Damaged Gifts

By
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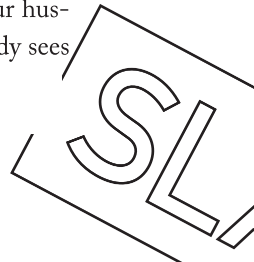
I see Poongothai for the first time in my mother-in-law's house the morning after my wedding. She is a round, dark-faced woman in her mid-40s. Her skin is the color of dark chocolate. She wears large gold loops in her ears that tugs at her lobe, sagging them a bit. Her neck is covered in yellow beaded chains, a mix of artificial and pure gold that glow like slick decorative paper. She has a loud laugh, the kind of laugh that comes from huge and happy men.

I wake up at 5 am because I am a new member in the house. I'll be frowned upon if I wake up any later. Also, I don't get much sleep as the large mattress in my husband's house feels too thin and firm. Inside the kitchen, Poongothai is filling up colored water bottles with drinking water from the RO filter that is installed on the wall. She closes each of them with their matching caps. Then, I watch her pour a spoonful of coffee decoction into a glass to which she adds generous amounts of milk and sugar. She mixes it up until it's frothy on top that resembles a layer of soap bubbles.

My mother-in-law, a large round-faced woman, in her fifties, pulls me aside and asks if I have brushed my teeth and showered. I shake my head. She says I will have to first wash myself and light the lamp for the Gods. I nod and watch Poongothai offer a cup of hot coffee to my husband and father-in-law who are sitting on plastic chairs and watching television.

My mother-in-law whispers as I collect a towel and my intimates, "Make sure you wash your underwear. And also, you will wash your husband's underwear too. These are private clothes. It's better if nobody sees them."



I nod again. I don't argue. I am a new bride. Nobody wants to deal with a bride that talks too much.

I decide I don't like my mother-in-law that much. She doesn't like me either. She never wanted me to marry her son. I belong to a different caste and my origins are in North India while my husband's family is from South India. My father-in-law agreed for the match because he had heard stories of couples eloping and he didn't want to be the talk of the town that could bring his career as a biotechnology professor to a stand-still.

After I fill a silver lamp with ghee, I roll a cotton wick between my fingers and place it inside the lamp with the tip of the wick resting near the lamp's mouth. I look around for a matchbox. Poongothai comes to my aid and hands me a rectangle shaped box.

"You never lighted a lamp before?" she says.

"No, my family doesn't use lamps," I say.

She looks at me as if I just told her that my family had broken one of the golden rules set by the Indian society which is to follow a religious life devoted to the Gods.

"Not to any God?" says Poongothai, standing beside me. I notice beads of sweat glistening near her neck that look like rounded pearls. It is early March and the Coimbatore weather has already reached 90 degrees.

"To a different God. The kind that doesn't need a lamp," I say.

She gives out a chuckle as if I had cracked a joke. "Ha! Here you must learn about these Gods soon. Your mother-in-law loves to pray, wash the lamps, apply kumkum, offer fruits and flowers. On festival days like Diwali and Pongal and Margali masam, she'll wake up at 4 in the morning. She even fasts every other Saturday."

I press my lips but don't say anything. I can't tell yet that I am a late riser and that I don't believe in praying to painted statue figures. Instead, I pour more ghee and light another silver lamp and place it in front of a golden framed Ganesha dressed in a red dhoti. I light an agarbatti and pierce the stem inside a ripe banana.

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I am asked to decide what I'd like to call my mother-in-law. I call her Aunty but she says now that I am married to her son, I will have to

either address her by the word Athai or Amma. I pick Amma because my husband calls her by that name and it's just easier to use whatever name he uses for all the members of his family.

