

ENVY: Rosa's Day

There were many things Aldora despised about Rosa Thayyil. One of them was her habit of leaving a soggy bath towel bunched up on the bathroom rack after use. She stared long and hard at her mother's belonging. It repulsed her like a punctured, oozing, pustule, reminding her of how much she hated all her mother's habits. It was futile though, she knew, trying to correct Rosa. If her mother suspected anyone of attempting to slight her or change her behaviour, she would retaliate within the second.

With a single movement, Aldora grabbed her own dry towel from the far end. She tried to calm herself, took deep breaths. Dabbing herself dry and wrapping the towel tightly like a bandage around her body, she turned to the steam-clouded oval mirror above the washbasin, and stared at her own dark brown eyes with some surprise, as if finding a different person in there.

The years had been kind to her. Aldora had lost her baby fat and chubby cheeks, revealing a slender, toned, body from years of walking and swimming. At thirty-eight, she looked younger and fitter than most of her friends and peers. In a crowd, she stood out for her sharp facial features and expressive eyes that could unnerve anyone with a stare. But there was a coldness that had crept into her countenance; she had been told that it made people think she lacked empathy.

Aldora turned away from the mirror and reached for the door latch. Her eyes fleetingly scanned the once-white tiles of her mother's bathroom, soiled and grey now with years of use. The tap leaked and the internal drainage system was choked, allowing the bath water to collect in a murky puddle near the drain pipe hole. A sense of futility crept in.

There was a time when Aldora used the same towel as her parents, but that was when she was five or six. Now, she couldn't imagine doing

that with anyone, not even with Mark or their unborn children. In the years of separation from her family and country, Aldora had become a different person. She was so far removed from any Indian influence, domestic or commercial, or the intertwined Malayalam Catholic Christian community of Cochin, that she could be easily mistaken for an American.

Aldora once again glanced at her own reflection in the mirror.

Why did you have to come here when Achan is no more? Mark had warned you.

The floodgates to tortuous memories opened.

Aldora was visiting India after a voluminous gap of twenty years, during which a lot of things had changed. She had left her family and friends, finished her education and started to work. Ten years ago, she had met and married her husband, Mark Duvall, a criminal lawyer with a great sense of humour, naturally a rarity for New York City. They bought an apartment near Madison Avenue, a symbol of their success, and they regularly vacationed in Hawaii or The Great Lakes or Colorado Springs with their distinguished friends. Every other year, they also went on foreign holidays. The last one had been in Spain. Three photos of them in Seville, Madrid and Barcelona were still pinned on their refrigerator with magnets that she'd collected during the travels.

Aldora changed jobs only twice during her career, and in between, she took a year off - the year she married Mark - to do pro bono work at Amnesty International. Her father had shared her blossoming, new life in the U.S. through letters, and later via emails and phone calls. Right from her college years to her work life, he had indulged his own childlike curiosity with her stories. He told her many times that he was proud of her and that Mark was the best decision of her life and her biggest achievement.

In Cochin also, besides the cityscape, many things had changed: John, her father, was dead. Her younger brother, Joseph, had moved to Mumbai several years ago; he married a Gujarati businesswoman, a

divorcee, eleven years older than him. Sheena, her classmate, had returned to Cochin after fifteen years and a public divorce with a politician-husband in New Delhi. Aldora planned to meet with Sheena at least once, before leaving for the U.S.

But John's house, Angel Villa, where she spent her childhood, hadn't entirely changed; it looked nearly the same from the outside. White colour exteriors; red tiled roofs on all three blocks aesthetically raised at split levels, the central courtyard, wide and open to the sky, frozen in time.

Skirting the rectangular space of the vast courtyard was the broad veranda with red oxide flooring. It still had that regal awning made of teak wood planks, supported on eight intricately carved pillars from all sides that were polished and smoothed by the elements of nature. Steps from the four internal faces of the house led down to the courtyard, where Aldora remembered Rosa and her father's aunts put out red chillies to dry.

They spent many afternoons in domestic industry, rolling out lentil and rice papadums, spreading out grated coconuts on muslin cloth to dry and gossiping after the neighbourhood scandals, while slicing raw mangoes for the pickle jars. In the later years, Aldora recalled how the sanctity of that sacred space, which had given joy and strengthened family bonds, would be invaded by random strangers who'd walk in to attend Rosa's awful, pseudo-political, meetings.

Inside, Angel Villa lay in a state of inevitable neglect: peeling paint, broken shelves and blackened ceiling fans. Higher up, ceiling corners were infested with cobwebs and preying lizards. All the six bedrooms, two at each level, were still furnished the same way as before; only the curtains, mattresses and linen had been changed some years ago. Joseph's room had an additional cupboard, Aldora couldn't imagine why since it was no longer in use. Rosa's bedroom was musty, and on the left wall, the paint bubbled from the seepage through the roof. The four-poster bed which Rosa had insisted on purchasing half a century ago was large enough to accommodate four people. She shuddered, thinking of her mother lying on it now, alone, every night, for the rest of her life.

John's cavernous study on the ground level, remained untouched, lined with book shelves that were kept upright with withering books, right up to the ceiling. His massive, teak, wooden desk and chair with carved armrests still squatted in the centre of the room, pretending to be occupied. It was clear that Rosa had nothing to do with the study's earlier preservation or current abandonment. Aldora's nanny, Valliama, who had lived in their household, cleaned and cared for John's study until she died a few months ago.

The living and dining rooms next to John's study were airy and spacious. They looked as they always had, decorated with hunting memorabilia, teak wood furniture and antique crystal chandeliers that belonged to John's grandmother. The kitchen, which was also on the ground level, was the worst hit of all. Scratched Sun Mica surfaces of cabinets, floor tiles cracked in places, and that annoying, continuous drip from the tap in the stained sink, told tales of a slapdash life..

