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Locks of Love

Mehak Burza

M.A English Sem IV

Jamia Millia Islamia

Delhi 110025

"Shall I come along Chetna?" said my mother from the kitchen, as she kneaded the dough for preparing bathuras in lunch.

"No mom I will be fine." I yelled back from my room. My voice sounded convincing enough for my mom, but I was not sure that I will be fine. "Payal is coming with me. We will meet up at the kalkaji metro station." Three bedrooms were a spatial luxury in kalkaji colony so acoustics were a problem.

"Call me when you reach and cross the roads carefully" said mom. As I braided and covered my hair to protect it from the June heat, I felt a pang of guilt, a wave of fear but I did not let that show. I had called up Payal in the morning and informed her of my secret plan.

"Hey Miss zebra" came my brother's immediate response from the living room as he glanced from his engineering project referring to my black jean and white cotton tee with a matching sequinned shoulder tote. Outside the apartment gate, I found an auto rickshaw in the vicinity. I had a habit of haggling over the fare but not this time.

"How much to Glam Hair Salon bhैया?" I asked and nodded at the preposterous rate he quoted. Not today. Not today.

Entering the hair salon I was enveloped in the odours of nail lacquers, and shampoos, the smells merging with the whirr of the hair dryers and the snipping of the scissors.

"Hair cut?" enquired the receptionist. I nodded. I sat turning the pages of Lakme fashion magazine looking but not looking.

"The magenta streaks look stylish." I heard someone say. A woman of a dusky complexion in a dull green suit which was barely able to cover her enormous bosom, getting her pedicure done was gazing at me. I don't recall I smiled or even made an attempt. Did it matter? As I glanced around the salon, business was as usual. The girl with a huge pink glittering bracelet was getting a hair cut. The fat lady in a starch kurta had put on a face mask with a big round cucumber piece on each eye which seemed to suit her size, and the young lady in a bright red dance costume was getting her hair straightened.

"Ma'am pleeece come now" the hairdresser told me. She had received stitches on her

upper lip which was visible even in the dim light of the salon, perhaps responsible for her lisping. I hesitated. I sat down in the chair facing my image covered with the grey coloured apron with its salon logo inscribed at the right end.

"You have such beautiful hair, which hair cut do you want? The layered one is currently in fashion," she said as she began unfolding my braid and combing it with her pointed finger nails.

"Cut it all ..Make me bald."

"What?" she said, her eyes bulging, eye brows arched to their max.

"Cut it all ..Make me bald" I replied.

Please don't make me repeat it again I prayed under my breath, I don't think I believe it either..

"Wh- why?" stammered the hair dresser and then corrected herself saying, "Are you sure?" Human curiosity shadowed by her business etiquette.

A part inside me was not sure..I stood up, removed the apron and without glancing back hurried out of the salon. I could feel the stare of the perplexed hair dresser upon my back. I wanted to rush back in and explain to her I have not lost my mind. But I did not go back in. Did it even matter?

"Just in time for lunch" said my mom, the moment I entered home. The aroma of chola bathuras hovered in the dining room redolent with the ginger-garlic paste. Though being one of my favourite dishes, it gave me no joy. I went through the motions and tried to hold back my tears. Gaurav had gone to Rahul's place to complete his project. Rahul was his best chum but was never liked by mom.

"Keep a distance from him," she would always tell me. "I think he smells of weed." Mom could never believe that the rich brat Rahul was not hooked on drugs. She viewed abundant money with suspicion, a side effect of her hard working middle class background. However Gaurav always managed to sneak in Rahul's house and "chill" as he said. They would play guitar together and talk whatever boys talk about.

Ever since I joined the Delhi College of Fashion Design, my life revolved around fashion. My favorite fashion accessory was my waist length hair and it was no secret to anyone the amount of care I took to maintain it. I sat on my bean bag looking at my room as if for the first time. It struck me how neat it was. The clothes were back in the cupboard, bed was made, books back in the shelves- Robin Cook novels separated from the Lakme fashion magazines. I realized that I had never thanked Anita for this. Serving our house since six years, Anita had become a family member for us. I should say thanks to her I thought. I have a lot to say to a lot of people. I felt the familiar sting in my eyes. I can't cry. I should not cry. I am strong. I am Chetna- DCFD's fashionista.

