

The Sea of Islands

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"Our death is not an end if we can live on in our children. For they are us; our bodies are only wilted leaves on the tree of life", Albert Einstein

"Launchday", Bangalore, Spring 2080, 10:40 a.m Nafisa placed her hand over Amala's. It was almost time now, just over an hour to go for launch. Maria had holoed in, and shimmered across the bed from Nafisa.

"How are you doing?", she asked Nafisa, worried at her mother's pinched face, dark circles under her eyes, hair uncombed and dry, "Are you holding up OK?"

"Hmm, I'm fine. I haven't slept much the last few days, and when I have, I've had weird dreams. Now that it's time for her to go, I'm feeling a lot of calm, a lot of peace inside. I'm just happy that I've been able to take care of Ammu at home the last few months."

"Do you think we can unsleep her one last time before we send her on?"

A cool breeze blew in through the window, carrying the smell of jasmine and tuberose with it. Amala had always loved springtime in Bangalore, "Everything's so green and moist and full of life and bursting with color!" she would exclaim, a dance in her eyes.

"I don't know if we should. She was lost, her eyes were far away the last time I unslept her, her pain meds I suppose", Nafisa said, "I don't like to see her that way, don't want that to be my last memory of her."

"Maybe she'll recognize me?," Maria asked, "I do want to say a proper goodbye to her one last time, Ma."

"Do we have time? It'll take us at least ten minutes to get her into the capsule, and another fifteen for the embalming. The InterStellar bot asked us to have the capsule launched by noon, that's when they plan to dock all the capsules for space flight. And our friends will want to view at least ten minutes before that."

"I think we have time, we can unsleep her, say goodbye, and get her ready for launch in under twenty minutes."

"Ok, I just feel a lot more confident now that you're here, let's do it", Nafisa said, remembering another time, another launch.

"Moonbound", Vikram Sarabhai Space Center, Trivandrum, Summer 2031, 3:10 pm Nafisa bounced her foot on the tarmac, a nervous tic, a childhood habit. She fished out her father's handkerchief from her windcheater pocket and wiped her forehead with one corner, and used the other corner to wipe her steamed-up glasses.

It was almost time now, just over an hour to go for launch. The rest of the crew were on their phones, saying goodbyes to their families, taking selfies with the rocket behind them.

Nafisa wished for a cigarette to calm her nerves. Her brain was overflowing with thoughts, excitement and sadness, bitterness and anticipation.

The last year had been a whirlwind of emotions for Nafisa. She had dropped out of school to take care of her father, who had died too young, clutching his head and screaming in pain during the first few weeks of the brain tumor, then dying the slow death of chemotherapy and insurance claims during months of hospital visits, and finally passing his last few days under a ventilator when he didn't recognize his own daughter.

She had gone back to school, twenty-two and orphaned, all her friends graduated and gone to the best bioengineering jobs in Shanghai and Mexico City. She had graduated six months later, alone, unemployed, and poor. Then, two weeks ago, a turn of luck at last: the Lunar SEA Mission had come calling, looking for bioengineers and ecologists who wanted to go to the moon settlement.

She had aced the interview, her natural love for plants, her schooling in Auroville, and her passion for ecology all coming together in the discussion with the director of the mission, "Just the person we were looking for to improve the biodiversity of the moon through silviculture and terraforming", he had said.

It was her dream job, a way to escape the constant activity and noise on Earth, the incessant social feed of successes and sexual conquests of her friends. She needed some quiet and loneliness to process her grief and heal her heart, a place where the gravity was less and the oxygen artificial, where she wouldn't feel the weight of the world and didn't need to remind herself to breathe.

The moon would be the perfect getaway, and it was almost time for launch...

"Pastor", Bangalore, Spring 2080, 10:50 a.m Nafisa squeezed Amala's cheeks and placed a dSolve unsleep patch on her tongue. The pinch of her fingers drew a pink trail on Amala's pale face. She kissed her on the forehead and turned away, not wanting Maria to see the tears that had sprung up in her eyes.

"Can you get me a lemonade, Tony?", she called out to her Chorebot. She blinked her eyes, and turned back to Maria.

