

I always look forward to Anju's letters. I save them for the afternoons — to savor and absorb in peacefulness. A cursive flow of even beads trickles out of the pages, word by word, and collects to form lovely images — of lives and events that seem so far removed from mine.

I am reclining on my bed now, a glass of minted lime at my side. Summer has come in early this year. I open the letter, there is always anticipation — what new adventure will she talk about this time?

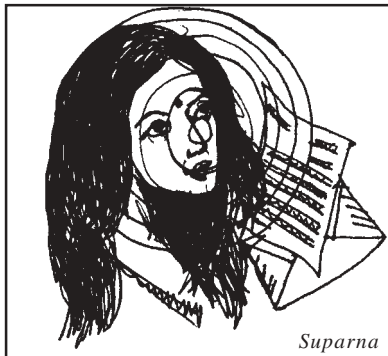
"Dear Niru," Anju wrote. "I just have to tell you about the special Valentine's Day I had. It was an evening designed for coziness. Snow had been falling all morning in mushroom-like flakes. By afternoon, the odd bushes on campus had swelled up like frosted cream puffs, and the fire hydrant outside my building into a creamy éclair. Feeble sunlight swirled and shivered, wraith-like, around the dark, dank stones. I took an early day off, missing the last lecture."

She was doing a Masters in Advertising at New York University. "I had been planning on doing some serious cooking — a special evening in. We eat out so often, just cooking something seemed the special thing to do. I bought flowers on my way home — glossy roses, deep red, twice as expensive as on normal days and loads of frilly, red with pink-skein chrysanthemums. And candles, red, of course — floating ones, to put in a petal-strewn glass bowl along with a few drops of rose essence for an Eastern whiff. But guess who was home before me? Rahul had escaped from his classes as well and, armed with a cookbook, was in the kitchen experimenting with Italian dishes. He would not let me enter the kitchen. There were even festoons of flowers on the table and tea lights on every surface, as if it was Diwali. Later, we had really yummy prosciutto and

## SHORT STORY

# Par Avion

○ Amrita Chowdhury



cheese-stuffed pork balls in a tomato-porcini sauce served over spaghetti, followed by creamy zabaglione with fresh, diced fruits and champagne to polish it all off. By night, it was snowing again, so we dragged our blankets by the window and snuggled up to see the snowflakes in the dark. It felt just so special."

I put down the crisp, blue onion-skin paper and mopped my brow with the end of my sari. The lemon, paisley printed cotton was limp like an exhausted butterfly, diaphanous wings creased. I let out a deep sigh. Anju was always like this — a bit over the top in energy, in enthusiasm, and, even, in

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writing letters. Still it was nice thinking about snow on afternoons like this one.

The overhead fan creaked in slow motion like a tin plate tumbling stair by stair. I looked at the chrome wall clock, its rapier arm slicing through the seconds in precise ticks — a fast, even overtone on the slower tempo created by the fan. It was four o'clock. Time to go to the kitchen.

"I have invited the Singhs over for dinner. Tomorrow," Ajay had said last night.

"But Sheela has gone to her village for a week. She had a telegram. Her mother is not well. It will be tough to organise a party without any help."

"I'll come home early. He is the new boss after all. I cannot really ask him to reschedule. It would not look good," Ajay had cajoled.

So I had set down to cleaning this morning, sweeping the tenacious cobwebs in the cracking, moisture-pocked corners with a broom tied to a stick. Our two-bedroom house was one of the newer ones in the Colony, only twenty years old. There was never any money for aesthetic repairs.

"The government has hungry mouths to feed elsewhere," Ajay would always say.

"More likely, it has to feed greedy and corrupt pockets somewhere else." I was the cynical one.

I walked into the drawing room. The sofa, a wedding gift from my parents, was in a nubbly, brown fabric, the rage of last year. Even though the windows were shut against the heat, warm, colloidal slivers of sunlight came in through the cracks and reflected in glittering chinks off the brassware

along the shelf. I had been polishing these decorative pieces in the afternoon until I sat down exhausted to read Anju's letter, to feel its refreshing zing of the unknown.