When my husband heads out with his father to settle the wedding photographer's payment, Amma and her mother, who is called Amachi, pull out plastic chairs in the living room and offer one for me to sit on. I feel like a decorated doll dressed in a pink-laced churidhar with jasmine flowers pinned to my hair. A streak of vermillion fills the parting of my hair while twenty red and green glass bangles fill my wrists. I feel the Thali hanging around my neck like a heavy piece of metal. The holy yellow thread is strung into little metal pieces that consists of the shiva lingam, two gold coins, and two gold roundels. The sharp edges of the shiva lingam prick the skin between my breasts. I want to put my hand inside and itch the area and re-adjust the locket's position to anywhere else but inside my chest. I want to remove the necklace but South Indian married women are expected to keep it hidden and wear it at all times. The Thali is a sign of being married to a husband who is still alive.

Amma says, "You know you're very lucky that my son chose you."

Amachi adds in her hoarse voice, "We wanted our boy to marry a doctor. How much dowry they give? Cars, gold. So much."

I feel hot tears streaming down my face.

"Now, wipe your face," says Amma, "Don't forget how lucky you are."

Poongothai brings coffee in small stainless glasses and places them on a table for us. The South Indian filter coffee that is generally not prepared at my mother's place, tastes sweet and bitter. I want to ask for more but I don't. A new bride doesn't ask for more. I want to thank her but that will look strange. Nobody thanks the help to do their job.

Poongothai doesn't arrive early the next day. Instead, it's me in the kitchen making coffee for everybody after I have showered and prayed. She comes at eight which annoys Amma because she expects housework to begin by 7 am at least.

Amma says, "What is this time, Poongothai? Coming like a queen."

Poongothai gives a small laugh as she enters the kitchen and stuffs one end of her gray polyester sari into her waist. She picks a piece of green

scotch-brite sponge, smears it with sabena powder and spends an hour washing the utensils that fill up the silver-coated sink. Apart from this, she also did other tasks such as washing clothes on an open smooth rock and drying them on nylon strings, sweeping and mopping the rooms, folding clothes, chopping vegetables, and cooking. She also washed the silver lamps and ornaments used in the pujai room until they shined like sparkling crystals after which she'd make small designs on them with a wet paste of vermillion.

Ten days later, my husband and I fly to America from Chennai airport to begin a life far away from the only people we had known. We hop into three flights that cross oceans and touch different continents. In Worcester city, my husband works as a Software Engineer. We make a few Indian friends who, like us, have left home in search of a better life. Through video calls and voice calls, we talk every day with our parents giving them an update of how cold the temperatures dip in February that numbs our fingers and toes while they battled hot, sultry weather with air that felt muggy and still.

We return to India three years later in 2015 with a six-month-old daughter. My folks want to see her before she turns too big to hold. Babies grow very quick, they say. Not for me though. I have felt every day of it. Sometimes, it's bad. Sometimes, it's okay. Sometimes, it feels like nothing.

At Amma's place in Coimbatore, my daughter becomes a good baby. At six months, she is starting to look at me closely with her tiny, beady eyes. She is learning to know me as a person, other than just a being who carries her food in her breast.

The first few days, we are jet-lagged. We wake up at 2 am or 3 am and struggle to sleep in the Indian time, the baby wanting to play and laugh waiting for the day to start. Amma is a changed person and doesn't ask me to shower or pray at an ungodly hour. She even makes me coffee though it takes her a whole of fifteen minutes to fetch things inside the kitchen. Her psoriasis in the feet doesn't allow her to move around much. Her legs are now two big-sized pillars and the skin on her arms sags two

inches that wobbles like jelly. She also has stones in one of her kidneys for which she had spent a week in the hospital in the past year. Amachi has temporarily moved to Madurai where she lives with her second daughter but she has promised to visit us soon.

In Amma's house, there isn't a dishwasher or a vacuum cleaner. There is an IFB washer but no dryer. The sun blazes like a fireball in the noon so it made sense to use the sun as a dryer.

Poongothai boils water on the stovetop and fills a stainless-steel bucket with a mixture of hot and cold water. I dip my fingers and yank them out.

When I add two cups of cold water, Poongothai says, "Why are you making it cold now? Hot water will help her bones and she'll sleep like a log."