"It's OK to cry, Ma", Maria said, "There's no need to keep it all inside."

"I just wish you were here by my side and not just on holo", Nafisa responded, "I need you here by my side. Anyway, when do you land on Europa?"

"Yeah, Ma, I wish that I were there in flesh, but you know there's no way for me to turn back. 'Our Lady of Good Voyage' lands on Europa in about three months, that will be what, May of 2080 for you?"

"Yes, it'll be summer here when you land on the colony. How are they feeling about you coming there?"

"The parishioners are waiting for us. It's a tough life, and they need a pastor to guide them in service. Anyway, I'll spend three years on Europa and I should be back for a short break on Earth in time for your 75th birthday, before returning to Ganymede for my next assignment."

Amala let out a deep sigh, and blinked her eyes open. Her pupils were dilated, it would take a few more minutes for her to regain full consciousness. The Housepice bot detected that Amala was waking up, "Moving bed into 30-degree incline", it said and the motors of the bed hummed to life.

"Here's your lemonade, ma'am", Tony interrupted, as Nafisa wiped Amala's face with a moist towel.

"Thanks Tony, it was fine. Can you water the plants in the garden now?"

"I'll do that tomorrow morning, ma'am. I have completed my 3 hours of work for the morning, and I will be in my docking station till evening. You can of course buy a top-up watering pack for just Rs. 300, in case you want it done today."

Maria laughed, "You should just upgrade to the unlimited Tony plan, Ma, it's hardly like a few thousand Rupees more each month."

Nafisa sighed. Nothing had changed in some ways, house-help was as difficult to manage today as it was when she was growing up.

And the thought of growing up took her back, back to when she had first met Amala.

"Falling", LunarPort landing station, Moon, Summer 2031, 2:50 p.m (LST) They'd met on the rocket, just a few hours ago. Nafisa had strapped herself into her seat, double belts across her chest and horizontal over her stomach. She was seated snug in her bucket seat, eating the complementary packet of peanuts, getting ready for launch, when she saw the woman next to her struggling with her seatbelts.

"You need to get the across ones first, it's non-intuitive", she'd gestured to her companion, "It looks like you need to do those later, but you actually gotta do them first."

"Thanks", she'd replied, adjusting the seatbelts and clicking them into place, looking at Nafisa straight in the eyes, "I'm Amala, it's my first flight to the moon, and I don't know how to use these things, it's different from the planes."

"My first trip too, I just read the manual. I'm Nafisa, by the way", she'd smiled as the boosters kicked-in for launch and they were pushed back into their seats, removing all chance of further conversation till they landed.

Now, they were here, on the moon, everyone stretching their limbs and talking with each other, waiting for immigration and customs, tired from the trip and excited to step out and see the moon for the first time. Nafisa noticed how attractive Amala was, tall and good-looking, with her hair cropped short and beautiful coffee skin.

"What are you going to be doing here?" Nafisa asked.

"I'm an MP, military police. I was asked if I'd like to join the lunar force, and I said yes. It seemed like the best way to get over a heartbreak", she said, "What about you?"

"Likewise, I'm running away as well", Nafisa laughed, "I'm part of the scientific team though, not as exciting a job like yours, I'm an ecologist, they needed someone to help with the bioengineering projects."

"Hey, that's exciting and sexy, I'll be catching criminals, but you'll be growing trees and making this place green, giving life to this place", Amala said, and Nafisa immediately fell for her.

"That's so nice of you, we should definitely catch up sometime", she said, hoping Amala didn't notice the blood that had rushed to her cheeks, her head light with the new gravity and her heart a loud thrum.

Amala grinned at her and winked, and she leaned over and kissed Nafisa on the lips, "You message me when you're ready, I think you and I are going to have a grand time on this rock."

"Plumcake", Bangalore, Spring 2080, 11:10 a.m "Water, give me a sip of water", Amala mumbled, coming out of her stupor. The Housepice bot handed her a waterball and Amala took a deep sip from it.

"How are you feeling, jaan?", Nafisa asked her, brushing back the hair from Amala's forehead.

