**Jewel Patience**

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The cruise ship on the horizon glows like a Vesak lantern as it moves east towards Singapore. I aim *Menike* the other way, towards the light on Pigeon Island. Piyadasa, the lightkeeper, is usually drinking on the rocks when I motor past, but not this morning. He must have bedded down at a decent hour for once.

Not that this is a decent hour. It’s one AM, and as always, *Menike* is the first boat out. A few torches mark the shoreline behind me, but beyond them the village is dark. The men still haven’t learned my secret: if you spend your evenings sleeping, instead of getting soused at the tavern, staggering home to fuck your wife, and being kicked into the street for waking her children, it’s that much earlier to rise early.

I cut the engine a kilometre west of Pigeon Island, far enough from mainland Trincomalee but in no danger of drifting into Indian waters. The motor gutters to a halt, and there’s the familiar moment of ringing emptiness before the schlop-schlop of waves and the singing wind return. I anchor *Menike* and cast the nets; they billow just under the surface like giant lotus blossoms before sinking out of sight. After a lifetime of fishing everything is instinctive, and soon I am settling astern, pulling the shawl around myself. *Menike* rocks gently, cradled by a current too weak to scatter spray. The cruise ship has vanished, and stars are swarming like fireflies in the shoreless sky ahead of me.

On nights like this it is so much easier to think of Tigist. When Nandamma was still alive, she used to say, “You can tell a child one thousand times not to put his hand in the fire, but he won’t believe you until he is burned.” Nandamma told me all my life not to get involved with foreigners from the hotels, but I thought that meant the white men in the too-tight batik shirts, ruddy with arrack they couldn’t handle. No one told me that the spirit against whom I would have to guard would be a woman with skin as smooth as a ripe brinjal, that her hair would be braided tighter than the ropes of my fishing nets, that she would speak a language older than Sinhala and I would understand her anyway. And like the child with the fire, I could never know until I touched her all the ways she would burn me.

I wrap my arms around my knees and curl into myself like a mollusk. It’s dangerous to think of Tigist out here, when I am the only soul awake for kilometres, when the sea below widens like the well that opened in me when she left, when the sky above brims with stars that are still outnumbered by my memories of her. The first time I saw her, standing at the edge of the waves in her white cotton habesha kamis that made her look like a woman coming straight from temple, until I got close enough to see the texture of her hair, wild around her head like no Lankan woman’s hair gets. The glimpses I caught some mornings as I walked back from the market, of her lounging on a pool chair beside her husband, nails redder than blood wrapped around a wine glass. The first night I saw the ease with which her husband hit her in the face outside their cabana, the calm of his expression, as if he was just reaching for his beer and her face was in the way.

How I used my fingertips to wipe makeup from the bruise, just beyond the hotel fence the next night, and then used them again to cool the purpled skin with bee’s honey and aloe. How we lay together at the bottom of the boat, covering our bare shoulders with the same shawl, the nets heaving with fish beneath us, and how she whispered to me that her name meant patience, but she had none when it came to me, her *Menike*, whose name meant jewel. How the most fascinating thing to us about each other was our hair, how it was possible to smooth out my curls with coconut oil, the way Nandamma taught me, but with her it was the opposite, each of her braids furling tighter than a nidikumba leaf, the furrows of scalp between them studded with sand and salt and fragments of shell.

How I arrived at the fence on the sixth night and saw the hotel boys carrying new sheets into the vacated cabana. How I bribed one of them my entire day’s earnings to check if the foreigner madam had left anything behind, anything at all, and he said no, only this half-empty bottle of red nail polish in the bathroom, did I want it? How I drank it down and Piyadasa recognized *Menike* drifting off Pigeon Island the next morning, motored out, and found me lying in vomit at the bottom. How I let him tow me back to the island and wandered there for days, drinking his arrack, unable to even look in the direction of the mainland.

I jolt upright. *Menike* is low in the water; the nets are full. I’ve slept for hours. I wonder what woke me and realize that the bay is studded with light; the men have brought out their boats. Almost all the stars have disappeared from the sky, and dawn is nearly here. The light on Pigeon Island is out, which means that Piyadasa is awake. If I want to greet him and still make it to the mainland before the men, I need to haul in the nets. But I sit there in the stern with the shawl pulled around my shoulders, lulled by the whisper of dawn waves, watching the last of the stars wink out.