

# No Letter from Mother

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**J**UNE: The monsoons had caught the trees by the throat and were shaking leaves down into basins of slush. I climbed the wooden staircase, pitter, patter, softly, with the crepe soles of new school shoes. Friday, Bangalore ...

New Delhi would be hot, the dining table laid out with bunches of lichis, cherries and plums. My sister would be laughing. Appa would return from court with chilled bottles of beer, and gladioli. The red flowers looked beautiful against his black coat.

'Holy Mary Mother of Christ, blessed is the fruit of thy womb ...' I was late. 'Always late,' Sister Francis screamed, 'in her last janam she must have been a tortoise.' The letters had come, the red bag with the appliqué battleship was full to the brim, there would be a war over postage stamps.

The bag would spill out letters from France, Japan, Portugal, Morocco, Algeria, Sudan, Malawi, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Kenya, Kuwait, Dubai, Bahrain, Egypt, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand, Ireland and New Zealand. From Kashmir, the coffee estates of Coorg, Nagercoil, Bombay, Calcutta, but these created no conflict, the stamps were common.

Sister Francis would reel the names off like a hymn and hand the letters out as if they were almond-honey pastries. Even best friends would part, rushing to secret cracks of sunlight, shade, and to suck the warm milk of concern. It taught us to loop words across continents, the crackling long-distance electricity spattered on paper.

The girl from Saigon never got any letters, she stood with



her back to us, hands clenched like dead sparrows, her father was Vietnamese, her mother Tamil. Fabula never spoke to anyone, never laughed and never had any foreign goodies like chewing gum, chocolates or fancy pencils and rubbers.

Vietnam remained mute in our imagination. Her dresses had French chiffon pleated ruffles, but they looked shabby with washing, the dhobi had burned the fabric a bit, so it wasn't 'foreign-foreign'.

Shama, her father was a Collector in Nagercoil, told Fabula during dinner, 'You are telling lies, you are not from foreign, Vietnam does not exist, you are Indian. Show me one stamp from Vietnam.'

Fabula stood up and screamed hysterically, 'There is a War!'

Shama laughed, 'There is war in so many places but everyone still gets letters ...'

Fabula threw her custard on Shama's face and started to cry in a strange gasping way, 'There is napalm, napalm everywhere ...'

The new French nun came and took Fabula away, muttering something in French. Fabula responded in torn syllables of the same language, so we concluded that she was really foreign after all. Shama is now our representative in the United Nations in New York, Indian Foreign Service and all that, she had led the discussion on napalm in the grotto.

Bougainvilleas shook raindrops off crimson petals on our soft brown cheeks, rajnigandha grew at the Madonna's feet. We ate English toffees from Kenya.

Shama said, 'Napalm is a kind of Vicks, like the Malaysian Tiger Balm, maybe Fabula is a kind of orphan, that's why the French nuns are always running after her.'

Fabula was taut, numb, back to the appliqué bag, her hair on edge. Fabula was afraid of getting a letter.

Appa would write me long letters, full of anecdotes from



Birbal, Tenali Raman and Kautilya. Nothing could puncture his enthusiasm for anecdotal algebra. If I got bad marks, there would be a story, a rhyme, a proverb. If I did something horrid for which I was disgraced, Gladstone or Disraeli would come to my rescue. Nice envelopes, with markings of the Supreme Court Bar Association. 'Be humble, be determined, be considerate.' His adjectives flew flags, his letters were funny, but always that Gandhi stamp. My letters caused no commotion in the power-axis of stamp collectors. I read them on top of the haunted tree, in a hammock of long, gnarled damp-brown branches, in the filigree green light from shimmering leaves. In the company of great men I learnt to say, 'To hell with ...'

I had not done anything recently which provoked compassionate comment, so Appa hadn't been able to dip into his magic bag of quotable quotes, he was beginning to sound a little boring, like Nehru. I was embarrassed to tell him, but I had read those letters to Indira in the library. There was no wit, no masala in the words, they were like boiled vegetables when you were sick. I wanted hot pungent words like the spices in the kitchen, roasted brinjal fragrant with cloves.

Mother never wrote me letters. Mother was always reading Kannada novels by women late at night; when she thought everybody was asleep she would read aloud. It was raining, I remember that passage:

Thick night, wet footprints of sorrow search a whole world for the meaning of the circle, flowers with scents of passion grow in your footprints, a snake comes and guards your vats of perfume, each moment of your absence, each mile of your distance sprouts succulent red petals in the earth. Search my beloved, for meanings ... search till the edge of madness and despair, for everywhere the flowers grow in your footprints. Your body grows limbs of perfume in my memory. Like an eyelid, this door is open, return with



threshed sheaves of meanings, my beloved, return with the golden wheat of love, return with ballads that turn your throat into bells. The world is an iron circle; does the lotus grow in the swamp of madness or in clear springs? This eye is open and waits to mate infinite meanings within your eyes. This is the threshold of the world.

