

The Etymology of Maman

by

Elia Rathore

When a whale gets stuck in a net, people die trying to save it. I met a sweet, watery man in Edinburgh who got drunk at a ceilidh and told me he both loved and hated his mother. They grew up dirt poor and she mostly did good by him and his brother. But now, she held onto the comfort of suffering. It left her bitter, terror-stricken. Asking her heart to change was like detangling a whale from a trap, from a danger that would weaken it by inchmeal until it was killed.

*

In those last tugging days of summer the rain came all at once. Ali and I joined Baba in the sheltered part of our wraparound garden.

“What’s happening, Baabs,” Ali chirped to my smiling father.

Ali was tough, steadfast, and three years younger than me. Once, while he still thought I knew everything, he mimicked my eggshell diffidence around our father. I mimicked my mother’s. As our friends wrestled with their patriarchs, we realized that our father was a steely softy. No bark or bite, just an austere poker face that got him through the work day.

Maman, however, loved to yell at her children and the two permanent workers of the house. She was hollering at Julie, our maid, about the clothes on the

clotheslines as she panic-collected them. Then she screamed about getting the chai patti on the stove to Yunus, our cook, who had been with us for ten years.

Maman's rain routine was designed to drive me mad. It was like this every time. By the time she came to sit with us the rain had petered out to an effete drizzle.

*

I returned to four missed calls and three voice notes from Sara. The last one: "I'm coming over bitch"

Sara was insane, my best friend since I tore my shalwar in the fifth grade and she barked at everyone who noticed. She lived two streets over. We had earned the right to take each other for granted.

On account of her doe-like eyes and her practiced warm smile, Sara was easy to like. I watched as she gave Maman a kiss on the cheek and let go of her hands.

In my room, Sara undid her innocent affect, promptly dumping the illicit contents of her weary Vera Wang purse onto my bed. She lifted a pink pill from the girl mess and popped it into her mouth. I pretended not to see.

“What’s up with you and Auntie? She seems more tense than usual.”

I explained that it *was* the usual.

“Hmm,” said Sara, eyes closed, “feels like we should take her.”

“To Hunza?” We were planning our first trip to the mountains, ice-capped and far enough up north. We wanted a formless summer adventure. I didn’t see where my mother would fit.

“Yeah, maybe the air up there will change that. Everything is too... accumulated here.”

Maman, in the mountains. I couldn’t imagine her in the next town over. We had the hills around us, blue, serene, and she never showed any interest. My mother was in self-exile from fun, and sugar, and anything that wasn’t a dutiful maternal chore.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to spend time with her?”

“She wouldn’t want to.”

“But you want to.”

I wanted to say no, but said nothing. She gave me a hug and changed the topic.

Sara brought it up again at dinner. My mother was in the kitchen making roti, even though Yunus was on duty. I was rolling my eyes when my father said it was a brilliant idea. Ali nodded. Sara squeaked and went to ask Maman.

*

Maman said no. She was too old, too weary, there was too much to do, she had never been, she didn't want to, she would be imposing, she just couldn't. I was relieved, then ashamed at the relief.

Every Sunday Maman made Ali and I sit with her to fold our laundry, not trusting anyone else to touch our underwear.

“Maman, remember that story you told me, about the kid who gets lost in the mountains,” he said, “and the ladies in the white dresses guide her back home with buttered loaves of bread?”

“You remember?”

“Of course. You should go to Hunza, and you should wear a white dress.”

She laughed, slapping him on the back of his head. She never told me this story. I got prayer memorizations and moral lessons. The stories were for Ali. An odious prick of bitterness – too much to look at – had to be swallowed back into my gut.

Baba said the final thing that needed to be said. I talked about the trip budget as Maman walked in. “This is for you and your mother both?” he asked loudly.

“It’s per person,” I told him, looking at my phone.

“This is silly, Latif,” my mother said, “who would look after everything?”

“Julie and Yunus,” I said, despite myself. “That’s their job.”

“This life is prayer and play,” my father followed, removing his glasses to clean them, “jaan, where’s the play?”

*

On the bus, I offered to sit with Maman who told me to sit with Sara. Tauseef, the guide, said we were waiting for one more person.

She came loudly into the bus with tote bags on either arm, 'THE MET' and 'THE NEW YORKER'. They banged into every seat. She dropped her water bottle. I handed it to her.

“Well aren’t you a doll,” she said in a Brooklyn accent, “thanks honey.”

This mysterious middle-aged woman with a pixie cut and tattoos on her fingers sat next to Maman. Her name was Fauzia, and she said she already felt good energy from us. She spoke to my mom in formal newscaster Urdu. Maman, too, was remarkably forthcoming.

Sara and I shared looks. I didn’t think Maman ever had a friend.

Tauseef did a headcount and started blaring ugly Russian techno.

“This keeps the driver awake.”

*

We stopped frequently on the winding, magnificent route up. For tea, to pee, to breathe, to avoid puking. With us were four undergraduate boys, a young married couple, and a nature photographer.

