

Euphoria: Bandra

Rochelle Potkar

They met every Friday at Muthu's cart, outside Bandra station at 7:30 pm, before heading back to home or office, and soon Naina and Fatima began smiling at each other, as they waited, with stomachs growling to stuff their mouths with crispy rice-pancakes, dipped in *chutney*.

By one year their smiles had turned to pleasantries and small talk and before long, deep questions over the love for *dosa* and new things.

Fatima sensed in Naina a kind of stylish tenderness as she stood graciously tearing into a hot piece of *dosa*, swirling it, with long-manicured fingers, into piping-hot *chutney*. Each movement - an act of delicacy and ferocity that Fatima concluded was unique. This senior woman with a dash of white hair was beautiful and powerful, standing apart from the English-speaking, sophisticated suited-booted men she sometimes accompanied.

"What do you do, *didi*?" Fatima asked Naina.

"I work in that building....," Naina pointed to a dark-glass tall building.

"And you?"

Fatima drew in a sigh. “Long story. Wanted to be a policewoman. My father didn’t allow. My sisters married at 14, now with children around their hips. So, I ran away and joined the NCC to become a cadet. Began eating lots...,” Fatima mimed, and Naina laughed. “Yes... meat, eggs, fruit, drinking two-two litres of milk. From 55 kgs I became 80. Now I’m a saleswoman in a shop selling lingerie at Elco Market. Just that other lane.”

Naina sensed Fatima’s restlessness, rippling in her body, as she paced about waiting for her *dosa*, drumming her fingers on the cart’s edge, or flinging her hands in conversation.

Fatima’s body did not let her rest, indeed. It engorged in tautness each night as she tossed and turned, until she realised she needed a release like a dancer needed dance. Her mind was her body and her body had to be on the move. Life couldn’t be sedentary. She joined a nightly karate class, and soon de-stressed the knots in her breath.

Though the one thing that did not change was coming over every Friday to eat the most scrumptious *dosas* the suburb of Bandra had ever seen, and of course meeting Naina Tivan and Muthu.

Muthu Ramaswamy’s stall had metamorphosed from a cart. From one stove, it now had four stoves that cooked batters of *dosa* simultaneously, and supported tins of freshly-ground *chutneys* in tamarind, chilly, garlic, and plain-coconut flavours.

"Sisters, don't be surprised if I disappear from here, okay," said Muthu. "I've saved enough money for a restaurant." His eyes twinkled. "Please don't forget to come. I'll give you my new address."

"Congratulations!" said Fatima and Naina widening their eyes, as Muthu lowered his head into a smile.

"May you go from strength to strength," said Naina, "What sets you apart, Muthu, is... your *dosa* has a unique crispy nutritious value, and you are always dressed in cap and apron. Clean hands! Hmmm..."

"I've used my secret recipe, madam, that I know by heart, from my native land. You know Fatima sister, my earlier cart was taken away by municipal authorities many times."

"Is it?"

"Oh yes, many times. Because handcarts don't get license as food stalls. So, I paid heavy fines. But that too never stopped me." Muthu smiled.

Fatima had a glint in her eye.

Naina smiled as she restrained her own tensions from surfacing over her face under the paint of her foundation cream. "How did you manage this?" she asked, "Were you born into this? Your family too, in this business? Ya?"

"Arrey! No! I came from my village after passing 10th standard. Just. My family was poor. I couldn't go for higher studies. Some man from the town told my father he would give me a job and I could send money home. That man took my father's savings and brought me here. When the

train reached Bandra Terminus in the morning and I opened my eyes, he was gone. He even robbed my luggage. I didn't know Hindi. I was... lost. Just."

"So... you really started from scratch?" said Fatima, "And then?"

"I decided to stay and try my luck. What more could go wrong? I couldn't return home. I had no money. I washed dishes at a bakery in Mahim. They let me sleep there or I would sleep at the station. I did odd jobs and slept like a dead horse. In this city, even the roads are made of flowers if you work hard."

