I have met my father's whore twice.

First, unwittingly, when I was ten years old and accompanying him on one of those mysterious but unimaginably important errands only fathers are burdened with.

He was slicing through an incessant crowd, long legs making devilish strides that kept him always out of my reach, and I was scampering and scurrying and straining in his wake. Bouncing off every pedestrian and their haggard wife, out of breath but desperate not to lose sight of the brown-black trench coat whipping about my father's shins.

She could have been any woman. A stranger pausing to apologise for not looking where she was going. An old friend from a lifetime ago suddenly eager to skip down memory lane. An exasperated sales agent waving sim cards in the air. Maybe even a nimble-fingered thug working on liberating poorly-pocketed iPhones. She could have been any woman. But the effect she had on my father assured me that she was not.

The old man was overwrought. More than once he fidgeted with a tie he was not wearing. He shifted this way and that, appearing uncharacteristically uncertain as to where to stand or how to go about it. Like he had suddenly surrendered control of his body to an alien entity, and it was still figuring out which was the clutch and which the accelerator. His voice rose in an unnatural cadence, high then low then lower still, until he had to *hmm-hmmm* and *haarrrgh* dramatically to dislodge whatever debris was stuck in his windpipe.

It took him nearly three minutes to recall my existence. The sight of me, when it finally registered, seemed to jolt him. 'Oh!' his leaping eyebrows said. And then, 'Oh. You're that fella I sometimes see around my house.'

He clapped me on the shoulder, wheeled me front and center.

"This is my boy."

I remember thinking that she was tall. Everyone is tall when you're ten years old, but she was all the way up there, long neck and long limbs and long, elegant fingers which closed firmly around mine. She was beautiful, too, in a soft, ethereal way. Small oval face. Bright eyes brimming with mirth. A poof of soft curls dancing around her head. I held on to her hand a second too long, picturing her floating away, borne away by jaunty clouds as music swelled around her.

It was over all too soon. The hand on my shoulder tightened. My father nodded in the direction of a nearby fast food restaurant, then produced a five-hundred-shilling note. Go on, I'll join you in a moment.

I glanced back as I was walking away. Something big had happened, I just didn't know what. This interaction, as fleeting and innocuous as it had been… was significant, I could feel it.

I carried the story home on swift wings. I sought my mother, bursting with what I was convinced was crucial new information. My father, her husband, actually had the ability to blush. *You should have seen him, mother, giggling and drawing circles in the dirt with his big toe.* It was a stab at

humour. Proof that I belonged in the exclusive club of people allowed to make fun of the big man.

But my mother did not laugh. She did not find the story funny. She straightened, her joints clicking and groaning in protest, a half-washed cup clinging from her fingers. Her eyes were lanterns when she turned them to me. Her grip was a titanium clamp. Her voice was cold but clear, sending a familiar chill down the spine. A different chill, not quite the same as the one that locked your knees in place when she bellowed your name from three rooms away. Subtle. More powerful.

"Tell me what happened. From the beginning."

And so I did, feeling an odd tinge of guilt and not understanding why. I lingered over the things I had found peculiar; the way the two of them spoke without looking at each other, yet when they did, it was cozy and intimate and uncomfortable to witness. The way they stood in tandem with each other, each half-turned away from the other, but never not in each other's view. Like strangers standing miles apart but whispering inside jokes into each other's ears.

Mostly I described, poorly, the way my father moved. How he seemed to have retired the slow, measured bursts of his usual movements. Gone was the rigid, assured posture, for instance. The arrogant thrust of his hip in line with the defiant jut of his chin. Missing in action, too, had been his repertoire of conservative gestures; the rare twirl of fingers to illustrate a particularly colourful point, the way he used his shoulder like a trampoline to bounce indifference back…

"He wasn't dad like we know him, you know…"

I did not notice the exponential bulging of my mother's eyes. I was lost in the throes of my first creative flurry, the pulsating euphoria of painting a picture with words. When I think back on it, I realize it was the memory of my father's unspoken actions that afternoon that turned me into a writer. But it was also my mother's resigned, unsmiling response to my story:

"That was her. That was your father's whore."

I met my father's whore again at his funeral.

Twenty years had passed. The memory of her was a blurry image in the shadowy recesses of my mind. All I recalled of her was the weight her name carried around the house from the moment my mother christened her.

I did not comprehend it at first. There was an icy silence permeating the breakfast table the morning after I had gone out with my father and returned with tall tales. There was a pretence of courtesy, an illusion of politeness performed by two amateur thespians wearing my parents' faces. There was a wounded look that often flashed across my father's face, followed in the weeks afterwards by his wordless refusal to let me accompany him anywhere he went.

She hung in the air for as long as I could remember. The thought of her. The idea of her. The memory. I learned to pluck her presence from the unsaid pauses in my mother's insults, from the

stiffening in my father's jaw that sent him silently to his room. I learned the curious reality of living with a ghost; never seen, never heard, but present all the same.

And then the ghost showed up at my father's funeral.

I recognized her right away.

She stood apart from the ceremony. Dressed from head to toe in black. Like the mysterious figure in a spy thriller lurking on the edges of a beloved family man's funeral. Except that family man turned out to be a deadly assassin who had lived a secret life.