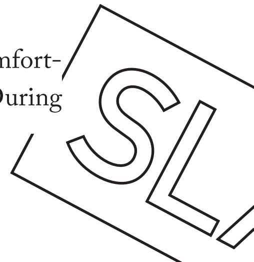
I shake my head, "This is too hot. If I can't bathe in this, my baby also cannot."

"Look at you, Akka," says Poongothai, clapping her hands, "This is how we have washed babies for generations and you are scared. Make it cold if that makes you happy."

In the verandah, where the sun streams in, she helps me bathe my daughter by placing the baby on her legs with the baby's face and tummy facing the ground and her nose lying between her legs. I pour baby soap and water as Poongothai runs her fingers over her legs, arms, neck, and genitals. The baby screams until Amma picks her, dries her with a striped cotton towel and dips her finger into a kohl box and presses it on her forehead for a round black bottu to ward off evil spirits. She presses a round brush in some talcum powder and runs it under the baby's arms, between skin folds, behind the neck, on the eyebrows. After she is dressed in a cotton white frock, I pop my breast inside her mouth as the fragrance of rose and vanilla tickle my nostrils.

In the kitchen, Poongothai helps me make baby food - mashing cooked rice with pureed lentils or a mix of cooked apples and carrots pureed in a mixer.

My baby is kept diaper free in the light hours but I keep her comfortable in the night with a diaper as I hate waking to a wet baby. During



the day, she wets underwear after underwear which I throw into a plastic basket. Poongothai picks up the clothes and washes them in warm water and hangs them on a nylon string under the sun's glare.

One day, in the afternoon, after eating a few spoons of pureed rice, the baby poops in her underwear that leaks onto the red flowery-designed rug. I had recently purchased the rug from Amazon after Amma often complained that the marble flooring gave her feet an icy feeling. She had also mentioned that she had slipped a few months ago when she hadn't noticed water on the white floor. Now the rug's dark-red embroidery design is stained with a yellow mass that stinks like the odor of rotten eggs.

I stare at the baby and the yellow mass.

Amma laughs and says, "We washed all the bottoms in our days. We never had diapers. Only cloth bits that were reused until they tore."

I say nothing. Amma notes my muted expression and calls out for Poongothai.

"Help her wash the baby. And teach her how we wash everything and not use paper for cleaning bottoms," says Amma.

In the bathroom, Poongothai directs me to pour warm water as she holds the baby and rubs her bottom and front with her fingers, removing poop bits that are hiding between skin folds.

"You can take her now," says Poongothai as she hands the half-wet baby back to me.

"Thanks," I say in a small voice.

"Can I ask something, akka?"

I nod.

"I saw your bra. If you're not going to use it later, can you give me one? Mine is five years old," says Poongothai.

"Yes, I can give it to you right now," I say as I turn around to look at my closet.

Poongothai stops me. "Not now. If Amma sees, she'll get angry."

"Why?"

"Because you are a guest here. And I can't take things from you."

"But what if I want to give you something?"

Poongothai shakes her head. "You don't understand how maids work here? No maids in America?"

"No maid. I have machines for everything," I say.

"Ah machines? My daughter lives in Switzerland. She said the same thing," says Poongothai.

"What does she do in Switzerland?"

"Her husband works in a hotel, washing dishes and cleaning tables," she says and beams with a cheaply made bright-pink colored smartphone in her hand, "She sent this for me three years ago."

I smile and say, "Did you go to see her?"

She frowns as if I have spoken something unrealistic. "Who will do my work here? I have to feed myself, you know? It's been three years since I saw her. She has a girl baby just like yours. Once I save enough money for the ticket, I'll go see her once."

"How much money do you need?" I ask.

"Why? You want to give me money, now?" she says.

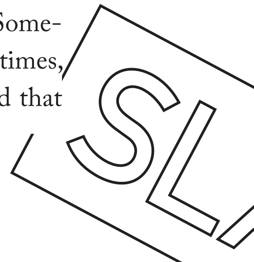
Before I can talk, Poongothai gives her loud laugh that sounds like drums. "You keep the bra on your bed. When I come to clean this room, I'll take it," she says.

