

INCARNATING - By Sumedha Verma

She thought she lost me. At 26 weeks, she started bleeding, and they told her she'd lost another. "You were my miracle child," my mother strokes my curly black hair with her tough, weathered hands. My six-year-old self sits cross-legged on the carpeted floor of our Bendigo home, "But you found your way back to life, and back to us." I go on listening, playing with my doll, unaware of the impact of her words. I don't look at her, but when I do, I catch her dark brown eyes looking tenderly back into me, pillowed with a little pain. We share the same eyes – she feels like home to me. A gentle smile rises to her face, and I feel her love, immense, immersive, immeasurable. The feeling has never left.

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1992: In the early hours of Saturday morning, a strong-boned Punjabi woman with thick black hair is in labour, her bindi a little askew. The smell of gum leaves infuses the air of the birthing suite. At last, she births me, her second and final child. And at last, one becomes two, and so begins our story, earthside, and in this lifetime.

Where we come from, we believe in reincarnation. My mother holds me for the first time, my newborn body warmed by her embrace. She welcomed me like an old soul; being born felt like a homecoming. "From where you came, little angel, I do not know. But I will protect you and care for you with every atom of my being." She sheds a tear, which match newborn mine.

Her mind casts to her own mother, a thousand miles away, and feels her hand on her shoulder. Worlds apart, but where we come from, the line of love remains forever unbroken. When I open my eyes for the first time, it's my mother's I see – I see the universe within them, and the two of us in the ocean, swimming. Together. Free...

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2025: If I close my eyes, I can feel the softness of her upper arm. The toughness of her shoulders. Her thick black hair. If I close my eyes, I see her brown skin sweating beneath the sunlight, droplets dripping onto the lawn. She plants new seeds, waters old growth. She looks over her shoulder and beams at me. I catch the sparkle of her gold tooth. And

a rainbow in the arc the sprinklers create. My mother, forever in motion. Yet in the garden, she finds deep peace.

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My mother put me in childcare at six months old. One year prior, she started lecturing at a university in the small country town in Australia where my family had settled post-India. The childcare is attached to the university. “I could always spot you from my office window,” she tells me, “You were the only one with black hair”. I imagine my little self, wondering where she is. She feels near and far.

My mother speaks of her own childhood: her family of seven. Their mudbrick home in rural Punjab. Swinging on the swing in the summertime. Eating mangoes and sugarcane with bare hands, mouths covered in pulp. Snakes in the fields. Studying beneath candlelight. She remembers the night her father, an army man, brought home a husky puppy from the mountains, and the night, years later, it was stolen by thieves. She recalls another memory – seeing the concrete courtyard of her home split and crack during an earthquake in the middle of the night – ਮੇਰੀਆਂ ਅੱਖਾਂ ਦੇ ਸਾਹਮਣੇ – “right in front of my eyes”.

I have been thinking of my mother as I follow in her academic footsteps, lecturing just like she did. Scholarship juxtaposes us. Her university headshot was taken when eight months pregnant with me – we look so alike. It feels beautiful, but bittersweet.

For my mother, knowledge was a way of enrooting herself within the world; she devoted her life to scholarship. At university, she studied English, Law, Sanskrit and Russian, soaking it all up, and wanting more. Her scholarly strides were an ode to her own mother, who didn’t have the option or opportunity. Heritage imbued learning. Education was devotion. Her career, her firstborn.

I grew up studying her. As a mother, she was complicated. Chasmic, kaleidoscopic, and difficult to behold. Marriage, motherhood and migration muddled her ambitions, splitting her worlds. Like many of our mothers, she was limited in time and busy in the mind. I’d wait for her in her office as a little one. If I close my eyes, I can see totems of

her travels sprinkled all over her desk, and a picture I'd drawn for her on her office wall. Love undying, but she still feels near and far.

Like all, my mother tried with all her might. The first language she taught me was feminism. The second, endurance. Third, pride. I open the first few pages of her dissertation and see the dedication: To my children, who give meaning to my existence. She named me Sumedha, intellect, and my sister, wisdom. Both girls born with the same wanderlust and a need to know, to grow. The world will move with every stride you take, she would tell us. Two little wide-eyed brown girls looking up and listening and learning. And still listening, learning...

Where we come from, we believe things move in circles, in spirals. Story (ਕਹਾਣੀ), sadness (ਦੁੱਖ) and love (ਪ੍ਰੇਮ) all travel in the blood. I see myself, an incarnation of sorts. Doing and being things my mother hoped to do and be but couldn't. A quiet sorrow bonds us. She held my hand and cried like a child at my graduation. Mirroring, in tandem, incarnating. I took her hand and soothed her like a child. She fills the chasms of my very being. Our bond is immense, immersive, and immeasurable.

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My mother is in the garden again. Her thinned once-black hair glistens beneath the sunlight. She summons me: ਇੱਥੇ ਆ ਬੈਟਾ, come here, my child. Look at the flowers on the almond tree. She reaches out her hand as I approach her, and holds me once I'm close. I am now nearly the age she was when she had me, but her embrace remains the same as the very day I was born.

We look together at the flowers that are in bloom beneath the springtime sun – they are white and pink and blossom together. I look at my mother. Years have toughened her face. Yet the same smile is cast upon her face that I remember as a six-year-old. I look into her eyes, and see the same ocean within them – we are still swimming, and we are both free.

As I get older, I see my mother ageing and I feel saddened and afraid. But when I close my eyes and hold my hand, it feels like hers that hold me.

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