



The Envelope

Richa Sharma

Is a poet and writer.

“It is sheer good fortune to miss
Somebody long before they leave you”

Rishi read the dedication again. He has been re-reading more often since she left. He has dug out this book and everything else that reminded him of her, including himself and those

around him. Although right now, caressing its purple cover, her favourite colour, he thought of the black dress she walked in, with a sleek paperback in her hand. A huge tote on her shoulder, the term that she taught him, for she loved bags too. Books and Bags. Maybe boys as well, maybe not, now he wonders, a little too late. Book in hand, not in a bag, tote, he corrected himself, even in thoughts she teaches him. He had looked at her hands, her long fingers, sharp, curved nails in light mauve, manicured, not in the parlour but by herself. He came to know later, years of marriage impart these kinds of information, too. A subtle contract of informational exchange, that neither the pandit nor his (hers) friends informed.

Greeting him with a side hug, she sat opposite him. Placing the book in the front and she told him about Toni Morrison—the great, as she would often call her. The red light from the restaurant’s nameplate gave her a red aura. Her hair, then burgundy, glistened as she moved her head in sync with her hands. He had looked at the purple of the book, stagnant on the table, in contrast to the shifting red of her head, reflecting the light overhead. Ignoring the glare, he had tried to focus on her words, for it was important to remember them, to research about them later at night and come up with his own (borrowed) opinions. Opinions, to be shared at some point, at some other discussions with friends (hers) who spoke about books and sometimes about boys too.

After a plate full of *jeera* rice, yellow *daal* (lentil soup), and two plates of omelette, she had asked him about his favourite author, to gaze at his inclination towards life and love, which he realised later. He was glad when she asked, as he was ready with the answers. She didn’t know then; must have understood later. After all years of marriage also unveils secrets, especially those left unguarded, and the choice of books is one such. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, he had told her, stating her full name and the books, a summary of which he had read and prepared.

She had given him the book just after he paid the bill and she tipped the server the exact amount, for he wouldn't let her pay and she wouldn't eat if she couldn't pay.

Reading the dedication once again, he closed the book and ran his fingers over the rose embossed on its cover, entangled with the title Sula that ran downwards. His life was entangled too, with the woman who melted into words, embossing herself on the entirety of his body, top to bottom, artistic yet stocky embossment- their relation.

This book had delighted him then, to an extent that he grinned for many days to come. He knew then and now too that books were her ways to include him in her world. Later, in their five years of dating and five years of marriage, she often shared her feelings through words borrowed from authors across the world. She would pick them, dissect their words and present them to him to tell a story that's personal to her.

'Rishi *Bhaiya* (brother), come for lunch,' Sunil, knocked to convey the message from Saheb.

Sunil, his father's driver, who stayed more inside the house than on the roads, became a substitute after Ma's death. *Pitaji's* (father's) convenience. His wife's eyesore. His informant. Although he boasted allegiance to Pitaji, it was Rishi's work that Sunil did willingly. Sunil was important. After all, it was from Sunil's driving her in and out of the book clubs he had presumed her fondness for boys, those who spoke books. Discovery that she had denied, and he had stood by. The discovery, that gave him adjectives- chauvinistic, regressive, possessive, and even fanatic. That led to counter adjectives- characterless, radical, show-off, ambitious, pseudo.

Placing the book on the windowsill, he threw a glance at the road, still devoid of the red Polo, with a dent in the front. The red car that had once hit the neem tree shaking not just the tree but him too, standing on the veranda and seeing her leave. That was the first day of her new car. Two years to

today. Two weeks to the day she left. “Now I will drive wherever I want. Sunil, your spy can’t follow me now!” she had told him the night she got the car.

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Pitaji was at the dining table, serving himself. Punctuality was something he was born with. The family legend, although invented for the pleasure of others, stated that Pitaji was born on the same day the doctor had said and at the exact time, his mother had prayed for. He had cried at the right time, had learnt to walk, and even talked in the expected year.