"Feeling OK, all my limbs are stiff though", Amala said, forcing a weak smile, "Otherwise, I'm feeling OK".

"Look, Maria has holoed in to see you, she's spending a lot of coin to be here today, before you launch".

Nafisa turned Amala on her side, so she could see Maria without having to twist her neck.

"Hi, Amma", Maria said, "Are you able to recognize us? You were all disoriented the last time we unslept you. We thought of not waking you up, but I wanted to say goodbye properly".

"Yes, kanna, I am feeling much better. The last sleep was deep, those meds really knocked me out and the painkillers are doing a great job, so I'm feeling nothing. Ready to conquer the universe!," Amala joked though Maria could see the muted pain in her eyes.

The entreport glowed and buzzed, "Esther and family are here to visit, should I let them through?" it asked.

"Hey, your cousin and family are here to visit you, that's great ", Nafisa said, "yes, let them in".

Esther, Vinayak, and their twin sons entered, Esther carrying one of her home-baked plum cakes.

"Hey, good to see you awake, Ammu", Esther said, giving Nafisa a big hug, "We wanted to come by in flesh and blood to say goodbye, none of that holo shit".

"How long did it take you?," Nafisa asked, "It is so nice to see you all, such a surprise, and how much the boys have grown!"

"Not too long, the zip from Delhi to Bangalore took about 8 minutes, and then it took us about 20 minutes from the zipstation to your home, the traffic was all blocked up near the metro construction."

"But Bangalore is so nice", Vinayak said to Nafisa, "other than the metro, it's really changed since we were young, no? And I'm so proud that you've been the force behind the change."

"Hey, you introduced me to the InVert Bangalore initiative, remember? I have to thank you, it took time for us to get going, but it's really accelerated in the last ten years, we've made the whole city green. I think the tipping point was the vertical podhousing, after which we were able to reclaim space for reforestation."

"Yeah, I remember getting you into making Bangalore a green place again, instead of wasting time on the moon", Vinayak smiled at her, "It felt so good to see the Blue Jacaranda, Gulmohar, and Bougainvillea everywhere when we took the zip, we even passed through Lal Bagh and the woods cover so much of the city again. It had all gone to concrete and dust when we were growing up."

"Hey, you two stop yakking about how great Bangalore is, I thought I'd be the center of attention here for at least my last ten minutes", Amala laughed at them.

They all gathered around Amala's bed then, the morning sun streaming in through the window casting a golden hue on the group, Esther cutting out large triangles of plum cake, and Tony topped up with credit and bringing in the coffee.

“Proposal”, Maria Insularam, Moon, August 2033, 8:20 pm (LST) “Will you marry me?” Amala asked Nafisa, presenting her with a beautiful ring of black lava.

Nafisa smiled, and hugged Amala, “Yes! Yes! Of course, I’ll marry you”, she exclaimed, accepting the ring in joy.

They were holidaying at the Sea of Islands, “Maria Insularam”, one of the “seas” of basalt on the moon. Two years had passed since they had landed on the moon, and they had indeed had a grand time together, just like Amala had promised. Now it was time for Amala to go back to Earth, her Lunar rotation assignment completed. “Why don’t we take a trip before I leave next week?”, she’d asked Nafisa, surprising her with a trip to the Sea of Islands where Nafisa had wanted to go since she came to the moon. She had never expected another surprise, this proposal of marriage.

Nafisa thought back past the two years they’d been together, her eyes filling with tears of joy.

They had started to see each other within a week on the moon, but it took time for them to fall in love. They each had to get over their heart-breaks, Nafisa dealing with the grief of losing her family and Amala with the pain of her family disowning her.

Amala had been unlike what Nafisa had ever imagined a cop would be. She was full of verve and wit and energy, a positive force in a world that was broken. She truly believed that she could make a difference, and knew that the answer to anything started with action. She had embraced her sexuality, had been open about it to her parents and family, and was sore and angry at them for disowning her.

“They brought me up with all this crap about how we were high-thinking and liberal Tamil Brahmins”, she had told Nafisa one time, “And when I came out to them, they behaved like I had leprosy and that the cure for it was to get married to a Tamil man!”

