

The Things We Bow To

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By the third time I opened the pleats, I had begun to dislike the sari.

This was unfair to the sari. My mother had chosen it well: cream-white, a wide kasavu border, the gold quiet until it caught the light. It had looked beautiful folded in its box.

On me, that morning, it had developed opinions.

I stood before the mirror with a safety pin between my lips and six yards of cloth refusing to fall the same way twice. The bed behind me had disappeared under everything I had touched while getting ready—bangles, jasmine wrapped in damp newspaper, two blouses I had rejected, one earring, Karthik's watch.

One of the pleats slipped again.

I made a sound.

"What?"

Karthik was at the door.

"Nothing."

He looked at me, then at the sari, then back at me.

"Don't."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were about to."

He had decided to wear a dark blue bandhgala. In Kerala. In September. He looked annoyingly comfortable in it, which I knew would last only until we stepped outside.

He came in, doing something to his cuff.

"Still the pleats?"

I took the pin from my mouth. "They're crooked."

He looked down. "They look all right."

“That’s because you don’t know what you’re looking at.”

“True.”

That should have ended the conversation.

I tried again.

The first fold behaved. The second did not. By the fourth I had somehow made the first one wrong.

Karthik watched for a while.

“I think you’re making it worse.”

I turned around.

“Would you like to try?”

He paused.

“That sounded like a threat.”

“Come here.”

He came.

I gathered the cloth and held it toward him.

“Just make these even.”

“How even?”

“The same.”

“They are nearly the same.”

“Karthik.”

“Fine.”

He took the pleats from my hand.

For a second I thought he would stand there and fiddle with them.

Instead he bent down.

One knee touched the tile.

Then the other.

He did it without looking at me, without a joke, as if this were simply where the work was.

I went still.

“This one is too wide,” he said.

“I know.”

He separated it from the others.

His hands were not careful hands. They were hands that tore packets badly, dropped coins, drummed on the steering wheel at red lights. He had once spent ten minutes looking for his phone while holding it.

Now his fingers moved slowly over the cotton.
He folded one pleat inward. Held the next against it. Undid both.
I watched him in the mirror.
His head was bent. The collar of the bandhgala sat close against the back of his neck. Below that, the straight line of his shoulders. Below that, absurdly, his knees on our bedroom floor.
Something old and half-remembered passed through my mind.
My grandmother after a puja.
The rustle of her sari as she bent.
My grandfather standing very still.
Then it was gone.
“Don’t move,” Karthik said.
“I’m not moving.”
“You are.”
“I’m breathing.”
“Try not to.”
I smiled despite myself.
He worked upward.
To reach one of the higher folds he shifted, rose a little from his heels and brought his weight forward onto his knees.
I noticed because his face changed.
Only slightly.
A tightening beside the mouth, gone almost as soon as I saw it.
The floor was hard.
He stayed there.
He caught the fold he wanted and drew it into line with the others.
I looked at his knees.
Then at his hands.
I nearly told him to get up.
For some reason I didn’t.
He lowered himself again and sat back to inspect what he had done.
Apparently it failed inspection.
He started over.
I looked away from the mirror.
There was something embarrassing about watching him take it seriously.

He could have said it was good enough. I would probably have accepted that from him.

Instead he kept finding small things wrong.

A fold half a finger too broad.

One edge sitting forward.

The fall at the bottom not quite straight.

He followed the pleats down to the border near my feet and smoothed the jarigai between his fingers.

One corner had turned under itself.

He tried to pull it free.

His right hand moved along the gold edge.

The nail of his index finger grazed my ankle.

It was hardly anything.

A thin accidental scrape.

My skin tightened above it.

The shiver came before I could stop it.

His hand stopped.

So did I.

The place he had touched seemed suddenly too exact. I could have pointed to it with my eyes closed.

He glanced at my ankle.

Then he looked up.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

He was still on his knees.

That was the problem.

Or perhaps it wasn’t.

I don’t know how long I looked at him. Probably no time at all. Long enough for his expression to change. Long enough for him to know I had felt it.

A little amusement appeared in his eyes.

