



# FLOWERS AND CREEPERS

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

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"Please cut off half of the hair," the woman whispered.

I stared at the long mass of jet black hair she had, how it flowed down into slow, twirling ringlets, how it caught the fluorescent lights and shimmered like the fur of a black panther. Women and young girls these days would walk into our beauty parlour and demand that their hair be cropped off till it hangs just under the ears. They wanted a myriad of shocking colours flecking their locks or dyeing the whole mass into a single choice of shade. Yet this woman was different. She had neither the slightest of excitement nor the craze in her eyes. Rather she looked kind of... scared.

I gestured her to take the empty chair and she did without making any eye contact. She was still looking down as I combed her hair and sprayed water over it.

"If I cut half of it then it will hang right under your shoulder blades," I said angling my scissors across them.

Looking up, she mumbled, "He said to keep it like-like," her beady brown eyes looked down again, and she whispered after an uncomfortable silence, "how long do other girls keep it?"

I tried to make eye contact with her through the mirror but she still had her head hung low. "The trend is to have short straight hair. The exact length doesn't matter."

The woman looked around. A girl beside her had choppy bangs and a bob

highlighted a voodoo blue and the other woman in the room had wild curls flowing down her nape.

"A bit shorter then, I suppose," she touched the base of her neck, "up to here," she murmured and suddenly dropped her hands under the cloth covering her. If before she was looking down and embarrassed, now she seemed as if she was digging down a hole through her eyes where she could bury herself.

The image of her hands, how she kept looking down flashed through my mind every now and then as I started trimming down her hair. Her hair was softer than average and as they met the blades of my scissors, they seemed to sigh goodbyes.

"Here. You like it?" I said giving the ends a slight curve. She merely looked at her new reflection, rather she had her eyes on the strands laying on the cape like fallen leaves.

"Does it look okay?" she paused. "Would a man like it?"

"Yes, you look beautiful," I smiled but she didn't.

The woman nodded and I watched her dusting off the cut hair locks tentatively; her hands still tucked under the cape. She seemed so absent-minded yet at the same time so intimidated, as if she was handling china clay dolls while walking on eggshells.

In my experience of work, we had all sorts of women coming to our parlour. Some were our local customers, some dropped by occasionally. Yet when they

failed to recognise me even just after a week, it used to upset me at first. My mother who also used to work in a women's beauty parlour and who loved to talk about her work like she was keeping it alive, told me when I complained, "These women are like tides of waves hitting you every day. And you'll feel like those old rocks by the shore; ever constant with the crashing waves. It may seem all you do is stand but in truth you're actually doing your job by letting those swells hitting you and then leaving you there." It took me a while to understand what she said but I did.

When this woman walked into here, she scrutinised every customer as if she was looking for someone familiar. I was wrong though. It was actually the opposite.

"Hey, would you like me to apply henna on your hands?"

She finally looked me in the eye. "I mean, it's Eid," I scratched my neck and was racking my brain for something to say after my sudden strange offer. But then I only looked at her and holding her gaze, smiled.

She nodded.

It was a furtive little nod yet it gave her eyes a gleam of courage.

I motioned her to a corner and grabbed a henna tube and a box of tissues.

"Mita, you forgot the design book," my co-worker, Lipi shouted.

"I have a design on my mind," I shouted over my shoulder and made my way to where she was sitting. She had her hands

tucked under the lavender orna draping her. Slowly, she took one of her hands out.

"This henna is really nice. It dries almost instantly and turns a shy shade of red after drying," I told her as I held her hand that had their own marks of red interspersed like veins.

When we lived in the crooks and crevices running down the green hills of Rangamati, we used to pluck flowers from there. White and yellow oblong plump flowers that grew upon slithering creepers. We used to pluck them and tuck them behind our ears or adorn our wrists with them. It used to be our undisputed symbol of womanhood as the flowers were epitomes of beauty while the thin creepers seemed like wrought iron vines encaging us.

And so with utmost caution, I drew over her hand. The thin rivulets of henna spilled and on their own accord, they twisted, coiled and fistulised. Buds bloomed, breathed breezily into delicate petals. And they also had creepers; creepers that ruptured forth and crept over the reddish hue on her slender butter-like hands.

"Done," I whispered to her.

She stared at her hands, tears glistening in her eyes. She no longer had red bruises, she had a thicket of red flowers and creepers all across her hands.

*Maisha Nazifa Kamal just doesn't get why all the black cats meow at everyone else except her. Send her ways to communicate with them at 01shreshtha7@gmail.com*