Happiness is a Collage

The weather is bad in New York, sheets of rain hammering down with enough force to shut the airport.

There is no rain here in Detroit. Is it raining in Indore? My restless fingers tap on my smart phone to find out and stop. Of course it isn't raining in Indore. It never rains in October. October is the best month of the year with the monsoon having spent itself, and winter some weeks away.

Another update on the flight status. It is expected to leave at six in the evening – a delay of over six hours. The airline regrets the inconvenience caused to the passengers, says the announcer sounding a little apologetic, which is needless. Who can control the weather? Who can control anything?

A young Indian woman seated a little away looks at me. She is traveling with a child who must be about two. I turn my face away. If I don't she will gather up her bags and the child, and take the empty seat beside mine. She will introduce herself and drag me into her life, sharing intimate details about her in-laws and her husband. She will do that because I am an Indian woman and we are, naturally, sisters. All women are sisters and must help one another, especially when our men are not around. The rules are simple. I lay bare my life and you do yours. In the similarity of our troubles, we find comfort.

Who needs a shrink?

But dear young Indian mother with the hurt look on your face, my life is not like yours. I did not follow the rules. After you have told me all about your unsympathetic mother-in-law and the covetous sister-in-law who raids your wardrobe for saris, you will demand the time-honored payment, and what will say?

Whatever I say will shock you.

You will edge away and yet drink in my words, forming pictures of a life you will later sit on judgment along with the women in your family. My story will give you an importance in their eyes until your mother-in-law, or perhaps an older woman, toothless, wrinkled, will admonish you, tell you about the dangers of talking to 'such women' and you will lower your eyes, and in a docile voice promise to be careful. The years will go by without you thinking about me. You will forget my face, my name, they will be erased even from your subconscious and yet, if, though I hope not, the silken skeins of your life become entangled, the order of your days scuttled, you will remember my story. You will wonder whether my choices were not the right ones, after all.

Trust me, dear sister of my land, there is much to be gained from an ordered life.

The seasons follow a pattern with the blazing, sweltering summer days and nights give way to the monsoon. How can one bear the summer without the knowledge of dark clouds, heavy with soothing, cooling rain, gathering over the distant oceans, the wind herding them together like so many wooly creatures, their heads firmly in the direction of a parched land paradoxically laden with sweet, aromatic mangoes?

Will the monsoons keep their date? That is the question every year. June 1st is when they are supposed to touch India, their destination being Kerala on the west coast. Sometimes they are late and their betrayal splinters hope and trust and makes the heat intolerable by filling it with a stifling humidity, a futile promise of the rains that cannot be seen but only felt in the stickiness of sweat.

It is bewildering to have the order of things broken.

The young mother's face lights up. She is picking up her bags and telling the boy to wait for a little bit. I'll take you to the restroom, we'll go over to that nice aunty and then I'll take you to the restroom, she says.

From behind my dark glasses, which I'd put on after looking away from the eager face of the young woman, I follow her progress. She is making for a woman three rows in front of her. An Indian woman dressed in a loud sari. The woman stands up and takes one of the bags. The young mother gives her a grateful smile and says something. The older woman nods and the young mother walks away with her son.

There is no mystery in what has transpired. The older woman has assured the young mother she will look after her bags, and the young mother has taken her son to the restroom. Once inside, she will inwardly fume at this culture of people waiting in a neat line, holding themselves apart, without making even eye contact. If this was India, she would have walked to the beginning of the line, if there was a line, and told them her boy could not wait, he was only a child. Now she can only pray that her son will not throw a tantrum, or worse - have an accident.

I look at the older woman. She is in her mid-fifties. Even after eight years of living in the US, I can tell she is from Bihar which doesn't mean she lives in Bihar but her roots are there. The shade of the vermilion in the parting of her hair, her *tussar* silk sari worn with the *seedha aanchal*, and her distinctive jewelry are a geographical patent. Actually, they are more than that. They brand her a traditional woman, and that is why the young mother has trusted her on sight and left her bags in her care.

Familiarity may breed contempt but it also inspires trust.

Five more hours to go before I board this flight. After that, a change of aircraft in New York, a nineteen-hour flight to Delhi, and a domestic flight to Indore.

And then?

Ma knows I'm coming. She must be worried at this unexpected visit and would be going about her day with a tiny wrinkle creasing her forehead. In earlier days she wouldn't have given me peace until I had told her all, scrapping the last of my thoughts for her to read, and to comment upon. Now I have learned the language of words that convey nothing. I have erected a door, a transparent door as hard as tempered steel. My mother has felt it, has run her hands all over it looking for a chink, and has grown silent. Her words rise to the surface and linger in the tiny frown she has no control upon.

A man in a business suit paces the small area beside the boarding gate. Every minute or so he glances at his watch. He is speaking to someone on the phone. He stands close to the gates, almost touching them. He looks restless, caged. The six hours he is losing belonged to something else, perhaps to a business meeting and now the airline had robbed him of them.

