



Grey

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I can tell you the colour of shame. That is if it has a colour.

It is a dull grey.

I know it covers you like a shroud. You are left hovering at the
thin line of divide between what is and what was.

Blurred thought. Stagnant spirit. Stasis of time.

You watch it like mist descending and thickening around you.
Where do you run? Where do you hide?
Can you?

"Wake up, Esha!" I hear John's raspy voice. "Open the gate. It's your turn."

"No, noooo...". She mumbles. Esha loves her sleep and will do anything to get that additional five minutes of non-wake up time.

For that matter, so does her father love his sleep. Hence it doesn't surprise me when after half an hour of *idli* making, I notice the lull in the house and peek in to see all three of them, limbs thrown over each other, sound asleep.

I opened the window curtain, letting the slanting rays of the morning float into the room and wedged myself between Nithin and John.

"Wake up, sleepyheads! It's past 7! We haven't even opened the gate. What will the neighbours think!"

John stretched his arms and drew me into a tight squeeze. I could feel the stubble on his cheek and brushed back his unruly hair.

This is what I love best about my day—this morning cuddle.

"Wake up *ponnu*. It's so late already." I whisper in his ear, drinking in the waking smells.

"Lockdown *alle!*...What is the hurry! We have the whole day to ourselves."

"But milkman..."

"Yes *amma*... Shush!" Nithin threw his leg over me, and I lay sandwiched between father and son. Esha pinched open a

sleepy eye and turned away to hug her pillow and sleep more comfortably.

The golden yellow light of the morning sun streamed in through the bedroom curtains. Esha's art teacher had begun to teach her glass paintings, and she started with mosaics. Each of the fragments shone vividly, distinct from one another. Like my family. Different. Unique. Together we made ourselves complete.

I sealed my thoughts, kept them tidily away into the cracks of my mind and closed my eyes.

Everything could wait.

The neighbours could think what they wanted. So could the milkman. We were going to rest the first lockdown Sunday.

March afternoons in Kerala have a drowsy stupor that hangs in the air, and it tires you out quickly, especially if you are out in the sun. And that, we were quite often.

John and the children would spend most Sunday mornings outside. We had a steady vegetable patch that sprouted greens. I loved walking outside and cutting a clump of green peppers for the dish. Red tomatoes and wine brinjals stood in neat arrays boasting a well-tended garden. Rusty and Pocco, the two bunnies, were not allowed entry into this paradise, though Esha spared no second thought in stealing a treat out to them every now and then.

I settled down at the study with the laptop open and my bundle of notes spread across the table. I had a class that I had scheduled last week, which had to be postponed because the college closed abruptly. The final semester batch had their exams around the corner, and I was worried of how we would wind up the term. I had a rather long story of Hemingway's to finish.

After a week of deliberations, the government declared a lockdown to curb the COVID hike. Five people in Kerala were already infected. Their route maps were diligently made, traces and contact lists studied. The panic was palpable. God alone knew when it would hit our small township at Chengannur! We stopped watching the television at odd hours as all that it ran were COVID updates and how it was submerging one country after the other. The world map on the National Channel was sprayed with red. The virus was spreading. And spreading fast. Down south, if we thought we had the rabbit's foot to immunity, we were being proved wrong.

"100 year's curse. Look at history. Spanish flu. Killed more people than the world war." My dad would say.

"Gargle. Vitamin C. Lime and ginger tea. Perfect for driving away any virus." Added my mother.

These days COVID 19 was all we ever talked about on the phone.

An invisible threat wrung us into fear. We were afraid, not for ourselves, but for our loved ones. And we were tired of the uncertainty.

I looked down at the neat rows of letters that filled the pages of my book. Lines drawn, colour coded and highlighted; my lecture notes were always dazzling. I would not deny that I was secretly proud of my increasing academic presence in Ecocriticism, a hard-earned space and claim among male chauvinist colleagues.

I had a presentation at the neighbourhood boy's college tomorrow. The slides were already decided and the concept note was circulated among the prospective participants. It was a comfortable topic, on "shifting bioregions" and I knew what to garnish my topic with; that extra tidbit that remained in my listeners' minds long after the talk was over.

As the time neared 4 pm, I looked up from my books and switched on the audio and video output of Google Meet. We were still fumbling with the nuances of the technology and hardly knew enough to sail through without sporadic outbursts as "Oh my God! How can online teaching ever be possible! Such nonsense!"

I was fiddling with my notes when John came from behind and stood silently behind my chair. His sturdy hands began to massage my neck and back.

I moaned, thankful for the release of pent-up tension in my body.

John's hands dipped into my dress and playfully cupped my breasts, giving them a rub. He bent down and kissed me full on the lips, arms still fiddling with the buttons on my salwar top and tugged at a breast. I responded, earnestly drinking up his desire.

It was then I heard background feed from the computer.

We let go of each other.

Froze.

I touched the dark screen, and it blinked open. Forty-eight students were watching the erotic moment of their teacher online.

Someone once said shame would recede like how a storm does.

Maybe.

My only prayer was that it wouldn't wreak havoc and destroy our lives forever.

It's been a week since last Sunday, and a few girls I had helped in the past sent me personal messages saying a few boys had circulated the video. Trolls were everywhere. They were flying

from phone to phone at the speed of breath. Across classes.
Across campuses.

John went to the police for cyber help.