He was the man of the time, who since his birth had laid out his life in timelines that he followed until the day his daughter-in-law left. But that was just one day, one day in his life when he had skipped lunch and had gone to console his son, who, to his much frustration, had sat crying by the bedside. A weak son of chances born to a son of time. But what could he do? It was his mother he reflected in his genes more than his father. That day he had skipped his evening walk too as he sat thinking about the further course of action. He, to Sunil’s surprise, had eaten in his room at night, deciding against indulging his son anymore. His son, he decided, should now stop crying and take charge- of his life and the wife who outsmarted him on several occasions. His daughter-in-law had fuelled his wife too, who, for the first time in their 35 years of marriage, showed signs of revolt.

One year after Rishi’s marriage, one year after his *bahu’s* (daughter-in-law’s) entry into their life, his wife, a perfect wife, abiding by not just his rules but by those laid out by his friends and family, had complained. When she had expressed her disappointment at having to cook every day, he had indulged her and got a cook, too. He felt she had earned herself the right to comfort now. He had assumed it to be a comparison with her daughter-in-law, who not only refused to do her household duties but also asserted herself more than

his son. But as complaints grew and focus came upon him, his stature rumbled, and so did his calm control, which he blamed his daughter-in-law for. As the wife died, the focus on him shifted and so did his contempt towards his son's wife. The angst remained though.

Although he felt a need to shield his son from the glower that his radical bahu emanated, he didn't act upon it. A few instructions for the new husband of the house, in the guise of suggestions, candid jokes on the role of women, and the glory of the life of servitude that his wife led, were sprinkled here and there. But the man of the house never interfered in matters as trivial as his son's inability to follow in his father's footsteps.

As Rishi pulled the chair, his father's gaze landed upon him. Rishi's appearance disappointed him. Still, in his pyjamas and vest, his son has been spending most of his time in his room, going to the office only for a few hours a day. His son has forgotten to live like a man! Once a sharp jawline is now covered in an uneven beard, with few greys making Rishi look older than he was. His eyes looked lost, and his height shortened. That is what a woman like her can do to a man, he thought. His son had disappointed him in choosing a partner, but he had hoped for improvement after marriage. Nothing changed in her, not even after nights of fights that they used to hear from their room. The egoist woman of his son's life had refused to deflect. If his wife were alive, they would have discussed how his son had failed in doing what all husbands could. But now he has to save his son, bring him out of his cave, and give him a life that his Rishi deserved.

'It's close to 2. Eat at least on time!'

'Yes Pitaji'

'Don't look this sad. Go out with friends.'

'Hmm..'

‘You are young. You should have fun. Don’t think about that woman.’

‘You are too good for her bhैया,’ Sunil added while serving him.

Rishi kept quiet. He sat and ate. Although his face refused to give any reaction, his body went against his control. The spoon in his hand trembled, no matter how tightly he held it. Emptying the bowl of lentil soup on the rice, mixing the bitter gourd fry, which on any other day, he would have shouted at her for getting cooked, he ate. Gulping a spoonful of rice like a hungry dog who is given food after a day-long wait. It wasn’t the hunger for food; it was the craving for what he couldn’t achieve, for something he needed, something he wanted, from someone. What this something was beyond even his comprehension. Maybe he never dared venture into the search for this need he had. Time might take its course and reveal the mystery. Maybe.

Finishing everything he had on his plate. He pushed it away. A sudden rage struck him, towards the plate in front, at the dining table that has been in this house longer than she was in his life, towards Sunil, who took charge of everything, the entire household, who had supplied him with gossip about her and others. He felt betrayed; betrayed by her, by his mother who died leaving him with his father, at Pitaji, for still being in his life.

