

## Marine Drive/A heavy Anchor Cast

by Chani Fifield

The wind whipped sharply against Clara's face, biting cold across her cheekbones. Her scalp, although covered with a thick woolen scarf, fizzed and tingled with the assault from the icy blasts. Bristling, Clara tensed her body in defence against the cold and dug her small hands further into the rough hewn lining of her large coat pockets. She pressed on into the headwind, her chin dipped and brow furrowed.

She didn't know why she hated the blustery weather so much, it really got to her, made her angry even. Maybe it was how out of control it all felt; it caused her hair to break free from its usual carefully braided style and fly wildly around her face. It tugged at her scarf; dragging it behind her dancing raggedly so she had to stop every five seconds to readjust it. Or maybe today her irritation was more to do with what loomed ahead of her; the resistance in her body was palpable.

Clara thought back to all those months ago and where the letter had first taken her, to the hotel up in the Western Ghats with nothing but a name and a hand-scrawled note. There had been a series of events at the hotel which played over and over in her mind, every day since her visit there. But she couldn't think about that right now. If she did, she'd go crazy. "I'll think about that tomorrow," Clara told herself, pushing the memories away again. Her pace quickened and the thin leather soles of her shoes made dust across the cracked and sun-bleached promenade. She looked down at the terracotta tiles underfoot, their edges interlinked in a pattern of concentric circles. A rat, huge and fat-bellied, scuttled across Clara's path, making her gasp.

Despite the weather, the residents of Kochi were doing their best to enjoy the city's traditional Sunday morning walk along Marine Drive. Families: parents with children scampering around them in circles; young lovers unmarried: sitting side by side on the filigree iron benches, not touching and demure in demeanor.

Elderly men wizened and moving at a snail's pace, smiling sagely at the bustling life around them. Clara regarded the scene unfolding before her and her vexation at the wind evaporated. Suddenly she stopped in her tracks as her eyes fixed on a figure in the distance. Could it be who she thought it was? Striding closer now and more quickly towards her, Clara traced the familiar outline of the man in her mind's eye. She had done this so many times before when she was just a girl, trying to cling on to her childhood memories in painful moments. The man was tall and thin, with an ease in his step suggesting confidence. Long wavy hair pulled back off his face exposed high cheekbones and his deep brown eyes that she remembered so well, that once glistened with joy. But as the figure made his way towards her she was startled that her memorised imprint of him was now different. The man before her seemed weaker somehow. His face was riven with years of sadness and she noticed him hastily blinking back tears. "Clara, my dear, it IS you!" the man exclaimed, moving towards her with arms outstretched. Instinctively, she flinched, backing away. "Don't be scared my child, it's me, your *Achhan* (Father)."

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An hour had passed, or maybe more. The pair sat on one of the filigree benches next to the water's edge. The wind had dissipated, replaced by a pleasant breeze which was met gladly by Clara. She looked out across the backwaters, past the jutting angles of the Chinese fishing nets lined up in neat rows now their days' work was done. In the distance, the industrial port bustled with its cranes and municipality of corrugated iron shipping containers. It contrasted starkly with the glazed tiled façades of the residential buildings, made in the colonial Portuguese style when the city was the centre of the global spice trade. The man kept his head downcast, his hands knotted together on his lap. They'd exhausted the small talk and Clara was ready to move on from the pleasantries.

"I was so young when you gave me to him, I was just a child," she began, "but believe me, I had to learn to be an adult, fast. My husband...he was almost an old man. An old man!"

Clara paced backwards and forwards, she could feel the ground through the thin soles of her shoes.

"I had to put those memories, those feelings, in my pocket, stuffed deep down inside. For years they remained there, stored safely away. I didn't think I'd ever have to let them out again to see the light of day. And now here, here you are. And you make me remember...everything!"

Clara wanted to run, she couldn't stay still any longer. Shoban looked at the woman, recognising a glimpse of something familiar in her eyes. He began to speak, softly.

"It really weighs me down Clara, what happened to you. Such heavy anchors were cast, the day they took you. As each year has passed, it has become more painful Clara. They say it gets easier, but I have most definitely experienced the opposite."

Clara felt the force of her anguish rising.

"You've experienced the opposite? How about me! How about me experiencing the opposite of everything I was meant to have, meant to be? Where is the justice for me in all of this!"

Clara exploded, rising to her feet and backing away from Shoban.

“Don’t go Clara!” Shoban pleaded, “I’ve been dreaming of this day for so long, the thought of seeing you again has carried me through some very dark moments in my life.” Clara’s jaw was clenched as she stared in disbelief at the audacity of the man in front of her. She focussed all her strength on fighting back the hot tears of disappointment ready to erupt from her eyes at any moment. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of that. Imploring her to stay, Shoban realised his requests were futile. He watched his daughter run away from him, her figure becoming smaller and smaller, just out of reach like it had been in his mind’s eye for so many years before, just like it had been on the long arduous path to finally finding her. Shoban fell crumpled to the ground, heaving great sobs as waves of grief wracked through him.

Lighter and somehow lifted, exalted beside the sea, Clara hurried home and didn’t look back.