

Fair and Lovely

by Hasara Ekanayake

Tharu puts her elbows down on the stylist's makeup table and leans into the mirror. The harsh morning light slashes across her face, throwing every bump, scratch and spot into sharp relief. The dark marks at the ends of her lips, the gravestones of popped pimples, the shadows that stretch, bruise-like, under her eyes – worse, today, because she is stressed about the wedding, and because it is four in the morning, and because she has never absorbed the love for early-morning starts that her mother has endlessly endeavoured to instil in her.

In summary, she does not look like an angel.

Tharu knows this. So, it does not shock her when the stylist tuts, her fingers running down the row of foundation bottles sitting on the makeup table until they reach the very darkest. A soft tan amongst delicate creams. Tharu wonders if it is still too pale for her, or if it is the morning light that makes the colour so bright.

“You will look beautiful,” the stylist tells her. She asks a lot of questions, like, “Are you excited?” and “Have you seen him yet?” and “*Oh*, but are you excited?!”

She's a pretty girl. Gold bangles jangle on her wrists, and her face is sweet but defined, like a generous spiral of whipped cream. Her hair is straightened and hangs down her back in a single defined sheet.

Tharu fingers her frizzy curls, watching the stylist pour a pool of cream foundation out into a tray.

“Don't worry,” the stylist says, as she picks up a smear with her brush. “This is full coverage.”

The lightening face-cream is white and sour-smelling on her mother's hands. On Tharu's face, it is sticky in the places where it doesn't sting. She mewls, trying to pull free of the palms that rub it into her skin.

Her mother gives a humph. “You’ve ruined your skin, Tharumini!”

Tharu stares at the bathroom mirror. She thinks, sourly, that her skin does not look ruined to her. Beneath the pale sheen of the lightening cream, it is darker than it was that morning. But how can that be a bad thing, when it was playing in her grandparents’ garden with her brothers, the warm summer sun on her skin, that had darkened it? That is a very good thing, she thinks.

Her mother squeezes more of the cream out of a pink bottle. There is a pale girl with blue eyes on the label. Tharu stares resentfully at her and thinks that this other girl’s mother has probably never rubbed a bottles’ worth of foul-smelling cream into her skin. Her mother probably lets her play in the garden all day.

Another blob lands, cold, on Tharu’s cheeks.

“Sit still, Tharumini,” her mother hisses, darkly, going in for a second attack. “You’ll thank me in twenty years.”

The first stroke of the stylist’s brush is ice on her cheeks.

Tharu squeezes her eyes shut with a soft gasp. When she opens them again, she is torn in two, a paler river of foundation splitting her face into dark halves. It cleaves her left cheek and crests the bridge of her nose. The colour is laughably too light. Fit for a shampoo model, or an actress. Not her.

Tharu thinks that the stylist will wipe it off and try a new shade, but then she leans back in with the same brush, her body blocking most of the mirror from Tharu’s view.

The hairs of the brush stutter over Tharu’s skin, over the ridges and bumps, and other monuments to her younger, pimpled years. In the brief glances in the mirror that Tharu snatches around the stylist, she watches as each, one by one, disappears. It is like watching mildly unpleasant relatives drive away around the end of the street; good riddance, certainly, but now the house is empty and cold, and that isn’t so nice after all.

Is it strange, Tharu wonders, to feel so fondly for spots and scars? Oh, but they have been with her through it all.

At thirteen, adolescence shoves Tharu right off her feet with the force of it. She is the dark, pimpled girl who everyone sniggers about. She is rounder than she should be, and then, when the prepubescent fat sloughs away, she is skinny in the wrong places – bony ankles and stick-like legs holding up a stomach that protrudes.

But Tharu tells herself that she isn't bothered. She has never expected to turn out a beauty. She doesn't care what others think. She does not.

She pretends that she does not suck her stomach in as she stands in front of the mirror. That she does not smuggle her mother's lightening cream into her bedroom or painstakingly poke pimples in the shower. Perhaps, she would have admitted otherwise, if any of those things ever worked – but nothing does.

