

Burnt Sugar Extract

I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure.

I suffered at her hands as a child, and any pain she subsequently endured appeared to me to be a kind of redemption – a rebalancing of the universe, where the rational order of cause and effect aligned.

But now, I can't even tally between us.

The reason is simple: my mother is forgetting, and there is nothing I can do about it. There is no way to make her remember the things she has done in the past, no way to baste her in guilt. I used to bring up instances of her cruelty, casually, over tea, and watch her face curve into a frown. Now, she mostly can't recall what I'm talking about; her eyes are distant with perpetual cheer. Anyone witnessing this will touch my hand and whisper: Enough now. She doesn't remember, poor thing.

The sympathy she elicits in others gives rise to something acrid in me.

I suspected something a year ago, when she began wandering around the house at night. Her maid, Kashta, would call me, frightened.

'Your mother is looking for plastic liners,' Kashta said on one occasion. 'In case you wet your bed.'

I held the phone away from my ear and searched the nightstand for my glasses. Beside me, my husband was still asleep and his ear-plugs glowed neon in the dark.

‘She must be dreaming,’ I said.

Kashta seemed unconvinced. ‘I didn’t know you used to wet your bed.’

I put the phone down and, for the rest of the night, was unable to sleep. Even in her madness, my mother had managed to humiliate me.

One day, the sweeper girl rang the bell at home and Ma didn’t know who she was. There were other incidents – when she forgot how to pay the electricity bill and misplaced her car in the car park below her flat. That was six months ago.

Sometimes I feel I can see the end, when she is nothing more than a rotting vegetable. Forgetting how to speak, how to control her bladder, and eventually forgetting how to breathe. Human degeneration halts and sputters but doesn’t reverse.

Dilip, my husband, suggests her memory may need occasional rehearsal. So I write stories from my mother’s past on little scraps of paper and tuck them into corners around her flat. She finds them from time to time and calls me, laughing.

‘I cannot believe that any child of mine could have such bad handwriting.’

On the day she forgot the name of the road she has lived on for two decades, Ma called me to say she had bought a pack of razors and wouldn’t be afraid to use them if circumstances deteriorated further. Then she started to cry. Through the phone I could hear horns bleating, people shouting. The sounds of Pune’s streets. She began to cough and lost her train of thought. I could practically smell the fumes of the auto-rickshaw she sat in, the dark smoke it pumped out, as though I were standing right next to her. For a moment, I felt bad. It must be the worst kind of suffering – cognizance of one’s own collapse, the penance of watching as things slip away. On the other hand, I knew this was a lie. My mother would never spend so much. A pack of razors, when only one would do the trick? She always did have a penchant for displaying emotion in public. I decided the best way to

handle the situation was a compromise of sorts: I told my mother not to be dramatic, but noted down the incident so I could look for any razors and dispose of them at a later date.

I've noted down many things about my mother: the hour she falls asleep at night, when her reading glasses slip down the greasy slide of her nose, or the number of Mazorin filos she eats for breakfast – I have been keeping track of these details. I know the skirted responsibilities, and where the surface of story has been buffed smooth.

Sometimes when I visit her, she asks me to phone friends who are long dead.

My mother was a woman who could memorize recipes she had only read once. She could recall variations of tea made in other people's homes. When she cooked, she reached out for bottles and masalas without glancing up.

Ma remembered the technique the Memon neighbours used to kill goats during Bakra Eid on the terrace above her parents' old apartment, much to the Jain landlord's horror, and how the wire-haired Muslim tailor once gave her a rusty basin to collect the blood in. She described the metallic taste for me, and how she had licked her red fingers.

'My first taste of non-veg,' she said. We were sitting along the water in Alandi. Pilgrims washed themselves and mourners submerged ashes. The murky river flowed imperceptibly, the colour of gangrene. Ma had wanted to get away from the house, from my grandmother, from talk about my father. It was an in-between time, after we had left the ashram and before they would send me away to boarding school. There was a truce between my mother and me for a moment, when I could still believe the worst was behind us. She didn't tell me where we were going in the dark, and I couldn't read the paper sign taped to the front of the bus we boarded. My stomach grunted, full of fear that we would disappear again on another one of my mother's whims, but we stayed near the river where the bus dropped us off, and as the sun came up, the light made rainbows in the pools of petrol that had collected on the surface of the water. Once the day became hot,

we returned home. Nani and Nana were frantic, but Ma said we hadn't left the grounds of the compound where we lived. They believed her because they wanted to, though her story was unlikely since the compound where their building stood was not large enough to get lost in. Ma smiled as she spoke – she could lie easily.

