

The Planner

Dia Bhojwani

7:45 AM: Eat Almonds

If you eat five almonds every morning, you will become more intelligent. This is something every good Indian child knows. Myra Chandni was, by all appearances, an exemplary example of the species. So down they went, brown and white shards sticking in her gullet like shrapnel.

The driver, Bittu, turned back and raised a concerned brow at the strangled noises she emitted. Rapidly flapping a brown wrist, she dismissed his concerns, and he turned back to the row of dusty Volkswagens and grimy Marutis blocking the road ahead of them.

A violent cough rose in her throat, and she frantically unscrewed the cap of her Nike bottle, tipping lukewarm water down her throat to assuage the wounds inflicted by those malevolent nuts. She wet her uniform in the process, sky blue cotton turning dark where the water dampened it.

Unconcerned, she wiped her hands on her skirt, leaving the imprint of five slender fingers on the fabric. Unzipping her school bag, she pulled out a hardbound planner with a violently floral cover, 2019 emblazoned on the front in gold foil. (799 rupees at the Inkbucket.) Flipping the glossy pages till she came to the fourth of October, she unclipped the black ballpoint pen she kept in her shirt pocket to score out the sentence 'Eat Almonds.'

Her phone chose that moment to buzz violently, the crooning of Glass Animal's frontman alerting her to a call. She accepted it without looking at the screen. She knew who it was.

"Myra, have you reached school?" Her mother's plummy voice made her ears throb.

"Not yet. We're at the signal." Her nails had suddenly become fascinating to her.

"It's nearly 7:45. You'll miss homeroom. I told you that you should have left sooner." She really ought to cut them. Dirt had begun to collect in them. She could have concealed that with nail polish, if she was allowed to use it.

"Yes Mama."

"Did you carry the poster for your Spanish project?" Reflexive verbs. Senor Mateo would put the best ones up on the bulletin board that faced the fifth-floor stairwell.

"Yes Mama."

"Did you eat your almonds?" Eat was a gentle word for what she had done. She'd downed them like cyanide pills."

"Yes Mama."

“Bittu will be waiting at the gate at 3. Come down fast. If I hear that you wasted 15 minutes talking to that useless Anaya again, you’ve had it. If you’re late to Bharatnatyam again, I’ll have to answer Ms. Jayanti, and that’s just embarrassing for me.”

“So?”

“What?”

“No, Mama. I won’t be late.”

“Good girl. Love you.”

The school gate was nearing, a swarm of children in blue and white descending upon the white building.

“We’ve reached. Love you too.”

She picked up her bottle to place it back in the bag as Bittu got out to open the door for her. Crescent moon weals decorated the gummy rubber where she’d dug her nails in.

Another tenet for every good Indian child to abide by – thou shalt not disobey thy mother.

~~8:00 AM. Go to Room 503 for Homeroom.~~

“Miss, I’m so sorry that I’m late!” An apologetic smile. No teeth. Displaying one’s teeth is a sign of aggression and hostility, something not kindly looked upon by the typical Indian school teacher.

“No trouble, Myra.” Ms. Singh beamed at her, warm and gregarious. An expression that said, “We both know that you weren’t late at all but being a good student and a suck-up to boot, you’re apologizing for any possible perceived fault, which makes you look better than the stragglers who’ll come in at 8:02, or, God forbid, 8:05, and with nary a look of regret.”

Myra smiled and nodded. Good, all was understood.

“Will you be a part of the Chess Club this semester? We’ve got some great tournaments coming up.”

Myra hated chess. This was irrelevant, because her mother thought she ought to play it to impress college admissions officers.

“Yes, I’m looking forward to it!”

~~8:03 AM. Sit at the seat second from the door, at the front of the room, instead of your usual seat at the back, next to the bookshelves.~~

She slumped into the plastic chair like a sack of potatoes. Lowering her head into her hands, she turned her cheek and pressed it against the cold desk. She allowed her eyelids to shut, blood vessels pulsing red behind her eyelids. The sounds of Ms. Singh scolding Anaya Agarwal for her hiked up skirt, Ethan

Fernandes blowing his nose, the rumble of the A.C – they all seemed to dull for a minute, sounding to her like they were coming from the other end of a tuba.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Hadn't she stayed up till 3 AM last night looking up guided meditations for anger management? Breathe in. Breathe out. Resist the urge to fling every chessboard in the club room out the 4 th floor window like frisbees. Breathe in. Breathe out. Resist the urge to pinch Ethan's nose shut, ball up his snotty tissue, and force it down his throat. Breathe in. Breathe out. Resist the urge to push your mother from your living room balcony. Resist the urge to spit roast your mother in the oven like a rotisserie chicken. She wouldn't fit anyway.

A waft of tarty, sweet perfume threatened to overwhelm her. Melons and oranges. (650 at Bath and Body Works.)

