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Pyjamas Are Forgiving

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Twinkle Khanna

juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,
New Delhi 110080, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2018

10 9 8 7 6 5

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P-ISBN: 9789386228970
E-ISBN: 9789353459239

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, New Delhi

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

For Mom

1

They took away my shoes. Leather was not allowed inside the old wooden palace with its intricately tiled floors. My loafers would now reside in a cubbyhole by the reception, right under a wooden board that declared: In order to find yourself you have to leave the world behind.

I entered the courtyard with its large pond, its water murky. Pond Water Level said a rickety signboard on one end, Slipping Hazard said another, No Swimming said the third, all in red paint.

A lone turtle was swimming languorously, looking for his mate, unaware that in this man-made pool there perhaps lay only sterility. The turtle dived beneath the mottled lotus leaves, went gliding to the bottom, disappeared. I had come here to do the same.

Unlike on my first visit to Shanthamaaya Sthalam, a

bulging suitcase in hand, packed with books and weather-appropriate garments, all I carried up to my room this time was a small duffel bag.

For the next twenty-eight days, I would wear starched white kurtas and pyjamas. One was already laid out neatly on the bed beside a string of jasmine flowers and jute slippers.

I undressed. The travel-worn, too-snug jeans and the T-shirt that proclaimed 'The Future is Female' joined its fellow inmates inside my bag.

The cotton kurta slid over my arms. Engulfed my head. For a moment I was inside a blinding white tent, transported to my childhood, where the six-inch circumference of a bed sheet around me was large enough to accommodate the vast universe of my imagination.

I pulled on the pyjamas, tugged at the drawstring – not so tight that it chafed against my skin, not so loose that it would fall down around my knees – and made a double knot.

~

The consulting room had not changed in all the years I had been coming here. The sloping tiled roof, the examination bed with its brown cover, the gleaming cream walls that always looked as if they were freshly painted.

The same certificates of accreditation in gilded frames arranged over the copper basin installed into what must have once been an English saab's writing desk and of course Dr Menon, in his cream silk mundu and jubba, an embroidered stole on his shoulder.

The doctor's meticulously groomed moustache and serious demeanour belied the sparkle in his eyes, a remnant of an impish childhood that had held out against the grave endeavour of poring over 5000-year-old Vedic texts.

'My shoulder is better, Dr Menon, but the sleep issues have got worse. I drift off the moment my head touches the pillow, but two hours later my leg jerks me awake. It's as if my brain is giving the body a kick that seems to say, "Wake up!" So I now spend night after night asking myself, "Wake up and do what?" and I still don't have an answer.'

Dr Menon loomed over me as I lay on the examination bed. Eyes closed, he checked my pulse, his fingers hovering over my wrists, my neck, even my navel was not spared, and then in his quiet, unapologetic manner, which usually held a hint of amusement, he declared, 'Anshu, what have you been ingesting? You always come back with a grievous vata imbalance. Chinese food or too much wine again?'

Walking back towards his desk, he continued, 'Parasomnia is what Western medicine calls this disorder,

but I am telling you it is because the air element is running through your body helter-skelter. It is vata that is responsible for all your problems. I have told you this right from the first time you came for treatment.'

I first came to Shanthamaaya thirteen years ago with Usha Bua, my favourite aunt and the last link to my father. I could always see bits of him in her, in the rounded shape of her eyebrows, the way she flapped her hands when excited and even in her minuscule earlobes that barely had space to hold an earring, let alone the multiple piercings she sported, tiny diamonds that caught the eye as she moved her head.

I had been in constant pain from two herniated discs in my neck after a nasty fall off a ladder of all things. So when Usha Bua decided to undertake this Ayurvedic pilgrimage for her rheumatoid arthritis, I accompanied her as well. That first trip with its curative, rejuvenating outcome meant that soon a visit to Shanthamaaya became a biennial event.

