

In Three Months A Tree

Selina Sheth

You are told many things, but never the truth. Not by impassive specialists, not by bored nurses, not even by the odd well-meaning acquaintance, from the chatty chemist ('Ma ji will soon feel better') to the corner shop spiritualist ('God saves the good, have faith'). No, they all ignore that she has negative platelet count in her infected blood, has mental delusions that she is fighting the Czech Velvet Revolution, has such searing pain in her bones that she has forgotten she has been your mother for thirty-seven years and that it is the summer of 2010 in New Delhi. And like a fool, you have clung to hope and prolonged her agony when you are the one person she counted on to never, ever lie.

She has been dead for three hours this July morning. Last night, after eleven excruciating days of kidney dialysis and chemo, you brought her home. No point in bathing, sponging, feeding, talking. She hates you now anyway. Somewhere near three am, you leave her side, even though you know you will remain wide-eyed till dawn. Your mother lies in your childhood room, just below your tattered 1987 G'n'R poster. She couldn't stand Slash, his flashy Jheri curls, the way he jerked his Broadway Brown Electric on stage; she'd laugh insanely at your girlhood crush.

Now she appears strangely calm. You touch her forehead, dry like sandpaper. You clutch her arm; her soft, translucent skin appears to breathe, to pulsate, for some reason you can't quite figure. You run out in your sweats – the ones you've been wearing for all the last sixty days and nights in hospital, the ones that have turned from bright adidas yellow into a sickly rough mustard – and ring the bell of the neat little clinic down the street. Dr Bhatia, bleary-eyed from sleep, puts on

his poker face, follows you home, looks at your mother, shakes his head and whispers that this is all very sad. A pause. Then he adds, 'I'm afraid it seems she appears to have expired.'

You nod, merely awaiting the next instruction. You've become very good at this. Before the nightmare of tube-lit hospitals, curt matrons and Velcade injections, back when you had a big-city life, a sexy advertising job, a world filled with Beautiful Immortal People, you would have chuckled at this moment, this scripted high-point guaranteeing smash prime time ratings for any soap opera worth its kitsch. Cancer. Death. Tears. Meltdown. Up the background score. Close up on wide open eyes, staring, vacant.

But instead, basic training kicks in. Logistics. Phone calls. A booking at Lodi Electric Crematorium. Yes, today, please fit us in, no matter what. Do you have anything in white that you can wear? No? Not even an old college gym tank top? Forget it. You've always been a black tee kind of girl. Will the hearse manage to enter and exit the narrow lane downstairs? You've parked badly. It's a Tuesday, people have things to do, places to go, and here you've blocked the street, and likely upset the residents. Your mother was always complaining about the folks from next door who did things like that.

You don't have to worry. Within minutes, Riz arrives. Riz, who has come every day that you spent in the hospital, who brought you Arabica blend coffee in a thermos so that you didn't have to drink out of a Styrofoam hospital cup, who did a lot of kind things but also the unforgivable : she told you to have hope. She helps you strip your mother's haemorrhaged-on ethnic print kaftan, shreds the vomit-stained towel, makes the phone calls to all the relatives and former neighbors who, come to think of it, never once visited. Life's too busy. You know. You were exactly like them, once.

But people trickle in now. Death is an Event, after all. The house is suddenly buzzing. Your father – a geologist who you have always looked down on for being frighteningly rational, who has always been excluded from the jokes you shared with your closer parent – is now the object of your utmost gratitude. He ushers you into the bathroom cubicle, trying to get you to wash your face. Outside, he takes charge. There are cups of tea on trays, a gurney for Ma's body, an efficient phone call to ambulance services, a confirmed time of 4.30 pm from the hyperactive Director, Lodi Funeral Services ('That's the earliest our electric furnace is free, as you know the wooden pyre takes forever to do the job,' he says cheerfully). You have the 'slot' thanks to your ex-boyfriend, a news reporter with Star Sports, who knows someone who knows someone. Ma never liked Anish because his 'contacts' were all he ever talked about. He had the quality to survive, she said at the time of the break-up, but lacked the quality to love. Well, it's your mother who loved, it's your mother lying dead here, it's your mother who could not survive, and you want to bottle the irony of her words and sell it.

