When I Hit You

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Or,
A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife

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juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
KS House, 118 Shahpur Jat, New Delhi 110049, India

First published in India by Juggernaut Books 2017

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 9789386228307

For sale in the Indian Subcontinent only

Printed at Manipal Technologies Ltd

To Cedric,
and Amma, Appa and Thenral

I

This is about the future of her only daughter, really the only thing that matters to her in life, the only reason for her late nights and efforts, in short, her only hope, her only consolation, and she is not going to sit on her hands watching her throw her life in the garbage.

PILAR QUINTANA,
COLECCTIONISTAS DE POLVOS RAROS

My mother has not stopped talking about it.

Five years have passed, and with each year, her story has mutated and transformed, most of the particulars forgotten, the sequence of events, the date of the month, the day of the week, the time of the year, the etcetera and the so on, until only the most absurd details remain.

So, when she begins to talk about the time that I ran away from my marriage because I was being routinely beaten and it had become unbearable and untenable for me to keep playing the role of the good Indian wife, she does not talk about the monster who was my husband, she does not talk about the violence, she does not even talk about the actual chain of events that led to my running away. That is not the kind of story you will be getting out of my mother, because my mother is a teacher, and a teacher knows that there is no reason to state the obvious. As a teacher, she also knows that to state the obvious is, in fact, a sure sign of stupidity.

When she tells the story of my escape, she talks of my feet. (Even when I'm around. Even when my feet are actually visible to her audience. Even when my toes curl in shame. Even when the truth is that my feet had no role in my escape, except to carry me a hundred yards at the most to the nearest

auto-rickshaw. My mother seems oblivious to my embarrassment. In fact, I suspect she quite enjoys the spectacle.)

'You should have seen her feet,' she says. 'Were they even feet? Were they the feet of my daughter? No! Her heels were cracked and her soles were twenty-five shades darker than the rest of her, and with one look at the state of her slippers you could tell that she did nothing but housework all the time. They were the feet of a slave.'

And then she beats her rounded mouth with her four fingers together and makes this sound that goes O O O O O. It is meant to convey that what happened was lamentable – indeed, should not really have happened at all. This is also the way Tamil mothers beat their mouths when they hear of the death of a cousin's acquaintance by misadventure or the neighbour's daughter's elopement – signifying the appropriate mix of sadness and shock, and, most importantly, disapproval.

Sometimes, when she is in a more relaxed mood, and feeling flush with tenderness for her husband of thirty-six years, she will say something along the lines of: 'He is such a devoted father. You remember the time we had that trouble, and my daughter came back to us, with her feet looking like a prisoner's, all blackened and cracked and scarred and dirt an inch thick around every toenail? He washed her feet with his own hands, scrubbing and scrubbing and scrubbing them with hot water and salt and soap and an old toothbrush

and applying cream and baby oil to clean and soften them. He would cry to me afterward. If this is the state of her feet, what must she have endured inside her? Her broken marriage broke my husband, too.' But that is the kind of thing that she says only to close relatives, to family friends, and the few remaining people who are still cordial to her even though she has a runaway daughter at home. That is about six and a half people in all of Chennai.

She does not stay on the subject of my feet for long, because what more can she say about it, especially to an audience of semi-elderly people with a laundry list of *actual* health complaints? The story of the feet is a story that does not travel far. They are useful but limited metaphors. It is the other story, the story set at the other extremity of my body – of what happened to my hair, and, more specifically, my mother's rescue mission – that gets more publicity. It is this story that she insinuates into every conversation, hoping that the stranger across from her will press her for more details. The potent combination of medical advice, cautionary tale and lived experience is irresistible to her borderline hypochondriac friends, and she unfailingly plays her role with style. Over the years, she has emerged as some kind of faith-healer in her friends' circle, largely because she has managed to preserve herself into her sixties in a more or less pristine form.

'Stress. Stress can have any reaction on the body. Stress is what's making your psoriasis worse. Skin and hair. That's

the first level where stress operates. When my daughter was having a bad time – yes, in that marriage – you cannot imagine what happened to her hair. What can I say? Distance yourself from the stress. Do breathing exercises. Learn to be relaxed.'