Amala had been Nafisa’s first lover, the first long-term relationship she had had. Amala had made her feel alive, and Nafisa felt a great clarity when she was with Amala. Her grief of losing her family ebbed, her confusions about her sexuality waned, and her depressive thoughts receded into the background.

They’d had their disagreements and fights of course. There were all the tropes of Earthly relationships even on the moon, determined by their personalities, of Nafisa wanting to stay home and Amala wanting to hit The Sixpence for a drink, of Nafisa wanting to order-in from the Orb and Amala wanting to cook a meal for their friends, of Nafisa wanting to visit the Lunar Marias, and Amala wanting go CraterJumping again.

Then there were Amala’s black days, when had been exposed too much to the worst of humanity, her face purple and her mood foul, smoking cigarettes in silence and drinking her whiskey, the stereotype of a cop from a hardboiled novel. Then, the next morning she’d be bright and cheery, a jasmine flower renewed by sleep and sunlight and water, with no remaining trace of the darkness of the previous evening.

The last two years of love had been magical and healing for both of them. The time and distance had restored Amala’s relationship with her family and had stitched the wounds of Nafisa’s heart, and their love for each other had grown in the peace that each of them had found.

“Hey, where have you disappeared to”, Amala asked, hugging her close and kissing her, “what are you thinking?”

“Thinking about us, just thinking about the last two years and how good they’ve been. When should we get married?”, she asked.

"Why don't we get married once you're back on the planet too in six months, once you're done with your work here?" Amala asked, "We'll get married in Bangalore, now that I've made up with my family, I'd like to have a grand wedding and invite all my cousins and friends."

"That sounds wonderful, let's do that, you've always wanted to get married back home", Nafisa said, "I hope you've told your parents about me though!"

Amala ignored the question and pulled Nafisa close and kissed her, "Look back home, look at Earthrise", she said, pointing to the bluegreen orb of home that was suspended in the sky in front of them.

"Bittersweet", Bangalore, Spring 2080, 11:30 a.m The holodeck buzzed. Amala's father shimmered in, the first of the visitors.

"How are you doing, da?", Amala's father asked her. He was 102, still proud and sure and no signs of mellowing with age.

"Doing OK, appa, it's almost time for me to go now, I hope you'll be fine, that you won't get too emotional to see me launch."

"Why should I be emotional? You've lived a full life, lived it your way, just like I wanted my daughter to do. Tell me," he said looking at Nafisa, "Have I ever not supported any of her decisions? I may have checked her conviction once or twice but I always supported her fully."

Nafisa let that pass, and there was a strained silence in the room, with Esther fussing over the twins, Vinayak getting a drink, and Maria muted on her holo.

"We should probably load the capsule, we don't have much time now", Nafisa said.

It was always hard to let someone go. The progress from funerals and burials to the technology of interring someone in space, embalmed and deep frozen in a capsule so that they could someday be thawed and revised was still new, just a couple of decades old.

"Yes, yes, it's already late, hardly 20 minutes left, I don't know why you all leave everything to the last minute, let's start", Amala's father agreed.

"I'm ready", Amala said, "it's time for me to make this last trip."

Nafisa voiced Housepice, "Let's load the capsule", she said. Housepice coordinated with the capsule. They had ordered the TombRider, the top of range capsule, a shiny six feet by two cylinder that slid into position at the base of the bed, its head snapping open to reveal the blue-lit hollow inside. Housepice commanded the bed to load, and the bed inclined and snapped its base with the TombRider, and gently let Amala slide into the capsule till only her head was visible.

"Start DNA swab", Nafisa voiced, and got confirmation from Housepice that the DNA sample had been collected and sent to the genory banks.

The holodeck glowed and Amala's friends from the force, and a couple of their friends from their lunar days, and several of Amala's "aunties and uncles" buzzed in.

Nafisa felt a quiet peace. Both her parents had died under ventilators, isolated and alone in sterilized hospital rooms, her mother in a COVID ward when she was 13, and her father in a cancer ward ten years later.