"Yeah," said Naina, "if you can get good sleep. If not, even an ergonomic curl-on mattress is of no use..."

Fatima and Muthu looked at her, understanding the essence without its words.

"Then after that?" asked Fatima, "What did you do?"

"In two years, I collected money and rented a handcart, bought utensils, stove, basic ingredients, and made *idlis* first, then *dosas*. That's how...," said Muthu.

This discussion lightened Fatima's mood. Even though her job as a lingerie-shop assistant supported her expenses and her karate classes gave her restlessness a vent, she was sure her fate would change. If it could for Muthu... She just had to keep at it. Perhaps, believe in it a lot more.

The city wove its thickness into dead traffic, honking interjections around them. But listening raptly to Muthu, Fatima turned tone-deaf. So had Naina, as she headed

back to office. It was going to be a long night. There was an audit in the next week and three business acquisitions in the pipeline.

Naina Tivan was the only person who excused herself every other week from her office to go to an undisclosed gathering. It was: *Workaholics Anonymous*. She had signed up for its 12-step program that could get rid of any and every kind of workaholic. She wasn't sure she was a workaholic. She loved working so much and that had paid off in her becoming director of finance in the family firm, where her husband Nitin was CEO and father-in-law in the board of directors.

Their son Aarav, would soon join them, after his course at the London School of Economics.

The Japanese term for *death from overwork* is *karōshi*. Wonder what is the Indic word, mused Naina. She calculated she had been a worker bee for 30 years.

She didn't look 50, thanks to the once-a-week rituals of skin treatments and moisturizing spas. Also, her tiffin of salads and cold cuts, boiled veggies and fruit juices, dried nuts, and hotpots of steamed fish and packed coconut water, helped.

It was her son Aarav who had been giving her stress of late. Strange, because that was the last place or person from where she would have seen it coming.

In a few weeks, the fates did intervene. An NGO worker dropped by the lingerie shop and as she checked for hosiery, she spoke to Fatima and soon enough news of a job opening for a female bouncer came up.

“A female bouncer?” asked Fatima, knotting her eyebrows. She applied for the job, missing her day at the shop, and getting late for the Friday encounter with Muthu’s for her taste-buds.

That evening as the sky became a jubilant jumble of grey, air laden with the scent of rain, Naina’s heart opened up too. She had been brooding the whole day and now grew candid. There was a headache refusing to go away from her temples, even with two aspirins. The stall was making slow business. With the raucous winds, all officer-goers were hurrying to the railway station or seeking refuge under shop roofs.

“This smell of air seems of sweat,” said Naina, “like the toil of each person has evaporated to form clouds that will now break.”

“And we will be drenched in sweat-rain?” laughed Muthu.

“I had to fight the glass ceiling, you know,” said Naina, “You know what that means? I’m working in an organization not created by someone else, but my own father-in-law. My husband, Nitin, is a good, liberal man, but my father-in-law doesn’t think much of women. It’s strange – this kind of thinking that I have to deal with at every turn.”

Just then Fatima came by, huffing.

“And where have you been?” asked Naina.

“Guess what? I went for an interview! I’m so happy. I’m soon to be stationed on campus for women’s safety. This is the closest to what I love. Closest to myself! But what were you talking about? I heard you and you rarely talk...”

“I was telling him about my father-in-law, who doesn’t like women being smarter than men. You understand the glass ceiling?”

Fatima nodded, bemused, as Naina continued, “He’s grumpy at every meeting when my suggestions are better. He waits for my smallest failures. Every a tiny miscalculation is magnified...”

Naina realised she had spoken too much yet felt uncannily relieved. Soon the bleakness from the sky cleared its plumage into trails of rain.

Fatima and Naina huddled under the slight roof of Muthu’s stall.

They shivered as they ate *dosas*, that he managed to cook in spite of the winds, muck splattering onto their shins.

