

Road-trip

by Ajay Nair

When she sees the house for the first time, she is surprised by its sprawl. It is as if a massive lump of stone has fallen from the sky and then someone has carved a house into it. There is a small, dark porch that sits outside the house that reminds her of a waiting room at a doctor's clinic. She notices two women sitting there; the boy's grandmother and his mother. Her shoulders and arms are thin cords of pain by now and she welcomes the opportunity to set her heavy haversack down as she greets the women.

The boy shows her into her room — the first one on the left as soon as they enter the house, accessible through a narrow corridor which has one other room up ahead on the same side; or maybe there are two. She is not interested in the details. The room's bare, but a large bed occupies its centre, like a spider in the middle of an empty web, only the spider's legs are made of wood and its eyes are two large, hard pillows.

She is not exactly welcome here, she realises. The grandmother sized her up and instantly disliked her. When she was a child, she had a grandmother who did not approve of her either. The old woman would taunt and berate her without cause. It was her father who would fold her into his arms then and console her. Her father would whisper in her ear that senility had eaten large parts of the woman's brain; but he'd be careful to say this out of earshot of her mother. She imagined senility to be a small creature, like a rat, with crooked, sharp teeth.

This grandmother had mumbled at her when she had hugged her lightly but she could not make out what she said. Mumbling, grumbling old woman with breath that smelled like soggy peas, and talking rapidly, as if she was afraid that she would not have enough time to say all that she needed to before she died. She had deep-set

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eyes and they saw everything. She picked out a scrap of dandruff from the girl's hair as she passed by, suddenly swooping with her stick-like hands.

The mother had been friendly but it was a vacuous friendliness. She looked lost and vaguely troubled. The girl felt a distasteful sympathy for her - with her shifting, clueless eyes that seemed to have two black pupils swimming in the viscous beds of the whites of her eyes. She would not last long, the girl thought, and possibly would not even manage to outlive her old mother.

The boy was the most confused of the three. She had met him the previous day in the train — he had his berth opposite hers. She had been staring outside, watching the unblinking window-eyes of the train watch the barren landscape that rolled by. She was aware of his eyes on her, but the awareness was like knowing that there was an itch somewhere near the sole of her foot, mildly irritating but something that could be ignored. When it had turned dark outside, she had turned to look at him. She thought that he was young, impossibly young, even though he was probably the same age as hers. He averted his eyes, feigning nonchalance, but instead, he looked stricken with guilt. After some time, he had tentatively broached a conversation. She must not have spoken more than a few words.

She locks the door behind her and keeps the bag on a chair that has a thick nylon mesh for a seat. She goes to the large open window and pulls the curtains together. She must not be seen. Ever since she lost her child, she had been waiting for this moment, to be still in a place where no one knew her, to stop running.

She turns and looks at the insolent bed again. She kneels by its side so that her eyes are level with the thick mattress. There's a small bug, or maybe some kind of a worm that's sliding along the edge of the bed. Its smooth black body stretches and contracts

rapidly, and she is reminded of a snake. She peers at it, leaning closer, so close that if she gets any closer it could crawl into her eye. This proximity does not disturb her — instead, it sends a shock through her body, not an unpleasant shock and she welcomes the brief moment of feeling something, some sensation that fights against her numbness.

She thinks about how she got here. The boy was smitten by her and despite her reluctance, had plagued her with questions.

Where was she going?

Nowhere, in particular.

What do you mean — don't you have a destination?

No, I am on a road-trip.

What kind of a road-trip — and who goes on a road-trip by boarding a train? His laughter had been polite, so as not to offend.

This is a different kind of a road-trip; one on which I will find out where I want to go when I get there.

That is mysterious, I like mystery. Maybe you should come with me; I am going back for a few days to my native town. It is rather beautiful, you will like it. You could stay in my house — my mother and my grandmother stay there but they won't mind.

The boy had been lying; they did mind, at least the grandmother did. Now that she was here, the boy was not so sure why she came. He pretended to understand the nature of her visit, pretended that this was perfectly normal, but it was not. His voice had increasingly become whiny as they had neared his house, and it almost sounded hysterical as he introduced her. She is a friend from my college, she

is visiting, needs to go to a village nearby, just staying for one night. His excuses, his lies were amusing to her.