It impressed me, that she was such a liar. For a time, I wanted to emulate this quality; it seemed like the one useful trait she had. My grandparents questioned the watchman but he could verify nothing – he was often sleeping on the job. And so we paused in this stalemate, as we so often would again, everyone standing by their falsehoods, certain that their own self-interest would prevail. I repeated my mother's story when I was questioned again later. I had not yet learned what dissent was. I was still docile as a dog.

Sometimes, I refer to Ma in the past tense even though she is still alive. This would hurt her if she could remember it long enough. Dilip is her favourite person at the moment. He is an ideal son-in-law. When they meet, there are no expectations clouding the air around them. He doesn't remember her as she was – he accepts her as she is, and is happy to reintroduce himself if she forgets his name.

I wish I could be that way, but the mother I remember appears and vanishes in front of me, a battery-operated doll whose mechanism is failing. The doll turns inanimate. The spell is broken. The child does not know what is real or what can be counted on. Maybe she never knew. The child cries.

I wish India allowed for assisted suicide like the Netherlands. Not just for the dignity of the patient, but for everyone involved.

I should be sad instead of angry.

Sometimes I cry when no one else is around – I am grieving, but it's too early to burn the body.

The clock on the wall of the doctor's office demands my attention. The hour hand is on one. The minute hand rests between eight and

nine. The configuration remains this way for thirty minutes. The clock is a fading remnant of another time, broken down, never replaced.

The most diabolical part is the second hand, which, like a witching wand, is the only part of the clock that moves. Not only forwards but backwards too, back and forth at erratic times.

My stomach growls.

An audible sigh comes from the others waiting when the second hand stops moving altogether, but it is only playing dead for a moment until it starts up again. I resolve not to look at it, but the sound of the ticking echoes through the room.

I look at my mother. She dozes in her chair.

I feel the sound of the clock move through my body, altering my heart rate. It isn't a tick-tock. A tick-tock is omnipresent, a pulse, a breath, a word. A tick-tock contains biological resonance, something I can internalize and ignore. This is a tick-tick-tick, followed by a length of silence, and a tock-tick-tock.

Ma's mouth falls open, shapeless like a paper bag.

Through the wavy pane of glass I can see a group of peons gathered around a narrow desk, listening to a Test match commentary. They cheer, basking in the transmission of glory emanating from the speaker. The ticking changes again.

Inside the doctor's examination room, we face another kind of clock. This is one he draws on white paper, leaving out the numbers.

'Fill this in, Mrs Lamba,' he says to my mother.

She takes the mechanical pencil from his hand and starts at one. When she reaches fifteen, he stops her.

'Can you tell me the date today?'

Ma looks at me and back at the doctor. She lifts her shoulders in response, and one side moves higher than the other, somewhere between a shrug and a twitch. Every sign of her physical degradation feels repulsive. I look at the cream walls. The doctor's certifications hang lopsided.

'Or the year?'

My mother nods slowly.

'Start with the century before the year,' he says.

She opens her mouth and the ends of her lips point down like a fish. 'Nineteen . . .' she begins, and looks into the distance.

The doctor tilts his head. 'You mean twenty, I think.'

She agrees, and smiles at him as though she is proud of some accomplishment. The doctor and I look at each other for an answer.

He goes on to say that in special cases they take fluid from the spine, but he hasn't decided if Ma is a special case yet. Instead he does scans, draws blood, checks orifices and glands, and lays the map of her brain against a plate of light. He analyses shades and patterns, and looks for black holes. She has the brain of a young woman, he insists, a brain that does what it's supposed to do.

I ask what a brain is supposed to do. Fire neurons and crackle with electrical currents?

He narrows his eyes and doesn't answer. The muscles in his jaw give him a square head and a slight overbite.

'But my mother is forgetting,' I say.

'Yes, that's true,' he says, and I begin to discern a lisp. The doctor draws a picture on a fresh piece of paper, a fluffy cloud that is supposed to be a brain. He picks his pen up from the page too soon and the curved lines don't touch at the end, as though the cloud is leaking. 'We should expect cognitive decline that will manifest in memory loss and personality changes. It won't be too different to what we've already noticed.'

'What you have already noticed,' he clarifies. 'It's unclear how much your mother is noticing.'

With a pencil, he highlights areas where synaptic function is declining, where the neurons are dying. The pristine white cloud begins to look crowded. Now the opening where he didn't complete the shape seems a blessing, a way to let some air in. The neocortex, the limbic system and the subcortical regions are mapped in messy strokes. I sit on my hands.

The hippocampus is the memory bank and, in this disease, the vaults are being emptied. Long-term memory cannot be formed, short-term memory vanishes into the ether. The present becomes a fragile thing which, moments later, seems to have never happened. As the hippocampus gets weaker, space may appear different, distorted.

