

**Uma Jayaraman**

## **The Stained Window**

Vinita sat by the dirty window on the fourth floor of the HDB flat which she shared with her mother and two younger dizygotic siblings, Malati and Pranav. The window overlooked three coffee shops that sold *kaya toast*, *kopi*, *teh*, and chicken rice. The three shops were set beside one another in such a way that made the place look like a mini food court.

A motley crowd thronged the hawker centre during the day. Taxi drivers came here for their mid-morning *kopi o* and a couple of *kaya toasts* to go with it, when they had company. Sometimes the drivers also asked for chicken rice *bungkus* so that they wouldn't have to stop over again at lunch and lose wages; the late afternoons at the food court saw students from the two neighbourhood schools, who bought a quick snack to last them through the various tuitions and classes they had to attend before night would bring much-needed rest.

In the evenings, the food court wore another hue. After the rigour of the day, men flocked over to the blue, red and white rotund low stools that adorned the shop front and dreamed of a better life over mugs of beer.

Night finally fell on the food court close to dawn.

Chew Yun Ze, or Uncle Chew as he was known to all, was the last to close his chicken rice stall around 2.30 am. He would wash the pots and pans, the basin and gas top, stack the cookware neatly in the draining tray so that his wife would find a clean kitchen when she opened shop at six in the morning to dish out beverages to the sleepy-eyed school children, dreamy teens and *rotan*-wielding adults of the garden city. After the last plate was put away safely, he would count the cash in the register, put a dollar for his son in a piggy bank that resembled Dibo the gift dragon, turn off the lights of the shop, and go home with Palaniappan, his friend who sold *kopi* during the day and beer in the evenings at the stall next door.

Vinita sat by the window as Uncle Chew locked up his shop and waited for Palaniappan to pull down the shutter for him. The two men had seen Vinita by the window on most nights but had seldom considered why. Life posed many challenges and had robbed the two men of their sense of wonder. As Vinita watched them walk briskly into the dark night, she sighed. She looked at her legs and slapped them hard. She didn't feel a thing.

She had been practising for the "Sundown" with Shawn. Her mother had tried to argue her out of running the twenty-one kilometres, then pleaded with her and finally settled for the easy way out: to speak about

it to everyone who crossed her path. She derived gross pleasure from harping on how the young didn't listen to parents these days.

Vinita had met Shawn outside Grub, a food outlet in Bishan Park one evening. Exhausted by her high intensity workout, she had come to get water for her protein shake. It was eight in the evening, the time of the night when families walked in the park with children in tow, hoping to burn off calories from fast-food binging, and couples strolled hand in hand in the comforting shadows of the young night cooing into each other's ears. It was also the time of the night that one was instructed to watch out for reptiles and boars that had been sighted here.

Oblivious of all these motives, thoughts and fears, two little girls scampered around the lotus pond. Their mother ran after them in vain trying to strap mosquito patches onto their pyjamas. "Sweeties, you haven't put on your patches. Come away from there."

A dad protested. He didn't think there were mosquitoes at the pond.

"You know our neighbourhood is on high alert for dengue. Neha got fined last week when they suspected mosquitoes were breeding in one of her indoor plants."

"How thoughtless of her, really," the husband retorted. The wife looked away. They sat in silence while the girls played near the pond without their mosquito patches.

Vinita looked at the couple. Neha was probably a good friend, she thought. Why would anyone want a family outing to sour on account of someone else's worries about living in the fine city?

An elderly lady shuffled past the couple and heaved herself down on one of the wooden benches. An elderly gentleman hurried up to her as fast as his wobbly knees could carry him and heaved himself down beside her. "I am sorry darling," Vinita heard him saying with sincerity. He gently removed the support that she wore on her right knee, took out a tiny bottle from a pouch and dabbed some of its contents onto a kerchief before covering her knee-joint with it. The old woman seemed to be in pain but she spoke in a soft voice. The elderly gentleman nodded his head once in a while but was focussed on his task.

As Vinita had walked away, her thoughts returned to the old man, tending to his wife like a shining knight in fairy tales. The old woman was like the princess decorously poised on a balcony, who would throw her perfumed handkerchief coyly over the balustrade. The kerchief would descend like a leaf caught in a gentle breeze, attracting the knight who would reverently catch the piece of cloth and plant a kiss on it.

