



Once everything you cherished is gone/ Manhattan of Mumbai

by Chani Fifield

“We’re really pleased to have you on board Cara,” her boss beamed, a mix of relief and anticipation flashing across her face. “This department is a tall order,” she continued, “a very tall order indeed. But we’re sure you can make it work.”

The call was finished abruptly with a cursory nod. This was a job Cara had been chasing for more than a decade and now, it was finally hers. She’d won it on merit and it proved she wasn’t useless and hopeless like *he* had always told her.

It was July in Mumbai and business was booming. An influx of foreign investors to the fintech market had seen agencies springing up across the city. Nariman Point, where Cara lived, was a well-established area of the central business district known internationally as the Manhattan of Mumbai. She enjoyed the hustle and bustle of life there. It was a far cry from the earthen hut on the Rajasthani plains she remembered, surrounded by famished cattle and steeped in the practice of Sati*

Her apartment was on the third floor overlooking the edge of the peninsula. There was a desk in front of the floor to ceiling windows in her lounge, where she sat each day to work remotely. Cara had positioned the desk there to feel the breeze which whipped up from the bay below dispelling the heat of the midday sun. At night she loved to gaze at the lights on the arc of the peninsula which illuminated the dark like strands of a glistening necklace.

As she settled back to work, Cara heard car doors slamming with intent in the distance, one after the other. A riot of chirruping children, chastising mothers and the occasional wheel screech followed by some very choice adult language travelled up through her windows. The scent of cardamom and cloves from the chai wallahs wafted in, as she listened to the clank of their copper canisters containing the sweet tea being peddled to passersby.

The ruckus signaled the start of the afternoon school run at the infant school just blocks away from Cara’s apartment. And with that common commotion, came the familiar feeling of tightness in her throat and stinging at the edges of her eyes.

“Two more hours,” she lamented; “two whole more hours my children will be languishing in after school club, not at the school next to where we live but in the one in the next district,” - the only one that could offer the wraparound hours she needed to keep her job. The job she’d fought so hard for.

Guilt swelled in Cara’s chest as she tried to turn her focus back to the document she was now rushing to complete. “It’s just not right”, she told herself, like a stuck record, every day. “They should be at home with *me*”. Cara longed to be standing at the school gates to collect her children, relishing that moment they would first spot her in the sea of parents and light up with the most delighted smile. But things hadn’t turned out that way for her and all hopes for the type of childhood she’d always dreamed of providing for her children had been dashed. These were the cards she had been dealt.

Cara was so desperately striving for a ‘better life’ for the three of them. If she wanted the nice apartment with a bedroom each for them, if she wanted to be able to buy them what they needed and occasionally what they wanted. If she wanted to break free of the stigma she felt moored by and prove to everyone just how capable and actually *fine*, she could be. Then this was the life she had to get used to - running from pillar to post, missing her children dearly, wiping their tears as she budged their belligerent little bodies through the door to breakfast club each morning. Missed recitals and sports days, sending them in cocooned in infant paracetamol instead of being able to rest off their coughs and colds at home. She declined play dates for pay checks, and instead of showering her offspring with the patience and attention their ages begged for, she feared they had instead ended up with a snappy, dysregulated mother flying by the seat of her pants.

At bedtime that night, Cara tucked in her sleeping children. She admired her daughter’s almond shaped eyes, upturned nose and how her mouth didn’t quite close fully from her lip tie as a baby. The girl sleeping soundly now was almost two thirds as tall as Cara, with every inch of toddler squish long since vanished. “Six whole years of loving you” Cara sighed, “gone in the blink of an eye.” She listened to her daughter’s breath drawing in and out and smiled at the snuffling sound it made.

Sitting beside her, waiting for her to drift off to sleep is something Cara had made sure she’d done every night since her girl was born. Deep regret flooded her but this time she let the tears come.

“This is how it has to be now, no one else is going to do this for you, for us”, she reasoned. The incessant ping of new emails emanated from Cara’s laptop outside in the hallway, beckoning her away with crass urgency. Cara kissed her daughter’s forehead and whispered, “that’s the problem in this life. We are always in a hurry to be happy. And before you realise it, everything you should have cherished slowly slips away.”

**Sati was a historical practice in Hindu communities in which a widow sacrifices herself by sitting atop her deceased husband's funeral pyre.*