

# The Thai Massage

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We had gone on a package tour to South East Asia and on the last day of our trip we spent the whole day in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand. The tour guide took us to a central shopping district and said that we were free to do whatever we wanted and also fixed a certain point where we would have to come and meet exactly after four hours. Everyone in our group was very excited and rushed to the big shopping plaza on the other side of the street. I had nothing to buy as I started believing in the idea that actually we have too many things in the house and instead of adding more we should start to reduce things. So there was nothing else to do but walk along the streets and do window shopping.

First my husband and I got inside a KFC outlet and however slowly we took each bite, we could not spend more than forty minutes at the crowded joint. Out on the street again we didn't know what to do. There was no place to sit, no park benches to ease our boredom. The pavements were very crowded with different kinds of hawkers selling their wares and there was hardly any space left for pedestrians to walk freely. Except for tubs full of small coloured fishes being used to dip your legs in and clean

the feet, there was nothing very exciting. The usual stuff everywhere. It was like walking aimlessly outside New Market or Gariahat. Suddenly, through the glass window, I saw a shop where rows of armchairs were set and people were massaging their feet. We had heard of the famous Thai massages (sometimes quite sensational) and seeing the rate charts outside, it seemed quite affordable. Well at least if not anything else, we could get to sit peacefully for an hour and not go on gallivanting on the streets.

I did not have any Thai Bhat left with me so I walked in and asked whether they would accept dollars. As they agreed we went in and relaxed in one of the chairs. Several pretty young Thai girls were massaging the feet of the clients and the massaging from the knees downwards was quite relaxing, though nothing exceptional from the way it was done in the beauty parlours back home. But probably because they were so much used to the requests of the different tourists, one of the masseurs voluntarily asked for my mobile to take a picture of us as a memento to carry back home. I obliged.

After I came back and rejoined my department one of my male colleagues

casually asked me how I had spent the puja vacation. I started telling him about the whole trip and suddenly remembered about the experience of the Thai massage. I told him what happened and fished out my mobile from my bag to show him the picture that girl had taken as a memento.

--"Wait, I'll show you the picture of both of us relaxing and enjoying the Thai massage."

--"No, no. It's all right. I don't want to see the picture." He replied.

"Why not? Just see how beautiful the young girls look in the photograph."

When I passed on my mobile to him he turned his face away and almost closed his eyes. He didn't want to see it.

What's wrong? I wondered. Why was he behaving in this manner?

Then suddenly I realized that he was feeling ashamed, bachelor that he was, to see a sensational picture of his senior woman colleague getting her bare thigh massaged. He had actually mixed up Thai and thigh!!

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FICTION

# Mothers and Daughters

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Atia crossed over to the window and looked out into the rain-soaked streets. A rickshaw-puller had taken refuge under the mango tree and was huddled in the passenger seat. Two crows sat on the electric wires as still as statues. Atia wondered absent mindedly if they might be electrocuted. There were so many ways to die, she thought. If a truck had hit her rickshaw today, she could have been killed too.

She shook her head. What was she thinking? Soon Hamid would be home, and she needed to prepare the evening meal. A thin wailing sound was coming from the next room and Atia hastened out. Her old maid was trying to pacify Munia who was crying for her mother.

Atia took up her little girl and laughed, "O my little darling, what ails you?" She looked at Rahima's ma and said, "Heat up a little mustard oil. I think she's cold."

"I told you not to take her with you," grumbled Rahima's ma. "It's a long way, and the poor thing got wet."

"I know," replied Atia. But she didn't like leaving her fourteen-month-old daughter at home. It's not that she didn't trust Rahima's ma, but she just felt like taking Munia everywhere with her. And to be honest, she thought her mother would be more generous towards her if she saw Munia. She felt a little guilty too; probably it's not right to use one's own child this way. But she was left with not much of a choice.

Hamid's job was not bad, but for the past couple of months he has been giving half of his salary to his father. His youngest sister Rani was getting married next month, and there was a load of extra expenses. So, Atia had no option but to go to her mother. And even though Amena Begum did not say anything, and provided the money without question, Atia could sense that she did not approve. When Atia was leaving, she said, "Take the car, it's a long way."

When Atia just shook her head, her mother said, "It's going to rain, and Munia might get soaked."

Atia suddenly felt angry and replied, "It's her lot then—her parents are too poor."

Amena looked at her daughter carefully before replying, "It needs planning. And I don't think it's poverty that's the problem."

"You don't know what the problem is, Amma. You're just jumping to conclusion."

"I'm not jumping to anything. All I said was that there should be some kind of plan."

Atia felt angrier. "Have I ever asked for money before? And I'm just borrowing from you. I'm going to return it as soon as I can."

"I didn't imply that you won't return

the money. But borrowing is not a good habit, ma."

Atia felt like crying. "How come you never say 'no' to Afi? She takes money from you all the time!"

Amena was visibly distressed. "Ilias doesn't have a job right now. It's not that she asks..." Before she could finish Atia plunged in, "And so, I shouldn't ask, but moan and cry piteously, right? You're not being fair, Amma. We're both your daughters!" Atia rushed out of the room, and then out of the house. She cried in silence all her way.