I got up as if to distract my body before it could overwhelm me. I went to get some chilled water from the fridge when I overheard the conversation between mom and her friend- Neelam aunty. Neelam aunty was my best friend Payal's mom, a convenient set up, part design, part coincidence.

"It must be difficult for you Renu isn't it ?" Neelam aunty said.

"More than me its difficult for Chetna but she is trying to accept this in her stride." My mom held no shame in crying. It was her catharsis.

Neither of them could speak more and I could not bear to see this too long.

Could my mother handle to go with me to the salon? She should come, I needed her. That basic fetal connection revved up within me.

Early next day Anita came with her daughter Champa whom I used to teach on weekends. Anita was a single mother for her eight year old daughter. Her husband had remarried as he wanted a son. Champa's main attraction was my bangle box. She could play with them for hours till her mother was over with the chores. I liked the way Anita encircled the corner of the end of her saree around her neck. But when she had told me the sad story behind that simple style, I gasped. Anita had met with an accident during Diwali when Champa was three. The fire crackers making permanent scars on the back of her neck. Since then she couldn't wear deep necked suits or sarees.

"But don't you miss wearing the deep necked clothes?" I had asked in past

"No gudiya, sometimes you just have to let go and adjust." Gudiya meaning doll.

Simple woman simple words but today as I recalled that conversation, it held a new meaning to me. Let go and adjust. I would have to do that too.

We didn't talk much, my mother and me during the auto rickshaw ride to the salon. The constant honking, the traffic, the heat, the red lights - none of that seemed bothersome to me. It was reassuring in a chaotic way. The auto rickshaw-wala sitting on the edge of his seat wearing only his grey trousers and off white tattered vest with yellow stains, tiny beads of sweat glistening on his forehead, holding the handle of his auto with one hand, tilting it as and when required and with the other wiping the sweat with his shirt, managing to take out a bottle of water lying under his seat, gulping down the contents in a quick nervous movement, spilling some of it over his clothes yet with precision so as not to touch the rim of the bottle to his lips, his eyes fixed like a radar on the traffic ahead, unusual this early in the afternoon.

We passed by the Kalkaji Mandir, the Global Laptop Repair Shop, Costa Coffee, Subway and reached our first destination for that day- Lotus Temple. Built in the shape of a large white lotus flower, this place was always swarmed by people of all religions,

creating a microcosm of beliefs which never failed to impress me. The temple had a meditating effect on me. Every time after the visit I would come out as if purged from the excess of emotions as Aristotle would have described it.

"This is not just a food to eat, but the physical presence of Gods blessing to you," said the priest distributing the sacrament in the temple. I felt confident.

We reached our next destination, Attitude Hair Salon. My mother preferred this than the rest. She never said why, but it was clear, it was the discount on weekdays that drew my mother to this one. I felt uncomfortable as the hair dresser, Suman knew me .

"Hello Renu ji" said Suman as soon as we entered the salon. There was no one else in the salon, perhaps a little early for business on a weekday.

"Chetna, if you want anything done I can give you a bigger discount than to your mom."

Without a word mom hugged Suman. It was not the discounts it was a close friendship, I had not seen mom react this way. Perhaps this was the shoulder that she was waiting to lean on. I turned away. Suman held my mother and waited till her trembling calmed down. Suman did not say a word, but gingerly, tucked her hair back, straightened her apron and helped mom to the salon chair.

"Chetna has blood cancer" said my mom sitting on the brown chair with rusted legs. Ever since the diagnosis my mother never said it aloud and as plainly as this time. She had accepted it.

I went into the restroom just to avoid to see the pitiful look in Suman's eye. The restroom was small and sad looking, just the way I felt about myself. No Chetna don't cry, don't cry. I tried to look at myself in the small faded mirror hung on the wall with visible bare bricks. I saw pity in my own eyes. Back in the salon, Suman made no dramatic reactions. She told me to sit down in the chair, covered me up with the same faded pink apron and then just bent over and kissed me on my head. It was so tender that there was no way I could control my tears. They came pouring - silent and sure.

"First I will cut your hair short and then shave it off. It will be easier that way." I sat still and made no attempt to wipe my face. I closed my eyes. I didn't have to look.. Did I ?

