

“Familiarity”
by Aditya Desai

When Mira's mother came in and told her about the crash, she didn't even flinch, the nerve of the girl. She sat, solemn and despondent, in her childhood bedroom, looking out of the window where below she could hear the sounds of her sister's children playing in the backyard. Downstairs, all of her aunts and uncles had packed into the kitchen to make the preparation for the bridegroom's big arrival: threading the flower garlands, frying the snacks, plucking little samosas and jamuns from the aluminum catering trays and putting them into small dishes, so they looked five-star.

Her mother sat at the edge of the bed and touched Mira's shoulder, and then burst out saying chi chi chi, as if to hush herself. Then she said, "You should come down perhaps. Everyone is waiting."

"For what, ma? There's nothing to wait for anymore."

"Yes, yes, you need some time of course. He meant so much to you."

"I'll be down in a minute ma. Don't make a drama out of it."

So mother left, and Mira slowly took off the pounds of gold: necklace, earrings, bracelets for ankle and wrist. Surely they would say wearing such things would be an admonishment at a time like this. So quickly did her gown of wealth turn into a shroud of insensitivity.

She only wanted to go to sleep. It had always been a bad habit of hers, to ramble through a day so tiredly, yawning agape that shamed her parents at parties and got her disapproving looks from teachers at school. When night came around, she buzzed awake, wired on the knowledge that fewer people were about. It was the world's motion that tired her, and it was a shame no one saw when she was at her most ambitious.

She worried how she came off to him, carrying on the deep hours when their parents first goaded a telephone conversation or two. But then when they met, over an Italian dinner she festered at keeping her head up. She told herself it was not for lack of trying however, since his talk was pedestrian at best, and blatantly so he talked up the menu as if he'd been to Europe and sampled the dishes himself; she kept it to herself that she had spent a week in Italy, and deduced that pasta was more or less the same wherever it was. Boiled flower with lots of garlic.

At this he got up to use the bathroom. She laughed to herself. Perhaps it was the wine, but she had come to dinner expecting to play some cruel jokes on him. He was the unfortunate target of a larger vendetta that she had, with her family, with her traditions, with her own desire to accommodate.

"I think Italian food is very similar to Indian," she ventured when he got back.

But he argued on, saying that nothing could compare to his mother's cooking. She made an excellent daal fry, he claimed. Nothing to speak of her own mother, she thought.

He assumed that much of her she knew, that once the ring was exchanged his mother would be her own, her daal fry would be on the list of lessons she would have to take in. Marriage was the one finished school that came after graduation. First evaluate and certify (before God, no less!) and then begin the tutelage.

It was a truth she swallowed in heavy rolls of pasta around her fork the rest of that night, one that had been spoon fed since childhood. She didn't bother to raise the question of why it didn't have to be this way. Society had not come so far, yet.

He stretched back at this, so much so his hair, which was always styled to point skyward, felt even higher. But he didn't answer, and let silence fill a purposeful minute before saying, "You have a big appetite. That's good."

"Do you want me to get fat?"

"I just don't like skinny girls. I mean, I like them skinny. Like slim. But not too skinny."

"So the way my body looks is very important to you, then?"

"Well, isn't it to you?"

"Do you mean how I look, or you?"

"What?"

"What. . . ?"

He watched her as she slept, rolling in her Sari She was weighed down on the bed under folds of a sari that was dotted all over by small decals of peacock feathers. A gold chain hung down her forehead like an extra bang, and traveled up over her scalp and down her back, affixed to her waist like some kind of body brace.

Outside the window there were children playing. Mira got up to watch them. Little cousins who saw each other with such infrequency they didn't even recognize other, but still bandied for games without an extra breath. They'd even roped in little Franki from next door, who's dad also wanted to come, but he'd just been admitted into the hospital three days before for something too terrible Mira wasn't even told. He didn't question how he came upon this information.

It seemed like death was all around her life at once, in an ambivalent way. She could not bring herself to cry for Franki's dad, nor did she really have a tear for that body lying in the hot sun?

Downstairs, the women speak to each other in hushed tones, even though there is no one to hide anything from.

Was he drunk?

I never really liked him, you know. Bad match.