Fatima said, “*Didi* I never thought you could have any problem – good-looking, rich, well-educated, coming by car... and all?”

“We have different problems, Fatima,” said Naina, “Not money problems. But same heart, remember? Invisible problems. That can be handled, but it does give grief. Bigger bargains, bigger risks, bigger needs. But money

does grease the situation, I agree. It makes tough things easier, but not altogether disappear.”

Soon the time for Muthu to shift shop had come. He paid a hefty 50,000 rupees deposit, using his savings, and also got a loan towards this payment. On the board of his new shop, in bright red he painted: **Dosa Village**. After budgeting for a monthly rental of 5,000 rupees, he hired two more people to join his cousins from Telangana, who assisted him in the background, in similar caps and aprons.

Soon students from nearby colleges -- National, Raheja, MMK, Chetana, Rizvi and Andrew’s came to his shop.

They introduced him to the Internet.

“You can find anything on this,” they said.

“Anything is it?” asked Muthu, his eyes wide and blinking, “Even a *dosa* recipe? A new one? My old one?”

“Yes, anything. Just type the words in the search engine.”

“There is an engine here?”

“Yes, and it is fab. Just type the right words.”

Muthu began learning the Internet. The first time he saw a *dosa* image on a flat screen, he was thrilled to insomnia for a whole night, in the makeshift space of the kitchen that was his restaurant by day.

Soon he followed recipes from across the world and began introducing them into his *dosas*: Schezwan, paneer-

chilly, spring roll, watermelon, veg bulgogi, red bean, cinnamon-apple fritter, chocolate, and paprika *dosas*. He altered his menu to include 26 new offerings with intercontinental fillings.

Fatima and Naina were thrilled. It was a lease on their palette. A rejuvenation of the same old Fridays.

To counter her father-in-law Mr Yashraj Tivan's pervasive disgruntlement that was as slow as the hum of a regular air-conditioner, Naina got passive-aggressive. When she had been younger she would seethe and breathe heavily the moment she saw his frowns as she stepped into the decision-making chambers. Quick on her feet, she was acerbic with her words then. Now she used gloved attacks and retorts that not even Nitin could decipher, but which hit home. It was always a different and a better frown on Yashraj's face when she could give it back to him.

But over time she made peace with his begrudging nature, promising herself she wouldn't let ups and downs get in her way of peace. She altered her reaction, collecting rage under her skin, transmuting it into longer working hours. It tore at her seams. She had to change her heels to flat sandals. Sometimes just out-dress his three-piece suits, with red hot pants, or the smartest *chikkan kurtas* with a string of Hyderabadi pearls.

She began getting her hair ironed, coining original power phrases, hiring graphic geeks to design her presentations with infographics. Soon people reckoned her to be a

falcon, lioness-in-waiting, that Yashraj could ignore only at his cost.

Naina told Fatima one unhurried evening, after they had enjoyed a Souvlaki *dosa*, “You have to grow big to crack obstacles. Your hammer has to reach solid fibre or your bones can break. If your hammer is iron-solid, the unseen can splinter into a 1000 pieces. It’s strange that I always thought as a young girl that battles were physical and visual. But these other battles are even more delicious!”

Fatima began getting assignments now at the IPL cricket matches, reality show-auditions, film promotions, corporate launches, and many-a-times as a bouncer for ladies going to the Mahalaxmi racecourse. Long days would turn into short nights, as she would be dropped home by her clients’ cars at 1:30 am.

“My neighbours have started talking,” she said to Muthu and Naina, seated at the cornermost bench of Dosa Village.

“What are they saying?” asked Muthu, digging into a quick bite before the office crowd broke loose into his shop, like hungry lions over a sunset snack.

“They’re saying God knows where she goes and what she does this late at night.” Fatima dabbed her eyes with tissue paper. “I’ve ignored this, but now it’s getting to me. You know I thought being physically fit was everything. Take care of your body – work out, eat right, weigh right,

practice karate... No, the mind has to be fitter for such bullshit.”