Maman and Fauzia spoke the entire way. Sara's pills knocked her out, but my dull nausea kept me perpetually half-awake, greedily listening to their conversations. Maman seemed different in them.

We spent one night in a hotel in Naran and sat around a fire. Someone mentioned stories of heartbreak. Maman didn't participate, saying her heart was perfectly intact with Allah. I didn't either, saying I don't like to dwell on the past.

"Liar," Sara whispered. She talked about her father leaving her mother right after she was born; Fauzia spoke about her divorce and not seeing her son for years. After everyone's stories, I felt bad for not saying anything.

"I will pray for all your hearts," Maman said in the middle of a solemn silence. I noticed she was crying, and looked away.

*

The next day we reached Karimabad, our final destination.

“Unfuckingreal,” Sara said to the snow-covered peak of Rakaposhi drenched in midday light across our balcony. Maman was taking a nap, so we walked around the sloped town, full of coffee shops, markets, and tourists.

Outside a tuck shop we ran into Rohaan, one of the undergraduates. He invited us to Attabad lake for our last day, to watch the sunset. The offer included hash and the local mulberry moonshine. Thinking of Maman, we told him we’d confirm tomorrow.

In a secluded grassy patch by an abandoned building, Sara and I got high and talked about a future we didn’t know. Maman was having apricot cake with Fauzia when we returned. We went to the shops before a quiet dinner of *chapshoro* in a cafe downtown. We tried to steer the older ladies towards their own plans for the last day. It wasn’t difficult; Fauzia suggested stargazing. Maman said she had never done anything like that.

“It’s like saying hello to God,” Fauzia said. I thought Maman would take offence, but she smiled. A smile I didn’t know.

“I’ve done something like *that*,” Maman replied.

*

We confirmed with Rohaan on the morning hike to Eagle's Nest. The objectively mild trek was taxing for Maman and me, with our skinny legs and nonexistent cardio practice. Men from our group periodically fell back to check on us. Sara and Fauzia, who seemed to be competing, went ahead.

We were alone for over an hour. Following a protracted silence, I gathered the courage to ask whether she had actually never been heartbroken. The resultant quiet pricked at me.

“My mother died when I was young,” she eventually said, “I didn’t have room for any other sadness for a long time. Then Abba died, and I was alone. Now I have God, and my children.”

For the first time since I was a child, I reached for her hand.

*

We rode to Attabad lake in two janky cars rented from a local. Maman and Fauzia went to see a palmist before we left. Fauzia somehow convinced her it wasn’t haram.

We got there in time to see the last carrot embers of the sunset. The mountains surrounding the lake hummed, eerie and alive. The air crisped up quickly, we all became comfortable together. The moonshine was easy to drink and kept me warm.

Sara was flirting with Rohaan, crossfaded and loose. A little huff emerged from my nose like steam. The pills made her sloppy. Esau – the quietest of the boys – talked to me by the bonfire about the lake, which resulted from a landslide fifteen years ago. It was named after the village it leveled.

“It’s kind of morbid how everyone parties here,” he mumbled, “there’s all sorts of dead bodies at the bottom.”

The dead villagers reminded me of my mother’s parents, and the nausea came in a wave of guilt, bending me over. Esau, flustered, told me to throw up, that I would feel better when I did, but I didn’t want to. I hated the sour sting of vomit in the back of my throat.

I hobbled over to Sara, who seemed ready to sit on Rohaan’s lap. It had already been three hours, and, strangely, I wanted my mom. She scoffed at my suggestion to wrap up and told me to have fun for once. I told her to stop embarrassing herself and have some sense for once. We were suddenly yelling over the music.

“You never take me seriously,” she said at some point, “like I’m some sort of sick character study to you. People are more than side characters in your life, Laila!”

“Are those the pills talking?”

“You think you’re above everyone, that you have some special pain or whatever the fuck and the rest of us can never understand, that you’re just so fucking smart and melancholic. Well, guess what, Dostoevsky? No pain is that bad, no pain is that special, we’re all fucking traumatized, get over it you dumb fucking bitch!” She spun around and speed-walked back to a wide-eyed Rohaan.

“Why did you invite my mom?” I yelled after her, searching for something hurtful.

“Just because your family’s a mess doesn’t mean you get to mess with mine!”

She ran back and slapped me. The boys had turned the music off. Our violence echoed over the placid lake. I felt ashamed. The ghosts of the dead were watching.

*

Esau dropped me to the hotel in a thoroughly silent ride. I walked around the dark town, still part-drunk, weepy, looking for Maman. Eventually I was directed to the stargazing spot, a little way up a small hill.

It was just them there. I stood in the darkness between some trees, where they wouldn't notice me watching. I recognized the large patterned cashmere shawl underneath them. My mother's winter praying shawl. There was giggling and nuzzling and hand holding so intimate I turned away multiple times. Still I stayed for a while, watching Maman look like she was in love, letting this new sense of disgust build on itself.