It just goes to show. God's will. Chichichichi.

In the kitchen, the women spoke to each other in hushed tones, even though there was no one to hide anything from.

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When they saw her, her aunt Davina immediately ran up and cried, "Darling, darling you must take all of this off at once! It's a bad luck omen to be wearing it now. Take it off before some more calamity falls us! Still so much of our family is in cars or airplanes trying to get here. Your father is in the other room trying to get all of the money back that he's already spent!"

"I'm sorry, kaki," Mira said. "I will in a bit. I took the gold off, at least."

"Leave her be," another auntie said. "How else would you feel if you lost your companion?"

The others hissed her to be quiet. They all had companions who were in the basement, tossing peanuts across the room and trading glasses of whiskey. It was how men coped, they took it to be.

But their companions had been with them for decades, Mira thought. What exactly was she supposed to be so upset for?

She took a seat next to her grandmother, who continued to string buds of marigolds together. "We may as well," she said. "They will rot soon anyway."

No one went to sleep early that night, as they had all planned to. There was nothing to wake up for, and so they sat late into the night, trading stories about memories and relatives back home, as if it was another realm entirely, the way kids talk about their favorite cartoons – sounding at once so familiar and still ludicrously fake.

She laughed and smiled appropriately, but did not say much. The people they discussed were ghosts to her, always threatened by their potential existence through late night phone calls and crumpled airmail. A host of voices and opinions she knew were, at this very moment, abuzz about her life and she did know most of them. She wondered how many of them had gotten the news of today, of last night, of whenever it happened. They found the car just this morning, who know how long it had been at the bottom of the water? She had not asked Raj about his bachelor party plans. It was his night, his purview.

Most of the decorations had been packed away. In the trash can he saw the discarded garlands.

"So much wasted," kaki said.

Dad came in and told her he'd cancelled the catering order. "They were very nice," he said. "No charge. I let them keep our deposit."

Mom protested, "It was out of our control! This was totally unexpected."

"It's only right and proper," he said. "Tomorrow we must go to see his family."

"Have you called them?" she asked.

"No, didn't you?"

"I've been dealing with everything in here!"

"Well, I was calling."

She thought likely her parents had not told anyone. They were considerate where it counted; no need to ruin the family's good spirits with such drab news, even if the extent of their celebration was the formality invitation they could not afford to accept, and the photos that would go online and jump continents. Where it didn't count though, mummy and papa did not bother with consideration. The day had been spent calling vendors to cancel orders, to scratch every last penny back they could. The bank of marriage was not considerate back. Deals had been done, as was all in America.

This truth she knew, about contracts and deals. Sometimes you're stuck in them.

It went late, enough for a new helping chai to go around. By the time the kids had fallen asleep, her parents retired upstairs and the others had gone to their hotels and Manishkaka was snoring on the couch with too much whisky as was his habit, she quietly slinked upstairs, and in minutes, left without a creak.

He suddenly was sitting at the kitchen table, watching her uncle fiddle with the top of a bottle of Johnny Black. There was riotous laughter coming from the other room. The voices were garbled like pay-per-view television, the nights he spent up surfing channels his dad did not want to pay for, but if he concentrated he could see a nipple through the fuzz.

He saw in the kitchen photo frames hung about, stained with the fumes of cooking oil. He saw her at eight, at fifteen, growing abundant through Disney World and a backstreet – India, perhaps? Who knew. Her parents were both doctors, as was she, and he assumed they took trips elsewhere. In their talks and meetings, she came off as someone who'd seen the world. She spoke without accent, unlike him, no stain of vowels bent inward and out.

He followed the sound to the living room, but it was still hard to make out. There she was, still unchanged in her ceremonial garments, dozing off in the corner, with no one noticing or either letting her be. Of course the day must have been trying.

They all laughed again, and he wondered how they could so. The uncle pierced from behind spilling his glass and deeply apologizing. No one seemed to mind, though he caught a scolding look from the grandma. She reminded him of his own, old ladies displaced through decades, finding new habits and routines so bewildering, an auspicious event like this brought peace to her when it threw the rest into a fit of anxiety.

In the next moment, it all went black.

