard, plastic chairs drinking bland hospital tea from Styrofoam cups. In the evening, Varun fills in Papa on the day’s developments at the office. Priya reads a magazine to kill time.

On the third morning, Varun asks Ma if they should tell Reema or her family.

“Have you lost your bloody mind?” Ma asks, her face turning red, eyes threatening to jump out of their sockets, each word bristling with so much anger that Varun wishes he hadn’t asked. Priya shrinks into the chair, burying her face in the magazine.

“Now listen to me. I’m going to say this only once. I don’t know why your brother tried to do what he did, but I am not going to let him ruin his life because of this one mistake. Not a single word to anyone about this situation. I’ve already talked to Doctor Uncle, and he’ll make sure all of this stays under wraps. Once Arun is up, we are going to take him home. No one will bring this up ever again, not with him, or with Reema and her family. The wedding will happen as scheduled in one month. Do you understand me? No one will ever bring this up again. EVER.”

Ma returns to Arun’s bedside, determined to resume her vigil. Arun is still not awake but his face is contorted as if battling demons in his dreams. Many years ago, Ma remembers Arun’s

face contorted in the very same way. The image comes back to her, fresh as if it was yesterday. She had confiscated Arun's favorite doll, Radha. Arun must have been five or six then. "Boys don't play with dolls, beta." she had said to him. "You are old enough to know this now. I don't want people making fun of you." Arun had given up the doll without protest but something in his face told her she had robbed him of both his favorite toy and his childhood in that moment. Yet, she persisted because she knew that the world wasn't kind to boys who played with dolls. That night, she watched as Arun thrashed and turned in his sleep, seeking out his beloved Radha, but she didn't give the doll back to him.

Arun is doing it again, his face twisted with pain, body writhing restlessly despite her attempts to calm him. She is about to run out to get a doctor or a nurse when he whispers something. She leans closer to hear him. Then he does it again.

"Ravi."

"Ravi," he repeats softly.

"Ravi," he pleads plaintively, even as he struggles to open his eyes.

Something gives away inside her, unleashing a tidal wave of doubt, guilt, and grief that corrodes the very core of her convictions. She doesn't know what she believes anymore. The only thing she is sure of is that she wants Arun to recover. She holds on to this one certainty even as her world crumbles.