The Last Song of Dusk

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On the day Anuradha Patwardhan was leaving Udaipur for Bombay to marry a man she had not even met in the twenty-one years of her existence, her mother clutched her lovely hand through the window of the black Victoria and whispered: 'In this life, my darling, there is no mercy.' Anuradha nodded respectfully and ached to ask her what exactly she meant by that. But even before she could articulate her question, Mrs Patwardhan's large, oval eyes, the hue of liquid soot, misted over and she shut them with gracious restraint. At that moment, young Anuradha decided that her mother had never looked lovelier: robed in a cobalt-blue sari with a gold-leaf border, she was a woman of altitude although not imposing, slim but with pertinent parts of her biology eye-catchingly endowed, and a certain gift of Song that was, to say the least, legend in Udaipur.

It was this same simple but inexplicably alluring beauty which her daughter had inherited. Indeed, Anuradha Patwardhan's looks were so fabled that more than a few young Romeos of the Udaipur Sonnets Society categorically claimed her as their Muse. Was it her hair, that dense, fierce swathe of it – a poem in itself? Was it Anuradha's red bow lips, as thin and stencilled as Urvashi's – the Seductress to the Gods? Or was it her presence itself: assured, controlled and elegant, as though a hymn wrapped in a sari – which, this January morning, in the deep spleen of Rajasthan, was an easy pearl white. It duly complemented the pale yellow

duranta flowers billeted in her thick chignon, flowers with such an aptitude for fragrance that several bees grew dizzy and promptly fainted in mid-air.

'Maa . . . I will always cherish all that you have given . . .' she blurted as the horseman belted the black stallions with a whip made of carefully twined camel's eyelashes.

'*Never* forget the songs,' Mrs Patwardhan counselled as the stylish Victoria kick-started with a jolt.

In the carriage, Anuradha sat opposite her father, a man she loved but did not like. A tiny rotund creature with thinning grey hair and a nose curved like a macaw's beak (Anuradha frequently thanked the Lord Shreenathji that she had been spared her father's awkward lineaments), Mr Patwardhan grinned at her with a politesse bereft of all warmth. In any case, she cared not two bits for the clumsy, hollow manoeuvres of masculine sympathy and hurriedly turned to notch up the fading sight of her mother. Mrs Patwardhan was standing on the last step of the marble portico, erect as an obelisk but with the grace of a swan, the silken pallo of her sari drawn over her head: a sigh of sartorial grace. As the carriage trotted down the snaking drive, the wind picked up pace and crumpled into dust the image Anuradha was taking in with the fervency of a cyclone on the rampage: snatching every detail into the centre of her. She recorded the regality of the house, its scrollwork windows, the shaded long veranda as consoling as a paragraph from one's favourite novel. She recorded the glistening belly of Lake Pichola which hemmed their estate, the pergola she used to sit under to watch the dazzling saffron strokes of the sunsets of winter. She recorded the texture of air, its depth of character, the songs that the women of her family had sung inside it.

A weep gathered in her chest like the white crest of a wave.

The grand old Marwar Express, painted black with gold accoutrements, would bring them to Bombay inside two days. The platform itself was narrow, long and littered with an assortment of corpse-like beggars and lifeless Britishers. Several travellers stopped in their tracks to nail glances at Anuradha, at the animal fluidity of her movements, her noble stride, the carriage of her lovely head, all various aspects of one mesmerising concerto. Her neat leather luggage stood by her side; her father had fallen into conversation with an acquaintance. She crossed her arms and thought about how her mother had promised to come to Bombay as soon as she had conducted the delivery of her youngest daughter-in-law – her due date and Anuradha's leaving had crossed like the tributaries of two rivers: unknowingly, ferociously. Mrs Patwardhan had assured her that no matter what ('I shall grow wings and fly, if need be'), she would be in Bombay if Anuradha's marriage was decided, which, of course, seemed most likely: only a monumental fool would ever turn down someone like her. The irony, of course, was that Anuradha had scant idea of her own charms: she was under the impression that all women inspired sonnets; all women had received marriage proposals since they were four years and thirty-nine days old. As a result, modesty trailed her as the most dignified of chaperones in her candlelight tryst with Destiny, and it was *this* unassuming humility, an ingenuous unpretentiousness, which elevated her from merely being attractive to being – yes, let us bow our heads and admit it – downright ir*res*istible.

A little ahead of her, she noticed someone feed coal into the throat of the train and a minute later a swaggering cockade of smoke billowed over its haughty metal head. Behind the

iron paling of the station was a cluster of resilient acacia trees, hammered by the sun, bitten by wandering camels. Now, just after she and her father had boarded the train, and as they were arranging their luggage under the seat, everyone on the platform started whispering and pointing towards the clutch of trees: naturally, even Anuradha rose to see what the hullabaloo was all about. Her eyes fell again on the acacias behind the station, where peacocks had gathered – and not one or two, mind you, but dozens of them. An ostentation of peacocks that, just as the Marwar Express snorted its way out of Udaipur, unleashed their rain-beckoning cries of *Megh-awuu, Megh-awuu, Megh-awuu* . . . bit by bit, sounds of the train, its metal rancour and romantic whistle, the awed gasps of passengers, the sweet traces of the roving flute-caller – in fact, all sounds – were doused by peacocks unfurling a melody one would not normally associate with such pavonine braggarts.

Anuradha's father looked at her with slanted eyes; his daughter had fed these birds from the high balcony of her bedroom for the last sixteen years.

'I suppose they have come to say their farewell?' he said before opening the *Times of India.*

'Actually,' she clarified, her hand on her breastbone, 'I called them.'

