

## Afternoon Affair

By Asela K.

I hear him gargling. Rinse, spit, clear his throat and, gargle again. He repeats it several times. It was always the same, every time, this purification ritual. I heard the water run in the shower. I hated this. Was what just happened between us so dirty? Impure...unhygienic to him, that he has to go through such a lengthy cleansing process?

I, on the other hand, would long for him after he had gone... smell his scent on my pillow, on the bed sheet, in the air of this stuffy room, on my body because, at the end of the day that was all I was left with... his scent. I shifted on the bed. My body was covered in sweat; the creaky old ceiling fan didn't provide any relief from the heat and humidity of the room. I felt my entire life was like that creaking old ceiling fan, constantly moving without really going anywhere... around and round.

I got up and wiped my naked body with the towel that was folded over the towel rack. I saw his clothes neatly folded over one of the rungs. 'Can't get the shirt crumbled... will have to give an explanation to the wife' he had explained to me once.

Yes, the wife!

I reached into the back pocket of his trouser and pulled out his wallet. I flipped open the well-used black leather square wallet. Inside a see-through flap was a passport size photo that I often look at, without his knowledge. A photo of him, his wife and child. The laminated old passport size photo had been put there by his wife. Put there with a purpose. The purpose, according to him, was to remind him that he had a family so that he would not, stray. Perhaps also to convey to any would-be competitor that he was a married man with a family. 'She's so suspicious. But she only thinks of the possibility of another woman. She will never suspect something like this. She shouldn't either.' He told me the first time I had accidentally seen the photo.

'But why is she so suspicious?' I asked. 'Don't tell me, you have other *girlfriends* also...'

'Of course not...I have only you. Only you! I tried very hard to get her pregnant soon after the wedding, I hoped that way she would be busy with our child and won't want me anymore... but she still wants me. And she's suspicious now, because I don't want her like I used to. But she can never give me what you give me Rajitha. Even when I'm with her I constantly think of you. 'What he said made me happy, that day, never considering the utter betrayal that I too was party to.

I looked at him in the photo; Staring back at me smiling. Was he happy there in the photo smiling with one hand on his wife's shoulder and the other on his loveable little daughter? How I wanted desperately to have a photo of the two of us, a photo of us there in his wallet. A photo he carried around with him always... and perhaps once in a way, he would reach for his wallet flip it open and look at the two of us. I returned the wallet to the pocket of his trouser when I heard him turning off the shower. I sat waiting for him to come out. He was wearing a towel, he looked down at me and smiled.

'Got to hurry! Have to catch the 4.45 train or I'll be late and you know what that means.'

I smiled. He's always in a hurry once his need to be with me is fulfilled. It will be another 3 or 4 weeks till he calls and makes his eager request to meet... 'Aiyo can't you put a half day? Please, I really need to be with you. Aiyo, you know I can't come to Colombo on Sunday nai... What will I tell her? Please...?' It was always the same.

He is quick to dress. He combs his hair.

'You can try that new perfume there. It's great' I suggested, knowing the response very well.

'Are you mad? She has the instinct of a German Shepherd. How am I going to explain the scent of a expensive perfume?' He laughed, adjusting his shirt. He reaches for his Surrai\* which he had laid on the dressing table. He carefully puts it on making sure that it doesn't ruffle his hair.

Ahh...his precious amulet has a tail of its own. His parents presented him with this all powerful amulet after he was caught in a passionate embrace with a *near and dear friend* from campus. Apart from the many different powers it's supposed to bestow on the wearer, it was also supposed to protect the wearer from been attracted to other men!

He always takes it off before he would even allow me to touch him. He even refused to eat beef one day for the fear of lessening or breaking its powers. Knowing him the way I did...I failed to see the effectiveness of the Surrai, but I didn't dare tell him; I didn't want to hurt him. I can't offend him.

I won't offend him. I could never hurt him. Because... I love him. I love him more than I have loved anybody.

'Hey, gotta go Bro.' he says coming over to me, smiling. He looks at me surprised. 'Hey, what's this? Aiyo, Come on. Are you crying? Why? What's wrong?'

I hadn't noticed but there were tears in my eyes. Why Am I crying? What was wrong with me? I didn't know myself. All I felt was the enormous weight of a thousand tones pushing down on me, suffocating me. Something I felt every time we met and parted.

'Aiyo Raji, please... don't cry' He said sitting down beside me, on the bed. He doesn't get too close- his clothes would get crushed. He starts stroking my hair. 'I promise... we can meet again, very soon.' I don't know how to react to that.

'Hey, say something, will you!'

'We meet....and in one and a half hours you have your fill and you go Randika. Then what do I do? Wait for your next call when you have got over your guilt and need me again?! Just ...go to your family Randika.'

'Aiyo, Raji, what are you talking? You know it's more than that nai. I love you. I need you. I...I...only you.'

'Really Randika? You think I don't know about, what happens on your train rides? One of my friends who travel on the same train knows you Randika'

'What? Who? I mean have you been discussing us with your friends?... a..a..anyway that's nothing...nothing...just fooling around, that's all. But it's not like what we have. We have something a lot more deep'

'Deep Randika? Your married Randika...Your cheating on your wife...betraying her. / am betraying your wife.'

'How can *you* betray my wife? You don't even know her.'

'Yeah', I laugh 'Ofcourse I don't. You won't even tell me her name, I still, to this day, don't know where you live. But I do feel I am betraying her.'

'Come-on even I don't think I'm betraying her. I mean I don't go with other women.'

I sighed and smiled and he sheepishly looked away. 'Well what do you want me to do Raji. I mean...I mean, I can't just leave my wife... I mean I wish I can. I love you man. It's you I love. But marriage is not that simple- Friends, relations, our parents, office crowd.....all these ties and now, my child... My daughter. You know also nai, that the only reason my parents are leaving me alone is because I married. And ...and whatever it is I'm responsible for them nai? I mean to my child and my wife. I do care for her, I desire and love you...but...I do care for her too. I mean I have to live with her? I mean I'm taking a huge risk, just meeting you. It's because I love you Bro. Can't you understand?'

I finally smiled wiping off my tears. 'Yeah, I understand. In that case Randi don't take that risk. Don't risk your marriage, your reputation, your daughter. I know you love your child. Don't take that risk. Don't come here again'.

He looked up at me surprised... He watched me, as if to see how serious I was. Then he put his arms around me. 'I can't Raji. I can't. I just can't'. He rests his head on my shoulder. We stay that way for some time.

I knew then. I knew what I have always known... that despite everything, I needed him, perhaps even more than he needed me. My life with him will be a shared life. Disproportionately shared, but shared never-the- less.

'Hey, Randi it's okay... You'll miss the train. You better go.' I said finally pulling away from him.

'Promise me you'll meet me again. Promise' He said pleading almost like a child.

'Okay. You call', I finally said and we embraced again, this time hard and he didn't seem to care about crushing his cloths.

He left soon after that, perhaps not as confidently as he had during our previous encounters. I hear the sound of the latch on the gate lift and fall with a loud 'clank' then, silence punctuated only by the squeaks of the old ceiling fan. I sat there waiting... I was not sure what for I was waiting for.

I knew, that I will get another call from him, sometime soon... and I knew I will be looking forward for that call. I would be waiting to hear from his voice, to see him again.

*\*Surrain- a small amulet worn on body protection from ill fate, calamity or sickness.*

**Note from the writer:** This narration is based on real incidents. The characters are fictitious and do not in any way represent any individual gay, straight or, married. The Surrain- unbelievable as it may seem is based on fact. But as in the narration here in real life too, it was ineffective. 😊