"What? Giving away the secrets of our marriage again?" Ajay would whisper in my ear whenever I wrote to Anju, which was quite often.

"But she also tells me so many things," I would mutter embarrassed.

Anju, my best friend, the sister I had always coveted, my next door neighbour when I was growing up, had left India to do a Masters in Advertising in New York. She met Rahul at her university and they married a year later. I had hoped once that we would grow into old neighbours, giggling and gossiping together. But now I knew that would not happen. Still, the oceans and continents could not constrain our thoughts. We wrote long letters, sharing little details of our lives, even cycles of correspondence with a time lag.

"That was very tasty," Mrs. Singh pronounced later that evening.

I looked around. Ajay was soaking up the praise. It was his good taste in choosing me as a wife that was being recognized, after all. Mr. Singh was crunching bones in the manner of senior officers, slurping, taking in all that was his due with impassivity. He flicked his tongue to capture a little smear of greasy curry at the corner of his mouth.

Later, well fed and burped, he told Ajay magnanimously, "Saxena. That two-wheeler loan you had mentioned earlier. Write an application letter and give it to me tomorrow. Accounts should be able to get a check ready by next week."

I will write to Anju tomorrow, I thought. Tell her about the new motorbike. Ajay had already shown me the model he wanted.

"That one in the corner, Anju. The silver and black one," he would always point out whenever we went

past the Honda showroom. "When we get the new motorcycle, I'll teach you to ride my old scooter. Then you can take it to your classes."

Summer was nearly over by the time I got Anju's next letter. Several lusciously slow months had passed. The nights were warmer than the moist stillness of the air, as I lay in Ajay's arms in the pheromone-heavy aftermath of our lovemaking. My days were occupied with my classes. I was doing a part-time course in Education and with the varied activities at the Ladies Club in our colony. I had sprained my leg after a fall trying to ride the scooter and had been limping around for two weeks. Nevertheless, I had managed to organize a fundraiser successfully and



had even participated in a variety show. I was Mrs. Singh's favorite.

Anju's letter was full of her usual bumbling effusiveness. Rahul landed a great job with an investment banking firm, having just completed his MBA. They had visited Hawaii to celebrate their first anniversary.

"It was so divine," Anju wrote. "The beaches were stunning but empty. There were so many of them. I would sit on the sun-kissed sand and feel the salty breeze gently ruffle the flowers in my hair. It would be so provincial, in India, to tuck a hibiscus in my hair. But there, on that lovely island, it just made me feel so beautiful. And the flowers were in

such lovely hues, colors mingling into each other to create shaded patterns. During the days, we snorkeled in the coral reefs, riding warm, underwater currents, exchanging surprised glances with iridescent fish. Night would arrive lingeringly as the vast horizon turned into a bright red that slowly bled into inkiness. We would sit beneath the palms and hear the gentle swish of the waves at eventide."

"So pretentious," Ajay had said upon reading one of her previous letters. "She sounds like a travel ad."

"She just gets excited," I had put that letter away. Our years together were still fresh in my mind, behind a barely-there veil of time. Loyalties had not been fully recalibrated yet.

Now, it was different. I had just celebrated my anniversary as well. But how could I even begin to compare with the glamour of all this? Why even try? My world revolved on a different orbit, a wide tilt away from hers.

I remember my anniversary day very well. It was a Thursday. Ajay had taken the day off from work, and we had driven to a nearby lake. We had walked hand in hand, oblivious to the newspaper scraps and plastic bags lining the lakeshore. We were aware, though, of the gaggle of village girls that followed us, nudging and giggling, white teeth flashing in dark, stained faces. Ajay had managed to bribe a fisherman to take us to the center of the lake. We went through the ring of used bottle floats in the shallows, their paper labels forming a gooey scum on the surface, like clumped and wrinkled cream on hot milk. Once in the deep, a peaceful lull surrounded us. The oars slid in and out of the water rhythmically, and our boat glided on the hot, shimmering water, leaving a long scar in its wake.