I stood there for too long, fresh with secrets. I felt motherless.

*

I spoke to neither Sara nor Maman on the way back, sitting next to Esau in the front instead. He was a good boy, and his taciturn nature was a welcome comfort.

The last chai stop was in Abbottabad. Fauzia pulled me to sit with the rest of the group. "What's wrong, honey? Sad the trip is over?" she asked. Not wanting to elaborate, I nodded.

"Aw, I understand," she looked at Maman, "me too."

I wondered if I would feel sick forever. Maman had not once asked me what was wrong. Sara, who hadn't spoken to or looked at me since the slap, was happily

talking to Tauseef about a jinn he met in Balochistan. Maman looked at me sympathetically.

“My poor daughter got my Grandmaman’s nausea,” she explained to Fauzia and the married couple.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” the woman in the couple said, “why does she call you Maman?”

“Maman’s side of the family calls their mothers Maman,” I said, parroting what I knew of the family lore.

“How come?” Fauzia asked me, “What is the etymology of the word? Sounds French.”

“My mother was a quarter French and a quarter Algerian on her mom’s side,” Maman replied for me, “Grandmaman came to Pakistan to teach with a group of hippies from France.”

“Huh?” I had no idea we had any French or Algerian blood in us. Even Sara stopped pretending she wasn’t listening to our conversation.

“When my own Maman died,” she continued, unfazed, “some of her mother’s side of the family came to the funeral. Auntie Nanette, Grandmaman’s youngest sister, convinced Abba to let me and my sisters go with her to their small hometown in France, near the mountains. We spent one summer there.”

“Damn,” said Sara, “Auntie, that is so cool.” Fauzia looked similarly impressed. I was entirely speechless.

“Yes, it was nice,” replied Maman, “I met my mother’s extended family, although none of us understood each other all summer. But it was beautiful, and the butter was so good.”

“What about the bread?” asked Fauzia.

“Best I’ve ever had.” She beamed.

My wonder quickly turned acidic. I knew nothing about anything.

*

A week later, I felt half-missing. I kept to my room. Baba kept trying to talk, Ali kept texting me to stop being such a brat. Maman left trays of food outside my door. She had been happier and more malleable since we got back.

After a sleepless night of watching reality TV I emerged at dawn for a cold mango from the fridge. My mother was praying in the living room. I tried to get my mango and leave before she finished, but she was waiting for me.

“Want me to cut it for you?” she asked.

“No,” I started going back upstairs.

“Laila, wait,” Maman’s voice sounded soft, like it sometimes did after praying, “what did I do now?”

I waited to hear what I was going to say. All the emotions of the past month thrashed inside me.

“Do you ever think about me?” is what ended up coming out.

“Of course,” Maman said, “why are you asking this?”

“You don’t talk to me, you don’t tell me anything,” and then I was crying. “All you do is yell, all you do is housework, what about me, what about your daughter?”

I sensed her bristle before she said anything. “Oh, poor Laila.”

“You tell Ali things, you told Fauzia things –” I began.

She cut me off. “When was the last time you asked me anything? You didn’t even ask me to come on the trip, Sara did, who you also tossed aside. ”

I kept crying. She continued, quietly then, wounded.

“You know, when I went to the palmist, he told me your daughter looks for you and she can’t find you. But I don’t know where I am most of the time either.”

“I want you here,” I blubbered, “I want you to kiss me and tell me all the stories you tell Ali.”

“I can’t tell you everything, Laila,” she said, cold again. “You’ll understand when you have a daughter.”

“I will never subject another child to this bloodline of broken women!” I yelled.

“Shut up,” she said, tears in her eyes, “you’ll wake your father.”

She left me there sobbing, holding a warm uncut mango.

*

Ali forced his way into my room and demanded to know what happened. After listening to my abridged version of the story, he started laughing. I told him to get out.

“You need to chill,” he said, “play around, stop taking yourself so seriously.” I tried to be mad but couldn’t commit. Sometimes Ali reminded me so much of Baba. My idiot brother, a sage.

The next few nights were rife with reckoning. I fought it, but knew my mother was right. I stopped being curious years ago. I made Maman another pain point in my life, another character study.

I was finishing up a long email to Sara early one morning when I heard the familiar rumble of thunder crack into a wash of water. It hadn’t rained since we got back. My dad’s full-throated snores told me my parents were still asleep.

Downstairs, Ali was standing in the living room, staring outside. “Still up?” I asked. Summer was almost over, and Maman would soon nag us about our routines. Ali didn’t say anything, continuing to look through some broken netting in our sliding door.

“Did you rip the net again?” I asked. Then I saw what he was looking at.

It was Maman. She sat alone on the grass. She didn’t shift when I sat down next to her and kissed her arm. I noticed my shirt in her hands. The rain was warm.

With closed eyes, her head tilted up. She was smiling. Under the wet weight of everyone else’s laundry, the clothesline inched closer to the ground.

Copyright © Elia Rathore 2025. All rights reserved.