Vinita smiled and slightly turned her head to get a glimpse of the old couple before moving on.

Then it happened.

The old people transformed into young dancers moving in a big hall. The young man held his lady by her slender waist and raised her off the ground. She raised her hands high and gently clasped them high above her head. The man gyrated, gently at first, but soon he seemed like a rotating axle on a wheel. Vinita could hear shouting in her head; the lady screamed, the crowd cheered. The young man heard nothing but the cheers and kept on turning.

No one knew how it happened or whose fault it was. The young lady lay unconscious on the floor. Her right knee was awkwardly bent away from the joint and her right arm seemed trapped under her face. She had probably tried to protect her face when she fell. There were shrieks of horror all around.

Vinita had tried to push her way through the paralyzed crowd to the young woman who lay on the floor. Even as she weaved her way through the motley limbs of the audience who had been cheering the couple only seconds ago, she looked around for the young man. Just then, a stinging pain in her ankle halted her. Her head swam, the night darkened and she ...wasn't sure what happened after that.

Coming to, she saw a young man hunched over her. She seemed to be propped upon a garden bench. The young man was forcing her to drink from a bottle. "Are you okay, Miss?" He asked. She grabbed it and splashed the cool water on her face. "Yes, yes, I am alright, but could you please help the young lady there?" she said, pointing in the direction of the bench on which she had seen the couple sit.

"Well, I would gladly help any young lady", he said, with a twinkle in his eye. "But I think one needs to see the people one is asked to help," he added with a suppressed smile. Vinita quickly looked in the direction of the bench.

And there was no one there.

"Hi, I am Shawn," he'd said with a smile that was honest and seductive at once. Vinita absently took Shawn's outstretched hand while looking around for the couple.

Shawn helped Vinita to her feet and offered to walk her home. He lived across the street in the HDB block facing the neighbourhood secondary school.

Vinita and Shawn often met at Palaniappan's coffee shop in the evenings when they did not meet in the morning for a jog in the park.

It was Shawn who told her of the marathon.

Vinita's father had been a long distance runner from the time she could remember him. He came home one evening after a ten-kilometre practice run, and collapsed. A photo in which he proudly held his medals and prizes hung on the living room wall was garlanded that day. Now his mother stood still before the photo every

morning - surely, a believable, lovable gesture. But no one knew what she said in the minutes she religiously spent with him, as she dusted the photo and changed the flower garland every morning.

Well, almost no one...until the morning Vinita happened to watch her mother's 'conversation' with her dead husband from the other side of full-length glass doors which she had been asked to wipe clean. These sliding glass doors opened into a small area which was used as a dumping space for all objects that waited for an appropriate place in the four-room flat. The curtains were drawn to keep out the morning sun and view of unseemly clutter, so Vinita's mother didn't know that her daughter had chosen this moment to do her bidding. Poised on a stool to reach the top of the glass panes, Vinita could see the expression on her mother's face through a small gap between the curtains.

"Why isn't Mom breathing?" Vinita thought. Her mother was saying something under her breath. She couldn't hear what she was saying but she did not like her mother's expression. So that afternoon when her mother refused to allow her to participate in the marathon, Vinita seemed to know why.

"Amma, what happened to Appa was an accident."

Her mother looked up from the document she was reading on her Acer tablet only to turn away without a word.

Vinita was stunned and she edged away to a corner from where she could watch her mother. She couldn't understand her mother at all. Her mother was in her early forties and had given birth three times. Of these, the first-born had died in his baby cot before he was three months old. She had raised the two remaining twins single-handedly.

She had not remarried.

Strands of grey hair hedged her forehead but her face made up for such early signs of middle age. Her high cheekbones gave her face a covetable angularity and her thick, long hair belied the kind of suffering a young widow is conventionally believed to have undergone. As Vinita watched, her mother sat pristinely at work, putting young women who did nothing but sit on their comfy couches all day to shame.

From the time Vinita first met her mother at the age of nine, she thought of her as the model wife and parent. "Who else would want to adopt a child that was the result of her husband's wanton ways with women? She took her in, washed her, put food in her plate, cared for her through her share of measles, viral infections, and the pains and pleasures of adolescent life.

At eighteen, Vinita was a well-spoken, confident and desirable young adult.

She adored her mother...till that morning when, poised on a stool behind the curtain, she watched her mother talking to her dead husband.