My memory, though, of the decade-old lecture that Dr Menon was referring to was hazy, but what I did recall clearly was sitting in this room after I had finished my first tenure. I was scheduled to go back home in two days' time and Dr Menon had handed me a printed sheet.

'Please, no non-veg and alcohol for two weeks after this panchakarma treatment.'

Thinking of the adjustments I would have to make at home brought another question to my mind. I hesitated at first but then asked, 'Doctor, but what about, you know, physical relations?'

'Anshu, that also entails two weeks of waiting, or all benefits of the treatment are lost.'

'But doctor,' I wailed, 'why didn't you tell me? What if I had not asked you, my whole treatment would have gone down the drain.' To which he replied, 'See the instruction sheet, point no. 6 says, "No vigorous physical activity".'

'That's hardly self-explanatory, Dr Menon. It's not always that vigorous, you know, sometimes you just lie down flat on your back and think of George Clooney!' Dr Menon's expression, his eyebrows reaching high enough to salute his receding hairline, was clearly etched in my memory. Trying to redeem myself, I had ended up falling deeper into the pit with, 'You can also think of patriotic things like your country or the prime minister!'

A horrified pause on both ends, and I squealed, 'No, no, I didn't mean the prime minister, just a slip of the tongue, Dr Menon! Manmohan Singh looming between your legs wouldn't work as a fantasy! I only meant country, like that famous saying "Lie back and think of England". Come to think of it, we as a nation did exactly that for more than a hundred years!'

And I came to an uneasy halt with a nervous giggle.

That evening Dr Menon stopped me near the lotus pond and handed me another printed sheet, this time assigning a new treatment which involved sitting for forty minutes with a funnel made of dough on my head that was slowly filled with hot oil. Below the appointment time, in bold letters it said, 'Shirovasthi: Treatment good for Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and mental imbalances.'

I clambered off the examination bed.

'Yes, yes, of course, I remember, doctor!' I said hastily before he decided to write down another toe-curling treatment for memory loss.

Dr Menon then asked me about my dreams, making a few notations in my file before he thrust a half-filled glass towards me.

This part never got easier. I gagged as the first drop touched my tongue and reluctantly swallowed. It was medicated ghee, mixed with, as I discovered only on my third visit, cow's urine.

The taste was putrid ammonia. The oily decoction slid slowly down inside me, as if a family of slugs was slithering down my throat.

I had once seen a woman who had come from Tokyo for the treatment vomit copiously after her first gulp. She then dragged her husband and left Shanthamaaya immediately, refusing to swallow another drop of the

clarified butter that was meant to lubricate the body and soak up all the toxins.

I pinched my nostrils together and tried to throw the rest of the ghee down my throat pretending it was a tequila shot. Failed, retched and then stoically swallowed the rest.

Dr Menon patted my back. 'Well done, Anshu. I don't know why these foreigners make such a fuss about drinking ghee, not so difficult, no?'

Then the hour-long walk began, a straw hat perched on my head, trying to get the oleaginous infusion to settle down, ignoring the belches that were my poor body's desperate attempts to expel it from whichever orifice that would give its kind permission.

I walked circle after circle of the main garden that overlooked the small lake, under jamun trees ripe with fruit. The fallen jamuns crushed under my slippers, which now bore the purple splatters of their sins. My kurta sleeve brushed against jasmine bushes and I stopped, plucked the scented flowers and dropped them into my pocket.

This would be my sole source of perfume here since the Sure deodorant I usually used, by virtue of it being declared a 'chemical weapon' by Dr Menon, was contraband within the hallowed halls of Shanthamaaya.

On my past visits, there had never been more than

twelve or fifteen people in the majestic wooden palace that had been turned into an Ayurvedic hospital. This time there seemed to be fewer. I crossed them along the narrow path, as we all walked in solitary circles, trying to get the ghee to spread within our systems.

A frail-looking young girl with cropped blonde hair, a pair of tubby Russians and two Indian men in their early fifties, the taller one shortening his stride to match the other's pronounced limp.