It was much later, after a horrendous twist in Anuradha Patwardhan's kismet, when she would return to Udaipur with a splintered heart and sullen despair, that the peacocks would seek her audience again. But then, as if to honour the anguish she had tripped into like an animal walking into the metal fangs of a poacher's trap, they were unsettlingly silent in her presence.

2

It was rumoured that Vardhmaan Gandharva was so highly thought of as a doctor that more than a few nubile lassies of Dwarika – the quaint, plush arm of north Bombay he had been born in twenty-seven years ago – feigned fevers and simulated stomach aches only so he might measure their excited pulse or even – praise the Lord Shiva! – glide his stethoscope over places no man had ever touched before. Dr Vardhmaan Gandharva, the only son of the Gandharva clan, was, in all honesty, irritated by such juvenile attention: he was of the firm conviction that his time could be better spent than in reassuring the child of some loaded cotton trader that her bellyache was only gas caused by chewing on far too many boiled peanuts. Eventually, after one annoying 'patient' requested his attentions for the eleventh time in two weeks, his fortitude snapped and he leaned forward and whispered into the maiden's ear, 'I'm afraid, my dear, you are pregnant.' Almost instantly, her fever vanished and her stomach pains never returned for as long as she lived. Thrilled with the success of his new technique, he began using it on all his female patients – with very good results. Never again did one of the Dwarika virgin lassies pester him with that pathetic request uttered in a throaty, breathless tone, *Put the metal thing all over me, will you, Doctor?*

Dr Vardhmaan Gandharva had heard about Anuradha Patwardhan from the frighteningly corpulent Ghor-bapa –

Bombay's most eminent matchmaker. Dubbed 'Mr Thunder Thighs' in good humour, he was said to have broken a chair or two in every household he had graced, which *he* claimed was a good omen – the devastating harbinger of a wedding – although one glance at him and you knew it was only because of his epochal ass.

'I have heard,' Ghor-bapa had whispered into the ear of the young Vardhmaan, 'that when Anuradha sings, even the moon listens.'

One line.

That was all it took for Dr Gandharva to tender a formal proposal to the Patwardhan family in Udaipur. Anuradha's father was ecstatic, for he had heard tomes about Vardhmaan Gandharva and his family: how they had originally made their fortune in rare stone trading, the propriety of Vardhmaan's character, the valued prudence of his medical opinion. Other bits of scuttlebutt recovered informed them that Vardhmaan's mother had passed away when he was a boy of six, and a few years on his father had married a younger woman, his stepmother, Divi-bai, of whom disconcertingly unsavoury things were said (but the Patwardhans ignored this crucial splinter of data since they presumed that all stepmothers, from time immemorial, were a tainted lot). Vardhmaan's father had died a few years ago, and the Gandharva household, consisting of a motley of relatives, was a pyramid – and the ice queen located at the very top was the legendary Divi-bai.

After Patwardhan's enthusiastic response to the proposal was conveyed back to Bombay, after their horoscopes were matched and approved, an auspicious date was set for the intensely eligible duo to meet at the house of Mrs Patwardhan's sister, Radha-mashi. Anuradha and her father, Vardhmaan had been told, were arriving in the port city on Thursday of that week: they were to meet the same evening.

In the days leading up to their meeting, tense with this information, Dr Vardhmaan felt his own pulse rise and his heart smote inside him like the heart of a wolf under a full moon.

On the day that he was to meet Anuradha, Vardhmaan was plucked out of his sleep at dawn, overwhelmed as he was, by the unforgettable scent of cinnamon. A lush fog of a scent, it reminded Vardhmaan of the day his mother had died, oh, around twenty-one years ago. That fateful morning, his mother was sweating streams on the four-poster teak bed and her body was shivering, having perceived the menacing footsteps of her incipient Death. In her intolerable anguish, she extended her hand towards little Vardhmaan, and grasped his wrist: a cold, poignant touch; a love letter from someone drowning.

All of Vardhmaan's Destiny woke to that one desperate caress.

'Can you save me, Vardhmaan, please?' she pleaded to her boy. The answer, only a minute later, came from Reality: *no*. At that instant, Vardhmaan's father returned to the room – for he had gone down to get her a tumbler of water – but the tableau of his dead wife's hand clutching the six-year-old child's wrist caused him to drop the tumbler: this steel reverberation, two decades on, still woke the hound of History sleeping inside Vardhmaan.

They all thought he had trained as a doctor because of an intrinsic love of medicine or some desire for the respectability that came with a doctor's life: no one once guessed his *real* intention, his *real* hope.

At exactly seven thirty that morning, Vardhmaan bathed and dried his body in front of the five-foot almari mirror with bevelled edges. As he ran the white cloth around the bend of his muscled calves, the limp leg hair rose again. Then he daubed the delicious dimples of his buttocks, the incline of his back, the coltish nape of his neck, and with every movement over his lovely form, bath water found itself slowly exiled to the lobes of his ears. The mirror revealed a fine specimen: a tall, muscular man with broad shoulders and a gallant puff of chest, a jaggery-brown skin, and a member between his legs that was lonely and strong willed and *utterly* gorgeous inside its own confusion. After putting on his dapper suit and linen shirt, he walked along the corridor outside his room, went down the steep stairwell and entered a kitchen with four dormer windows and tessellated flooring. He sat at the head of the rosewood table and downed his seera and bananas, and it was not until just before he left for work that he casually asked Sumitra-bhabhi, a widowed aunt who lived in the gardener's quarters at the back of the house, 'By the way, do you smell cinnamon?'

She handed him a glass of chassh and said, 'So what time are you meeting Anuradha?'

'At eight,' he answered. 'At her aunt's house. In south Bombay.'

'All love is a storm,' she said, and left the room.