

My mother has not stopped talking about it.

Five years have passed, and with each year, her story has mutated and transformed, most of the particulars forgotten, the sequence of events, the date of the month, the day of the week, the time of the year, the etcetera and the so on, until only the most absurd details remain.

So, when she begins to talk about the time that I ran away from my marriage because I was being routinely beaten and it had become unbearable and untenable for me to keep playing the role of the good Indian wife, she does not talk about the monster who was my husband, she does not talk about the violence, she does not even talk about the actual chain of events that led to my running away. That is not the kind of story you will be getting out of my mother, because my mother is a teacher, and a teacher knows that there is no reason to state the obvious. As a teacher, she also knows that to state the obvious is, in fact, a sure sign of stupidity.

When she tells the story of my escape, she talks of my feet. (Even when I'm around. Even when my feet are actually visible to her audience. Even when my toes curl in shame. Even when the truth is that my feet had no role in my escape, except to carry me a hundred yards at the most to the nearest

auto-rickshaw. My mother seems oblivious to my embarrassment. In fact, I suspect she quite enjoys the spectacle.)

‘You should have seen her feet,’ she says. ‘Were they even feet? Were they the feet of my daughter? No! Her heels were cracked and her soles were twenty-five shades darker than the rest of her, and with one look at the state of her slippers you could tell that she did nothing but housework all the time. They were the feet of a slave.’

And then she beats her rounded mouth with her four fingers together and makes this sound that goes O O O O O. It is meant to convey that what happened was lamentable – indeed, should not really have happened at all. This is also the way Tamil mothers beat their mouths when they hear of the death of a cousin’s acquaintance by misadventure or the neighbour’s daughter’s elopement – signifying the appropriate mix of sadness and shock, and, most importantly, disapproval.

Sometimes, when she is in a more relaxed mood, and feeling flush with tenderness for her husband of thirty-six years, she will say something along the lines of: ‘He is such a devoted father. You remember the time we had that trouble, and my daughter came back to us, with her feet looking like a prisoner’s, all blackened and cracked and scarred and dirt an inch thick around every toenail? He washed her feet with his own hands, scrubbing and scrubbing and scrubbing them with hot water and salt and soap and an old toothbrush

and applying cream and baby oil to clean and soften them. He would cry to me afterward. If this is the state of her feet, what must she have endured inside her? Her broken marriage broke my husband, too.' But that is the kind of thing that she says only to close relatives, to family friends, and the few remaining people who are still cordial to her even though she has a runaway daughter at home. That is about six and a half people in all of Chennai.

She does not stay on the subject of my feet for long, because what more can she say about it, especially to an audience of semi-elderly people with a laundry list of *actual* health complaints? The story of the feet is a story that does not travel far. They are useful but limited metaphors. It is the other story, the story set at the other extremity of my body – of what happened to my hair, and, more specifically, my mother's rescue mission – that gets more publicity. It is this story that she insinuates into every conversation, hoping that the stranger across from her will press her for more details. The potent combination of medical advice, cautionary tale and lived experience is irresistible to her borderline hypochondriac friends, and she unfailingly plays her role with style. Over the years, she has emerged as some kind of faith-healer in her friends' circle, largely because she has managed to preserve herself into her sixties in a more or less pristine form.

'Stress. Stress can have any reaction on the body. Stress is what's making your psoriasis worse. Skin and hair. That's

the first level where stress operates. When my daughter was having a bad time – yes, in that marriage – you cannot imagine what happened to her hair. What can I say? Distance yourself from the stress. Do breathing exercises. Learn to be relaxed.’

Or:

‘It is just stress. When one is stressed, one loses one’s immunity completely. The body’s defence mechanism is broken. It is a free-for-all situation. You are catching colds all the time because of stress. Don’t laugh now. When my daughter was with that bastard, married and gone away, she was under so much stress that when she returned it took me months to get her back to normal. She was brittle and empty like a shell. Any disease could have snatched her away from us. It sounds unlikely to you, especially when you see her like this, but you really cannot imagine. Ask me about it. Even her hair was not spared. It was *teeming*. That’s an epic in itself.’