Minutes later, on the bed, I keep two white nursing bras that are loose and saggy from repeated washes, which I will eventually throw away.

By evening, they are gone.

Sometimes, women from different households can share a maid. If the maid excels in her chores, other women will try to steal her by offering her more money and incentives. An incentive could be anything – used sarees, house-hold items, a holiday, less work hours, snacks, or food. In current times, a maid can expect to be paid anywhere from 5000 to 7000 rupees. These rates can go higher in the case of bigger cities like, Mumbai or Chennai or Bengaluru.

Maids are never subjected to background checks. Nor do they have any fixed rates that go by hourly basis. They are simply put on trial. Sometimes, they are hired based on references from other women. Sometimes, they have the power to negotiate. Sometimes, a maid will demand that



she get a meal and a hot beverage which is usually a cup of tea or a coffee twice a day. On festive occasions such as Diwali, a maid is given a bonus which is double the amount of her monthly salary along with a new saree or a box of sweets. Maids are not fired very easily until something goes missing from the house like gold jewelry or a mobile phone or a laptop. If there is a robbery, the suspect is usually the maid. Sometimes, a maid is capable of betraying her employers. But there are some who remain loyal as if they shared the same blood with their employers.

In Amma's house, there are other maids who show up on particular days of the week. I can't be sure which days. Roosa comes to collect the trash and clean the toilets. She is a small woman in her early thirties and drives a TVS scooty pep plus. Sheela, a thinly built woman, comes to sweep and mop the house twice a week.

But it is Poongothai who I see every day. She works exclusively for Amma.

She knows everything about us. She knows all our secrets. She knows what shade of coffee Amma needs in the morning. She knows that I am planning to invest in a property when I secretly whisper to my husband about how to raise the money while I breastfeed the baby. She knows that I am worried about my baby's health when I don't touch the food that is kept on my plate. She knows that sometimes Amma wants her to be quiet and sometimes, she wants her to be talking because she is bored. She knows that Amma keeps a glass and a dented steel plate aside to be used for Poongothai so she never has to use the utensils reserved for the family. She knows that Amma scratches her bottom as if she is merely touching her forehead when she talks about the neighbor's son's extravagant wedding.

I'd like to think that Poongothai is like family but maybe she is a maid first and nobody wants to forget that. She is allowed to make tea at 3 pm every day with leftover milk and a spoon of sugar. She is allowed to watch TV and sip tea, sitting on the floor beside Amma who sits on a plastic Nilkamal chair with her legs resting on a wooden stool, as she switches between bhajans, news, and Tamil serials. In the afternoons, after everybody has eaten, I see her in the kitchen eating cold leftovers, her

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legs folded in a crisscross position on the floor, her dented plate perched on her lap.

I ask Amma after Poongothai leaves for her house in the evening. “How much do you pay her?”

“3000 rupees,” says Amma, as she punches the buttons on the TV remote.

My cheeks blow up like a balloon as I make a quick conversion. $95 or $100 a month.

“But she’s been pushing me for a raise. She wants 1000 rupees extra,” Amma adds, “I would let her go but I can’t.”

“Why is that?”

Amma pulls a cloth over her nightie to cover her chest and says, “She knows too much. Ten years! She’s been here that long. If I hire a new maid, I will have to train her from the start. That’s too much work.”

Sometimes, when the baby is fussy and crying in a tone that tickles my ears, I will pass the baby to Amma. But Amma can’t walk around with the baby with her swollen feet that are now covered in dry scales. So, she will call for Poongothai and ask her to walk the baby outside the house where she can show the baby crows, the lazy cows or the street dogs that wander, sniffing food from the overflowing trash bin around the corner. There is always so much to see outside of the house which my baby seems to enjoy.

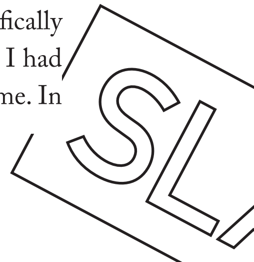
As I watch Poongothai with my baby positioned on her dark waist, her legs dangling sideways, I try not to think about the dirt under her nails or the things her hands have touched before touching my baby.