Ma looks amused as you drape her in a fresh, bright blue sari (she never wore saris, but couldn't resist buying them) and now you think that she could do with a touch of color to her cheeks. Rouge, a bit of eye-liner and her favorite MAC lipstick that you got her for her last birthday. Just before the final six months of her life. Just before the diagnosis and the slow, torturous transformation from mother to infant, from protector to hostile stranger.

They will come for her any minute. Panic. Can't you just keep her here? On this bed? On ice, perhaps? It's no problem, no one needs to know. No one comes here anyway. Your father's eyes catch yours, then abruptly blink away. He is quiet. When his own mother died last year, at ninety, he was simply relieved, and he doesn't quite know how to address your new rootlessness, your adult confidence reduced to a hollow ghost by your semi-orphaned status. Or his own, now that his wife is gone. Later, months later, you will forge a tentative bond with

him, this man who has always been loyal to you and your mother, a steady husband and father, who has gone to work and returned each evening with the groceries, who has always paid the bills, who always quietly assured your mother, and indirectly you, that she would outlive him. You will also humbly understand that he is the only person to have known your mother longer than you have. That they'd met in 1968 at a science symposium in chilly Prague, where your mother was the local interpreter for visiting professors. That when it was time for him to leave three weeks later, she abandoned everything and flew half way around the world to live with him, to learn his language, to eat hilsa fish curry and to think of her birthplace as a vague memory rather than with a persistent longing. He will show you letters, letters she had written to him before their flight to India, and later her notes, the notes that she tucked into his office satchel each morning, and one day, the day he really breaks down, he will bring out the saved bits of cryptic crossword puzzles that they both solved together in the evenings, with tea and edgy banter over whose vocabulary was better even though English was neither's first language.

But right now, your father says nothing. There is a commotion at the door and four men, in smart grey uniforms, enter. They've come for her, they're finally here. One, two, lift. On the way out, the gurney gets stuck and breaks the door jamb. No problem, it can be repaired. You feel irritated. This was the one job that you constantly told your mother to have done. Fix the door so that the jamb doesn't stick out like this. Now see what's happened?

People collect downstairs. Dad's colleagues, your friends from work, a couple of classmates from school you're in touch with on Facebook. They've all heard, courtesy Riz. Well, it's nice of them to come. The hearse is loaded. Everyone makes plans, everyone has cars. Take this route, it's faster. No, there was an accident on the outer Ring Road this morning, the bypass has been closed. Hurry up...let's not waste time. You clamber into the hearse, beside your mother's body, and tell her – just like all those days you drove her to chemo

showers and back – that the traffic isn't too bad, that soon you'll be home, that soon you'll make her a cup of black tea and switch on some of her favorite Vivaldi.

You don't want the ride to end. But for once, there is no traffic at all. The final journey has taken only ten minutes. Maybe you could grab the car keys, speed off with her, out of the city, up to the mountains, not stopping until you reach Ladakh. Maybe even Tibet. Or anywhere. Just not here.

There are more people at the crematorium gates. It's an open space, framed with large neem trees, and a stench not of smoke and death but of too many marigolds and sweaty onlookers. The priest, doused with the arrogance of humanly-conferred holiness, is from Bihar and marvels that your mother is European. Where was she from? The Czech Republic, you say? What was she doing in India then? Oh, your father is Indian? From Kolkata? I see. Did his family accept her? I mean, did she adjust? How did she die? What did she have? Ah...cancer. My-e-lo-ma. A very...*foreign* kind of disease...no one in India gets it, here it's all typhoid and leprosy and murder and bride burning. Ha ha.

The priest sits on a little cement podium. He's just back from Haridwar, right from the mouth of the Sacred Ganges. That's where you release the ashes, he tells you, it is the resting place of a million souls. And that is where hers will find salvation.

You laugh unexpectedly. You want to scream at this plump young man, sitting supreme in his cotton whites and wooden beads : 'You know nothing of salvation. You know nothing of ultimate journeys of the soul. You never left your home country for a strange new one simply for love. Haven't you merely chosen ritual and the afterlife over meaning in the present one?'

But you say nothing. You are just too damn tired to argue. Rapid chanting cuts through the heavy air in an expressionless drone of Sanskrit, a language more alien to you than Chinese. You feel damp patches of sweat under your arms. Pandit ji suddenly brings his gaze upon you and smiles kindly at you, as if noticing you for the first time. He wonders aloud what you – a woman – are doing at a cremation. It's too brutal. Let the men take your mother's body in. You tell him that you, you who have changed her diapers, you who have seen her body crumble and rot, you who have wept over her helpless rants, you who have felt guilt seep through every pore of your skin, you are more than worthy to burn her, thank you.