An hour later, drenched in sweat, I sat by a grove of guava trees. It reminded me of my grandmother's sprawling farm in Panvel. My father lifting me above his shoulders till I managed to pluck some fruit. He would feed them to me, cutting the guava into long slices, sprinkling them with salt and chilli powder. The memory of that tangy sourness filled my mouth and I was tempted to grab one from an overhanging branch but I stopped myself.

In Shanthamaaya you could only eat when the big bell heralded mealtimes and have just the simple fare that was placed on the brass plates. A strict regime, one that was difficult to adhere to. No wonder my sister always refused to come.

Mandira, two years older than me and her voice two notches higher than mine, but close enough for us to pull pranks on our extended family, had called while I was

driving here, starting off abruptly as always. 'Mummy just told me you are going to that Kerala place again for the hundredth time! Did she call you?'

I replied, 'Yes, Mandy, she called me, but it was mainly to complain about Manisha Tai and how fed–'

Mandira usually had a reason for calling and there was very little anyone could do to derail her. You could yank at the chain incessantly but this hurtling train would only stop at its destined station.

She cut me short saying, 'But what I still can't understand is what do they charge so much for in that hellhole? You keep saying there isn't even a TV in the room, no swimming pool, and not even bloody room service!'

Mandira would have just returned from her regular ladies' lunch. I could see her, sitting upright on her grey couch, a cigarette in her hand, overdressed in her stifling, overdecorated flat in Punjabi Bagh.

I took a swig of water from the plastic bottle in my bag and then a deep breath to control my irritation, as she went on, 'Mummy was saying, "If Anshu only took half that money and spent it at Dr Chandra's, then she would also be tip-top like you!"'

'Mandy, I don't know why Mummy and you keep talking about me constantly! I never discuss you with her!'

A guilty pause. Then my sister tried to mollify me.

'We just worry about you, that's all. Listen to me, Anshu, forget all this holistic hocus-pocus. What you need is to just get some Botox done! If you fill in the cracks in the plaster and give the building a fresh coat of paint you find it easier to get tenants. It's the same with us women, you know!'

Barbed retorts flew from my mind and banged against the wall of my gritted teeth. I took another deep breath and reminded myself that while blood is thicker than water, it has a tendency to congeal unpleasantly.

'Mandy, everyone is not desperately trying to hold on to their crumbling youth. I'm fine the way I am.'

And to blunt the sharp edge of my tongue before it ripped into my sister further, I said, 'You do get more comfortable in your skin as you get older but that is probably because the poor thing is also not as tight as it once used to be. So you are partially right there.'

My sister laughed, a short, guttural bark, and I added, 'Come here with me at least once, Mandy, you will feel a big shift.'

'Anshu, I swear I would rather go off to Tihar jail!'

But as usual she didn't know when to stop. 'I'm just concerned, that's all. All you seem to be doing these last few years is working obsessively or taking these odd trips to your beloved santhalam, shantalam, I can't even

pronounce it! Mummy says that you hardly go out and she has to remind you to even thread your upper lip, for God's sake.'

I could imagine their hour-long conversations, a washing line tied at one end in Bombay and the other in Delhi with me left to hang and dry in the middle.

'Mandy, I am fine, you and Mummy have just made it a point to find faults in me. I am sick of this "poor Anshu" business. So what if I have been focusing on the school? You think businesses just run by themselves? Before giving me lectures ask yourself what you have done in the last few years aside from depleting your bank account and inflating your dermatologist's? Stop getting on my case.' Only sisters can hurl nuclear weapons at each other and come out unscathed.

Our conversation was mercifully cut short because Malini, the senior teacher at my preschool, was on call waiting and, as I soon discovered, rather anxious. An abnormally strong preschooler-cum-sociopath had tried to strangle his classmate with the strap of her Chhota Bheem water bottle within a day of my being away.

