

## Fog and Famine - Ala, Year 8, WA

The smell caught my attention before my eyes could relish in its beauty. Inside the shack of some men clearly not bothered by the anarchy just a street ahead of them, I heard Mama's voice beckoning at me, "Anish, you must come eat your roti, my love."

I stand confused. It has been two full months since Mama died. She was gaunt and emaciated, her skin tautly stretched across her meagre figure. Papa said it was because she always gave her scraps of fruit to *me* at the end of a scavenge in the rich man's trash, almost begrudgingly.

"You take it, I'm full." Her eyes would beam at me, hoping I'd realise that it was a token offer, that she would die if she didn't eat. I knew, of course, that it was impossible to be full those days, but hunger unleashes a greed that ravishes even the tightest of familial bonds. It makes me think that perhaps it was my selfishness that killed her in the end, not the starvation.

Here, however, she is lively, like the days before the farms became barren. Gaps in the entrance's awning show her skin untarnished and unweathered, immaculate even.

"Anish, come quickly! Or else the roti will turn cold, and the naan will spoil."

I gravitate towards her voice. Whether it is my lust for the taste of real food, or the longing of my mother's embrace that lures me forward, I do not know. Or should I say, I do not care. Caring is a privilege reserved for those who can choose not merely to subsist through life, at least not in the slums like I do. They live in houses with only their family members, who sit across from each other on a table and exchange jovial chatter.

I feel a tug on the torn sleeve of my rags, so harsh that I feel it might break off again. Mama won't be here to mend it this time.

"Anish, how many times must I tell you? You cannot go there! They don't care about you! They will anger if they see useless boys like you bothering their paying customers."

I hate my Papa. He's become so bitter after Mama died. I know what he means, though, even if he doesn't say it aloud, because it's written all over his face: *They don't like slumdweller*s.

The red ink from his words stains his cheeks, a less conspicuous alternative to a shameful counterpart: tears. That ulterior meaning oozes more anguish than words could inflict. I succumb to his grip, and we continue with our lives. Or not.

Days and days pass dripping with the sweat of us low lifers in northern Mumbai. The buttery roti permeates my nose, tickling the inner workings of my mind as it pulsates through my body, giving me comfort. Not so much like the appalling heat that the sun punishes me with because of my sins, but the sort of warmth you find when probing the least conscious parts of

your memory, where Mama cradles you to sleep, the wind sings you lullabies, and the moon reminds you that light can be found even in the darkest time of day. Until she disappears from the sky.

Papa slowly crawls into the dilapidated shelter we share with some other depraved men. He watches me spread upon the flea-infested mattress we secured from some old dump site, engrossed into the only sanctuary granted to us. He feels almost like a father, but he realises that is not possible in our world.

“Anish, get up now. You must go deliver some papers to Mr Ramid. Promise me you will not go near that-”.

“I promise, I promise, I promise. Are you done yet?”

The silhouette of my Mama slowly fleeting, I bury my head into the rags, as futile an attempt at keeping her here the way a lumbering predator would chase the elusive deer. She will lithely weave her way through the dense foliage, throwing him off guard and disorientated.

I regret the insincerity and impertinence of this exchange, considering it would be my last opportunity to be comforted in the fact that I have a Papa, however broken and desolate, he stands for me when needed. But my mind was plagued by fog and famine. The other men growled at us indignantly. They, too, do not like to contend with the likes of reality; the men prefer to remain their valiant selves, vanquishing some Daitya or other.

“Alright.” Papa’s body is smeared all over with the discoloured pink paint one calls embarrassment.

I walk and walk until I get to the same crossroad my Papa and I passed a week before. Crossroads are supposed to symbolise some sort of life-altering scenario. *How funny is it that I will walk over this crossroad another thousand times, yet no change will come to my life?*

I waited as the cars passed; there’s no given I would cross in one piece trying to dash through.

Then a shack selling roti caught my eye.

What happened next was rather trivial; I travelled far off into a distorted daydream, deflecting the rioting in my stomach. I will note, however, a peculiar aspect of that hazy thought. I imagined a young boy named Anish walking into the shack selling roti. Shreds of cloth tenuously shrouded him from the abundance of contemptuous eyes. He was in a state of delirium, like a drunken sailor, as they used to say. He walked up to the vendor, smiled, and proceeded to ravage his shack for food. He demolished the entirety of the edibles the man had left. Having been finally satiated, he sat down in resignation.

“Gluttonous pig!” some ridiculed with an air of amusement. His nonchalant demeanour had all in the street locked in a merry bellowing with one another. All except the owner. His face grew into a disfigured monstrosity, and he slammed the closest spatula he could find straight into the young boy’s head. And repeated it multiple times.

Anish’s smile became wider with each strike, until it looked almost diabolical. *Young Anish is so brave*, I thought to myself. But Anish was no more. Pieces of him scattered to the floor faster than anyone could process what had just happened. He shed no tear, made no remark, simply sat and accepted any fate that would come his way. Remnants of butter intertwined with Anish’s blood and taunted the owner, hinting to him the words *It was worth it*, and to me, *do it*.

Just in time, the road appeared to empty of cars and people. Only myself and the vendors across the street seemed to remain. Slowly and composedly, I began walking towards the shack selling roti.