A finger taps her shoulder. She didn't need to look up. She knew who it was.

"Anaya, I'm not giving you the answers to the biology homework."

A sigh. The finger ceases its tapping.

Resist the urge to pull it back. Resist the need for contact.

~~10:20 AM. Eat the grapes and the salad your mother has packed for you. Don't waste a bite, don't let even the slightest remnant of dressing linger in the corner of your tiffin. Don't waste your food, because why would you waste your food, Myra? Be a good girl.~~

The grapes felt like they were fermenting in her mouth. The dressing felt like it was curdling in her stomach. Sloshing through her intestines, duodenum and ileum, turning rancid from extended contact with her body.

Anaya walked up to her desk, full hips swaying gently under the school-issued skirt. (Rs 300 from the front desk at the beginning of the year.) When she blinked, her sooty eyelashes briefly obscured enormous brown eyes. Limpid pools of chocolate.

"Do you want a red velvet cake? It was my dad's birthday yesterday." She thrust a tiffin under Myra's nose. Sweet, rich buttercream glistened white against mounds of scarlet pastry.

Myra pulled her mouth tight, taut as a laundry line. "No thanks, I'm good." She was on a diet.

"Don't you want to be thinner, Myra? Look at this." Her mother pinged the waistband of her skirt. "You look like a little pig." Her breath beat down hot on her neck.

Anaya wasn't thin. She was full-bodied and glorious, like some sculpture of a Mesopotamian Mother Goddess. Dark, curly onyx hair. Lips like two flower petals, soft and inviting.

"Why are you being such an asshole today? You're not even sitting in our seat." Anaya's smile disappeared when she realized her bribe hadn't worked.

Myra stared down at her feet. Her school-issued patent leather shoes had suddenly become fascinating to her. (Rs 399 from Bata.)

"Babe." She nudged her shoulder. "What's wrong?" Her voice was gentle, painfully gentle.

Myra wanted to punch her in her stomach, for daring to be so lovely. For her skirt being so short she could see the plush flesh of her inner thighs, begging for teeth to sink in, leaving bite marks.

~~10:23 AM. Do not kiss Anaya, because your mother will not take kindly to her daughter turning out to be some kind of deviant. It's just a phase, Myra.~~

~~10:24 AM. Let Anaya walk away, Myra. You're better than that, Myra. Resist the temptations of the flesh, resist the lure of food. Be a good girl, Myra.~~

~~7:45 PM. Return home.~~

The apartment was empty. Her chess trophies shone gold under the cold white light. She sat down at the dinner table, pulled out her composition notebook. She had English homework to do. An analysis of Part 1, Chapter 24 of Anna Karenina, the bit where she goes ballistic in a train. Though that descriptor could really apply to most of the novel.

She didn't want to finish her English homework. But it was right there in her planner, in neat cursive. *Finish English Assignment.* Finish your English Assignment, Myra. Whenever she read the instructions in her planner, she read them in her mother's voice. Her mother's voice, echoing in the empty cavern of her mind. Her mother's breath was hot against the nape of her neck. Her mother's veiny fingers tightening around her throat.

She stood up abruptly, planner in hand. She walked away from the dining room to the balcony. She slid the glass door open, trembling as the scent of warm earth and neem trees wafted into the sterile room. The perfume of a Bombay evening.

Myra, no.

Her eyes took a moment to adjust to the dark as she stepped outside. Below and beyond her, lights glittered in the dark. She could hear the thwap of tennis balls against racquets from the court. She can't stand tennis. Tedious sport. She'd rather swim.

Myra, don't be ridiculous.

Slipping through the cool water like a silverfish. Slicing through it like a knife. That sounded nice.

Myra, be a good girl, MYRA-

She hummed a snatch of a verse from a Bollywood song as she began tearing out pages from her planner. They fell like snow onto the black concrete, bobbing and cavorting on the wind for a moment before landing.

She walked back into the kitchen, abandoning the skeleton of her lovely planner. It lay forlorn, only a spine and a cover remaining, on the coffee table. Stretching on her tiptoes to reach the top of the fridge, she grabbed a Tupperware box and readied herself for work.

When the jangle of Mrs Chandni's keys echoed through the apartment, she flung open the front door to find her daughter sprawled on the carpet, hair falling around her shoulders, fistfuls of chocolate cake in her hands.

Frosting caked around her mouth, Myra barely spared her mother a glance before reaching for the TV remote and turning the channel to HBO.

"Jesus Christ, what's the meaning of this?" Her mother's voice was so high pitched that she was surprised the windows didn't shatter.

It was hard to speak with a mouthful of Black Forest gateau, but Myra tried her best. "First off, consider the diet over. I'm leaving the chess club and joining the swim team. Also, I'm bisexual."

8:25. Do what you want.