She tried to think of a suitable saying to mark this expression. “If looks could kill, Appa would be ashes,” she thought. “Oh, but he was already ashes.” Her brother had gone to India with their mother after the funeral and immersed the ashes in the holy river, Ganga. “What could she be saying, really now, to warrant that expression?” Vinita continued to muse.

The landline rang at that point and her mother put on her mother-of-three-children look as she said “hello” with this-better-be-important tone of voice. Shawn was on the line. She called to Vinita and warned her by raising her index finger about the “Sundown” marathon again.

...

A month had passed since this happened. The wife stood before her husband’s garlanded photo every morning and Vinita practised for her marathon.

Sometimes, reality stares us in the face, overcome by emotions of selfishness, ambition, insecurity, or the anxiety to do something that will stand out. Truth-telling on such occasions seems more impossible than walking barefoot on the folds of the Himalayas in the dead of winter.

Or, as impossible as opening your heart to your loved one.

The morning jogs and the practices for “Sundown” gained glamour owing to the furtive quality of her meetings with Shawn. Her mother would be at work when Vinita returned from her jog so that she was seldom aware of how long her charge was away at the park. When she returned home from work in the evening, Vinita was away at her Polytechnic, where she studied for a diploma in sports sciences. She hoped to go to Australia to major in Sports Injury.

It was two weeks to “Sundown.” They were practising at their peak and Vinita had to work hard to hide the daily disappearances from her mother.

Vinita returned home one evening and saw her mother pacing the living room. It was small and her mother’s strides were long. She was like the panther that had been put in a cage just when it had a mind to cross the Sahara.

Bracing herself for what she thought would be the last day of her freedom, Vinita was surprised when her mother didn’t ask her where she had been.

Just then, she noticed her mother’s travel case on the sofa.

There were two things her mom hated — menopause and travel. She had been going through the former for a year now, which led to all sorts of real and imagined ailments; she had to travel now. To make things worse, her mom-in-law had just called to say that she would be unable to step in to help with the boys. Vinita’s mom had tried to protest: “but you don’t surely mean it mom, do you?”

“Well,” she cooed over the phone, “There is always the first time, dear daughter-in-law. I don’t see why you can’t allow your children to take care of themselves. Don’t you trust your older daughter?”

Vinita’s mom did not miss the spite with which the ‘older daughter’ had been pronounced. She had displeased her mother-in-law by taking in Vinita. All mothers believe that their sons are incapable of errors, and thus suspicion of infidelity had fallen on the daughter-in-law, the next best option in this case. Years had passed since her son’s death, but her disappointment hadn’t.

Vinita sensed the hesitation in her mother’s voice when she said, “It is now your call, Vinita. Can you take care of everything here this once while I am away?” She was almost pleading but of course, she wouldn’t say “please” to her daughter. Mothers seldom did, even though they taught their children to say “please” for everything. Vinita knew her mother was not expecting an answer and she didn’t reply. Her mother picked up her suitcase and left.

She had to play ‘mom’ to two hyperactive siblings . What can one say about it? She slipped into her role with unease. What sustained her was the hope that her mother would soften towards her if the trip went well for her. She tidied the house with gusto on the day her mom was to return and was never so happy to see her mother as now as she climbed out of the taxi near their void deck. Her mother was back and everything would be normal again. As she made for the door, she saw her mother bend slightly towards the rear window of the car as if to speak to someone. Vinita couldn’t see much from her vantage spot yet thought she saw a silhouette through the striped windscreen.

The silhouette of a man.

Vinita withdrew from the window because her mother had a habit of looking up at the flat from below. She rushed to the bathroom, splashed her face with cold water, sipped some Vitagen that she had put out for Pranav, and went to the door.

Her mother was at the entrance when Vinita opened the door. She was beaming but she looked tired. Vinita wanted to throw herself on her mother and tell her what a wonderful mom she was. She had been waiting for her return these three days. But...she quietly put out her hand to take the suitcase from her mother, and asked her if she would like some coffee.

Her mother thanked her and absently asked how everything was. But before Vinita could answer, she had walked into the bathroom and shut the door.

Who was it with her in the backseat? Where did Mom go? Was this not one of her business trips then? Vinita’s mind flooded with unnameable thoughts. Her mother stepped out of the bathroom, and looked divine in her new night suit. She kissed Vinita good night before she walked off to her room.