Mandira would never understand why I liked coming to Shanthamaaya. She didn't like regimentation, while I revelled in the fact that I did not have to think about what to wear, when to eat or even what to eat. The freedom of

a mind unchained from the mundane worries of should I put on a peach lipstick or do a matte beige, should I make butter chicken or should I grab a sandwich. At Shanthamaaya, all the shoulds were replaced with musts, as if we were part of a cult, Scientology, Children of God, the Manson Family. This freedom from our own urges, safely cocooned in rules.

~

The young girl stopped near the guava trees and hesitated before sitting at the far end of the bench.

'Jenna,' she said, her voice grave and surprisingly deep for one so slight of build. She had a gentle smile, quivering at the edges, unsure if it should be wider. The long bangs hanging down her slender face lent it a pleasing softness.

'I'm Anshu,' I said. 'First time here?'

'Yes, I just came in this morning and this place, it's a little disorienting.'

She held her head precisely, straight, her chin tucked in, the muscles at the back of her neck elongated as if she was balancing a pile of invisible bricks on her head.

'I have done this a few times, Jenna, and fair warning, within five days you will be more than willing to do a dramatic, over-the-wall jailbreak and run for your life!

But stick around and it does get better or perhaps like all prisoners, some of their own circumstances, you just get used to the misery.'

I leaned back against the wooden bench, peering at her and unable to discern any obvious ailments. 'So tell me what brings a nice girl like you to what my sister kindly calls Dante's first circle of hell?'

A small sound that could be mistaken for a laugh escaped her and she said, 'Psoriasis.' She pulled her sleeve up, letting me see the angry red scabs all over her elbow.

'And you?'

'I have some ancient broken parts, all clumsily put together. Everything works but only now you can hear the joints grinding and squeaking.' I rotated my shoulders and the creaking sound was impressive even to my ears. 'A nifty party trick!' an orthopaedic surgeon with a Donald Duck tie had told me many years ago. 'But this time it's primarily to sort out my sleep issues!'

She touched her thin hair, her scalp peeping through in places. 'You have such nice hair, most Indians do, I have noticed,' she said, her hand moving with delicate grace as she pointed towards my long, dark hair that I had oiled and plaited.

I shrugged. 'My one pride and joy! I guess all that coconut oil really turned out to be as effective as the

advertisements on television used to claim, after all. Growing up, my mother would upend bottles of oil on our heads like she was about to fry French fries on our scalps.'

For all her self-effacing manner, Jenna was a trained gymnast – 'A performance artist,' she said. And like me she was also here for the twenty-eight-day programme; three weeks being the minimum that Shanthamaaya deigns to open its gates for inmates to balance our out-of-whack bodies.

According to the tenets of Ayurveda, we are made up of three biological energies. Doshas they call it. Vata, pitta and kapha. These doshas are based on proportions of air, ether, fire, earth and water in individuals, elements that govern the physical processes. Every individual is defined by his or her dominating dosha, every illness by an imbalance in the doshas.

Jenna seemed the quintessential airy vata, delicately boned with a quick mind that scampered like a sparrow. In her body, it was pitta, the fire element, responsible for all metabolic functions that was out of balance and waging war on her skin.

We were opposites as far as Ayurveda was concerned. I was ruled by pitta, fiery-tempered and mercurial. Though a novice would perhaps have categorized me as a kapha with my generously sized eyes, masses of hair and the

broad shoulders that would suit me well if part-time wrestling were to ever become a hobby. I also had what my mother graciously called my 'oversized lips and hips!' as if they were bags that I would have to pay extra for to check in at airline counters. All these traits normally denoted the water–earth element, though I wish I had their temperament instead, their slow, calm minds.

The bell rang for lunch and we walked towards the covered porch, sitting next to each other on the hard benches facing the sprawling gardens. I picked at my roti and bland dal, leaving the boiled spinach alone, while Jenna was unable to swallow a single bite.