The worm pauses its patrolling, and seems to be looking at her. She suddenly thrusts her head at it, snapping her neck forward and it scurries away, scared. She laughs at its fear. She contemplates the size of the bed again. She will sleep at the edge of it tonight, because otherwise, she'd drown in it, it's a sea of cotton quilts and beddings that would swallow her if she rolled towards its centre.

Dinner is served and she walks out to the kitchen. She has washed her hair in the wash-basin in the bathroom attached to her room and it is damp, hanging lifelessly to her back. Every few seconds a drop of water would drip off it, and slide against the back of her sleeveless, partly torn t-shirt. She is wearing short pants with the t-shirt, and her bare legs are swollen, the veins in them visible, purple, hurting. She feels as if she is naked when she sits down at the table, because of her wet hair.

The grandmother mutters something under her breath, her teeth grinding the air as she chews out words. The mother smiles pleasantly, but her hands give her away, because they are trembling, as if she has been subjected to some grievous shock. The boy sits next to her, too close to her, his hand not accidentally brushing hers as he serves her the chicken.

They ask questions — the grandmother rudely, the mother haltingly.

Where are you from? What do your parents do? Where are you going? What for?

She lies sometimes, sometimes she tells half-truths. She tells them her parents are dead, though they are not, they are merely angry. She eats little, sipping the gravy with a spoon.

Why are you eating like that? Is that how a person should eat?
Don't you like our food?

The boy tries to shut his grandmother up but she cannot be controlled. She mocks the girl, condemns her lack of manners.

The girl listens quietly, still sipping the gravy. She does not hear the words flying at her, only grasps their intent. She is thinking about her baby, the one she loved for exactly one month before she lost her forever. Now, all the love for her baby is coiled in the pit of her stomach and it has fangs and venom, and it is leaking into her blood, her bones. The mother is flapping weakly at the grandmother's words, but she fails to curb her.

You are one loose girl, just walking into our house like this, and not sitting properly, dressing properly. Have you no shame? Why did you corrupt my boy — are you after our money?

It's perhaps her silence that provokes the invective, because she can't think of any other reason. But she is consumed by her silence. This is because she is listening to her baby cry, and all the time, the poison is oozing inside her.

She had had her pregnancy terminated a week back. The child's father — her lover (and how dramatic, how fantastic that word sounds) — was with her during the procedure. He claimed he wanted to be with her, but she knew that he just wanted to make sure she went through with it. She had not seen him since. He was a boy too, frightened, callow, like the boy sitting next to her now. Now all that is left was the baby's ghost, kicking her from inside.

The words don't stop. There's a storm brewing around her but she does not respond. She looks at the corners of the rooms, the walls and the floor, and sees that they are all slightly misaligned. This is a

badly built house, and it houses badly broken lives, she thinks. The boy had told her, with his eyes brimming, how his father had died when he was a child. She did not tell him then that a father's death is nothing compared to a child's death. And a child's death is nothing compared to a child's murder.

She lifts the plate that's in front of her and hurls it at the wall. The piece of chicken smashes against a picture on the wall — of the dead father. The plate breaks into many pieces. Somewhere outside, a dog barks. She gets up and goes back to her room, leaving behind a trail of spent anger, a smattering of unknowable misunderstanding.

When she is in her room, she opens her bag, fishes out a small case and pulls out the solitary cigarette inside it. She switches the lights off. She had bought this cigarette the morning of the day she'd found out she was pregnant. Since then, she had kept it sealed and protected, like she had kept her baby sealed and protected inside her. Now she can smoke it, and she does. She takes deep, wretched drags, the smoke escaping into the darkness around her. She pushes her finger at the curling smoke and writes her baby's name in it.

Tomorrow morning, she will go the lake nearby. It was the boy mentioning the lake near his house that had brought her here, that had been the vital hook. She had always loved water. She will go there and wade into it till the water reaches her neck. She'd wear a skirt so that the water can clean her. If she cried then, her tears will mix with the lake's water and her sad regret will dissolve in its depths.