I was too numb to see, hear, or say anything. I threw my phone in the crevices of the kitchen shelf between old masala bottles. I stopped going to the study where the laptop was kept. Hated the presence of John.

I was broken, shattered into a thousand minuscule glass pieces.

My reputation of the past 17 years pared to nothing in an absent minute.

Nothing remained.

I was expecting a summons from the Head of the Department. From the Principal. Perhaps even from the Manager.

Suspension? Dismissal? Termination?

How could I be so irresponsible?

Once, we had a large bonfire.

Nithin and Esha carried bundles of twigs from all over the courtyard, as much as their little hands could hold and threw them into the growing pile.

John lit the matchstick and caught the firefly flame into an old sheet of newspaper. Like a magician, I sprinkled in a capful of dazzling blue kerosene onto the wood. John fanned the tiny flicker with a large plastic plate and together, we stepped back and watched the flame erupt. Slowly at first, crackling, breathing, breaking. We watched the *tandava* of flames consume everything, waiting until its eventual slow sizzle, death.

But what I remember is smoke spiralling upward, carrying with it billowing paper —the streaks of grey settling over everything around.

Shame is grey.

Tragedy without poise.

It settles on you and becomes you.

It took me many days to talk to John about this. He had attempted to raise it several times. I shrugged away, not finding courage enough to revisit the darkness.

What did we do wrong? It was a moment of intimacy, an extension of the morning cuddle.

I dreaded he would blame me and ask “Why didn’t you tell me the class was on? Why didn’t you motion me away?”

He didn’t. Or maybe he did, and I didn’t notice.

After the initial numbness, came visiting, despair and fear and guilt. Like the witches in *Macbeth* circling the boiling cauldron, the three sisters in grey circled me.

I had nightmares of falling. Dark eyes chased me as I ran, eventually falling into a deep ravine.

It will be wrong to deny thoughts of dying. Many a time, my vacant mind would conjure up images of solace. Death calling me, gently laying me down in the river of oblivion.

Perhaps that is why John never left my side. He had an inkling of the demons my fertile imagination would spew out.

Children too, realized something amiss and cautiously kept their distance. These days they were still as mice. Once Nithin made a joke and Esha laughed aloud, I ran out, hysterical, a loud groan blasting through the house. Children froze and John came running. By then, I was whimpering on the floor, huddled into a ball.

"Sorry *amma*. Sorry *amma*. I am so sorry *amma*." Esha was repeating herself. I was sure she had no idea what she was sorry about.

John took me in his arms and rocked me like a baby. "It's okay...It's okay". He whispered into my ears.

Somewhere as time melted into time, I slept in his arms.

When I woke up around midnight, I saw them all on the floor. Around me. Surrounding me like a cocoon.

I realized then that I would never think of suicide again.

Friends sneaked in-home despite lockdown. One by one, they sat near me and reminded me of everyday things. The internals that were scheduled next month. The conference the Department was organizing. Our sweeper's disoriented talk. The Principal's eccentric remarks.

After cups of tea, some would muster the strength to talk to me about the fatal Sunday. Others squeezed my hands and said, "come back soon. We miss you".

I would nod, eyes on the floor.

It took me 47 painful days to gather the courage to walk back to college.

"Are you sure you are ready?" John repeated for the nth time.

I had surprised everyone when I decided to stop travelling through the dark alleys of my mind and come out.

As the car pulled up the Department driveway, I could feel bile rising in me. There were students everywhere. Talking. Laughing.

On any other day it would have been an everyday picture of a busy campus. Not today. Today they were all in a combined conspiracy. And I was sure what the subject of their jeers was.

I stepped out of the car, turned back for a second, caught John's eye and forced a smile.

"I love you." He said, smiling reassuringly.

I turned away and took the first steps towards the Department.

I desperately wanted to hide behind my mask.

Little did I notice that I was shivering even in the hot April sun.

"Happy to have you back, ma'am!". Sangeetha from 3 BA came running towards me. With her were Anagha and Joshua.

"We missed you for our social! Did you see the photographs?" Arun asked, his eyes searching mine as he dashed in from another corner.

"*Oh ma'am! Goodmorning*". Nihal and the gang of boys of the junior class stood up as I passed.

I nodded quickly and dipped my head.

Ma'am!

Hello ma'am!

Morning Ma'am!!

By now there were an increasing number of students with me. They surrounded me. Led me by hand. Took my bag. Held my books. I let the fall of their voices wash me.

When we reached the door of the staff room, Susan, Stephen, Uttam and others stopped what they were doing, walked briskly to my side and enclosed me in a circle. Kavitha dashed in and hugged me tight. "Oh I missed you!" she said and then

whispered, "now I don't have to be the warden of your unruly class!".

I stood there. Slowly gaining courage to raise my eyes and see them all.

These were my concentric circles of love. Like the *athappoo* we decorate the department with every onam season.

These people who I had worked with. Spent time with. Laughed with. Fought with. The students who I had taken endless hours of classes for. We had talked about life and death. Talked about what it was to be human. To err and to celebrate life.

I had never imagined that I would be at the receiving end one day.

I was. It was all coming back to me in these pockets of love.

I was not naïve to believe that this would be the unified response of the world. Beyond these walls would lie demons . But love had made a threadbare passage through the snares of life.

I could feel grey lifting. Slowly. Mist dissipating at sunlight.

Note

Grey is a simple story of a family's everyday life, how an unforeseen event topples life over and how resilience is found.

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