



UNCHAINED

PHOTO: PAHN CHAKMA

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A million minuscule droplets exploded from the sky, shattering as they hit the pavement. Rumi let the wind dance with her hair as she inhaled the damp odor of the earth. She extended her arm from the shelter of her polka-dotted umbrella; the water sent a chilling sensation through her. She loved the rain and, more than anything, she loved the tranquility that washed over her every time. It was a zeal her daughter inherited too. She watched as the tiny figure ran towards the nearest puddle. "Saniya, don't!" But it was too late. Saniya was drenched from head to toe in a murky brown colour. Rumi let out an exasperated breath – a mother's work was never done.

"Oh honestly, don't you know you could get sick from all this water?"

"But ma, it's fun!"

Of course it was. Rumi's heart yearned to join her daughter in the puddle jumping expeditions, but she knew she was too old for those things now. She was a mother, she had responsibilities now. More importantly, society expected her to do the right thing, behave the right way and act like an 'adult'. This was just one out of the million things that restricted her. She sighed, trying desperately to conceal her disappointment. She adjusted

her sari's *achol* and cleared her throat "Come on, Saniya, we better get home before it floods."

It wasn't always like this, Rumi thought to herself. She remembered a time when she, too, was free. Her childhood heaven was her grandma's house, of course. The ivy-covered, two-story house felt more like a little cottage, one that could only be found in fairytales. Living in the outskirts of Dhaka meant that there were hardly any neighbouring buildings, only the canopy of trees. The best part of the house wasn't the beautiful garden or the backyard pond – it was the rooftop. Rumi closed her eyes and recalled all the times she had spent stargazing, laying on the cold concrete listening to the wind howl. She would also play football in the rain and her grandma would have to practically drag her away before she caught a cold. And how could she forget the times when she had picked the dandelions and got yelled at by the gardener!

Those were the good old days. Rumi began to wonder when it all changed; it was right after her wedding. Being married off at 21 resulted in her not only dropping out of university, but also being deprived of many juvenile memories. Her new family was kind but conservative. They preferred the typical stay-at-home-

and-cook housewife. Her new life forced her to trade her T-shirts for sarees and her sneakers for heels – well, wedges actually; she could never survive in heels. While she went to fancy dinners, draped in jewelry and a fake smile, her friends went to parties and hangouts. Rumi would have to endure all the exciting stories of hiking, camping, canoeing – everything that her friends did without her. Slowly, as she failed to keep up with their world of gossip and adventure, she confined herself to her family and children.

She didn't love the life she had chosen – or, rather, was forced to choose – but it was livable. She just wished she didn't have to embark on this road so soon. She had missed the best years of her life. Excursions, projects and even graduation. She missed being free. A little voice disrupted her contemplation.

"Ma, look!"

Saniya pointed to a brightly coloured butterfly and without warning, chased after it.

Instead of trying to stop her, Rumi smiled. She watched Saniya's chubby little fingers reach out towards a nearby branch. Saniya giggled as she failed each time. These things used to make Rumi happy too, once upon a time. Just then, the sky roared and hell broke loose. There was no way they were getting home dry now. As

the damp wind caressed Rumi's face, a bubble of nostalgia erupted in her stomach. "It's been too long" she whispered to herself. Unable to fight the urge any longer, she lowered her umbrella. The raindrops created a shiver that resonated through her body. Without another thought, she stretched her arms out and began to spin. She wanted to melt away with the water, diffuse into the zephyrs and blend with the vibrant green.

The strangers around gave judgmental stares and disapproving frowns. Some laughed in amusement and others gasped in horror. Who could blame them? It's not every day you see a mature woman dancing in the rain. But Rumi didn't care. She was tired of living up to the expectations, of having responsibilities and of being 'grown up'. She wanted to feel like the little 11 year old in baggy t-shirts and shorts playing on her grandma's roof again. She wanted to morph into her forgone university life. More importantly, she wanted to stop pretending, faking and lying to herself – she was no perfect wife or mother. She wanted to invent her own rules to conquer the world, not live chained to the society's ones.

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