It had all happened the day when I was late for my fabric designing presentation. I had collected enough material and I was confident I would do well. As I zoomed along the uneven roads, on my TVS scooty which was my dad's gift to me much to my mother's chagrin, I overlooked a speeding Maruti 800 and in order to avoid a head on collision, I took a sharp left, crashing into the utility pole. Within minutes a large crowd gathered and I was taken to the Shubham Hospital. My left knee bled and I received minor bruises on my left foot and arm. I passed out seeing my own blood. I could never make it in a medical field. Mom dad and Gaurav were next to me in the hospital when I came round.

"Of course she can go home," I heard the doctor in the blue scrub attending me in the emergency room saying. She handed over my x-rays and prescriptions for the antibiotics and the pain killers. Back home, I was glad I was drugged up enough not to have to comprehend my mother's endless trite on safety, scooties, and how right her decisions were. A phone call from the hospital that evening stopped all that. Something was wrong.

Gaurav who found this whole episode rather entertaining was speechless as he kept repeating a monotonous "yes" to whatever the voice at the other end was saying.

I was at my family doctor's clinic the next morning who ordered a battery of tests.

"Beta, do you get tired a lot ? he asked. "Yes" I replied. My easy fatigue, my occasional fevers and the fact that I to my utmost joy had lost 6 kilos without any special effort, now put together was worrisome. Dr. Sinha called us after a week for discussing the reports.

"How can this be possible doctor ?" my dad said dropping into the chair. "She has just turned twenty one." It was there in my report file written in clear bold letters LEUKAEMIA. "This can't be true doctor."

"I am sorry Mr Dutta, this is what her test reports say. You should start the treatments.

The more you linger, the worse it gets and the patient has been witnessing the symptoms for two months now." I was shattered. No No No it's a dream, I should wake up from it .

"But isn't there any other option ?" my mom pleaded.

"I am sorry, this is the only way. " answered Dr Ravi Sinha.

"But doctor what caused this ? diet ? any thing we did ? stress?" asked my dad.

"None of these Mr Dutta. It - it just - happens."

This was the explanation given for the situation that would unravel my whole life, uproot my whole existence. It just happens. Why me ?

I opened my eyes and looked up in the mirror. Suman was clipping my hair in full speed and the sight of it strewn on the floor, made my heart leap.

"Half is done. Now the other half and then the shave."

My most prized accessory was lying down on the floor like bits of waste. The magenta streaks, the recent glitter mask which was my birthday present, all of no use now.

My dad had become more stoic than his usual self, and my mother was trying her best to focus on the mundane things of life. It was only Gaurav to whom I talked more freely

after my diagnosis and it was during those tete-a-tete's I realised that my brother understood me. Two years younger, Gaurav was a complete opposite when it came to fashion. Pursuing his bachelors in Engineering, all he cared was about engines and their dynamics. But he had a sympathetic side which was conspicuous during the chats. I had begun to grow irritable after finding about the illness and Gaurav did his best to retain his humour. I tried hard not to cry at every chance I got, to be as indifferent as I could about my illness. It was an amalgamation of feelings that could not be put into words. I wanted to escape from all this and prove to my family that I was fine but my dizziness, recurring headaches and the wound was a constant reminder of my illness, which I could not ignore. My parents made an appointment with Dr. Aggarwal, a reputed oncologist, for a second opinion, I was not interested. I felt if I could somehow not think about it, talk about it, it would just go away.

"Chetna its 7. You have an appointment due at 7.30" dad said, as I entered the house. I had gone out alone for a long walk just to remain alone with myself.

"Yes papa", I answered- my tone fell flat. Why couldn't they get it ? I didn't want any opinions, I didn't want to deal with all this. Why couldn't they just let me be?

"We were all waiting for you. Do you even realise how important this appointment was for you ?" mom said. I did not reply. No I did not care because it did not matter, it would not change a thing. Why couldn't we all forget this and go back to our lives the way we were? They did not hear all this. What they heard was a loud bang of the closing door when I entered my room.

"Escaping the appointment won't do any good Chetna" I heard my dad say.

Dinner time was a torture. A stone faced dad, a nervous mother trying to dish out okra curry , and poor brother making an attempt to restore normalcy to this heavy atmosphere. "Hey, I know what you need more – not okra curry but egg curry ! Eat some, apply some." No one laughed. Laughter was dead in our house ever since that fateful hospital call.