Or:

'It is just stress. When one is stressed, one loses one's immunity completely. The body's defence mechanism is broken. It is a free-for-all situation. You are catching colds all the time because of stress. Don't laugh now. When my daughter was with that bastard, married and gone away, she was under so much stress that when she returned it took me months to get her back to normal. She was brittle and empty like a shell. Any disease could have snatched her away from us. It sounds unlikely to you, especially when you see her like this, but you really cannot imagine. Ask me about it. Even her hair was not spared. It was *teeming*. That's an epic in itself.'

Or:

'[Insert name of a chronic condition] is nothing, nothing that care and love cannot solve. The cure is not even in medicine. It is in the state of mind. You have to stop worrying. Every day after that is a day of progress. Worry just kills you from the inside. Any disease can take hold of you. I've seen that in my daughter's case. God, her hair! But every problem, every condition can be fought, and it can be vanquished.'

And in the extremely unlikely event that this constant, direct reference has not sparked sufficient interest in the

listener for her to divulge my follicle 'condition', she would move on briskly and disapprovingly to talk about other things. In most cases, however, the recipient of her token advice always seemed to have a healthy curiosity, and this pleased her enormously.

'I have never seen so much lice in my life. Lice, or louse, or however you call it. You know what I'm talking about. Her hair was swarming with it. She would be sitting by my side and I could see these creatures run across her head. They would drop on her shoulder. I put her through twelve years of school and she had hair that reached her knees and not once did she have any problem with head lice. Not once. Now, she was back home after only four months of marriage, and that criminal had cut my daughter's hair short, and it was in–fes–ted. The lice drained my girl of all energy. I would put a white bedsheet over her head and rub her hair and then the sheet would be full of lice. At least a hundred. Killing them individually was impossible, so I'd dunk the sheet in boiling water. I tried shampoo, *sheekakaai*, Nizoral and neem leaves – nothing worked.'

With each progressive retelling, the hundreds became thousands, the thousands tended towards infinity, and the lice multiplied, becoming settlements and then townships and then cities and then nations. In my mother's version of the story, these lice caused traffic disturbances on my hair, they took evening walks on my slender neck, they had civil

war over territory, they recruited an enormous number of overenthusiastic child soldiers and then they engaged in out-and-out war with my mother. They mounted organized resistance, set up base camps in the soft area of the scalp above the ears and in the nape of the neck where it was always harder to reach, but they were being decimated slowly and surely by my mother's indefatigable efforts. Every war strategy was deployed, Sun Tzu was invoked: appear weak when you are strong and appear strong when you are weak; when your opponent is of choleric temper, seek to irritate him with more chlorinated washes than he can handle; attack him when he is unprepared; force your enemy to reveal himself; be as rapid as the wind when you are wielding the *paenseeppu* (the merciless narrow-toothed lice comb that removed as many hairs as it removed lice and lice eggs and baby lice); make use of the sun and the strongest shampoo; above all, do not spend time bothering about lice rights and genocide tribunals when you are defending a liberated zone.

This is how my story of Young Woman as a Runaway Daughter became, in effect, the great battle of My Mother versus the Head Lice. And because my mother won this battle, the story was told endlessly, and even those who forgot the original context of the story or the bad-marriage setting always remembered it as a fable about one mother's unending, unconditional, over-conditioned love.

* *

Naturally, I hope that anyone can understand why I am reluctant to allow my mother's story to become the Standard, Authorized, King James Version of my misadventures in marriage.

Much as I love my mother, authorship is a trait that I have come to take *very* seriously. It gets on my nerves when she steals the story of my life and builds her anecdotes around it. It's plain plagiarism. It also takes a lot of balls to do something like that – she's stealing from a writer's life – how often is that sort of atrocity even *allowed* to happen? The number one lesson I have learnt as a writer: *Don't let people remove you from your own story*. Be ruthless, even if it is your own mother.

If I do not act immediately, I fear that her engaging narrative may override the truth. It will damn me for eternity because every reference to the sad tale of my marriage will be indexed under: Head Louse, Ectoparasite, *Pediculus humanus capitis*.