Her greatest fear had been that she would lose Amala the same way. It was a bittersweet feeling that though it was time for Amala to go, she was going in comfort, conscious and cheerful, and with all her people, her tribe with her.

“Wedlock”, Bangalore, Summer 2035 Nafisa couldn't believe that she and Amala were finally getting married, with Amala's family and friends present at the occasion, Esther and Vinayak planning the entire event, a simple Christian wedding at St. Paul's Church.

Just six months ago it had seemed over, like nothing could revive their relationship. Bangalore had been a disaster from the start, from when she had given up her budding career on the Moon to return to Bangalore to get married to Amala.

The city was polluted and hot, with a scarcity of water and electricity, constant traffic jams, and the noise of construction everywhere. Trees had been cut, roads had been dug up, and lakes had been reclaimed for construction, and the air was filled with drones. The lunar landscape seemed so much more appealing in comparison to Nafisa.

And she had learnt that Amala hadn't told her family about her, not all of it though. Amala had told her parents that she wanted to get married to a girl whom she'd met on the moon, and had got their acceptance for that, although reluctantly.

But Amala had failed to tell her parents her lovers name, Nafisa, that she wanted to wed a Muslim girl. It had taken Amala's parents five years to accept her sexual orientation, but it looked like it would take till eternity for them to accept Nafisa.

Amala had changed too, she was cranky and stressed all the time, calling off the marriage, stubborn about having a grand wedding that her family and friends would all attend.

It was Esther and Vinayak who had rescued them. Esther worked on convincing Amala to be open to a smaller wedding, and worked on Amala's parents to let go of their prejudices. It took her two years of conversation and cajoling to get everyone to agree, and Nafisa couldn't thank her enough, Esther had become the sister she could speak to about things that she didn't couldn't discuss with Amala anymore.

And Vinayak had been like a brother to her during this time, connecting her to the InVert Bangalore initiative that was looking at creative ways to bring back greenery to Bangalore.

“You'll be perfect, this is a challenge even greater than the moon”, he'd said, “Think about it, vertical housing to reclaim space, vert to make the city green, and invert to turn Bangalore around.”

She had loved connecting with a passionate community of volunteers who were looking to change the city and turn it around, back into the Garden City it used to once be. It had helped her keep her sanity when Amala was talking about “breaking up”, and she had made friends with the volunteers, who had started to look at her as their guide given the work she had done on the moon and her ideas and contributions to the initiative.

Her success with InVert had been the rock to the tides of Amala's moods, which had helped her stay in the relationship, while Amala and her parents had come around.

She snapped back to the present, smiling to see Amala emerge from backstage, all decked up in a green silk saree and jewelry, happy at last to have the kind of wedding she'd always dreamed of.

“Speaker for the Dying”, Bangalore, Spring 2080, 11:40 a.m Maria zeroed in on Amala so she could have a private conversation.

“I’m going to miss you, Amma”, she said.

“I am going to miss you too, da. We haven’t spent enough time together, especially the last few years that you have been away.”

“Yes, that’s true. I have really enjoyed the work I’m doing, being a pastor and serving the community, and I just haven’t had the time to come home more often. At least the holo tech has improved, and we’ve managed to holo a bit.”

“I remember both Nafi and me being surprised when you got into theology and religion in college, so different from either of us. I just didn’t understand it, and didn’t speak with you enough to understand it then I think. I feel proud of what you’re doing now though, I’ve never told you before, traveling across the universe and bringing hope and comfort to people.”

Maria smiled, “You put it so nicely, I am just happy to listen to people and have them talk and share whatever they are going through. And I enjoy traveling to all these new colonies, where life is tough, where people are going through so much. It’s an adventure for me, just like those stories you used to read to me of adventurers hundreds of years ago traveling to other parts of the world.”

“Yes, I remember reading to you, those were such good times. You were such a good listener, you used to absorb everything I read. And you were always great at comforting people, calming me if I had a bad day at work, making Nafi cheerful, and of course, you were the counselor for all your friends in school and college, people always seemed to want to share their difficulties with you!”

“How are you feeling, Amma, are you ready to go, are you in peace, ready for the capsule and embalming?”