The next few days passed as if I were a cuckoo in a grand old clock. At regular intervals, the clock would chime regimentally and I would pop out of my room which overlooked the dining room.

The shrill wake-up call before dawn, water hastily splashed on to my face, scrambling to reach the yoga class for sun salutations, where the teacher's instructions mingled with prayers from an unseen temple that drifted into the wooden pavilion along with the morning light.

An hour later, we would once again hear the clanging of the brass bell and, salivating like Pavlov's dogs, we would walk to the porch to often be greeted with nothing more than a solitary fruit. All the patients were instructed to reach the clinic by mid-morning where we

had to swallow increasing amounts of ghee before walking around the yard, diligently finishing the fourteen circles the doctors had ordered.

Sometimes I would spot young children from the nearby village climbing over the wall in worn shirts and dingy vests peeking at us. I would wave out at them, pause for a moment, pull out my Nikon from the sling bag and take a few pictures.

A pigtailed little girl with bottle-green bangles, two little boys with large eyes reminiscent of Margaret Keane's paintings. I wondered what went through the children's minds when they saw us, people in white, walking endlessly, round and round the garden. Did they think this was an asylum? And we the deranged inmates in need of electric shocks?

Coming together for three meals a day meant we got to know each other soon enough. Jenna, her spirit as frail as her slight frame, loudly signalling: fragile – handle with care. The Russians, Vyacheslav and Afanasy, were here to lose weight. The other two men were from Bangalore, a couple it seemed. Javed who with his long face and aquiline nose reminded me of Nehru, especially with the small flowers he liked to tuck into his kurta buttonhole, while the only touch of ostentation on his partner, Anil, was a serpentine ring.

2

On the fourth day, just before noon, voices drifted up through my bedroom window. It was an unusual occurrence within the monotonous regularity of Shanthamaaya. No one was permitted into the dining room till the bell tolled at lunchtime.

I shut my book and, curious, leaned out from the wooden window, pushing the heavy green shutters as far as they would go, peering through the gaps in the red tiled roof of the dining porch.

I saw the mundu-clad server carrying a tray of refreshments and two people facing the lush gardens. I could only see parts of a shoulder and two backs, but the white cotton marked them as patients, new arrivals probably, who were being given the customary banana

and cinnamon bark water with honey. A moment later, the man turned to look at his companion.

I fell back on the hard mattress with a thud. The nineteenth-century bed, which groaned each time I tossed and turned at night, let out a creak as loud as a gunshot. My hands were trembling, and I felt more nauseous than I did in the few seconds after swallowing the ghee each morning.

There sitting on that porch, that light-eyed man, the one with salt-and-pepper hair and a decisive mind, a pitta like me, was my ex-husband and that woman whom I could not quite see and whose inner element I was unaware of, unless bitch is accepted as an undiscovered fourth dosha in Ayurveda, was his young wife.

I sat numb, as voices drifted through the window, invading my room, coiling around me. I wanted to take my small bag, run down the wooden steps to the porch, catch a taxi, say 'vegam' (the only word I knew in Malayalam), urging the driver to go faster and faster, the destination irrelevant as long as I put enough kilometres between here and there.

A few minutes later I crossed my legs, inhaled and began a series of breathing exercises. Kapalbhati, bhastrika, anuloma viloma, holding, and then letting go. Cycles that I have mastered and done so many times that if they had wheels I would have reached Ladakh by now.

But the cycles led me to an even more remote place, a calm place inside my head. I opened my eyes and asked myself why I had to be the one to run away. In the victory of her thighs over mine should I give this up to her as well?

The temperamental shower within the spotless bathroom needed skilful coaxing, adjusting the right faucet and its dribbles of cold water and turning the left faucet to precisely 35 degrees so that scalding hot water did not come gushing out. I stood under the cascade of water, washing my hair with the foul-smelling herbal soap in the bathroom.

