

She was late again. I stood there waiting for it, preparing my ears for my grandmother's reaction. There it was, on cue.

"Servants today are horribly spoiled. Just two days ago she asked for a raise, and look. She's late. Can you believe the audacity? This would never have happened twenty years ago." Ama looked down into the ground floor and made sure her voice carried downstairs to my mother and aunt.

I hoped I wouldn't have to hear about this for the rest of the week. Harassing the servants was once vital to every upper middle-class old woman's emotional well-being. Ama's day would be quite empty if they ever showed up on time and did the washing right. Ama was of a generation that adamantly believed that critiquing the help was their birthright. Ama noticed me looking at her from across the hall. I tried to keep my face blank. She altered the ritual complaint to include us. "Ha, you all are here, so of course everything is good. The day you leave, the very next day she'll change her face. You don't live here. You don't know that it does no good to spoil them. Servants are servants. How will they do their work, if they are chatting and sipping tea with you for an hour? She's been late three days this week. I'm telling you. Just wait, you'll leave and she will call in sick. Those dishes, they will just sit there."

I tried to pacify her, just to make the noise stop, "Ama enough. She'll be here and everything will be done before you all come back."

Ama gave me a look, condescending affection. What do you know? naïve foreign girl. "Nalini, you are too soft hearted, still a bud. They love you because you coddle them. I can't believe your mother, giving them presents before the holidays. Who does that? Watch, she has her sari, so she won't bother coming."

Ama yanked a few shirts off the clothes line. "Look at this. It still has a stain on it. Look at it. Even when she comes she doesn't do the wash properly."

She started folding a few of them on the table and muttered under her breath. The only way I could have a quiet evening was by getting her to leave. "Ama. Don't worry about it." Maybe she sensed my exhaustion and took mercy on me.

Ama wrapped a red-embroidered beige shawl around her shoulders and slowly made her way down the stairs. "Okay, okay, I'm going.