Naina patted Fatima’s shoulder. “You’ve just given me some ideas.”

“I know what you mean,” said Muthu, “I shouldn’t have agreed to a business partnership some years ago..., but I was swayed by this chap’s sweet talk, and he ran away with all the money, wiping my account clean.” Muthu paused, “But this city pushes you on – it’s like one long marathon, and when everyone is marching it just eggs you on. So much positivity – I remember the first time I was robbed, stranded at Bandra station. If I could do it then, I knew I could do it now again. I had to start from scratch again,” he said softly.

“And you found a way?” asked Naina.

“I did,” said Muthu.

“If you ever are in another tight-spot like this, come to me, I’m not a CEO of finance of such a big company for nothing!”

“No! No!” said Muthu. “I must find my own way, so I know it well.”

Fatima and Naina smiled.

In another three years of eating *dosa*, sipping *garam masala chai* and *kapi*, Naina’s raised hammer had grown rusted, towering in the violence of her silence. She commanded with lightning flash business-decisions that

included environmental sensitivity. There was nothing above her head now. Not even a roof against the clear blue sky. Yashraj Tivan had been managed. But some part of the credit Naina would give to time. It had wizened her and aged her father-in-law into accepting the inevitable. The way lions retire in a jungle much against their will, Yashraj let time slip from his jaws and paws. Naina's prowess outdid her last records, even some of Nitin's business performance in the last quarters of the financial year.

But it had taken its toll.

"I feel like a machine now. Not woman. Not human. Tougher than what I broke through, sure there's steel in my spine. Only here I seem to relax, show you who I really am. Be human. Isn't it strange? That you two are letting me be human? You know I can't talk about all this to anybody in my circles. They will judge, being kind and understanding only on the outside." Naina added, "But I had completed discounted my son, Aarav, during his growing up years, while I was struggling. To assert myself, I chased magazine covers, then they chased me. Business woman of the year. Most influential woman in business and finance. You name it. I didn't think of workaholism. I just enjoyed it all."

"I wouldn't have imagined you worked so hard!" said Fatima. "Tell me is working in an office tiring?"

"As much as physical labour. Very taxing, in a different way. I remember working on Sundays, strategizing on holidays, talking work at parties, picnics. Dreaming of

work for the next day. My problem-solving happened in my dreams - because they said somewhere you could rely on your subconscious to solve what your conscious mind couldn't. Imagine. I didn't even let my sleep go to waste," Naina laughed. "In those near-dreams, my outer layers of concern evaporated, revealing a fluidity that worked around my thoughts giving me new structures, skeletons. I worked whenever I could. I didn't consider a second child, rather new SBUs, and once Aarav was off to London to university I didn't care going home. I had dinner in office, adding two more high-protein tiffins to my bag. So now what am I supposed to do?" Naina began sniffing wildly.

Muthu placed a stack of papers serviettes in front of her.

"What has really happened?" said Fatima, "Everything seems to have gone right for you?"

"Yes...," said Muthu.

"My son dislikes me. He doesn't connect with me. He perceives me to be aggressive, because I had to visibly be so. What's worse he's taken a liking to his aunt, who in my eyes is less than efficient, but is polite and docile - easy for men or anyone not to feel threatened..."

"Have you talked to him - a real discussion?" asked Muthu.

"No... I really fear this. I cringe..."

"No. I suggest you speak to him. Face this head on," said Fatima.

The next week, after dithering enough, Naina called for Aarav. Since the last fortnight that he had joined office, they hadn't had a conversation. Either she was too busy or he avoided her.

Naina spent the first few minutes admiring him. He had indeed grown into a dashing young man, if slightly hunched. At 25 he still didn't seem to have gotten out the clutches of teenage angst. Or that's what she had first called it, before realizing he might be an emerging, new tyrant.

"Are you hanging out a lot with your grandfather?" she asked him, shifting in her swivel chair.