Not a smile yet.

That made me warm all at once.

“Nothing?” he said.

“Finish it.”

Now he smiled.

He looked down again.
I stared at the mirror until my face settled.
A minute later he sat back.
“There.”
He got up.
I looked down.
The pleats fell clean and straight, the gold border opening evenly near my feet.
I hated that they were perfect.
“Not bad,” I said.
“Not bad?”
“For a beginner.”
He picked his watch up from the bed. Before putting it on, he glanced once at the sari—at his sari, apparently, from the satisfaction on his face.
“Next time you better let me do it from the beginning,” he said.
“Otherwise you’ll get the whole thing wrong again.”
I looked at him.
He fastened the watch.
He said it as though the important thing was that he had proved himself better at pleats than I was.
As though the floor had not been hard.
“Very proud of yourself.”
“Obviously.”
He checked the time.
“We’re late.”
I turned back to the mirror.
He was already looking for his phone.
I looked at the pleats.
Then at the gold near my ankle.
Then, for no reason I wanted to examine too closely, at the two places on the floor where his knees had been.

By noon the wedding hall smelled of jasmine, ghee, wet banana leaves and too many people in too little space.

Rows filled and emptied.

Someone was always calling someone else.

Children had found the narrow passages between chairs and converted them into roads. Near the stage, the microphone produced a long whine every few minutes and nobody seemed interested in fixing it.

Karthik had discovered early that whenever an older relative asked us a question beginning with “So—”, the safest thing was to remember an urgent need for coffee.

At lunch he returned.

“Coward,” I said.

“What did they ask?”

“You know what they asked.”

“I was getting you coffee.”

“There is no coffee.”

He looked around. “Then it’s lucky I came back.”

We sat next to each other at one of the long tables.

Water was sprinkled over the banana leaves. Salt arrived, then pickle, chips, sharkara upperi. Avial. Thoran. Olan.

Karthik watched the line of servers approaching.

“Payasam,” he said.

“Lunch first.”

“I’m just making sure they haven’t forgotten.”

“They won’t forget.”

“You don’t know that.”

Rice landed in the middle of the leaf.

Parippu. Ghee.

For a while we stopped talking.

Then came the sambar.

I mixed it into the rice with my fingers. It was hot enough that I had to wait a second before eating.

“This is good.”
Karthik tasted his.
“Hmm.”
I waited.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“You don’t like it.”
“I didn’t say that.”
“Your face did.”
He looked at me.
I realised what I had said and almost laughed.
“It’s all right,” he said.
“All right?”
“A little sweet.”
“It is not.”
“It is.”
“Taste it properly.”
He took another mouthful because I was watching him.
“Still sweet.”
“Your taste is terrible.”
“That’s a strong thing to say to your husband at a wedding.”
“I’m prepared to defend it.”
He shook his head and went back to eating.
I mixed another mouthful.
“No, really,” I said. “This is very good.”
“I’m happy for you.”
“Idiot.”
I lifted my hand.
His fingers closed around my wrist.
I stopped.
At first I thought he was going to say something. He had that look he sometimes got when an argument had occurred to him half a second too late.
He didn’t speak.
His thumb rested on the inside of my wrist.
I could feel my pulse there.

Around us the hall continued.
A ladle hit the side of a steel bucket.
Someone asked for pappadam.
A chair scraped.
A child behind us began to cry.
Karthik looked at my hand.
There was sambar on my fingers, a little rice caught against the side
of one nail.

I understood what he was doing only when my hand began to
move.

Not toward his leaf.

Toward him.

There was enough time for me to stop him.

I didn't.

His grip shifted slightly.

My wrist turned in his hand.

For some reason I noticed his eyelashes.

Then his mouth touched my finger.

I had expected tasting.

That was not what it felt like.

It was a kiss.

The thought came whole.

Not a comparison. Not *like* a kiss.

A kiss.

Warm, soft, and much too deliberate.

The noise of the hall did something strange. It did not disappear;
I could still hear every ridiculous part of it. A spoon dropped some-
where. Someone called for more rice. A server shouted to another
server.