“Yes, kanna, I am. It’s better than going in pain, or without being conscious. And of course, the capsule is any day better than being burnt or stuck in the ground”, she smiled, “Then there’s the chance that I may be revived someday, that we’ll meet again”.

“If you don’t mind, can I do a small ceremony, Amma? I’ve planned a prayer and a singing of your life before we start the embalming. I know you don’t believe, but I’d like to do it for myself.”

Amala nodded, and Maria zeroed out. She clapped her hands gently to get the attention of everyone in the room, and all those who had holoed in.

“I’d like to thank you all for being here, to be with my mother in her last moments, to honor your friendship with her and your love for her by sharing the gift of your time...”

Nafisa leaned over and touched her forehead to Amala’s. They smiled at each other, a quiet pride shining in their eyes at seeing their daughter bringing together a group of people in service.

“The Graduate”, Bangalore, Summer 2058, 11:00 am Nafisa and Amala glowed with pride, Amala shouting out “Maria! Maria!” in excitement to get the attention of their daughter, and Nafisa squeezing Amala’s hand to calm her down.

Their daughter, Maria, was graduating from college, a Bachelors in Philosophy and Theology, training to be a pastor. They couldn't believe it, how time had flown.

Maria had been born four years after they were married. Their love for one another had bloomed once more after the marriage, and all the pre-wedding tensions had evaporated. Nafisa had connected with a purpose beyond herself with InVert Bangalore and Amala had made up with her parents.

They had started to speak to the scientists at GeneticART three years after they were married. The scientists had helped Nafisa and Amala understand the artificial reproductive technology, and had guided them through the initial phases of gene printing and meiosis. Then, the doctors and nurses had helped with the fertilization and had helped them each carry the baby, so they could both be the mother of the girl.

Amala had carried Maria through the first trimester and Nafisa carried her to term. Maria was beautiful and big at birth, 8 lbs, an August baby with a full head of hair and a cherubic smile.

Maria changed them both and brought in a new closeness, a feeling of being complete, of being family. Nafisa reduced her time volunteering with the InVert Bangalore initiative, and Amala cut back her duties at work so she too could spend more time with Maria.

Nafisa and Amala enjoyed raising Maria, through the baby years of feeds and diaper change, the toddler years of potty training and preschool, those beautiful childhood years, the pre-teen tantrums and teenage boyfriend years, and even through her college years of discovering ganja and God (they couldn't agree on which was worse).

Maria grew up well-loved and cared for, her Ma and Amma raising her together, Esther the doting aunt and Vinayak the father-figure in her life.

And now, their baby was graduating from college.

"Unconditional", Bangalore, Spring 2080, noon It was time.

Nafisa kissed Amala. Esther and Vinayak came by and cradled her cheeks. Amala's father brushed her hair down in place. Maria was quiet, her eyes filled with tears.

Amala's friends from the force started to sing their anthem from the academy, something about strength and courage that seemed oddly appropriate.

Amala winked at Nafisa, "Be strong", she said, "I'm ready."

Nafisa teared up. She voiced to the HousePice to start the embalming and pressed the button on the side of the TombRider to confirm her command. The carapace of the TombRider snapped into place, and Amala was injected with an anesthetic. She closed her eyes in sleep, and a few minutes later the cryogenic preservation and embalming started.

Housepice slid open the French windows to make space for the launch. Nafisa placed her hand on the capsule, transmitting her love through the steel and vacuum to Amala, tears streaming down her face. She then voiced the command for TombRider to enter drone mode. The rotors popped out and started to spin, the capsule tilted upwards, and Nafisa, Esther, Vinayak, the twins, and everyone who had holod in waved goodbye as Amala launched.

There was silence in the room.

Nafisa clapped her hands to call them all to attention, "Thanks everyone for holoing in, feel free to stay or drop off, everyone other than Maria of course", she said. "For those who are here, let's have some coffee and cake, I'll make the coffee this time!"

Maria smiled. Nafisa had stepped into the role that Amala would have played, the confident woman in action, bringing coffee and cake to people at times of sadness.

She felt blessed to have had the unconditional love of two mothers.