

It's difficult to describe the vivid image a beach evokes in the mind. To turn something living into simple, inanimate words. Can you capture nature's ephemerality? Waves don't crash with the same vivacity in the hermit's early morning sun as they do for the puppeteering moon. Sand is coarse when it slips through your fingers yet soft beneath your feet. Do you see the seagull flying? Blessed with freedom though it knows no God.

It's no shock then that a beach with neither name nor written history goes largely uncaptured. So when Bollywood stars and Northern models began to build their bungalows on the sea, It was skipped over completely. Honeymoons were consummated on Juhu Beach¹, Pilgrimages were made to rock-cut Elephanta islands². And the universe that existed in the same ocean remained, at best, rumor and, at worst, unknown to the rest of the country.

But the fishermen, the merchants, the dancers. The men, women, youth, elderly who lived on It. They nursed no ignorance. They saw that beach—Its fine sands of gold, Its water like liquid sapphire—every night in their dreams. For them, it was *Ananta*³, eternally in mind and infinitely present. Yet, if a lost vessel or misguided tourist came upon It, neither would find life on the shore. There would be no brown bodies sunbathing by the banana trees and no children's splashes disrupting the rhythm of the waves. But for the local people, the beach and Its waters were like the blood flowing in their veins, an unconscious necessity for their existence.

And so was life on Ananta Beach.

Then there was the wedding.

In a small island with little to honor or mourn, everyone is invited to partake in special occasions. The fishermen abandon their boats, and the salmon breathe easy for the night. The merchants close the market early, choosing not to haggle with aunties for the sake of time. The dancers tie anklets made of heavy bells to the base of their legs. Men, women, young, and old follow bright lights and the ripe smell of marigolds to the celebration. They walk on dirt paths through cement houses painted vibrant colors and covered in aged movie posters.

On that particular night, it was humid. The kind where mosquitoes swarm to feast on brown blood, and the air is a bit too sticky and heavy to walk in. But the people of the town were eager to share in the joy of their old friends, and so almost every house remained vacant.

Almost.

The procession passed right by her. Absorbed in their collective laughter, they failed to notice that a young girl, just turned nineteen, had blown out a single candle in her room. Nobody was around to mark her coming of age, and she took advantage of that moment of independence. With her feet bare, she slinked through the streets to Ananta Beach. The sky was still blue enough to light her path to the pale sand, but the sun was quickly setting and a deep purple was

¹ Beach located in Mumbai, a city in the western part of India; famous for being a vacation spot for Bollywood celebrities

² Island with ancient Hindu cave temples, also located in the city of Mumbai

³ Sanskrit word meaning endless or limitless, associated with the infinite nature of the universe

spreading over the horizon. The moon rose high overhead, and as the tide crashed with greater vivacity, a misty white figure appeared.

Through her kajal⁴-lined eyes and flowing red veil trimmed with gold, the girl took in the spirit before her. She, like every girl in the town, knew the story well. It had been fed to them every night at the dinner table, alongside their mothers' fish curries and baskets of rotis⁵. The girl could hear her own father lecturing to her now through a mouthful of food:

“Once, there was a beautiful woman. Though her hair was thick and wavy and her body curved, she was beautiful not for her looks. Rather, her dedication to her duty and commitment to the town set her apart. She prayed morning, noon, and night and touched the feet of every elder who came her way,” He would say, licking his fingers and scooping another fish onto his plate.

“Then one night, the woman haggled with the okra vendor more than usual, so by the time she left the market, the moon was a great white circle in the sky. On her way home, she walked past Ananta Beach where the sea foam sparkled like silver and the waves had grown taller. The woman stopped in the middle of the street. She had always felt that the life of the beach ebbed and flowed within her, but under the full moon, the song of the tide moved her like never before,” Her father picked out fish bones from the curry.

“But remember, she was a beautiful soul, so she carried her bag of okra home and resisted when the ocean begged her to stay. For some time, her days went on in the same manner—praying, meeting elders, shopping at the market. It was slow but so was life on Ananta Beach. The woman had tasted something more though, and the temptation had snaked itself around her heart. When the next full moon came to town, she ran from dirt path to soft sand to cool water, letting the song of the tide that she so loved lead her into the depths of the ocean. Nobody ever saw her again, and from incident, rule was born. So when the moon is full, young girls are not allowed to pass by the beach. If they do, the spirit of the beautiful woman will take them from this land and drown them in the sea foam,” He looked up at his daughter with sharp eyes and ripped a roti from the basket into pieces.

The girl shut her eyes and shook her head, hoping to physically clear her mind. She opened them. The spirit remained lucid in front of her, as clear to be seen as if it were day and not night. Yet, there was a surreal dreaminess about her. Yes, her hair was long and wavy and her body curved, but the woman seemed to glow with a brightness no human woman could have. She was even more beautiful than the girl had imagined.

You should go there, The spirit gestured to the raucous conversation and twinkling lights at the top of the hill, far from the empty beach and bubbling sea foam.