So, she says that none of it bothers her. None of it.

When the stylist shifts to the side, and Tharu can see herself in the mirror again, all she can think is that the foundation is *absurdly* too light. She opens her mouth to say so, but—

Her voice catches.

Tharu just stares, in fascinated horror, as the brush spreads easily across the dwindling stretches of rich browns, blank uniformity left in its wake. For a second, she is a motley of colour; she is a partial eclipse of perfection.

Then the act is done. The stylist pulls away, and the figure in the mirror is transformed. The strange face tilts slowly left, then right.

The stylist asks, “Is it not light enough?”

Tharu stares, heart thudding. She cannot believe that this new skin, the colour of sweet milk tea, is hers. She raises her hand to meet it, and the familiar darkness on the back of her palm calms her racing heart. She is convinced that the strange face will fall away under that hand, turn liquid and run through her fingers to leave the motley darkness underneath. But seconds pass, and it grows more firmly in place. Tharu feels smothered in a stranger's skin.

But her voice still sticks in her throat, because as she looks at the figure in the mirror, she cannot help but think to herself: *Oh my god, she is beautiful.*

She is more than beautiful; she is unreal. She has never burnt in the sunlight, never burst a pimple, or hidden dry flaking skin under three pumps of face cream. She has stalked

through life with a perfection so powerful that she has emerged out the other side without a scrape to show for it.

The stylist takes Tharu's hand and starts to paint that, too. "You will look beautiful," she says, happily. "He will love it."

Tharu closes her eyes.

The day her mother brings up marriage proposals, Tharu is so outraged, she can only stare. She has an internship at the local paper, she has just written her first article, she has just been to the seaside by herself with her friends to get a taste of independence on the salty air.

But now: marriage.

Tharu thinks about her rejected articles at the paper, and the department head who puts his arms on her hips when he calls for tea. She thinks about the men at the seaside who hoot at her friends when they sit in the shade, and whistle when they try to swim. She thinks about how small her room feels when she comes home; about all the friends and cousins who have moved on with their new families to bigger, better places.

She thinks: of course, marriage. Where else does she go from here?

"We have talked to the man who handles such things. He says there are many prospective grooms right now." Her mother brings a traditional saree and a hatte top and lays them down on her bed. They are olive-green, striped with garish orange, and they make Tharu sick. "Tharumini, you are old enough now."

When her mother finally forces the clothes on her, Tharu parades in front of her family like she's been put in a straitjacket. Her brothers snigger.

She tells them that she will never wear one again.

The stylist brings out the pearl-beaded cream *saree*, the long cloth draped over her arm. In her other hand, she holds the gold and cream *hatte* top.

"My wedding saree wasn't nearly this nice," she gushes, running her fingers over the detailing.

Tharu hums and looks away.

She keeps chattering. “He was an arranged one, wasn’t he? So was mine. Mine’s very clever. I would never have met someone so clever otherwise.”

A pretty thing like she is, and he’s probably an engineer or a doctor. Probably a little older, too – in his thirties, well-established, and looking to move abroad. Something sour twists in Tharu’s stomach.

The stylist is back to inspecting the saree. She looks up, grinning. “You must be the only daughter, to get a saree like this!” Her big eyes meet Tharu’s, and some of that twisting inside Tharu’s chest tugs itself loose. The stylist holds the *saree* so carefully in her arms, like a single crease would shatter the glittering cloth.

“Yes, you must be an only daughter.” The girl sighs. “I didn’t even get a good stylist.”

“I have two *mallis*,” Tharu tells her. Two little brothers.

The stylist hands Tharu the *hatte*. “And a *great* stylist.”

Tharu smiles. “What is your name?”

“Christina,” she says. “Tharumini?”

“Tharu,” she corrects, out of habit. Up close, she can see the creases of foundation on the stylist – Christina’s – cheeks. Tharu wonders if Christina is pretty under her paint. She probably is.

Tharu wonders, too, if Christina ever got to play in the garden all day. She probably didn’t. Dark girls shouldn’t burn, of course, but neither should the light ones.