‘Has she ever had a major head injury that you know of? Has she ever, to your knowledge, had prolonged exposure to any toxins? Perhaps some heavy metals? Has anyone else in the family had any problem with memory before? And any problems with immunity? I’m sorry, but we have to ask about HIV and AIDS.’

The questions come out of his mouth before I have time to answer, and I realize that what I say matters little in the end. Due diligence will not change what we’ve shared in this office, and Ma’s history will have no bearing on her diagnosis.

Inside the curves of the cloud, he draws an asterisk. Next to it, he writes ‘amyloid plaque’. The plaques are protein formations that usually appear in the brains of Alzheimer’s patients.

‘Did you see one of these in the scan?’ I ask.

‘No,’ he says. ‘Not yet, at least. But your mother is forgetting.’

I tell him I don’t understand how that can be, and in answer he lists some pharmaceutical drugs on the market. Donepezil is the most popular. He circles it three times.

‘What are the side effects?’

‘High blood pressure, headache, stomach problems, depression.’ He looks up at the ceiling and squints, trying to remember more. In the drawing, the amyloid plaque doesn’t look so bad. It’s almost magical, a lone tangle of yarn. I say this out loud and regret it a moment later.

‘Does she knit?’ he asks.

‘No. She hates anything that seems domestic. Except cooking. She’s a wonderful cook.’

‘Well, that won’t help. Recipes are notoriously difficult to keep

straight. Knitting, when it becomes muscle memory, can bypass parts of the brain.'

I shrug. 'I suppose I could try. She'll hate the idea.'

'Nothing about her is certain any more,' he says. 'She may be a whole different person tomorrow.'

On the way out, the doctor asks me if we are related to a Dr Vinay Lamba, someone senior in an important hospital in Bombay. I tell him we aren't, and he looks disappointed, sad for us. I wonder if inventing a relation could have helped.

'Does your mother live with someone, a husband or a son?' he says.

'No,' I say. 'She lives alone. Right now.'

'Don't bite your nails,' Ma says on the way home.

I put my right hand back on the steering wheel and try not to clench it, but my left hand moves automatically to my mouth.

'It isn't really the nail that I'm biting, it's the cuticle.'

Ma says she doesn't care for the difference and thinks it's a shame my fingers should look this way when I'm always doing so much with my hands. I stay quiet as she speaks for the rest of the journey, listening less to what she says than how she says it, the rhythm and hesitation in her voice when she doesn't say what she means, misspeaks, inserts a reprimand to cover for her own uncertainty. She apologizes, says I'm to blame for my mistakes, thanks me and sighs, massaging her temples. Her lips cave in where two teeth are missing at the side of her mouth, and she looks like she has eaten something bitter.

I ask my mother who she is speaking to, but she doesn't answer. I glance at the back seat, just in case.

In her flat, we drink tea with digestive biscuits because they're Ma's favourite and it's been a hard day. I tell Kashta to make a paste of honey and ginger for my tickling throat. My mother is wordless as I give these instructions.

'Add some fresh turmeric to that,' she says a moment later. 'Just a sliver the size of a baby's foreskin is enough.'

She presses her thumbnail against the tip of her middle finger when she says this, measuring the exact amount. Then she looks down into her teacup, stirring an elliptical in its firmament.

‘Please don’t talk about foreskin,’ I say, breaking the biscuits into halves.

‘What’s there in a little foreskin? Don’t be such a prude.’ She remembers how to insult me well enough.

Her apartment is a quiet mess. I consolidate three shakers of salt into one. A collection of untouched newspapers sits on the four-seater dining table. Ma insists on keeping them, says she will get to them one day.

I turn over a small bag of mung beans from the market into a steel thali and begin separating the pulse from the stone. Kashta tries to pull the plate from me but I push her away. When I’m done, I begin separating the mung by shades – military green, taupe, beige. My mother looks at the discrete piles and shakes her head. I crack my knuckles and continue separating. I know it won’t make a difference once they’re all in the cooker, but I’ve started now and I can’t stop, can’t stop looking for differences, until they are all where they’re meant to be, coded, surrounded by their own families.

Ma naps on the sofa, and for a moment I can imagine what she’ll look like when she dies, when her face slackens and the air abandons her lungs. Around her are objects, papers, photo frames filled with faces she hasn’t seen in years. Among these things her body looks lifeless and alone, and I wonder if performing for the world circulates something vital, if the pressure of an audience is what forces the blood to pump. It’s easy to unravel when no one is watching.

My old room stands apart from the rest of the flat, like a graft of foreign skin. There is an order, a symmetry I have left behind – one she hasn’t been able to undo. On the wall, in identical frames, are black-and-white sketches of faces I have hung five centimetres apart. The bed is made, and I run my hands over the sheets to remove the creases but they have been ironed into the fabric.