Or:

‘[Insert name of a chronic condition] is nothing, nothing that care and love cannot solve. The cure is not even in medicine. It is in the state of mind. You have to stop worrying. Every day after that is a day of progress. Worry just kills you from the inside. Any disease can take hold of you. I’ve seen that in my daughter’s case. God, her hair! But every problem, every condition can be fought, and it can be vanquished.’

And in the extremely unlikely event that this constant, direct reference has not sparked sufficient interest in the

listener for her to divulge my follicle ‘condition’, she would move on briskly and disapprovingly to talk about other things. In most cases, however, the recipient of her token advice always seemed to have a healthy curiosity, and this pleased her enormously.

‘I have never seen so much lice in my life. Lice, or louse, or however you call it. You know what I’m talking about. Her hair was swarming with it. She would be sitting by my side and I could see these creatures run across her head. They would drop on her shoulder. I put her through twelve years of school and she had hair that reached her knees and not once did she have any problem with head lice. Not once. Now, she was back home after only four months of marriage, and that criminal had cut my daughter’s hair short, and it was in-fes-ted. The lice drained my girl of all energy. I would put a white bedsheet over her head and rub her hair and then the sheet would be full of lice. At least a hundred. Killing them individually was impossible, so I’d dunk the sheet in boiling water. I tried shampoo, *sheekakaai*, Nizoral and neem leaves – nothing worked.’

With each progressive retelling, the hundreds became thousands, the thousands tended towards infinity, and the lice multiplied, becoming settlements and then townships and then cities and then nations. In my mother’s version of the story, these lice caused traffic disturbances on my hair, they took evening walks on my slender neck, they had civil

war over territory, they recruited an enormous number of overenthusiastic child soldiers and then they engaged in out-and-out war with my mother. They mounted organized resistance, set up base camps in the soft area of the scalp above the ears and in the nape of the neck where it was always harder to reach, but they were being decimated slowly and surely by my mother's indefatigable efforts. Every war strategy was deployed, Sun Tzu was invoked: appear weak when you are strong and appear strong when you are weak; when your opponent is of choleric temper, seek to irritate him with more chlorinated washes than he can handle; attack him when he is unprepared; force your enemy to reveal himself; be as rapid as the wind when you are wielding the *paenseep-pu* (the merciless narrow-toothed lice comb that removed as many hairs as it removed lice and lice eggs and baby lice); make use of the sun and the strongest shampoo; above all, do not spend time bothering about lice rights and genocide tribunals when you are defending a liberated zone.

This is how my story of Young Woman as a Runaway Daughter became, in effect, the great battle of My Mother versus the Head Lice. And because my mother won this battle, the story was told endlessly, and it soon entered the canon of literature on domestic violence. The Americans had trigger warnings and graphic-content cautions attached to the course material, but otherwise it picked up a lot of traction elsewhere. It was taught in gender studies programmes, and

women of colour discussed it in their reading groups (it was still a little too dirty and disorienting for white feminists, and it was perhaps considered a touch too environmentally unfriendly for the ecofeminists, and the postmodernists disregarded it because my mother's telling ignored the crucial concept of my husband's agency to beat me), and even those who forgot the original context of the story or the bad-marriage setting always remembered it as a fable about one mother's unending, unconditional, over-conditioned love.

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Naturally, I hope that anyone can understand why I am reluctant to allow my mother's story to become the Standard, Authorized, King James Version of my misadventures in marriage.

Much as I love my mother, authorship is a trait that I have come to take *very* seriously. It gets on my nerves when she steals the story of my life and builds her anecdotes around it. It's plain plagiarism. It also takes a lot of balls to do something like that – she's stealing from a writer's life – how often is that sort of atrocity even *allowed* to happen? The number one lesson I have learnt as a writer: *Don't let people remove you from your own story*. Be ruthless, even if it is your own mother.

If I do not act immediately, I fear that her engaging narrative may override the truth. It will damn me for eternity

MEENA KANDASAMY

because every reference to the sad tale of my marriage will be indexed under: Head Louse, Ectoparasite, *Pediculus humanus capitis*.

I need to stop this, before my story becomes a footnote to a story about lice infestation.

I must take some responsibility over my own life.

I must write my story.