The roads were clean at night, and though sleep dragged heavily on her eyes, she knew the route well enough that it wasn't a problem. Cars passed and she peered into each one, chasing a stupid hope he would drive by in the other direction, fine as pencil tips, on the way to her house to show he was still primed for the day ahead. She indulged the fantasy because she knew it was just that.

Gradually she rested into her seat, and scanned the radio to find the comforts of her late night drives – jazz, classical, and talk radio. She came across a relationship advice show to catch the end of a downfall of a torrid affair, where the host could simply offer, if she didn't love you back then, nothing will chance that, not a new house, not a ring, not even the best sex in the world.

Her eyes drooped again, and she tried the trick papa had once taught her: look deep into the headlights of another car. But the only car was behind her, and when she looked into the rearview she almost swerved the car off the road, thinking he was there in the backseat.

She put herself back right, her tires almost skidding against a curb; she was still barely out of the suburbs. Not the place for an accident. She stopped at a light and thought back to when he had, and admitted there was in fact someone else. It was the first time they'd met, over an Italian dinner in a fancy restaurant downtown. In the throes of wine, which he insisted on ordering and chose a bottle the server tried desperately to make him reconsider, she posed to him the question: "Okay, let's be real. Do you have someone else?"

"But she's old news now."

"If you love her—"

"But I don't. It was just for fun, you know?"

"How can you commit yourself to this so easily?"

There was a pause. It was hypocritical of her to ask at all she knew, not because they both had agreed to do so already, but because it was an unnecessary question in a conversation meant to be forward, honest, and bare.

"She is not Gujarati. It wouldn't work out anyway."

"You can't be so draconian." He'd gotten up, saying he needed to use the restroom.

She scolded herself at that bad habit of using words that would catch him mid-sentence, because English, as well as he knew it, was still full of foreign, intimidating, draconian words.

When he returned he did with purpose, sitting down and with two poised hands claimed, "Marrying outside the community is like running a red light. Everyone does it, but it's probably smarter if you don't."

But then he saw the ring that was sitting on the table, and she announced, "Listen, I think this is a mistake." The ring was on the table.

When he woke up again, in bright and piercing hallways. He saw a small robotic trash can roving up the hallway toward him, and when he was inches away from it, he kicked it out of fear. His foot of course made no contact, and he felt almost helpless in front of the little tin can that somehow felt unnatural and against logic.

In the emergency room, people lay over one another, grimacing over bleeding appendages and internal maladies. A scream echoed behind him from the operating rooms.

The next moment, he saw a woman on a stretcher, her arms crossed and with a frown. She had large cuts across her forehead that the doctor patiently sewed together. "Next time that son of a bitch hits me he's gonna knocked out. He doesn't know I can throw a punch."

Her greens felt comfortable, normal. Here she looked like the other interns, her hair tied up and brushing against the laminate cabinets, her eyes fixated on the floor, eating a candy bar. She'd walked in anonymously, but it did not take long before Janice walked in, flustered with the routine flood of paperwork that crossed her desk this time of night.

"Girl, you know you don't have to be here."

"What else was I going to do?"

"I know, you don't even like taking sick days. Bahamas, though!"

"What are you gonna do if the ship breaks?" Mira said, with conviction.

"I need a cruise. I need a few days out of here. Leave Shawn with my sister."

"How's he doing?" Shawn was fine. He was not doing well in school, but he keeps eating. "Tell him I said hi."

They went on like this for a few more minutes, discussing minutiae of life like it were chapters in a novel. Lunch dates decided, stories traded of the pranks they pulled on each other at last year's Christmas party, medical staff gossip of who had broken up with who and how it was making cold tremors in the ORs. It came around the inevitable for Janice, when she started to pry a bit deeper, at the pretty young girl who seemed to have no life beyond beds, changing dressings and catheters.

At the ER there was no such judgments, though there were others entirely. They expected her to work the hardest because she had proven herself. The buzz that sparked around two in the morning, when the latest gunshot stricken were rolled in on gurneys straight from the warzone in East Baltimore, and she would have then prepped for the surgery so far in that the doctor would be in and out in minutes. It put her in the sights of a good chance of taking up supervisor's job when residency finished up later that year, and she indulged in that future since it would be a surprise if it existed anyway.