Later, we had returned home and cooked together for our friends, sizzling love words and simmering affection. Quiet moments, simple pleasures – nothing snazzy there.

I wrote to Anju about the party, about fun moments together and with friends. The new sari Ajay had given me — an orange Benarasi with a green frond scroll in the border, symbolic of nature, verdant and fruitful. I did not know it yet, but Neeraj was already a rapidly multiplying tissue ball in my womb.

Our trans-ocean correspondence slowed down a bit. Reality had spread its heavy cloak around me, blocking the thin, silvery rays that came from afar.

“Are you taking your vitamins? You must take more rest,” Dr. Morarka advised.

“Is everything alright? The baby is okay, no?” I clutched Ajay’s fingers. I was in my fifth month now.

“The baby is doing fine, but your heartbeat is sluggish. I am not worried yet, but you must take precautions. Take short, brisk walks everyday. And rest more often. See that she does that, Mr. Saxena.”

Ajay was very loving. He would bring me little gifts every day, a guava one day, imported strawberries another day, a baby journal once. Even my mother-in-law, who had come to stay with us, indulged my whims.

“Eat some more *puris*,” Ma would make all my favorite dishes. “You need to eat for two.” Later she would rub oil into my hair and weave it into a tight braid that snaked across my back.

Anju wrote again. She had moved into a big house near Long Island, a short train ride away from her university and Rahul’s office. “I am into interior design and antiques these days. Our house is an old one, with polished wooden floors and crystal chandeliers. There are three fireplaces, including one in the bedroom, which is large enough to have a sitting area. These are real fireplaces, where wooden logs crackle and sear, not the artificially silent, mechanically efficient gas ones that

are popular these days. Our fireplaces have a real soul, a romantic soul at that...”

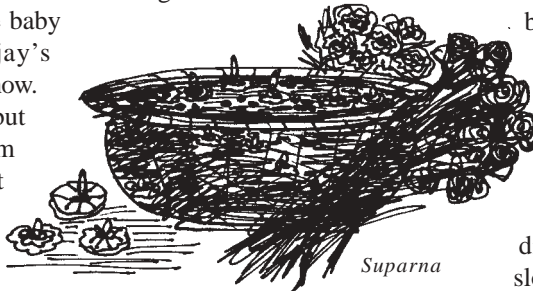
I felt a firm flick inside my stomach, not like the earlier flurries that had kept me wondering.

“Ma!” I ran to the kitchen, tossing away the letter. The images of Anju’s house dissolved away in a spray of excitement.

“Careful. What happened?” Ma came rushing.

“The baby moved. Oh, will it do it again soon?”

Then we stood there, in the middle of the kitchen, hands on my belly, waiting for the next kick.



Suparna

Motherhood has been so wonderful. How the last six months have sped! Despite the frantic days and rushed nights, the world changes when Neeraj focuses on my face and gives me a smile. Things become brighter, disappointments fade away. Money is a bit tight now, what with all the extra spending we had to do — hospital bills, the part-time baby ayah, and the big party that we threw after Neeraj was forty days old.

“I will be late coming home tonight,” Ajay called.

“Ajay, this cannot go on. You come late every day now. Do you hate me and the baby so much?” Alone all day with the baby, I could feel my nerves get brittle in the social vacuum.

“Niru, please try to understand. If I get promoted this year, the money will ease a bit. Then we can hire a full-time ayah, and you can start on your classes again. We can even plan on going to Nainital. You’ve told me so often that you would like to go on a holiday.”

I feel recriminating words rushing into my mouth. No use, I tell myself. I let my shoulders slump. I walk out to pick some flowers. Ma had planted two hibiscus trees when she was here— red and yellow. I like to offer these fresh flowers to the gods. I have become a believer now; it gives me much calmness to close my eyes, take a few deep breaths, and focus inwards — away from the mayhem of my life.