This passage was one of many which Mother opened like steel doors at midnight when the house had been quilted to sleep in a soft blend of mixed breathing. Her voice was rich, it leapt through the air like Beethoven, they were pressed in my memory like exotic blossoms.

I learned to crumple self-esteem in moments of despair, to unfurl these passages with intensity and exhort them to release perfume in captivity. I longed to slide into the cave of warmth of her plump body, and calm my simmering loneliness in the music of her midnight words, but she never wrote.

'Holy Mary Mother of God, blessed is the fruit of thy womb ...' Zarina from Zambia was passing a stick of Wrigley's Spearmint to Bina from Calcutta. I hope Appa was not hurt, I had written neatly on ruled paper last Sunday.

Please Appa,  
I beg of you, ask Amma to write me a letter ... anything, tell her she can shout also. Tell her to scold me because last week I did not do arithmetic homework, I talk too much during class, my keds were not blancoed properly, I am too lazy to do work properly, I am always coming late for everything. During geography I am always dreaming of climbing into ships and wandering away into places on postage stamps, I want to go to Vietnam and rub napalm on my chest because I have a cold. I am not wearing my woollen banian during the rains, tell Amma, she will be angry.



Amma shouted with gusto, she turned metaphors with an iron ladle in a simmering black bowl of *puliogray goj*, the traditional spicy tamarind rice. I bumped into her in the kitchen, she barked, 'Are potatoes sprouting from your eyes?' She heard me telling my sister something bad about a girl, and yelled, 'Throw a stone into a shit-pit, it splashes on your face!' I hoped she would have got very angry, I hoped she would react and scold me sharply, spicy, in a fruit-bowl of ripe words.

Mother had never written me a letter during the three years I was in boarding school. The rosary was at its vernal equinox in Sister Francis' white liver-spotted hand, 'Holy Mary ...' Bina and Zarina were bubble-kissing '... Fruit of thy womb ...'

I hope Appa did not think I had become idiotic, I did like to have a meaningful dialogue with him, only those Nehru letters, they were like starched serviettes, not at all like Amma's soft voile pallav which kissed lips as you wiped them, there were stories in every pore of her body, in her last janam she must have been Valmiki. 'Like an eyelid this door is open ... this is the threshold of the world.'

I wanted something dark, something shining, something wet, language like mother after her bath. I was lonely, I was talking to myself these days, images were marching towards poetry, every night I cried, I wanted someone to hold, someone's breathing to twine with mine, I was afraid of dormitories peopled with the dreams of so many children. I was running away from the herd.

'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost ... Amen.' The red appliqué bag was round and swollen like a pregnant woman's stomach, the letters came spilling out, Zambia, Ethiopia, Portugal, Malaysia, Singapore ... new alliances were made on the strength of postage stamps, friends fought and bubblegum kisses turned to bubble fights. I was ready to push my dhow out into the picture of the world, like eyelids my doors ~~were open~~. The letter did not have the



Supreme Court Bar Association markings, a hesitant childish writing had fumbled over my name. The envelope smelt of cloves, roasted brinjals and midnight soliloquies in the quilt of breathing.

Mother had written me a letter! In my excitement I did not register Fabula trembling when her name was called, her about-turn in a military parade towards an execution fire. In my excitement I had not looked at the Vietnamese stamp.

The letter stayed warm and breathing in my pocket. It was still raining, I could not go to the haunted tree and anyway that was for Appa's letters, I had to find a special place to read this. That night I burrowed under my blanket and switched on my flashlight and opened the clove-fragrant envelope.

Amma had written,

My dear Ippiya,

Many thanks for your letter dated ... Please do not beg for anything, not even a letter from me. Appa writes good English letters. Please accept that. I cannot write in English. Your teachers will make fun of my English so I will not write again to you. We are sending you plums, please share with friends. Don't be bad girl, don't be lazy, don't dream in geography period. Don't ask me to write again.

With love,

Amma

I cried that night like I did every other night, a little more perhaps. I was too young to realise that colonisation had cut the bond twixt mother and child. The threshold of the world became a spasm of pain in my guts. I never forgave Mother but, in time, I learnt to open my own midnight doors, searching for footprints of a forfeited language ...

I rubbed my tears with the letter, chewing the wet ball of pulp, I made it rounder and rounder. I wrote Appa a sensible letter the next day.



Fabula from Saigon never woke up in the morning, we heard the nuns whisper something about rat poison, no one knew what her letter had said. But now we knew that Vietnam existed, everyone had seen the stamp – except me.

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