When he got up and pushed his chair, Pitjai handed him an envelope. ‘This registry came today for you. It is from her’

#

Sun has brightened the sky to a blinding white, engulfing its soft blue. Clouds also disappeared, making the summer sky of early afternoons. Sun, although busy above, also entered Rishi’s room through the stained glass of his room’s window. Outside it, stood the neem tree, the one she hit with her car, the one she loved to sit and watch. On rainy days, she used to

stand by the window and look at its leaves hustling with drops of water. Sometimes she would extend her arms to feel a drop or two. Rishi would sit and look at her, her careful play with the rain, her admiration for nature, yet a decided aloofness towards it too. She would keep most things to herself, speaking more undersized than required, unless about a limited topic of her interests, and sometimes would let herself slip, especially when alone with nature or the idea of it. A rainy morning was one such occasion. So Rishi would make himself invisible. Quietly sitting in one corner, he would observe her, trying to solve the mystery that she was. She intrigued him.

A faint chirping of birds also reached him, but the sounds within his head silenced them.

What would have she written? Has she agreed to come back? Is she willing to apologise? What if she is again planning to work? Will she undermine me? She can. But she shouldn't. It wasn't my mistake. Was it? I am her husband. I should be the one deciding. Her life affected me, too. Was I insecure? No, she was wrong to shout. I guess she was.

Questions popped, and answers intervened. Questions, some of which had been there but never so apparent, for he didn't have time for them. Job and friends (her) kept him busy (on his toes). He had to perform and fit in, to burst out and then apologise, to hide and emerge, to pride and refute. It had been hectic for him as well. He, in fact, had been scared of the answers these questions might bring.

Sitting at the edge of his bed, curled up with his hands over his knees, Rishi was staring at the envelope. It perturbed him. All he needed was the courage to read her letter, to face her for the first time and maybe for the last time. Fear of losing hope, of facing reality, stopped him from tearing apart its thin border.

Outside his room, Pitaji was asking Sunil to make masala tea for his friends. He could hear the loud greetings with a joke or two. Pitjai, popular amongst his friends, often hosted gatherings, more so after Rishi's mother's death. His jovial hosting and his comfortable pride complimented his stout personality, giving his arrogance a refined touch. For a good hour or two, they would talk about everything, from current affairs, and pensions to property rates, from days of their childhood to their grandchildren. Today they started their discussion with the topic of children. They had come to inquire about the latest update about their house, Rishi guessed.

'How is she? Any calls from her side?'

'She will call. Where will she go? Even today's women need husbands'

'Our Rishi is a golden boy

'Yes, he is earning so much. This family is so good. No mother-in-law troubles.'

'But hitting is not good. Rishi should control his anger.'

'That happened only once. My son would never do such things.'

'True. These radical girls don't value what they have.'

On any other day, Rishi wouldn't have bothered with their discussion. He knew they wished good for him, but today their dissection of his life bothered him. It was as if he was being peeled in public, with each person taking a layer of his life and examining it, discarding it with a judgement or accolade. With each of their questions, he also questioned her. With each of their opinions, he formed an expectation from his life and hers too. As he heard them more, he decided to ask for what he felt he deserved. A husband should, no matter how fragile, his ego must be satisfied too. He wished her to see his aching heart

and bandage it with apologies for challenging him and his worth.

Getting up from his bed, he went towards the balcony. He opened the door, allowing the gush of a warm breeze in. The air, with a light scent of marigolds, brushed against his cheeks and went inside the room. With the envelope in his hand, he sat on the cane chair by the side of the high railing. He looked at the open sky, an uninterrupted view. A scorching Sun was yet to show its full potential with no clouds to disturb it. Under the sky lay the road, devoid of the red car he wished to see. On, the side of the road stood a small temple by the Banyan tree. A girl of almost ten years kneeled in front to light a lamp. At the end of the road, behind the white and grey towers of three-storey buildings, he could see a dome of a mosque. On the opposite side stood a row of auto rickshaws, waiting for the day to begin while the cars ran past them. Outside, a normal day had begun, but within his life, the time had frozen to the day she left.

Mustering the courage from a spry road and permanency from a warm Sun, he raised the trembling envelope to his eye level and opened it, hoping for it to unclog the stagnation he sat in.

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Richa Sharma has a Masters in Mass Communication from the University of Hyderabad. Her debut novel is slated to be published by Nu Voice Press with distribution by Simon and Schuster. She is currently working on her poetry collection. Her short stories and poems have been published in literary magazine eFiction India and the Hans India.

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