But all of it seemed to be happening at a distance.

His mouth moved.

Another finger.

Slowly.

I looked at him.

He did not look back.

That made it worse.

There was no hurry in him. No performance. He seemed to have forgotten, for those few seconds, that there was a wedding hall around us at all.

The sambar was an excuse.

I knew it.

He knew I knew it.

Still neither of us said anything.

My hand had become enormous in my awareness.

His thumb against my wrist.

The warmth between my fingers.

The faint smell of sambar and ghee.

The gold ring on my finger.

His mouth.

When he reached it, my ring finger caught lightly against his lower lip.

I felt my breath stop.

He paused.

The pause was so small no one else could have seen it.

I felt it everywhere.

Then his eyes lifted.

Only that.

His eyes.

The same upward look from the morning, and for one absurd second the two moments sat on top of each other in my mind: his knees on the floor; my hand at his mouth.

I couldn't hold his gaze.

I looked down.

He let me go.

My hand stayed where he had left it for a second, suspended above the leaf.

Then I put it down.

Karthik turned back to his food.

Just turned back.

I stared at him.

He mixed rice and sambar with complete concentration.

Ate.

“Well?” I said.
He took his time.
“You’re right.”
“About?”
“The sambar.”
I waited.
He kept eating.
“It’s the same sambar.”
“No.”
“Karthik.”
“Yours is better.”
I looked at him.
He was trying not to smile.
“Idiot.”
“What?”
“Nothing.”
I turned back to my leaf.
For a while I could not bring myself to eat.
My hand looked ordinary.
That seemed wrong.
Five fingers. My ring. A little turmeric near the nail of my thumb.
I touched the rice again.
Warm.
Soft.
I mixed it slowly, aware of every finger.
Beside me Karthik raised his hand.
“Sambar,” he called.
I kicked him under the table.
He bent over his leaf, laughing silently.

When we got home, Karthik dropped the keys into the bowl by the door.

“Water,” he said.

“Take off your jacket.”

“In a minute.”

“You’ll crush it.”

“Water first.”

I went into the kitchen.

He was still talking when I opened the fridge. Something about the traffic near the hall. I answered him once. I don’t remember what I said.

I filled a glass.

By the time I came back, the room was quiet.

Karthik was asleep.

He had made it as far as the bed and apparently decided that was sufficient.

He lay diagonally across it, one shoe still properly on, the other hanging from his heel. The bandhgala was buttoned. One arm had fallen over his face.

I stood there with the water.

“Seriously?”

Nothing.

I put the glass on the bedside table.

For a moment I considered waking him.

Then I saw the way his mouth had fallen open slightly against his sleeve and decided I could punish him tomorrow.

I went to the mirror.

My jasmine had loosened. I pulled it out and left it on the dressing table.

Then the earrings.

The bangles.

The chain.

Without them, the room felt suddenly very quiet.

I looked tired.
The sari did too.
The white had softened over the day. There was a crease from the
seat belt and another where I had sat through the ceremony. The jari-
gai no longer caught the light evenly.
My hand went to the pin at the pleats.
I had almost opened it when I looked down.
They were still there.
Not as they had been that morning.
But recognisably so.
I could see his hands again.
One fold held against the next.
His weight coming forward onto his knees.
That tiny change at the side of his mouth.
He had stayed.
Then the scrape at my ankle.
I rubbed the place with the side of my foot without thinking.
Behind me, in the mirror, Karthik had not moved.
One shoe was finally on the floor.
I put my fingers back on the pin.
For a moment I saw my grandmother again.
The end of her sari slipping forward as she bent after the puja.
Her fingertips near my grandfather's feet.
I had seen that gesture so many times in so many houses that I had
stopped seeing it years ago.
My fingers rested on the pin.
Then came the other image.
My own hand in Karthik's.
His mouth.
That quiet, impossible seriousness.
I looked at him asleep in his shoes and his ridiculous jacket.
"Next time," he had said.
I let go of the pin.
I switched off the light and climbed onto the bed beside him, still
in the sari.
The pleats stayed exactly as he had made them.