

Fruitful – Maya, Year 11, NSW

The cashew apple is highly perishable. In Goan culture, in its day-long life, it is processed into the alcoholic ‘feni’, its transience preserved in a fragile glass bottle for a stranger’s future bliss. The amber glow of ghee lamps thaw the midnight ragers and sugarcane cocktails of Goa, its honey menthol sands soothing the alcohol’s infection in local party-goers. In Sita’s family, however, the disease has been more chronic.

‘Six times three. Ten years old and you still can’t tell me the solution?’

Astringency plagued her father’s breath, courtesy of the feni. Sita’s eyes flicked from her dollar-store watch, then to the silver crucifix dangling from his necklace, his stare too volatile to meet. Her mouth refused to quiver as her father retracted his hand, ready to douse her vision in ashy nothingness.

‘Sita!’ A husky voice interrogated the crowd stampeding out of the terminal.

‘You’ve grown so much,’ the six-foot boy exclaimed. She was twelve when she’d last seen Chennai - seen him - but sugar pink still radiated from his cheeks. She scuffed her toe against the marble airport floor, dreaming it would collapse to reveal a sanctuary of memory loss and isolation. She’d made it through the past twelve years, yet she stood aged twenty-four with no maths homework but a decade of trauma to sob over. Her breaths came in waves - wild and rough. She badgered her silicon watch strap, aged an ugly mustard yellow which had witnessed a tale of dinner table rows and an imperfect child.

“We just need to settle the marriage deal,” she recalled her mother assure her before she boarded the plane; ‘money’s tight, so until his family accepts our-’ she hesitated. ‘I mean, your proposal, there’s more work in Chennai.’

Still, the frontier of Sita’s lips remained impenetrable, not even by the thought of her own commercialised marriage.

‘Hello? Earth to Sita,’ the boy said, rescuing her from her trance. “4” her watch read, in ridicule of the blinding dawn pouring through the terminal’s sunroof.

‘Missed your favourite cousin? You remember my name, right,’ he asked, teasing. ‘Sita?’

No response. They weren’t blood-related cousins, and they both knew why his parents had made him wear his Rolex to meet her. His efforts were rewarded with shifty eye-contact and silence to match it.

‘Name’s Hari, if you forgot.’

She hadn't.

'I'm not visiting the Church while I'm here.' The crack of her vocal cords betrayed her nonchalant facade.

'Of course. I know you,' Hari said, his smile infuriatingly warm.

'You've known me for three minutes. You don't know anything,' Sita said, her words igniting the pink of his cheeks further.

'I know you don't believe in that silver cross around your neck. Your eyes slant upwards, like your mother's, and your curly hair's from your dad. I know you.' The tension of his words ricocheted through her spine like whiplash, freezing time.

The airport TASMAL liquor store teased her peripherals. It was obviously funded more than the grid-barred, metropolitan TASMAL stores she recalled all too vividly. The airport's one displayed whiskeys, beers and wines like trophies sparkling with maintenance. Unlike the broken glass and spoiled potential that settled in Chennai's curbsides, a podium of spirits welcomed travellers, devoid of the true musk of Chennai's slums. The gold LED spilling from the store's entrance was enticing; her silver cross couldn't beat twenty-two carats. Nevertheless, words eagerly chafed her airways, and time returned.

'Where do they sell feni?' She asked.

'Please, let me take you home. Don't make things hard,' Hari said, begging this time.

'I know alcohol laws are stricter here, but tequila gives you a hangover - feni doesn't,' she rambled. 'So where,' she said, meeting his eyes with Medusa's gaze.

His stony grin finally cracked through, and its falsity revealed.

'Feni's illegal. That's why I suggested to your parents you travel here, temptation-free.'

Tension stung her tongue with the same bitterness of chewed Advil as she drew in another shaky, wave-like breath. He knew she drank?

'Whenever you'd holiday in Chennai I noticed things. Your whole family drinks, suspected you'd too,' he continued. 'Here, I'll carry your luggage, let's go-' but the hand he offered repelled Sita backwards.

'I'm not my family. Unlike them, I don't need the marriage your family probably wants for us just because your car is shinier.' Her eyes gripped onto his in a mental chokehold, slamming him into the floor, hopes and all. It wasn't until halos of light polluted her vision and her eyes prickled with salinity that he was freed of her gaze.

‘Nothing’s about my parents. I never forgot your bruises. Nor, the way your father always smelled of cheap liquor and never the way you’d sneak a sip when things got intense around him.’

He paused. ‘I remembered the fear I felt for you. I know marriage’s just money to your family. You needed saving,’ he paused at Sita’s sudden fascination with the ground. He was convincing, but she knew better than to trust anyone.

‘Alright, it’s okay, I’ll leave.’

She observed his warped, nasty shadow stalk away in what she presumed arrogance. Adjacent, the wines boasted crosshairs of gold, and she slipped inside the store.

Alas, outside the taxi rank, Sita sipped.

Undoubtedly, Hari’s parents put him up to the gig - he would get to know her, then marry her out of economic convenience - the usual. Hands trembling, she pressed the tequila to her lips, pouring in another drop of the elixir and relishing its flaming trail down her larynx. Bliss, ephemeral, but bliss, she felt.

Her ankles clicked, followed by the fold of her knees, then her hips, diving for the ground. The cold tar assaulted her jaw next, smothering her vision in beloved memory loss. Glass shards and tequila worshipped her, circling her like some grim shine.

Day-one in Chennai, and her limp body lay sprawled across the curbside as a smile tugged at her lips, dignified by her own independence. Content, she lay alone; perishable.