I had to stay on at Shanthamaaya for a practical reason as well. While the folks here were very generous with their noxious ghee, I doubted if their kindness would stretch as far as giving me a refund. Shanthamaaya was an expensive indulgence, one that I carefully planned for and looked forward to. I dried my hair with a thin, striped cloth that masqueraded as a towel and decided that I was going to stick around and to hell with them.

They were gone by the time I came out of the bathroom, the dining room deserted. When the bell rang for lunch, I walked down the stairs, reassuring myself that, having just had their refreshments, they would probably spend the afternoon resting in their room.

I entered the empty dining room and sat at my usual spot, the fourth table from the entrance. The Russians

soon arrived and a few minutes later Jenna, looking pale and wrung out, walked in and sat down beside me.

'I have been throwing up since the morning,' she said. 'Dr Pillai says it's normal but I can't do this any more, I just want to give up.'

Jenna had lost a startling amount of weight in the last few days. Vatas tend to be slender and she had been unable to eat more than a few morsels.

Dr Pillai who was looking after her, a pretentious man with tiny, beady eyes, was not one of my favourites. 'I will talk to Dr Menon,' I said eventually. 'You liked the porridge, right? Maybe they can give you some every day. Give me a list of what you are able to keep down and let's see if we can ask them to alter your diet.'

I wanted to finish my ragi roti and sprouts as soon as possible and go back to my room and when she asked me if I would talk to the doctor that very day, I nodded, chewing the last bite furiously.

I saw him as I was finishing up, taking a last sip of water from the brass tumbler. He was standing at the porch entrance.

For a brief moment I could sense the surge of adrenaline, the fight or flee instinct in the quick darting of his eyes, and then it was gone. An affable ease, like a well-crafted garment that he slipped into, as I had seen him do numerous times, slid into place.

Shalini was standing just behind him. I recognized her from pictures I had pored over obsessively all those years ago, stalking various Facebook accounts night after night – masochist behaviour, like rubbing chilli powder into my eyes.

He walked towards me as if he was pleased to see an old friend and said, 'Anshu, what are you doing here?' In spite of the churning in my stomach, I managed to appear nonchalant. 'What does anyone do here, Jay, drink ghee, vomit and hope.'

I stood up and headed to the sink in the far corner to wash my hands, flustered but holding on to my precarious self-possession.

As I went past Shalini, I tapped her, unthinkingly with my right hand, the one with the dal-and-sprout-coated fingers, leaving a turmeric stain on her shoulder. I said, 'You must be Shalini, welcome to Shanthamaaya, I hope you like it here.'

~

The day passed in tedious treatments. First, an ancient steam bath where I squatted inside a wooden cupboard with a cut-out for my head, the steam being delivered through pipes attached to boiling kettles on the adjacent gas range.

Then an hour of green poultices placed on my frozen

shoulder, followed by a massage of noxious medicated sesame oil and an unexpected beauty treatment. The short attendant, Deepti, her smile matching the warmth that her name implied, said, 'Doctor told red rice and milk pack for the face,' and at my protests she gently pushed me back on the wooden pallet. 'You try and see, skin will shine like anything.'

Kneaded, scrubbed and washed clean, I returned to my room exhausted. When the bell rang for dinner, the thought of the bland meal or perhaps the equally unappetizing prospect of seeing the happy couple made me skip my meal.

The open window, like an old wireless, sent me creaky bulletins of the scene below me – the clattering of plates, murmuring of voices and then a dull silence broken only by the low-pitched hum of insects from the distant bushes somewhere in the dark.

My eyes were weary from poring over a musty book from the Shanthamaaya library. I switched the light off and decided to try to sleep.

Lying in the shadowy room, my head on the pillow, the bed creaking with the slightest shift, I began my counting ritual: one, two, three. Numbers failed me that night and I tried another way of inviting sleep, by singing the alphabet song in my head like a toddler learning her letters.

A knock startled me as I reached 'QRST' and I put