The almond tree is shedding itself, fruits and leaves and all, the leaves crunching below my feet as I walk towards it. I want to sit on the swing under the tree — enjoy a few quiet moments while Neeraj is asleep, before doing my *puja*. But there, stuck in the fence, was a crinkled envelope bearing the signature striped border of Air Mail envelopes. A U.S. post-marked distraction. I don’t feel the usual rush to read it. Strangely disembodied from myself, I walk slowly to pick it up.

“Dear Niru. I haven’t heard from you in such a long time. Hope you are doing okay.” I haven’t told her about the baby yet, I think. I must make some time to write that letter. “I have to tell you all the news from my end. I graduated last month. It was such a relief getting the degree, with honors, too. We had been having a series of parties, everybody in the mood to celebrate the end of slumping-over-books days. The ceremony itself was a bit of drag. It was very claustrophobic inside the hall in the middle of a sweltering summer, but there were cases of free champagne after that. A week later, Rahul and I went to France — my little travel fling before I started working. I did tell you, didn’t I, about my job? I will be a Marketing Associate at Channel 9, one of the local TV stations, focusing on advertising. It should be so much fun. It is a bit scary, too — my first real job. More on that when I have



something real to report. But, let me tell you more about France...”

I caught snatches of phrases as I carefully folded the letter – “walking along the Seine” and “sipping at a Café on the Champs Elysees” – the even rectangles getting thicker and smaller, until pouf! They bulged and splayed and displayed their insides. There was stillness all around me, the cold, autumn wind resting on his haunches, ready to roll. I start swinging, waking up the air gently at first and then violently, invoking the wind to blow and envelop me in its coolness. I am searing inside. A warm wave is moving within me, rising and spreading and cresting into little wavelets that crash against my insides. There will be sizzle and fumes when the hot front meets the cold, but I look forward to that hissing dousing. I hate life and I hate the unfairness of things and I hate Anju for flaunting it in my face!

It is Spring again. The laburnum tree is budding. I am sitting under the striped umbrella in my back verandah, my books spread out over a small table and an *Eve's Weekly* spread out over them. There is a special feature on children's birthdays. It has some nice ideas – sailboat sandwiches and traffic light buns.

“Neeraj, don't eat that. It's dirty.”

I pick him up from the flowerbed, running as he breaks into a scooting crawl to escape me. “Sheela! Come here.”

She comes out, wiping her hands on her red-yellow block printed sari, mine from two years ago.

“Take Baba and change his clothes. He is getting very naughty now.” I tickle Naughtiness Himself under the chin, and he rewards me with a view of two teeth.

She works longer hours for me now, helping in the kitchen and with the baby, allowing me to get back to things. I am taking one course this year, slowly easing into studies again.

“You are letting yourself go, Mrs. Saxena,” Mrs. Singh had told me two months ago. “Having a baby does not mean the end of everything.” Since then, I had been going to the Ladies Club meetings again, not being very active but helping out with little organizational details. Ajay is even busier than before, his promotion still hiding behind a question: Will Mr. Singh be able to transfer his junior from his old plant?

I tilt the umbrella again. I have been doing it all afternoon, soaking up the flapping slivers of shining, filtered warmth. I can hear the faint croaking of a distant loudspeaker, proclaiming

devotion through film music, waxing and waning with the occasional breeze.

“*Memsahib*. Letter for you.”

I touch the ribbed, pink envelope and the pale pink writing paper within – the angular fold marks at odds with the random encrusting of petals. This paper was meant to be rolled and tied with a silken tassel. Anju would have done that, I smile, amused at my own thoughts. There is the hassle of mailing a rolled parchment in a tube across oceans and continents, though.

I can feel a niggling curiosity, and my fingers itch to spread the paper, to find out what that blot is, straining out behind the paper like a padded mole, unusual for one of the careful letters that Anju sends. But my mind tells me otherwise. It is time to walk inside, let my sun-brightened eyes adjust to the dim coolness within. To put this letter in the carved rosewood box in my almirah — like the others before it. To snap the lid shut on a peep show of tempting unreality.

*The author is an engineer, writer and management consultant. She holds 7 US patents for semiconductor manufacturing. She lives in Melbourne, Australia* □

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