I need to stop this, before my story becomes a footnote to a story about lice infestation.

I must take some responsibility over my own life.

I must write my story.

II

Life While-You-Wait.
Performance without rehearsal.
Body without alterations.
Head without premeditation.

I know nothing of the role I play.
I only know it's mine. I can't exchange it.

I have to guess on the spot
just what this play's all about.

Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,
I can barely keep up with the pace that the action
demands.
I improvise, although I loathe improvisation.

WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA, 'LIFE WHILE-YOU-WAIT'

There are not many things a woman can become when she is a housewife in a strange town that does not speak any of her mother-tongues. Not when her life revolves around her husband. Not when she has been trapped for two months in the space of three rooms and a veranda.

Primrose Villa, with its little walled garden, its two side entrances, has the quaint air of kept secrets. It is the sort of setting that demands drama. The white and magenta bougainvillea creepers in their lush September bloom. Papaya plants, along the east wall, with their spiralling, umbrella leaves and frail trunks. A coconut tree in its advanced years, its leaves designed to frame the solitary moon at night and play an air-piano in the rain.

Fifty yards away squats the home of the nearest neighbour, who collects the rent from us on behalf of his landlord-brother. On the other side, a second entrance to the house opens up on to a little alley that turns into a narrow cobbled path and leads to a nuns' cloister and a cemetery. In the middle of this, the house itself stands, small and self-contained, its well-defined boundaries in sharp contrast to the open, vibrant garden.

It makes a perfect film set. And in some ways, that is

how I think of it: it is easier to imagine this life in which I'm trapped as a film; it is easier when I imagine myself as a character. It makes everything around me appear less frightening; my experiences at a remove. Less painful, less permanent. Here, long before I ever faced a camera, I became an actress.

One has to enter our home through a moaning wooden door, once upon a time painted teal. Inside, there is an excuse for a living room with two red plastic chairs and a table, on which I've arranged the rice-cooker and the mixie and the iron and a stack of all of today's newspapers. On the wall beside this table, a calendar from my husband's college. This is the room that opens into every other space in the house. To its left, the kitchen countertop with the shiny utensils and a gas stove; underneath it, the standard-issue red gas cylinder; above it, tiny maroon-framed windows that look into the garden, scissors and tea filters hanging from hooks on the wall, a sink in the corner where only one person can stand, a brand new fridge that seems out of place. Step into the next room, and there is our bedroom that overlooks the road, its windows covered in thick ochre and rust-red curtains that I cannot be bothered to change and a large plywood bed that creaks. Of course, the bathroom with its white tiles and scuttling cockroaches and a big blue barrel to hold water. Next, a dungeon-room that smells of damp and dread where we keep our clothes, our books, and assorted furniture left behind by an owner who lacked the heart or the care to throw things

away. What else? The walls covered in coats of a yellow lime that swells in the rains like an expectant mother. On these sun-bleached walls, squares of deep colour where pictures were once hung, now framing rich blankness. Red oxide floors that need to be swept and mopped every evening. Lizards as still and ancient as the house. Rats that announce their presence only at night. This is the space within which I must move.

Everything here must be left looking as untouched as possible for the sake of continuity. Every object must be put back precisely where it belonged. This is not only because my husband loses his temper about misplacement, but because no one who watches a film expects objects to be jumping around from one frame to the next. Objects do not have legs of their own to get up and walk away. That being the unfortunate truth, it becomes my fault when they are out of place and my responsibility to return them to their respective positions.

It is only one of the expectations I must consider in my role as a perfect wife. The most important, of course, as an act*ress*, is how I look.

Here, there is more to undo than to do. I begin by wearing my hair the way he wants it: gathered and tamed into a ponytail, oiled, sleek, with no sign of disobedience. I skip the kohl around my eyes because he believes that it is worn only by screen-sirens and seductresses. I wear a dull T-shirt and pajama-bottoms because he approves of dowdiness.

Or, I wrap myself in an old cotton sari to remind me of my mother. Some days, when I am especially eager to impress and to escape punishment, I slip into the shapeless monstrosity that is: *the nightie*.