I like the delay. It is an unexpected gift. The faceless efficiency of the airport frees me; I don't have to think about what I must do next. It also pushes the moment away. If I'm lucky, there will be no connecting flights waiting.

Habits die hard. In spite of the façade I have painstakingly assembled, I hate confrontations. And this time I will be confronting my perverse younger self who had tossed away the life laid out for her. The well-ordered life. My mother will resurrect her and I will not know what to do. The nineteen-year-old Malini, Maalu as she was called, was a rebel, a fighter, she had stormed out even as the bridegroom and his party was being welcomed with the *tilak* and the *aarti.*

Now I'm Malini, battle-worn and the sort of person Maalu despised: a pacifist. Have I let Maalu down? Or has Maalu destroyed me?

The young mother and her new found friend are engrossed in conversation. They are talking about jewelry. They are examining each other's chunky gold bangles. They will go on to speak about wedding jewelry, and to compare notes with the other's traditions, each making a subtle attempt to show how much more her community is expected to spend on a daughter's wedding.

A daughter's wedding defines a family's status. One may moan at the expense, scrimp and save for a lifetime, and yet there is pride that one has not failed in this most unequal task. A daughter who refuses to get married or (the unimaginable) walks out of her wedding, destroys that pride.

The boy says something to his mother but her attention is not on him. He scrambles off his chair and walks through the rows of chairs. He comes out into the aisle and stares down it. He is solemn as he takes in the rows of people facing him until he connects with my light brown skin. Then he smiles.

I wonder if it is a primitive thing, this affinity to race. But no. The boy wouldn't have been exposed to any other ethnicity. His parents would have only Indian friends, or at a stretch Asian, and they would get together to celebrate Indian festivals with a frenzied gusto, festivals that would have been casually observed if they were back home.

"They go to a lot of trouble to follow tradition," Frank had said. His tone held appreciation, even awe. An Indian doctor had opened up his garden and his designer pool to facilitate Indian families to follow the tradition of making floral offerings to a river. The pool had been emptied and cleaned and then filled with water brought from the river in tankers.

"What you see is insecurity, even fear. They are in a foreign land and feel safe in numbers. You will not find anyone back home having his garden trampled over in the name of tradition," I'd said, suddenly irritated by Frank's tendency to find everything Indian meaningful.

I was not to know it was a phase, a passing phase. Just like mine. I fought everything that tied me to my roots until I was certain I had pulled myself free. Nothing, not a single fiber or vein held me to my past. I was in a new land, a land of dreams, a land of freedom. The soil was nourishing, the climate salubrious. I would flourish here.

"What do they fear?" Frank had asked, surprised, even a little uptight. This was America, the land that welcomed immigrants, what had anyone to fear?

"The usual. Drop a bunch of discordant Americans in a distant land. You will find them sticking together. They will celebrate the 4th of July, and Thanksgiving, and Christmas. They will do this for their own sake, and for the sake of the local people. They will try to prove that they are if not better, equal."

Frank had disagreed. He had pulled out bits from the article he was reading, about how the *Vedas* had been preserved, one generation passing on the knowledge to the next. Your people know how to preserve tradition, there is no doubt about it, he'd said.

In those early days, we courted not each other but our civilizations, our culture.

The boy starts walking with purposeful steps and stops beside me. He leans against my leg and starts playing with the tassel on my bag. I lift him on my lap. He leans back contentedly and continues to fiddle with the bag.

Suddenly he looks up at me. I expect him to get off my lap, or at least look around for his mother. He gives me a questioning look and snuggles against my chest. Then he falls asleep. The faint whiff of coconut oil teases me. His mother would have warmed the oil and liberally applied it. She would have massaged it in, applying more on the anterior fontanelle so that the brain would develop well. And then, after an hour or two, because she was in America, she would have washed the oil out, using Johnson's Baby Shampoo.

She is standing, looking around for her son. She sees him and sends a look of polite inquiry. I answer with a reassuring nod. The child can sleep in my arms. It's not a problem.

An hour passes and the unaccustomed weight makes my arms ache. But I can't hand over the boy to his mother. I have slipped back into my Indian skin. Often, in my childhood, a neighbor's child, finding the door open would wander in and if we were eating at that time, my mother would feed him, after which she would wash his mouth and wipe it clean with the edge of her sari. When the child's mother would come looking for him, she would tell her that she needn't feed him again.

"Children are kings," my mother would say, "They can go wherever they want."

An announcement alerts me to the commencement of boarding. I join the boy's mother who is busy picking up her bags. She has three. The other woman takes one bag from her, I continue to carry the boy in my arms and for those minutes, we are a family, a unit.

"He is usually shy with strangers but he went to you," the mother says as we wait for the bus to take us to the craft.

"There must be some *poorva janma sambandh*," says the other woman, nodding sagely. *Poorva janma sambandh,* connection from a prior birth.

Steve had laughed when I'd told him about this belief. Unlike Frank, Steve had no interest in anything that was not 'rational.'