"Of course I want to settle down," Mira said, as she always did.

"All I'm saying though – don't have kids too quick. In fact, think about not having them entirely.

Mira burst laughing. "Come on, you love your son."

"Yes, but I beat him every time he comes home late."

At this she did almost say something. It was there curdling in her stomach. When Mummy had come again to see how she was doing, as if checking for a change in fever, "You know, Mira, I was so hoping this would work out for you this time."

"I know, Ma."

"I think it might just be God's will for you not to get married."

"Don't say that, Ma."

"He was a wonderful boy. You thought he was a wonderful boy, right?"

The loudspeaker called for help in ER. Mira went to move but Janice pinned her in place. "Mmm-mm. Doctor Tulley said you're not gonna light a finger tonight. We don't care if you came in. In the system, you're on vacation, and that's how it's going to stay."

"Come on, don't be stupid. We took the oath, remember?"

"Everybody takes oaths, honey. Don't everybody keep them. Look at me. I make oaths to the Lord every week and I break them quick. I tell him I'm going to pay off my bills, I'm going to be tolerant with my son, and none of it ever sticks."

Janice got up, but Mira didn't stay. She'd come to not be helpless, not be stranded. She writhed but Janice's muscles, hardened from a life much tougher than her own had been kept her at bay.

"Hey, hey – what's this ring?" she asked, letting go.

"Oh, I forgot to take it off—"

"It is pretty."

One night it was she who had called him, a few days after the Italian dinner when he'd decided to cease with voice messages and emails, once regular and errant. After he had ignored the ringing several times, screaming into the phone in some erratic fashion that caused him to think she had fallen and broken limbs on her body. He said hello and at first she said she was sorry she called, it was by an accident. Perhaps he should have hung up after that – he would have liked to think not, he would have liked to – were it not for a deep swallow he could hear across the phone line. It was clear she wanted to say something. She did not.

But it kept him on for a second longer, and humility set in so he asked her, "Do you need help?"

She hung up the line. She called back a few minutes later, and this time he had been unable to go to sleep. They listened to each other breath softly, and finally she said, "I think you're a nice guy."

"Is that why you called?"

"I'm just telling you, you're a nice guy. I'm sure your parents are very proud of you."

His parents had packed him away across the country after a failed semester in college, off to live with a distant cousin in Oregon, where there was naught but cedar and cold winters. He'd heard it was nicer now. It was not until he had worked up a corporate ladder that they had felt comfortable enough to present him back to their friends back home. By now he'd philandered in ways they would never dare to know.

"Yeah. You shouldn't disappoint them."

"Listen, I'm not comfortable with it either."

"You're doing it wrong if you don't feel that way."

The loudspeaker crackled again, and Janice, with one last bloodied look, left.

It had been a quick, silent change in her room. The jewelry was too much fuss, too much jangling to risk at the late hour. At least her bracelets were hidden under her greens. In truth, she'd hesitated to remove it. It wasn't from him – that had been waiting for her with his family, perhaps with his brother, or a safe box in his father's closet. This had come from her mother's sisters, a collective offering, as though all of them could have afforded it by themselves. At first, it came with those same promises, but now, felt transferred to Raj, as if it's persistence on his finger still kept him alive.

She sank into the chair, her hands in her head, and let the hard gold band dig into her temples. She was overcome with sleep again, and as she reclined in the sofa. It was too hard and too short but it had been a bed for nights upon nights, in moments of brief respite when, even in the calamity of the warzone, it felt the only space where she wasn't watched.

But as she drifted he was there again, looking at her. He had taken in the entire conversation, the familiarity with which she'd talked with Janice, this black woman she connected with at some deeper, innate level. The kind where silences were enough. He simply stood there watching her.

Raj felt to leave the room, unable to hear what she could possibly confide to her friend about him. He could see that perhaps they were good friends, they had gone through college and medical school

together, had late nights failing to study and wandering out into the dark night to search for other boys and good fun, just as he did. In moments he stitched her life together in a way he had not until this time.

In her slumber, Mira blushed, and Raj suddenly wished he had a body again, for he knew that look could surge warm blood all over his body and make him shudder in glee.

This time he does leave, and wills himself away.