The effect of adhering to my husband's wishes gives me the appearance of a woman who has given up. But, I know that attired in this manner, I am all set to play the part of the good housewife. Nothing loud, nothing eye-catching, nothing beautiful. I should look like a woman whom no one wants to look at or, more accurately, whom no one even sees.

I should be a blank. With everything that reflects my personality cleared out. Like a house after a robbery. Like a mannequin stripped of its little black dress and dragged away from the store window, covered in a bedsheet and locked off in the godown.

This is the plainness that makes him pleased. This plainness that has peeled away all my essence, a plainness that can be controlled and moulded to his will. This is the plainness that I will wear today, this plain mask on a pretty face, this plainness that will hide me, this plainness that will prevent arguments.

* *

Plainness is its own protection. Sometimes, those who seek to protect something go one step further, dragging plainness down to the level of ugliness.

When I was a baby, my mother would powder me and put a big black dot of kohl on both my cheeks, to keep away the evil eye. She continued doing it through primary school. I think I would not have suffered as much from the anticipated evil eye as I did from the taunts of my classmates.

My father has a small black tattoo, the size of a peppercorn, right in the middle of his forehead. When my grandmother gave birth to him after fourteen years of self-imposed childlessness, the boy-child was so beautiful that she believed the gods would be tempted to take him back. To prevent any attempts of the divinity to reclaim her son, she made him imperfect. He was spared. Over the last sixty years, that gypsy tattoo has faded into a pale green.

I do not have to go that far. I use this mask of plainness to ward off suspicions in my husband's mind. This plainness comforts him greatly because it renders me unattractive to the world around me. The situation has not yet deteriorated to the point where I have to take recourse in disfiguring myself. For the moment, this will do.

* *

Lights, camera, action.

Rolling, rolling, role-playing.

Ext. It is early evening. She stands at the threshold of the house, waiting for him. Her right shoulder against the door

frame. The gaze into the distance. The restlessness captured in her left foot tracing circles on the floor. On an impulse, she decides to step forward and walks out of their garden and waits for him on the street. There is an element of nervous excitement about her that renders even her plainness becoming. She hesitates. She is still. She moves again, afraid to be spotted on the street, afraid of staying there, she retraces her steps hurriedly and waits for him by the door. She takes the same position as before. Leaning on the frame. Staring at the garden. When she spots his quick, wiry figure against the horizon, she runs obediently to him. Not a real run, but a semi-run that would meet his approval. Most importantly, not a run where her breasts jounce and jiggle as if to proclaim their existence.

She stretches up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek and they walk back together, shutting the door behind them.

Int. She takes his bag from his shoulders and deposits it carefully on a shelf. She looks at him, smiles, holds herself in that position for a few seconds, and then hurries to the fridge to pour a glass of orange juice. She remembers to wipe the condensation from the glass with the hem of her shirt. She kisses him, almost reverentially, on the neck. She pulls back, smiles. What follows is his reciprocal kiss, a hug, a clumsy grabbing. She is still smiling. Everything about her radiates the happiness of receiving her husband who has returned home after a long day at work.

Now, when the action has fallen into place, it is the time for dialogue, the time to reel off her well-rehearsed lines.

She asks him how his day at the college was. She keeps talking as he undresses, keeps talking as she wads his clothes in the washing basket. She tells him that she missed him. She asks him if he has papers to grade. She talks of how she was reading Lenin, or Mao, or Samir Amin (or some other ancient Communist dignitary) and how she was tempted to fetch the book and actually read a passage aloud to him, to know what he thought, to clarify some doubt, to see if such-and-such theory could be applicable to India. She is working on the principle that to consult a man is to make him feel like a king, and to report to him is to make him feel like a god. She tells him that she was ironing his clothes. Or, that she scrubbed the toilet clean. She continues to enumerate her list with a note of requisite humility until a look of satisfaction flashes across his face.

He tells her something that happened during his day but his words are muted. The camera only sees, only shows, how attentively she listens. What he says can be anything really: how he came to the rescue of his department head, how he managed to solve a problem with the student body, how he discovered amazing talent in a young man, how he saved his colleague from making a blunder in her research hypothesis, how he presented *The Wretched of the Earth* in a mind-blowing fashion to his class. Whatever exploit is

recounted with gentle false-modesty she hangs on every word; she borders on rapture.