"Not much! Why?" he asked with irritation.

Naina shook her head.

No... he was a loner – a whiz in his class, but personally unrelatable to her even if they were colleagues in the same business, and she his senior, except in the ways of the younger world. When was the last after-hour party she had attended? Her evenings were for *yoga*, or Workaholics Anonymous, Pilates, deep breathing, a good book, soft instrumental music...

Naina went for the jugular vein. She was also getting restless to turn back to work. "It's my fault I know, *beta*, I've not spent much time with you. But I wish you could understand I did everything... for you. Everything around you functioned smoothly because I had worked it out." Naina snapped her fingers.

Aarav's faced hardened. His eyes turning cold.

"I know Ma – Naina, that you are the god of processes. *Bade* Papa tells me that. Your flowcharts are flawless. And I'm grateful."

"But this is not about work. This is about us. Why are we not friends? Where is my Aarav?"

"We're colleagues here."

"And at home?"

"When is that?" He raised his chin up.

"Sorry?"

"When are you home?"

Naina could feel her temper rising. It had clutched her intestines and reached for her throat. Had anyone else said this, she would have fired the person. But here was a fact kicking her in the face, asking questions.

She stole a breath of fresh air. "You might not remember, but I have been there whenever you needed me – for exams, when you were unwell, when you had your boards and entrance tests, for admissions. I was even ready to come to London when you went to university."

He smiled, nodding. "I remember. But what about the times when I needed nothing? When nothing at all was happening in my life? Were you there then?"

"What does that mean?"

They looked at each other, then away from each other.

“Okay, I get it,” Naina quivered, controlling her voice so she could also stem the wetness in her eyes. “I can’t rewind time now. I thought I did well as a mother. You know... if I had a performance appraisal... I would’ve scored high.”

Aarav stormed out of her cabin.

The trio didn’t meet for a while.

“What, *didi*? You still think in terms of graphs, charts, and numbers?” said Fatima, at their next jaunt.

“No, no it’s important to think like that or we’d never know...,” said Muthu.

They were sitting in front of a buffet of American Chopsuey *dosa* and Schezwan *chutney* on trial.

They were also celebrating Muthu’s next milestone for Dosa Village. In a few short months, he had managed a crooked path to bail it out of the crutches of deficit, by opening franchises with a 49% stake-holding as investor. The time had come to move Dosa Village into bigger spaces.

“I’m just beginning to consider this – now that I have reached this new stage: offering my *dosa* in a mall,” said Muthu, “It seems like I’ve reached Jupiter.”

“It’s such a rich and proud moment. We’re such busy beings, Muthu,” said Naina, “tell me if it had to be without numbers why would there be time? Age? Hours in a clock?”

Minutes in an hour? Seconds? Birthdays? Why are we counting? Money? What are we counting?"

"But there are many things that cannot be counted like courage... love?" said Fatima.

"Sure," said Naina "and that's where I've failed. I'm surprised to find you so clear-headed, Fatima."

"I am happy. Two things have happened."

"Tell us. I'm the only one going on and on...," said Naina.

"My old problem, solved. Neighbours stopped whispering," said Fatima.

"That's very good," said Muthu.

"All thanks to the landlord. These people kept spreading rumours that I was into bad business, coming late at odd hours, ya? So, one day my landlord called all of us together and announced that he appreciated me - that I, at least, supported my family. They stopped after that. Now they say, all daughters should be like me."

"That's wonderful," said Naina, squeezing Fatima's hand. "And what is the second good news?"

"See how you won't miss a number!" said Fatima.

Naina raised her eyebrows.

"Okay, I got a permanent job as a bouncer in a discotheque and pub, and guess where - in a new mall not too far from here! And I can tell you this. Only you and Muthu will understand - tears of joy - how they seem? Light, weightless. I had once gone into a church and

dipped my fingers in holy water, brought it to my nose. Tears of joy feel like that, different from hot tears of anger, pain, hurt. I have cried so much these days.”