Atia was still grumbling when Hamid came home. But he was too pre-occupied to notice. He changed and sat for dinner. The fish was not as well-cooked as it usually is. Hamid made no complaint even though he was quite fussy about food.

"Did you visit your mother?" he asked.

"Why can't you call her Ma, like I call your mother?" asked a ruffled Atia.

Hamid shrugged. "I do call her Ma when I see her. And you also often call my mother 'your amma'. Why are you so upset today?"

"I am not upset," Atia stiffened.

Hamid looked at her thoughtfully. "She didn't give you the money," he stated quietly.

"She did. But I wish she didn't," Atia started sobbing. "I don't understand. She always has money for Afi. When I ask, she talks about planning."

"Did you tell her that you're borrowing? I wouldn't have dreamt of it if Rani's wedding was not so close."

I didn't have time to explain all that. And why would I have to explain? She gives money to Afi all the time."

"Well, Afi is going through a hard time. Do you want me to lose my job?" Hamid said gently. "Since Afi is in a vulnerable situation, she has more compassion for her."

"You don't know anything," Atia growled. "It has... it has... always been like this—always. She is... al... always there for Afi and Arman. It's as if... I'm her step-daughter, or worse—a foundling." Atia got up from the table and rushed to the bathroom crying hysterically.

Hamid sighed and looked at his daughter in her cradle perking up her ears listening to her parents. "I wonder

when your mother will grow up, Muni. May be she will grow up with you?"

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Munia wondered if her mother would agree to her borrowing the car and driver for one evening. She did

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"And you never see anyone else's but yours," said Hamid quietly. "You don't seem to realize that your daughter hardly talks to you these days unless she needs anything. You're pushing her away just as your mother did."



not like asking things from her mother because she could never be sure how Atia would react. Since her marriage things were going absolutely downhill. Munia often wondered if her mother had some psychological issues. She could never be sure. But now Minhaz and Tumpa were getting married. And the venue was Shenakunja—quite some distance from Elephant Road. They would kill her if she did not go.

"Amma, can I take the car for Friday night?" asked Munia. "We have to go to Tumpa's wedding."

"Can't Rahul get a car from office?" asked a fastidious Atia.

Munia laughed. "He doesn't do government job like Abbu did."

"You should buy a car," stated Atia.

"We will someday. But Tumpa can't wait that long," Munia smiled.

"I will see if we are free."

"Ammu, I don't ask for the car everyday."

"You asked for the car three months ago when your mother-in-law was at the hospital," reminded Atia.

Munia jumped up. "You know Amma, you're sick. You should see a psychiatrist."

Hamid entered the room just as Munia was storming out of the room.

"What's the rush?" he asked his daughter.

"Your wife is sick. Take her to a psychiatrist," yelled Munia. She rushed out of the room without looking back.

"Munia! You know I mean well," protested a flustered Atia. She looked at Hamid and said, "I don't know why she bursts like this at every little thing I say."

Hamid sighed. "What's it this time?"

"What do you mean, 'this time'? I just want her and Rahul to get independent. She wanted the car for Friday and I said I'll see if we are free. And she got mad."

"Well, we ARE free," replied Hamid patiently.

"Yes, but we may have something come up," Atia was defensive. "Nishan often takes the car on Fridays."

"But Nishan doesn't have plans for this Friday. And he has not said anything yet. Munia has asked for it first—and so she gets it."

"But Nishan might.. you know..." Hamid interrupted her, "Atia, you've been treating Muni differently since she got married. Do you want to throw her out of the family?"

"What are you talking about?" Atia grew red in the face. "She's my child too."

Hamid just stared at her. Suddenly he laughed, "Do you realize you are acting like your mother? Or, that's how you interpreted her behavior to you."

Atia's face was flushed. "Are you trying to say I'm like my mother? My mother was horrendous to me. For her Arman and Afi were always the first. I was nowhere around. I love both my children. Don't you compare me with my mother!"

Hamid's tone softened. "Maybe your mother too thought that you needed to get independent. Don't get me wrong, but you do treat Munia differently. You find fault with her all the time. Whatever she does is wrong. But it's not so with Nishan."

Atia's eyes glistened. "You're always on Munia's side. You never see my point."

"And you never see anyone else's but yours," said Hamid quietly. "You don't seem to realize that your daughter hardly talks to you these days unless she needs anything. You're pushing her away just as your mother did."

"That's not true," Atia's lower lip trembled. "I am NOT like my mother."

"Think about it. And you'll see the cycle," Hamid sighed again and got up. "Don't do what your mother did to you, Atia. You don't even go to visit Amma these days. And lately, she has been quite unwell."

He waited for his wife to say something. But Atia continued to sit still in the sofa, her eyes fixed on the table in front of her. Finally, Hamid walked to the door and said, "At least, tell Munia that she can have the car on Friday."

The door closed with a soft thud. Atia raised her eyes; they were bright with unshed tears. When she stretched out one hand toward the phone cradle, she noticed that it was trembling.

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