The sight of her was striking. The image was not so blurry after all. She looked familiar, but standing in front of her was like colouring in the edges of a half-finished portrait. The lithe frame with its eternal limbs. The small oval face, now framed by a tight bun with streaks of grey. The large, probing eyes, and the way they danced when she smiled.

Still beautiful. Still ethereal. It was still easy to picture her being borne away by a spirited gust of wind, a catchy chorus on her lips.

I ignored the hand she extended. "You should not be here."

There was a surprising undercurrent in my voice. Anger. Resentment. A growing dread at the possibility that my mother would realize I was gone and look around to find me chatting with *her.* Shame, that I was the one who had brought her name to my mother, and in so doing alienated my father. And here I was, cavorting with the enemy again.

I never knew when it happened, but at some point in time, I had picked a side. Because there were sides, even if nobody had explicitly said so. On the one hand, there was my father and this mysterious woman. His whore, as my mother called her on the rare occasion she allowed herself to 'go there'. It was a difficult side to choose. My father never talked about it. Never defended her, never offered any explanation.

The other side had my mother. A fierce champion. A vocal warrior. Somehow, without ever telling me the story of what had happened, she had secured my loyalty. Mothers and their sons. I knew there was pain there. I saw it whenever the other woman came up. When the ghost rattled a cabinet or dropped a spoon. I heard it in the tremor of her voice. That was enough for me. I would be on the side of the wounded. It did not matter what *she* had done. She had hurt my mother, that was reason enough for me.

"Please, I just came to pay my respects."

"You should not be here," I said again, louder.

Here it was, I thought. Finally, the grief that had been in hiding ever since the accident. The emotion I had been assured by a counsellor was on its way, not to worry. Was I supposed to feel this exhausted?

"I'm sorry," she said.

And then, right before my eyes, she crumpled. Her whole body seemed to wither and deflate. It was as if she had been holding in a breath and was finally letting it go. But that meant losing control. It meant letting the dam break and allowing the tears to come. Letting the lip quiver turn into a vocal tremble until the shoulders were heaving.

My anger flashed for the briefest second. What about *my* tears?

I did not push her away when she found my shoulder and buried her face in it. She sobbed, hard. There was barely any sound, but it rocked her whole body like she was wringing the tears from every muscle. All while I stood there, vaguely aware that she was not the towering mountain I had always pictured, nor the floating ballerina. She was a human being who had lost someone she loved. Just like I had. Just like my mother had.

"I'm sorry," she said again, pulling away. I shook my head, not knowing what to say.

She sucked in a rattling breath which seemed to steady her. She dabbed at her eyes with a faded handkerchief, then flashed me a weak smile. She offered me her hand again, and this time, I clasped it with both of mine. When she withdrew it, there was a crisp something in my hands. I heard her drift away as I glanced down.

It was an old photo. A bold crease in the middle, no doubt from spending years between books and thin wallets. I unfolded it and stared with mounting disbelief at the man and the woman in the photo.

I had never believed it when friends and family told me I looked like my father. But I could see it now. If you slid a wig onto my head and slapped wide bell-bottomed trousers on me, I could easily have been the man beaming at the camera. Straddling an electric guitar. Drinking in the adulation of a tall, bushy-haired woman seated next to him.

"Wait!"

I jogged over to her, stopping her before she opened the door to her car.

"What's your name?"

I will be meeting 'my father's whore' again. Except, I will call her by her name. I will swing one foot over the fence, and then the other, and I will step over the divide.

We will meet at a rooftop bar and sit at a table by the window away from the chatter. She will arrive first and wait, and I will linger at the door for a moment, still mulling it over, still grappling with the guilt of being there.

We will order coffee and joke about how he liked his. Dark. Bitter. Skimmed with whisky. Then, polite sips out of the way, somebody will *hmm-hmmm* and *haarrrgh* dramatically to clear the debris from their throat but really to indicate that it is okay to get real.

I will ask her about my father.

I will ask her about the width of his smile. The one I saw in the photo. What made him light up like that? I know she will say, the music, and I will nod. His secret life. My father, the rockstar. But I will ask again, because I know she will hesitate to say the smile was for her.

I will ask her about the man he was when he was with her.

It will be the first time she tells me about the time he left his family. The year he abandoned his wife and newborn son to pursue ill-fated dreams of becoming a musician. The bittersweet feeling of chasing his dreams, strumming his melodies to roaring crowds while his phone lit up with hundreds of missed calls from the wife he left at home.

Was it worth it, I will ask. His career never became what he hoped it would. Was it worth it?

He never regretted it, she will say. He chased his dream. He hated that it meant he lost time with his family, that it cost him the trust of his wife. But it was something he needed to do. For his soul.

And what about you, I will ask. What about you?

I will show her the story I wrote when I was ten. The story of the woman who made my father blush. The one who robbed him of his words and made him lose control of his limbs. I will tell her I am sorry for what I called her before I knew better. Before I realized that she knew my father as I had never known him, as I hoped she would allow me to know him.

As a man. Not as my mother's husband. Not as my father. As a young man, before life ushered him into a penn and branded him with its indelible ink.

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