“Also, you say I’m clear-headed?” Fatima added, “Hmmm, I was a bouncer in Delhi for two months, some time ago when Muthu was changing his shop location. The nights there were rife with the love for hidden guns and power. Delhi needs you to have a lot of guts to hold your own during fights that show no sign of ending. I felt unsafe,” Fatima widened her eyes, nodding, “but I tried not to show it. Because if we did, the girls would get scared. The shock we swallowed on unexpected nights, staying brave, gave me clarity on how little makes up our life or is worth holding dear. Rest, is mostly *kachra*.”

Naina was thoughtful, “I’ll figure it out soon. When we meet again, I should have something to say.”

They dispersed.

Fatima and Naina followed Muthu to a new location.

It was 4 am in the morning. An hour before, Fatima had guided a drunk woman in the new pub *TRB Social Brewpub*, her new workplace, onto her feet. She helped her to the washroom and to get a hold on herself. Then she called for an Ola cab.

They stood on the terrace on the third floor of this new mall, Sierra Vista.

Muthu watched the sky quietly. The night was a magazine of stars, bullets after bullet, camouflaged in the city's luminescence and vehicular pollution. He had managed by now 105 *dosa* varieties. Every mall besides Sierra Vista had turned him down, because space was reserved for branded eateries like McDonald's and Pizza Hut. But one day the new management of Sierra Vista offered him a deal. They had often dined at **Dosa Village**, and enjoyed its fare. They welcomed Muthu to the mall.

"It's so funny, now that I have come to this mall, my *dosa* has a halo of hygiene around it, though we were as clean near the gutter too," said Muthu, chuckling.

"But the gutter, no?" said Fatima, "When I was a bra-and-panty salesgirl, people did not look at me. I was behind a counter. Just hands. Now when I am diffusing a fight male bouncers can't – when a fight has escalated, every eye is on me. I have never felt so visible. So big. Like a bulb bombing the whole room into light. Boom!"

"Dignity of labour," droned Naina, blowing on her electronic cigarette. "That's what this is..."

"What's that?" asked Fatima and Muthu together.

"In many countries, you won't find people looking down on the work you do. Here it's possible to have another kind of caste system. Do manual, menial work – labourer, waiter, cleaner and you are low. Be manager and you are high."

"But that is the caste system, isn't it?" said Muthu.

“True, but also another caste system of rich and poor, educated and uneducated – if only education was enough to shake and quake the world. The caste system of designations. And that is the craziest, because designations are fluid, meant to change. No one owns a designation. But see what respect a person with a low designation has. Away from India, they do have hierarchies too, but no matter what work you do you are treated and greeted as a person. There is commonplace warmth. That creates so much joy. I am not talking only of air-conditioned offices, but outside on the streets. No work is big or small. It shouldn’t be connected to money. See where the person starts his journey. His starting point...”

“But they do treat our people badly there? Didn’t they shoot somebody recently?” asked Fatima.

“Yes, there are race and hate crimes. But people are fighting it... Finally, it’s about respect... They fought against apartheid and slavery long ago... though it still exists in subtle layers...”

“*Didi*, no checking your phone now, *haan*,” said Fatima, “Keep it away. What’s the point of taking time off if you have to look at it? Look at the sky. The stars!” said Fatima.

Naina smiled, slipping her mobile into her bag, “I cannot speak of the ill-effects of workaholism – but who will believe me?” she said giggling like a girl.” They’ll say you have it all. When we become CEO’s we will decide.”

“Now I want to settle down and open a training agency for female bouncers,” quipped Fatima after a long silence.

“That’s a brilliant idea!” said Naina.

At the next meeting on the terrace, which had now become their *adda*, after a round of stomaching dosas, the trio stood near the parapet.

“Look at this crazy traffic!” said Muthu. “I’m not sure how much I like this part of the city.”

“This city that allowed me to be me. Us to be us.” said Fatima.

