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A Floral Love

Her palms always smelled of *mogra* blossoms. Every day, at the crack of daybreak, her green bangles jingled as her fingers deftly and swiftly braided the fresh *mogra* flowers into a *gajra*. One after the other, she wove countless such *gajras*, the sparrows her only accompaniment in the silence of dawn. Sometimes she sang a folksong or two, and the soft twittering seemed somehow to rhyme with her lyrics, but maybe that was just because of her lack of musical knowledge. Around her on a tattered carpet lay a spread of *mogra* blossoms that she had collected from the abundance of *mogra* shrubs in a hidden grove at the outskirts of the city. This she did before the sun rose, and the first blossom she took care to place at the feet of her Lord, Vishnu. It was His favourite flower,

and hers too. The carpet was redolent with the fresh, moist fragrance and the cityscape seemed to fade out of the vision as the earthly miracle permeated the space around her.

Time passed, frivolously. Mischievously. The days were exactly the same, one pearl after another, yet they passed in a blur. Especially while making *gajras*. A minute lasted a moment and an aeon. Dawn broke like a biscuit and the crumbly darkness dissolved into the orange morning sky. The sun rose steadily but her eyes didn't flit away from the blossoms. She endured on.

She had many customers. Some stopped in their tracks while sauntering self-indulgently through the street when the mellifluous scent burst around them, like a bubble pricked. Then they had no choice but to go where their feet took them, to the solitary woman in her purple *navvari* saree. Others came to her with an objective. To surprise their wives, gift their mothers, please their bosses, impress their girlfriends. A *mograchya gajra* was the perfect gift for any woman of any age, anywhere, anytime. She knew some of them. The man who picked up a *gajra* every Friday evening. The woman who treated herself with fresh blossoms on weekends. The rich looking child who bought a *gajra* or two just to smell it on his way to the school down the street, and then hide it lest the other boys should see his girlish indulgences. Some she was on friendly terms with. Sometimes a simple hi, how's it going at home. Sometimes a question or two about how their day was. Sometimes some roadside gossip. Sometimes, something deeper. Sometimes, she came to know a person beyond their identity. Names, ages, professions, castes withered away like forgotten *mogra* blossoms broken off from their shrub too early. In their place, a new bud blossomed. An unlikely friendship, an unexpected companionship. A floral love.

Of these, he was her favourite. He was an adolescent boy, a shy, quiet one. A silent observer of the world. Every day, he came in the late evening. Every day, he tried to smell the blossoms (even though he knew exactly how they smelled) and every day, she slapped his hand away. Some people offer the blossoms to God so it's inappropriate for humans to smell them first, she said. So, he

smelled her hand instead. Everyday. Like a daily ritual. She had come to love these meetings, he was the only one who smelled her hands as if all the fragrances of the world were contained in them. What she didn't realise that they actually were. The *mogras* had become so regular in her life that she had almost forgotten to appreciate them. But when he smelled her palms, she remembered. She realized anew what a wonderful life she led. Bathed in *mogras*, and blessing others with their fragrance.

She had asked him who he bought these flowers for. My grandmother, he had replied. Over the course of their daily encounters, she had gathered that his grandmother was bedridden. Afflicted with something he called Alzheimer's. Memory loss, he said, when she asked him what it meant. There was no cure. Someday, his grandmother would forget him, then herself. He gifted her *mogras* everyday because it's harder to forget scents. For her, the *mogras* had become one with him. Now his grandmother associated him with them, and them with him.

That evening he was late. Her eyes wandered from her basket, and even from the money. As the evening wore on, she grew even more restless. He had not missed a single day of their daily camaraderie. She couldn't single out any reason for his absence. Then at ten, as she was about to pack up for the day, she heard the sound of ragged breathing. He had sprinted up the street and was heaving. His grandmother was in the hospital. Some complicated brain thing, he said. The doctors said there was no hope now. She had just a few hours to live. Maybe a day. He wanted to gift her a bundle of *mogra* blossoms, a last reminder of a beautiful yesterday, of a long life full of love gone by. When he touched his wallet, she shook her head lightly and smiled. Some gifts are priceless. He was off, running and panting.

A few minutes later, unwilling tears welled up in her eyes. When his grandmother passed away, he would stop coming here. There would be no reason to buy *gajras*. She forced herself to get up and walk home. She sighed. It was going to be a long night, and there were longer days that would follow.

The next evening, she sat on her stool, looking at her basket, and thinking about the fate of the flowers that would never be the wiry grey hair of his grandmother. That day, he did not come. And the next day. And the day after. And the next week. Her life went on, pearl after pearl. She grew accustomed to not cherishing the smell of the *mogra* blossoms. She forgot about the fragrance of her hands. About the wonder her life was. She thought of him passingly, as a fleeting phantom that excites you and drifts away.

Ten days later, she nodded off in the afternoon, as she frequently did, partially because no customers came in the afternoon and mostly due to boredom. And she awoke to find a familiar head sunk in the *mogra* blossoms. A smile broke on her wrinkly face. She didn't stop him this time. Disappointed, he lifted his head up, took her hands in his and smelled them for a long moment. Then he bought a *mogryacha gajra*. She was confused. Who was he buying it for?

Suddenly he swung around and landed behind her. She felt a rustle in her hair and realised with wonder, joy, surprise and disbelief that he was weaving the *gajra* in her hair.

“My grandmother might have associated the *mogras* with me, but I associate the *mogras* with you.”

Sakshi Nadkarni

Sakshi Nadkarni is an 18 year old humanities student at St Xavier's College, Mumbai. She is passionate about reading, writing and psychology, with a penchant for writing about convoluted relationships and complex emotions. Her articles and poems have been published in magazines like LifeOK and The Sulonian.

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