You notice something metallic glinting near Ma's face, making it come alive for an instant. Then you bend and unscrew the gold ear-tops in her lobes, the ones you bought her with your first salary. She hasn't removed them in fifteen years and rust has formed in her ear holes. You have to yank the damn earrings off. It's okay. She can't feel the pain. Stop being so tentative and just get on with it.

It goes fast then. Everyone stands, the gurney is raised high. You trail behind the procession, into a dark room, the walls dank and hollow. Prayers and chants grow louder, stronger. The gurney is set down, facing the mouth of the furnace. Ten seconds to go before the steel door lifts to accept her into its hot, greedy embrace.

So this is your time. Stare hard. Remember every line on her face. Every shadow on her eyelids, every brown hair on her head. You will never see her again. There is no eternity, no rebirth, no recognition in the next life. So concentrate hard because this is it.

Clang. Up goes the door. Wheels screech. While you are still looking at the red smudge by her lower lip, wondering whether you can quickly fix it, she slides away, into the pit of hell. Gone in three seconds. Metal sheets slam shut. It's

done. Everyone wails. But you are silent. You turn and your father's arms find you. Squeeze you tightly. You haven't embraced in years – not even at the hospital – and you don't want it to end.

But people – once again – disrupt that moment, surround you, lead you away, out into the fading evening light, as if you must not stay inside for even one second longer.

The cremation in the furnace will take two hours. Maybe longer, for she was a large woman and someone says that body fat takes a long time to burn. This absurd comment comes from Aunt Reba, who your mother counseled for months after Uncle Deb left her and the kids for his mistress in Mumbai. Cousin Shree, a very chic, very independent filmmaker, hugs you and says she'd love to stay, but has a meeting. Let's do lunch instead sometime? You don't mind any of this, you really don't. You understand. An old colleague from your mother's days at the Indo Czech Cine Foundation pipes up, that early detection is key, that one must be responsible when it comes to health.

You don't hear anyone saying they are actually *sorry* for your loss. There you go again. Feeling petty, being mean. Stop it, you tell yourself. You try to understand, to think charitably. An elderly uncle has come all the way from Delhi University north campus in a rickshaw. A socially awkward acquaintance, baring large white teeth, has remembered to send you your favorite yellow gladioli. But you have been robbed of your *mother*. So you decide to start feeling petty again.

The crowd thins. You see to it that your father sits and gets a drink of water. You tip the workers, the wiry men who lifted your mother's body. You make arrangements to collect the ashes the next day. No, you're not going to the Ganges with the urn. That's not who your mother was. You hear a loud blast echoing from somewhere within. That's the skull going. The supervisor who is

waiting for you to sign a form, smiles kindly and says, 'It will only take a little while now.'

You wonder about this man. The supervisor, a Mr. M. Damle. All day long, he makes bookings for dead people, sees how they go from whole bodies to neat piles in little earthen pots. When he hands you a dirty cream coupon, he says that he is sorry. May this soul find peace. His compassion pains you.

He shyly adds that he was in Prague once. Many years ago, in the seventies, as a student. Lovely place. Such beautiful girls. He remembers the spruce trees there, which the ancient Greeks saw as symbols of eternal life. Much like the neem here in India, he adds, which we consider immortal. There is a nursery nearby, he tells you, where you can buy a small sapling of a neem and plant it in a restful place. Watch it grow. It really is a tree of beauty and elegance and individuality.

You want to hug him. Your mother would want to hug him. Or at least invite him over for a stiff vodka or hot sweet tea, depending on her mood, and chat about specifically which girl in the old Czecho-Slovakia he found beautiful and how exactly he ended up at Lodi Electric New Delhi working nine to seven compartmentalizing the ashes of bodies without souls.

You miss her. Where is she? Why is she taking so long in there? Doesn't she know you've been waiting for hours, that you need to discuss this awful day with her? Tomorrow you'll plant the neem. Exchange this dirty cream coupon for the pot of your mother's essence, mix her into the rich earth, water it daily. In three months she will be a tree. And as she grows, her branches stronger and healthier than your ageing ones, she will listen as you talk.

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