“Yes, even with its crazy infrastructure - a hive for worker bees. *Jugaad* nation,” said Naina.

“How have things been with you, *didi*? Aarav?”

“Now there’s a new shade to this problem,” sighed Naina, crushing the smoldering butt of her cigarette. “Aarav’s aunt who was managing ops in Singapore and Malaysia is now here in India. And the way he deals with her - the smiling glances, the support, the way my father-in-law supports her. This man whom I thought a misogynist is so wonderful to his daughter...”

“Your father-in-law I can still understand. But your son? Why would he be doing this?” asked Fatima.

“Wait I can understand...,” said Muthu. “*Arrey!* because she’s his daughter.”

“So they know when to be against women, when to be for. It’s never all women. Like never all men.”

“That’s why it’s better being clubbed based on ideologies and objectives, temperaments. This man-woman thing bores me. So he’s a selective patriarch... in other words. Would love his daughter to break glass ceilings – in fact would not place any obstacles for her.”

“*Didi* sometimes you talk such *hi-fundoo* language...,” said Muthu, “No, but I am understanding it. So, what about your son? Was his aunty very close to him - like a mother?”

“Not really. They spoke over phone or chatted. So, I really haven’t figured this out, but I will...”

“And you will tell us...,” said Fatima.

“If not, whom...?” said Naina.

Naina watched her friends. She did not tell them about Workaholics Anonymous, as she watched the workforce of Bombay making their way home – pedestrians worming through the corners of the road, bikers and two-wheelers snaking against cars, and the cars waylaid by big private or state transport buses. Every vehicle moving just a bit. Every lane, a rivulet letting more and more people home, gathered at the arterial road of the highway, clogged like a dirty river. And as it got late, the stream thinning to a gutter more than a river.

“You know when people do not like their work – they call it slavery, exploitation,” mused Naina.

“Arrey, how can work have any negative word attached to it?” asked Muthu, “It can only have hardship as a word near it. That too changes after a while.”

“Also, if they don’t like the work, but want to play games they get into politics,” nodded Naina, “I feel all those who feel it’s slavery should go use their energy somewhere else – giving their passion a go – flying those kites high. Complaining only leads to unhappiness. Take it in your hands. Take action. Quit. Do something you would like. One life!”

What is all this? Work-drunkenness, *bevdagiri*? You understand? Better than *dadagiri* of any kind. When you drink and lie on the road – every single day?” said Fatima.

“Those that play politics become *dadas*. They do it to waste time – for the ones who want to just work. They come with strange dogmas. Sometimes it’s a mob – a group of people. Culture building and bullshit – easy tropes. Most of it is brand building ploys, committees, feeling important ruling and deciding – but it is cute to watch them – self-importance with not much consequence. But when it has consequence,” Naina clicked her fingers, “it can sky-rocket a project. I always like working with such people – the right kind.”

“I’m not sure I suffer from workaholism,” she said after a while.

“Arrey why would you say that *didi*? Look at me. If I hadn’t worked this hard would I have come here - to this mall?”

“But maybe there is something called too much? Sometimes? Even of things that are good?” said Fatima. “Then just take an easy break. Nice vacation. And come on *didi* you have the money and luxury to do that,” said Fatima.

Naina gave them a small smile. “Maybe we should all go for a vacation? Whose coming? Put your hands up! When habits grow around us into a tight mould, it is time to crrrrrack.”

Note: This story is from the upcoming collection, ‘Hangovers from a Bombay debacle.’



Rochelle Potkar is an Indian fiction writer and poet based in Mumbai, India. Her first book, *The Arithmetic of breasts and other stories* was shortlisted for The Digital Book of the Year Award 2014, by Publishing Next. *Four Degrees of Separation* (Paperwall, 2016) is her first book of poetry. She has represented India at the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program and was a writer-in-residence at the UNESCO city of literature – Iowa’s International Writing Program (IWP), Fall Residency 2015.

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