“Would you?” The girl asked with genuine curiosity.

⁴ Smudge resistant eyeliner popular in South Asia

⁵ South Asian flatbread

I did my duty for a long while because I liked it. It gave me fulfillment, The spirit looked down at the girl with a gentle smile, Until one day, it didn't. So I chose to chase a feeling, to alter my life in an unprecedented way.

“What if that’s a mistake?”

Does this feel right? See yourself with the bridal nath⁶ draped across your face and deep red mehendi⁷ painted over your body. See yourself covered with red chiffon and smothered with the smell of jasmine. See yourself for who you are, and that is the only duty you owe to God.

The girl got up to look at herself in the water, but there was too much sea foam built up and the waves kept rippling her reflection into fragments. She frowned and settled back into the sand. The spirit watched her intently, a sad yet knowing expression on her face.

What do you know about him?

“I have never seen him. But I know he was the tallest boy in his class, and his uncle owns acres of land. I know he is a good Hindu boy who prays early in the morning and brings his mother chicken and squash from the market in the evening. I know I’m lucky he is around my same age. Many of my friends were not so fortunate. I should be grateful God has blessed me with this match,” The girl fiddled with her wedding gown.

And are you?

The girl was silent. In the distance, the party could be heard in full effect. Aunties sang and uncles cheered as the dancers shook their anklets to the beat of the wedding drums. The town remained so enamored with the uncommon excitement happening on the island, that no one noticed the bride had yet to be seen.

You do not know God and what he has blessed you with or without, The spirit said, All you can know is yourself, and that is the faith God teaches you to believe in. So what is the choice you will give yourself?

The girl looked up at the spirit. From the softness of her gaze to the wispieness of her clothes to the fluidity of her movements, the beautiful woman possessed a freedom she craved. This was the temptation her father warned would snake around her heart, and he was right. She felt it gripping so tight she almost couldn’t breathe. It was overwhelming yet intoxicating. A rush of wind swept the veil off her head and the girl smiled. The banana trees rustled, and, like hands, their leaves shoed her towards the ocean. Each individual grain of sand rolled over, pushing her feet downwards to the water. Even the spirit extended her pale arms to the girl, her face full of warmth and understanding.

⁶ Large, ornate nose ring worn by Indian brides as a symbol of marriage

⁷ Paste used to create intricate designs on the body that symbolize love and prosperity, South Asian brides cover their arms and legs in designs as part of marriage celebrations, also known as henna

Then the beautiful woman's eyes narrowed at something behind the girl, and everything went motionless in anticipation. The girl whipped her head around and let out a small gasp.

She could tell he had been the tallest boy in his class, but his hands looked too delicate to carry slimy chicken and hard squash. Still, in the light of the moon, she saw a kind face and brown eyes that were surprisingly not resentful. There was something in them though. What that was she didn't quite know yet, but it made her take a step back from the ocean awaiting her.

"How did you find me?" The girl could barely whisper.

She realized it was a silly question to ask as soon as the words left her mouth. Of course he knew where she would be. For when every young girl was being force fed the story of the spirit, every young boy born out of discontent craned his ear for a crumb of the legend.

The waves continued to lap expectantly behind the girl, but the moon was slowly disappearing from above. At the point where the ocean meets the sky, a faint orange line was spreading like honey. The spirit showed no anxiety, however. That same look of warmth and understanding was all she bestowed upon the two young people before her.

The leaves of the banana trees began to rustle again, and a breeze gently stirred the sand. The boy reached over, plucked a pink flower from a cluster in the tree, and placed it behind the girl's ear. It stood out against the detailed nath in her nose, and she motioned for him to remove the gaudy jewelry. With delicate hands, he followed her lead, then he bowed his head to the sand and retrieved the girl's fallen veil. He tied it to his wrist and she grabbed hold of the other end. The red and gold contrasted his cream-colored wedding suit, yet, it didn't look or feel odd to either of them. Something fit, and as the faint orange line grew into a gradient of soft yellow and peach hues, the girl knew it was time.

She looked back at the gentle eyes of the boy and then ahead at the comforting arms of the beautiful woman. With sweet smiles tickling their lips, the young couple waded seven steps into the water, and let the spirit of the ocean overtake them.

Years later, when incident had once again birthed rule and fear gave life to legend, a young girl was running barefoot in the street. She was late for dinner, and the full moon was rising. As punishment for her tardiness, she knew father would eat all the curry, and mother would make her wash the pans. Still, when she passed the blocked path to the beach, something made her stop.

Far below, drifting blissfully over the waves were three white figures. She shut her eyes tight and counted to ten, but they were still there when she looked again. They were glowing with a happiness she had never seen a human possess. She felt herself pulled into a dreamlike state, one where love permeated her heart and salty waves coursed through her blood. How long she stood in that spot, she didn't know, but mother had her washing pots and pans for the rest of the month.

And so was life on Ananta Beach.