Aldora's room on the second level, above the kitchen, had been locked ever since she had left for the U.S. - as if she had died, and thus was never expected to return. She knew Rosa would've let everything remain untouched - but more out of malice than grief or regret, because she had been against her daughter's blind dash for freedom.

How fast the years had galloped away!

Aldora's stint at the boarding school in India, when she turned fourteen, was almost instantly over; that was followed rapidly by a challenging and hectic college education in America from when she turned eighteen. She finished her post-graduation from New York University and then joined the American workforce after six years of diligent studies there, finally earning her place under the foreign sun. Aldora didn't mind the gruelling pace. While half of Cochin was trying to get their sons and daughters to settle in the Gulf or migrate to the U.K., she was relieved to stay away from Rosa and the prying eyes of relatives. The only regret she nursed from this prolonged and deliberate separation from her homeland was the missed chance of seeing her beloved Achan alive once more.

About ten years ago, when John decided to retire, he had returned from Abu Dhabi to Cochin. Aldora knew that Rosa would've burst a blood vessel if she'd known that her daughter had stayed away from India for years, but continued to visit her father in The Gulf. After returning to India, John had often called and pleaded with Aldora to visit him once, but she had put him off each time, not keen on meeting her mother. After marrying Mark, Aldora intended to introduce her family to him, John and Joseph at least, but she never did.

Mark had politely inquired about their travel plans to meet the parents in the first year of their marriage. 'Sweetheart, I hear that Southern India is a magical place with its temples and quaint hill stations. Should we visit your parents and turn our visit into something of a holiday?'

Aldora had deftly evaded him. 'I think we should give my parents some time. Dad has returned home after twenty years. We could go next year, perhaps?'

'Of course, you're right.' Mark smiled.

But Aldora knew that smile all too well, so she had escaped to the bedroom. It wasn't possible to introduce Mark without Rosa's presence, which she was loathing to do.

Before she knew it, a decade had passed and her father was dead.

Six months ago, New York City was battling with its worst ever snowstorm of the decade. The phone lines were down and the postal services were snowed under. John had died from a heart attack in Cochin, but due to the climatic conditions in New York, Aldora missed the news of his death, and eventually, the funeral. Joseph called a week later when the storm had abated to inform her of their father's peaceful end. Aldora was shocked. Her old physical response to fear returned - a twitch in the left eye.

Mark noticed and asked her about it. 'What's with your eye, sweetheart?'

‘Just something...’ Aldora dismissed his concern as panic seized her. Suddenly, she couldn’t picture her father’s face.

What did Achan look like?

Her mind ran back and forth, skimming past those times she spent with John in Abu Dhabi, during the winter breaks, and yet nothing emerged. She heard his voice and laughter, replayed the conversations they’d had, but she couldn’t recall his face. Aldora tried to stay calm, but the twitch worsened. One night, in her dream, she saw her father’s body buried under a mound of earth that looked unholy and unnatural. He clawed feverishly to get out of his coffin and cried out her name in vain.

Shaken and terrified, but taking care to leave out the details of the nightmare, the next morning Aldora exclaimed to Mark, ‘I know it’s no use now, but...I’m planning on going to India.’

Mark, who was heading to work, stopped in his tracks. He retraced his footsteps from the front door to his wife, and kissed her.

Aldora clung to him with relief for a few seconds before he whispered, ‘He would’ve liked that. Do you want me to come with you?’

Aldora recoiled instantly. She took a step back and blurted, ‘No. That wouldn’t work.’

Mark raised an eyebrow when he saw the panic on Aldora’s face. Her left eye was twitching again. He nodded and left without another word. Aldora was relieved that he hadn’t pursued the matter, though he had looked pretty displeased.

Aldora had been so determined to stay away from the country of her birth that the thought of returning to it again, filled her with trepidation. She blamed India for taking away everything from her: innocence, childhood, mother and now father. If Joseph hadn’t called her again, right after she’d had that nightmare, she would’ve probably never boarded the flight to India. She was out grocery shopping when Joseph left that peremptory message with Mark, asking him to inform

Aldora to come home immediately. Whatever they'd spoken had made Mark smug. She couldn't believe when she heard that Joseph had struggled to maintain a courteous tone on the phone.

Aldora's eyes widened with surprise as the lamb chops crackled in the frying pan. 'I'm so sorry, darling. That's not like him, and it's totally unacceptable. I wonder what's gotten into Joseph. I'll speak with him, okay?'

Mark grimaced and loosened his tie. He grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator. 'That's not necessary. There could be a number of reasons for his curtness. For instance, your Dad leaving you half of his wealth, and the famed Angel Villa?'

Aldora's mouth dropped to her knees. 'He left me...what?'

Mark grinned and gestured to the sizzling lamb chops on the pan. 'The house and a lot more! If you promise to flip those lamb chops, I'll tell you the rest of the fairytale.'

Aldora blushed and flipped them over. Breathless, she said, 'Tell me everything.'

She learned from Mark that John had drawn up the will a week before his death. He inserted a maddening clause, which could be the reason for Joseph's curtness. The will stated that Aldora had to approve and sign off on the other half of everything, which John had left for his wife and son. If Aldora disagreed to the terms of inheritance by showing reasonable doubt with regards to their capability of managing that wealth, she would have the right to retain or control all of it, and do as she deemed fit.

Mark proffered a plate and winked boyishly. 'I'm hungry for the meat, sweetheart. Guess it's cooked now.'

Aldora opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. She slapped a chop on to his plate. They exchanged a look of uncertainty, and started to laugh loudly, for the first time since her loss.