Soon, he settles in with his laptop, begins making phone calls to his friends. She fetches him a cup of coffee. She asks him what he wants to eat, and, in the meantime, fixes him a quick snack of *dosa* with peanut chutney. She goes to the kitchen, begins preparing an elaborate dinner. The scene fades out on a cutting board piling up with red slivers of chopped onion. In the background, we hear her hum a Tamil song, '*Yaaro, yaarodi, unnoda purushan?*'

* *

And cut! I am the wife playing the role of an actress playing out the role of a dutiful wife watching my husband pretend to be the hero of the everyday. I play the role with flair.

The longer I stretch the act of the happily married couple, the more I dodge his anger. It's not a test of talent alone. My life depends upon it.

* *

It's not just the acting that I have to consider, though. I'm responsible for the whole, flattened film that has become my life. I think of camera angles. I think of how I should preserve the intricacies of the set. I must manage to capture what it means for a once-nomad to be confined to the four walls of a house. I must figure out a way to show on screen

how even a small space of confinement begins to grow in the mind of the woman who inhabits it with her sorrows, how the walk from the bedroom to the door of the house becomes a Herculean task, or how the thought of checking on the slow-cooking chicken Chettinad curry when she is busy reading a book becomes an impossible chore. I also have to find out the technique to show its exact opposite, how the rooms begin to close in on this woman when she is being violated, how the walls chase her into corners, how the house appears to shrink the minute her husband is home, how there is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, nowhere to evade his presence.

I am tone-deaf, but as the composer I need to consider mood-music. Church bells, the early morning on the move, the drop-dead stillness of afternoons, the chaos of every evening, the cawing of crows that mark the dying of the light, the slow way the grating noise of crickets seeps in to announce the night, broken only by the heavy trucks that take to the empty streets. This is how the world outside sneaks up to her, this is how she feels herself transported outside. I decide that among other domestic noises, the incessant patter of falling rain will be crucial to the soundtrack. This rainsong will have to be modulated to suit each scene where it is being used. Thunder rolling in the distance to accentuate marital tensions. The gradual showdown of a drizzle to signal the end of a moment of despair. Lightning, blue or pink or purple or

blinding white, a sensory warning lighting up her sleeping figure before the rumbling skies jolt her awake. Electricity that plays truant, leaving the bickering couple drenched in darkness from one moment to the next. I contemplate the right response to every provocation, I cross out lines of dialogue when I realize that silence sinks in better. Here, I am the actress, the self-anointed director, the cinematographer and the screenplay writer. Every role that falls outside of being a wife affords me creative freedom. The story changes every day, every hour, every single time I sit and chart it out. The actors do not change, I cannot escape the set, but with every shift in my perspective, a different story is born. For a movie that will never be made and never hit the screen, I have already prepared the publicity material.

TWELVE ANGRY MEN (IN BED)

This movie shows a young, bohemian writer being recruited by her desperate husband to campaign in favour of a Communist Revolution. He unwittingly believes that sex involves more than body fluids, and convinced that he is injecting ideology into his crazy wife, he brings eleven angry men to bed each night, inadvertently jeopardizing his own position as the object of her desire.

Sometimes terrific, sometimes tedious, the company of Hegel, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin,

Mao, Edward Said, Gramsci, Zizek, Fanon and the quintessential Che Guevara proves to be a bad influence. Quickly realizing that the more she changes, the more things remain the same, the writer begins to essay the mock role of an intellectual in a bid to save her marriage. Faking orgasmic delight in discussing the orthodoxy of the Second International, or dismissing the postmodern idea of deconstruction, she coasts along with aplomb. As a spoof, combining pretentious intellectual orgies and humdrum domesticity, this bawdy bedside romp features twelve angry men and one bewitching writer who is busy plotting her escape from their ideological clutches.

Showcasing fearless acting and dialogue that is simultaneously hilarious and horrifying, this comic avalanche is guaranteed to be a crowd-pleaser.