Tharu pulls the *hatte* on over her chest, and Christina does the hooks up, on the front. The girl is humming away, fingers still running over the pearl details.

Underneath the cups of the *hatte*, Tharu’s breasts are mashed against her skin. When she turns to the mirror, the figure staring back is grotesquely liminal. Halfway between fantasy and the mundane.

Her face is a portrait: pale skin, thin brows and red bow lips. Below that, the *hatte* forms two dainty mounds over her chest: not too big, and not too small. They catch the eye, but do not demand it.

But where the hem of the *hatte* hangs, she transforms. Her stomach bulges, a dark balloon. Her bony legs are ill-proportioned twigs.

The back of Tharu’s throat twists.

“She’s a bit...” the young man whispers to his father. Tharu, stirring a cup of tea in the kitchen, pretends she does not hear.

“We have been to enough of these,” his father hisses back. “Choose her. She is fine.” She is fine.

Tharu’s face burns, and she stirs the tea with violent energy, metal clattering against porcelain to drown them out.

She is not made for marriage proposals. They mortify her. The prospective groom and his family will sit in her living room, demanding tea and biscuits, and sizing her up like a suspicious hunk of meat on special at the deli. She has hated them, bitterly, from the very first one.

At first, she does not even try to be chosen: she is uncouth, she sits wrong, she brews the tea to be thin and bitter. But every time the groom leaves, it does not give Tharu the satisfaction she expects. The way her mother’s face falls as they watch yet another family get back into their car and drive away quashes any sense of victory.

But when Tharu tries, the proposals are only worse, because they still do not choose her. She tries again, and again—

And again. She walks back into the living room with the tray of tea, feeling stiff in her hatte, trying not to stumble on the saree winding around her legs. They all watch her, so Tharu wears the prettiest smile she owns, and hopes the lie she sells is sweet enough: I am here. Look at my saree. I will brew your tea. I will mend your shirts. Just choose me, please.

She never went to journalism school, or parties, or watched men in bars. She never wished she could grace the cover of a national paper. She is none of that.

An hour after he leaves, her mother puts down the phone with a beam so wide it crinkles the crows’ feet at the corners of her eyes. “He’s chosen you!”

Tharu forces a smile back, and fiddles with the end of her saree.

Once the saree is draped on, the transformation is complete.

Gilded pearls and marble crepe-silk. The woman in the mirror has become completely unrecognisable. Cloth clutches curves and moulds flesh into a shape that is as alluring as it is terrifying.

This woman lowers her head out of respect. She catches a man's eye across the room and wonders only whether he needs something to eat. She has never quartered her name into a coarse 'Tharu'. She carries Tharumini like a gilded crown on her brow. Her beauty is screamed in every glittering fold of fabric, like only a lie can be.

The *hatte* presses down tight against Tharu's chest. She is suffocating.

What if, she thinks. What if she just left? Christina has ducked out to get her hair spray, and Tharu is alone. So, what if she climbed out of a window, and ran? What if she tore this shimmering *saree* off her body, let the salt of her tears rip the false skin from her face?

She takes a step towards the window.

But the door creaks open.

"*Puthe.*" My child.

Tharu whips around to see her mother, wearing her best *saree* in a sage-green and gold. She stands in the doorway, like she cannot believe her eyes.

Tharu thinks that she is caught. Her mother knows that she is running.

Then she sweeps across the room to Tharu, placing her hand under her daughter's chin.

"You look so beautiful," she whispers, those crows' feet crumpling at the corners of her eyes. She shines with gladness, relief hanging heavy in her half-creased brows: *I have raised my daughter right.*

Their reflections dance across the mirror. Tharu catches sight of them. Her new skin is an ivory *saree*, a pale face, a perfectly diminutive figure. Tharu thinks that, maybe, when her mother looks at this new girl, she can believe the lie.

And, maybe, when Tharu looks in the mirror... she finds herself believing it, too. It doesn't matter that the figure is not real. She is beautiful, and that is all that matters.

Tharumini takes her mother's hand, and they leave the dressing room together.