“Meenu. Meenu, see crow. See dog. See cat,” Poongothai calls my baby by a different name.

“Her name is Ashritha,” I offer.

She waves me off, “I will call her Meenu. Your mother-in-law wanted to name her Meenakshi, you know? It means goddess Parvathi.”

Nobody but Poongothai refuses to use the name I had specifically chosen for my baby after months of research. In the hospital, after I had delivered, my husband and I argued endlessly about the baby’s name. In



the end, he agreed to the name I had chosen because I let my baby take his family's last name, Iyer.

On a Sunday, our house is filled with people. Relatives, who arrive from Madurai and Chennai, have come to attend my daughter's annaprasana, a ceremony in which the baby is fed for the first time, a solid food which is rice pudding. A priest is called to mark the ceremony with a special prayer. I am dressed in a green silk sari while my baby girl is dressed in a bright green and purple pavadai with bangles, chains and clips in her hair. She appears uncomfortable as I remind myself to wait so I can change her into a onesie and loosen her up from the ornaments. After my husband feeds our daughter her first grain of rice, relatives begin to offer gifts. Mostly, it's all gold. Rings, coins, chains, lockets - tiny ornaments for the baby to wear.

Amachi offers a pair of gold bangles that she immediately tries on my daughter. They are slightly big but she pushes anyway until they sit and dangle on my baby's wrist.

"Now, she looks like our girl," says Amachi.

I will not use any of these jewels because I believe that these little metallic gifts can hurt my baby's sensitive skin. Inside my room, I drop the pieces in a dull sandalwood colored purse that jewelry stores usually give out to customers. The purses are cheaply made in boring colors and old plastic.

I hear Poongothai's voice behind me.

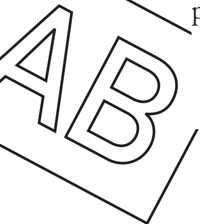
"That's a nice purse. I don't have a purse," she says.

"You never asked for a purse from Amma?" I ask her.

I have seen these kinds of purses lying everywhere in the house, stuffed with loose coins or notes or bottu packets or kumkum packets.

"A lot of times. She always says she will give later but I know she won't."

I remove the jewels and tie them up in a plastic bag and hand her the purse, "You can take this one."



She takes the purse in her hand, runs her fingers over the plastic material and hands it back to me. "If Amma sees, she'll get angry with me. I can't take this."

"Why not? I'll tell her that I gave it to you."

"No, no. You can't do that. There is so much you don't know. I can't displease Amma. She is my God."

"She is your employer. Not God," I say, with a chuckle.

Poongothai stares at me as if I have spoken a bad statement. She is annoyed that I have disrespected Amma, the woman who sometimes gave her stale food, kept her tea glass and plate aside from the other cups so they wouldn't mix, never allowed her to sit on the chair, always gave her an old piece of clothing or a used item as a gift and paid her less than what she deserves.

"She is my God. You won't understand. It's because of her that I have work," says Poongothai.

Two days later, I begin packing for my return to America. As I pack my clothes, I look at the purse that Poongothai had wanted but never had the courage to take it from me. I walk into the kitchen where Amma is giving Poongothai directions for the lunch menu - steamed rice, vegetables and a lentil soup.

"Cut one onion, one tomato and radish for the lentils. And for the curry, steam some beans and don't forget to put grated coconut over it. Last time, you forgot," says Amma.

"I won't forget, Akka," says Poongothai as she focuses on the tasks ahead.

"Take this," I say as I hand her the purse, "You can use this."

Amma stretches out her hand, her face a mixture of confusion and anger, "She doesn't need a purse. I can take it."

I hold the purse back and offer it again to Poongothai. "Amma, it's a torn purse. The zipper doesn't work properly. You shouldn't use such things."

Amma says nothing. Poongothai takes the purse and presses her lips together just enough for a smile that only I can read.