"But don't you think we should have a second opinion ?" said my mom, she would never give up.

"What is wrong with me ? I am as fine as ever. There is nothing wrong with me. I am fine, absolutely fine. Why don't you understand this ?"

"But Chetna -"

"No papa please."

"So you don't want a second opinion?"

"There is no need."

"Can't you even consider having one ?"

"I don't see any logic in that."

"Not even for your sake ?"

"My sake ? What's that ?" Irritated I had left the table, and tossed the plate in the kitchen sink making it land with a loud thud on top of the other utensils.

I did not hear the sound of the electric shaver. My senses were numb. It was only the physical touch of the sharp instrument on my scalp, that I became aware of the process that would follow. I shut my eyes and was thankful that I carried a scarf with me, washed and pressed by Anita. When I took a look at myself again I found the right side of my head clean shaved, and Suman was cleaning the instrument for the rest half.

Is this really me ? I thought. My heart sank ,it dawned on me that I could never have my beautiful hair grow back on this scalp. Chemotherapy would leave no scope of remission.

I had stopped playing basketball and going for swimming classes to conserve enough strength to reach the yoga classes with hope to get better by those asanas. But I had to call in sick quite often. My friends missed me, parents warned me but I resisted, determined to work up a solution for this wretched malady. But nothing seemed to work.

All this left me more fatigued than ever. I had dark circles below my eyes which no amount of make up could hide. I underwent a rapid weight loss and often felt nauseated.

My dad, the rational scientific person was the first one to commit blasphemy. He turned to Ayurvedic treatment. I took it. The medicines tasted bitter but I meticulously devoured the hakim abresham syrup, applied the zandu balm and ate every Arogyavardhini tablet. Every morning I anticipated the results but as soon as I removed the dressing from my knee, the wound bled, as fresh as ever. With a heavy heart I would apply a new dressing and hoped for improvement the next day. This continued for three weeks till my father was zapped of enthusiasm to continue with this treatment.

My dad was not the only transformed person I found myself praying for my wellness. I started fasting every alternate day. I went to temples and read the holy books for two hours till my backed ached and my lips went dry. I limped and was in need of complete rest, but paying no heed to ailing limb, I would climb those endless stairs of the temples with my offerings in one hand and the other on my left knee. Be it rain, or the scorching heat, I never wavered in my resolve and continued performing my services to God.

"Please God please please please make me fine just once, I would utter running out of breath, with little rivulets of perspiration down my cheeks. I had even filled up my small room with every possible idol I could get hold off in the market, brought garlands for

them and lit up small earthen lamps below them. In the mornings I would get up at 5 to light up the earthen lamps below the idols with a dupatta on my head . My family didn't stop me from anything and let me continue with my antics to the hilt.

By the end of December, I had given up. I realised I couldn't go against the fate. It was no use fighting it. I found myself defeated. All my hopes were deflated. I had to realize the fact that God was not a cosmic bell boy who would act according to my whims and fancies. Why would he cure me if chemotherapy was destined for me? Why ?

"Its done" said Suman. This time she did not hold up a mirror for the complete back view.

There was no pride in her work this time .With my head all shaved off, I could barely recognise myself. How different I looked. This is the new me, I said to myself, as I touched my scalp. It was smooth and I could feel my bony contours. It seemed surreal. Suman gathered the clipped hair and tied them into a thick long pony.

"Your hair." I held it, It felt strange. Mom reached over and hugged me. I hugged her back and held on for a long time. No tears this time. It was going to be the beginning of a new life for me.

"Get well soon dear" Suman said. I covered my head with the scarf to avoid the odd piercing looks of the onlookers, put my long combed locks in the envelope and we walked out of the salon. Once outside, we found the nearest post-office and went there. Mom sealed the envelope and scribbled the address -

Locks Of Love
Florida
USA.

On the back she wrote
Love
Chetna Dutta
India.

I had often heard about this organisation that donated hair pieces for cancer patients, but I had never imagined myself as either the donor or the recipient. Life is strange.

Back home dad and Gaurav were impatient for us. The moment Gaurav opened the door he yelled in "Hey baldy."

"I think I like you this way, you are my little Chetu," said my dad. "You look like the day you were born, the first time I held you."

Suddenly nothing else mattered.

"Dad," I asked. "How soon can I start the chemo ?"