

The Six-Hour Argument
By Anna Wostenberg

This was the most uncomfortable and frustrated she'd ever been; Sheena felt like people could practically see the steam rising from her hot and flushed face. The flight was full and she could not escape the passenger next to her, her mother. A conversation-less six hours was about to ensue because Sheena refused to speak. Nothing was going to change her mind. The flight from her home in New York, to San Francisco seemed endless. Sheena could not help but blame her mother for her father's death. They were flying out to San Francisco to bring him back to New York so that her mother could have a traditional Indian funeral to keep up the appearance of family bliss.

"Sheena, talk to me," her mother pleaded from the cramped airplane seat next to her daughter. She received no response. "Sheena, this is not how I raised you. I did not come all the way to America to raise you so that you could show me disrespect."

"Mom, whaddayou want me to say?" she replied tersely. Her gaze remained straight ahead.

"I want you to say anything. We must talk."

"Oh, I can say anything? Okay. How 'bout I tell you how you ruined my childhood because all you always did was argue with Dad? Or how I was always too embarrassed to bring my friends over because of all the fighting? And Dad never once started the fights! It was always YOU!" Sheena blurted this out, raising her voice suddenly afraid that she was attracting attention from other passengers. Her mother stared back at her blankly. This flight was indeed going to be long. The resentment Sheena held toward her mother was flooding to the surface. The captain turned off the "Fasten Seatbelts" sign as the plane gained cruising altitude, giving the illusion that Sheena could run away, but she couldn't.

"Marriage was not what I expected. When my parents arranged my marriage to a boy from a respected family I believed that my life would be as I always planned. I would have a husband who would grow to love me and support our family. Instead I left my family and friends and moved to a strange land where people treated me like I was of the lowest caste."

"That was your choice, not mine", Sheena fired back.

"I agreed to it for you. You were so happy and curious. I saw that if we stayed in India your life would turn out as mine had. Your father convinced me that in America he would be successful and our children would be also."

"What does that have to do with the way you treated him?"

After a pause, the mother said, "Life was not easy. We had to make our own place here. We were not born into wealth or castes as we had been in India. We did not have people who knew us and knew our family and acted as we do. The Indians we met were from different places and I could not open my heart to them. And your father was never home, always working and talking about how he was going to be an American business success. But did he do it? No, he forgot his family as he tried to fit in with his American friends who never thought of him as an equal. After a while I did not even know who he was"

Quick to retort, Sheena said, "Well then why didn't you divorce him?"

“My parents would have disowned me! They would not have allowed it. It simply isn’t done.”

“Your parents have been dead for fifteen years, Mom!” Sheena said, trying to keep her voice down “You’ve had plenty of time to divorce Dad so the both of you could move on and have a chance at being happy!”

The mother was silent as she sorted through images of Sheena’s childhood when Sheena had talked back or deliberately disobeyed her to go out with her friends or a boy, the tiles finally falling into place. “You think I’m a bad mother because I would not let you show disrespect for your heritage and the way we live.” That one phrase, by saying it out loud, was enough to shatter the mother’s world. She realized that her daughter saw her as a rigid old woman from a strange place. Not the shorts-wearing, wine-drinking carefree American mothers like her friends have.

“I don’t *think*, Ma, I *know*.”

A flight attendant came over to ask if Sheena and her mother needed anything. Sheena thought partly because she could see the anger and vehemence in their conversation and were afraid it was going to erupt into shouting.

“No, we’re fine”, Sheena snapped and the attendant politely walked away. “Now it’s too late, Mom, because Dad’s dead. He’s gone and he never had a chance,” she hissed.

“I don’t know what you want me to say...” her mother said, defeated.

“I want you to admit it.” Sheena was speaking slowly and deliberately, enunciating each syllable.

“Admit what?”

“That you’re the reason Dad is dead.”

A long silence followed. Sheena thought she’d finally won. Ironically, this was the longest conversation Sheena and her mother had had in years. Since she’d moved out to go to college, Sheena hadn’t spoken to her mother. Not until the bad news had arrived, that is.

Several minutes later, the mother slowly and quietly said, “You’re right. I’m the reason your father jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge,” as a slow tear rolled down her cheek. The silence continued and Sheena suddenly felt as if the whole plane were empty, not a single person on board.