It had started as a jest. "I must pay back Monica," I'd told Steve. Monica was one of my flat mates. She's paid my share of the rent because I wasn't in town. "I must write her a check. I wouldn't want to owe her in the next birth."

I hadn't meant to say that but it had slipped out, more out of habit than anything.

Steve's blond eyebrows had shot up. I remember the heat flushing my face as I had tried to explain. "Hindus believe in karma. We can't escape the consequences of our actions. The life we live, our parents, friends, even our enemies can be linked to previous births."

"So if you don't write that check, you will have to return the money to Monica in a future birth? Will you have to pay along with interest?"

And Steve had laughed. Then he had looked at me, surprise widening his pupils, really looked at the woman he called his darling transplanted American.

The boy wakes up. He stares at me without any spark of recognition in his wide-awake eyes and dives towards his mother. The bus has arrived but the child cannot be put off. I take the bags from the flustered mother and she receives the child. The child looks at me over her shoulder and smiles. I gave him my finger to hold as I climb in after them.

When he clutches it in a firm grip, I whisper, *"Poorva janma sambandh?* What were you to me?"

My seat is in the middle of the plane, the mother and son are to the front, and the other woman is somewhere at the back. We speak fleetingly in New York before taking our separate flights.

This transcontinental flight will take me to Delhi in a mere nineteen hours. From one side of the planet to the other, from the land I want to call home to the home that is calling me back, the journey will take less than what the earth takes to make one spin.

The hostess gives me a small bag. A pair of socks, earphones, and a travel eye band. The man in the next seat is already surfing the list of movies on the small screen in front of him. He has a bag of salted nuts and a chilled drink and is all set to binge on Bollywood.

The hostess brings a fleece blanket. I cover myself and slip on the eye band. I don't plan on sleeping but surprisingly, I sleep for five hours. Thirteen hours to go. A hostess stops beside me. You were asleep, she says. Would you like to eat now? My throat feels parched and the words don't get past it. She is back with a bottle of water.

"You can take whatever you want from the pantry," she says, reminding me that the flight also has self-service.

I eat a sandwich. After some time I bring a slice of cake. There's packed rice *pulao.* It barely has any vegetables in it but I like it. I like it much better than the sandwich and the cake. I drink tea, coffee, fruit juice. For the rest of the flight I eat and I watch bits of Hindi movies. I watch them without the headphones. The man in the next seat notices but doesn't say anything. I take it as a sign he must have lived out of India for a fairly long time because we Indians love offering advice. We Indians. The airplane must have entered the Indian atmosphere for me to have had that thought.

I have been so easily reclaimed. Is it because I hadn't morphed at all?

Within three hours of landing in Delhi, I'm on the flight to Indore. I'm not surprised to see my father at the airport. We are meeting after eight years. Two young boys stand beside him. They touch my feet as a mark of respect to an elder. One calls me *bua*, the other *massi*. I murmur a blessing, wishing them a long life and prosperity.

I'd told Frank there were different words for each relationship in India.

"My brother's son calls me *bua*, my sister's son calls me *maasi*."

Frank had been impressed. "That's because you set great store on family relationships."

Steve had laughed. “Don’t kids grow messed up having to remember so many relationships? What happens when they have two or three sets of relatives? You know step-whatever and step-whatever?”

“Divorce is rare. There’s never been a divorce in my family. I didn’t know a single divorced person until I came here.”

“So what do they do when things don’t work out? Lump it?”

In the end, the result had been the same. Frank had married me. Steve had lived with me. Frank had ended the marriage. Steve had ended the relationship.

I catch my father looking at me. His eyes are tired and the slope of his shoulders speaks of defeat. His hair has thinned and the pouches under his eyes make him look haggard. He is what, sixty-five? Did I do this?

“Your brother wanted to come but the boys wouldn’t agree to stay back. We didn’t know how much luggage you had and we didn’t want to crowd the car,” my father says while we wait for my luggage.

But I know. The boys are here so that the ride home will be made easy with their chatter. And it is. I ask the usual questions and they trip over each other’s sentences, telling me about school and friends, and the ongoing cricket league matches.

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We reach home at ten. My nephews spill out of the car and rush in, announcing my arrival. I drag my feet even though I know the moment cannot be stayed. My brother, his wife, my sister, a niece who was born the year I left, I see them all but my eyes skid over their contours. I hear them, I even reply but my answers are monosyllabic.

Then I see her and the air in my lungs, trapped like a fluttering bird, gushes out. It is not her intention to hold back; the boys have rushed to her and are holding her up with their talk.

“Maalu,” she murmurs, folding me in her embrace.

The awkwardness that my father couldn’t hide, the distance my brother and sister couldn’t overcome has no place between a mother and daughter. I lean forward and bend until my head rests on her shoulder. In that moment the only thing between me and gravity is the thin, bony shoulder under the folds of a soft cotton sari.

The moment passes. I recover, or perhaps ghosts from the past slip between me and my mother.