Vinita woke up earlier than usual next morning and left home before her mother was up and about. Her mother had left for work before she returned. “Sundown” was only eight days away and she wanted to stay out of her mother’s way till then.

Then, unexpectedly, the annual haze crept over Singapore. The PSI index stood adamantly at 96 for three consecutive days. While in the public world of affairs ministers and grassroots leaders talked about how the issue of haze was an international one and Singapore would take all steps to ensure the safety of her people, Vinita and Shawn retreated to the protection of the indoor sports stadium. Three days before “Sundown”, the couple stayed up late in the gym. Many outdoor public events were being called off. What if the race was cancelled too?

They had planned this for too long. Vinita was determined to run.

Hadn’t one heard of miracles? Like a change in the direction of winds? A day long downpour?

Keeping hopeful Vinita returned from her evening jog with Shawn one evening to find both lifts of her block under service. That’s odd, she said to herself, forced to take the stairs. She wanted to shut herself up in her room before her mother returned from work. They had not spoken to each other since Mom returned from her mysterious trip and Vinita could not shut out from her mind the silhouette in the backseat of the cab.

She strode up the stairs, two steps at a time, and began to enjoy the climb eight flights up to her flat on the fourth floor. After two, she hit her stride, running. Hadn’t Shawn said that he did it twice a day? If he could do it, why not her? Girls were strong and powerful too. As she flew up the last flight in record time and jubilantly jumped with both feet on to the landing of her floor, it happened.

....

“Well, it is difficult to gauge the exact nature of damage, Mrs. Kannappan,” said Dr. Quek, as if he was examining the parts of a car. Her spine seems to have hit the metal railing at the landing as she tumbled down. The x-ray doesn’t show any broken bones but this doesn’t say much either.”

Mrs. Kannappan sat by her daughter’s bed as the doctor went off to check out damages done to other beings in the course of the day. She didn’t blame him. What do you expect at Accident and Emergencies?

After three days, Vinita was still unconscious, waking up only to babble. While one could understand words such as “stairs”, “fall”, “amma”, no one could begin to think what “don’t let go” could mean?

The haze hung intensely over the Singapore skyline. People were queuing up at all medical shops to get their share of masks. There were debates at void decks and clubhouses about which type of mask was more useful. Primary schools churned out “haze worksheets” that needed to be submitted online in case schools had

to be shut down. Malati and Pranav secretly hoped that the haze would stay until October so that they may escape PSLE.

“Sundown” had been called off.

Vinita was in her bed. At home. She could not move her legs. A physiotherapist came to attend to her three times a week.

Shawn enrolled for Basic Military Training with his cohort. Malati and Pranav joined secondary school.

Mom spoke to her husband’s photo on the wall every morning.

Vinita was in and out of hospital.

She is at the hospital today. Shawn is holding her close to him. Her mother is speaking softly to Shawn. “When did mother become so kind to him?” Vinita thought. As Shawn got up to leave, Vinita pulled him down.

But it was not Shawn but her father. She was pulling his long, strong arm goading him to sit down by her. Was it not him? She surely recognized his medals. They hung there with him on the wall.

“I’m so glad to see you, father.” Vinita tried to sit up but slumped back into the hospital pillows with the very effort.

He gently kissed her on the forehead, and left. “See you tomorrow at Bishan Park, Vini,” she heard him whisper. “We have a day left. How can you bear to lie here like this?”

“Appa, don’t leave me like this,” she cried.

The nurse on duty peeped in to check on her. “Doctor, she is delirious again. She is calling to her father.” Her mother was the next to speak. “I can’t bear to see her like this. Please give her the shot.”

“Amma, wait. I want to speak to you.” Vinita tried to open her eyes but they seemed laden, like in beauty salons when one goes for under eye treatment. Her lips wouldn’t part but she managed to blurt out, “Don’t let go, Amma.”

Vinita felt a prick like an ant bite on her arm. Her head became lighter. Before long, her head sank heavily into the clinical pillows.

Calm. Calm. Very calm.

The old lady at the park waved to Vinita. Shawn bent over a girl in the park who was tending to her ankle. The young girl smiled sadly at him. The sad eyes looked at Vinita, at her mother in the taxi, at the stairs, and the hospital bed calling for the shots. Vinita screamed in her sleep. Her father walked in through the wall. Vinita got out of bed and walked away with him.

The haze hung over the hospital.