

Mima

J S Dali

The phone call finally came, everyone was summoned. She'd been the head of the family for over 60 years and now she was passing down her crown. Nine children, two farm lands, a petrol station; a widow. She ran it all. She was a modern-day rebel living in a small rural village from the past, where women didn't have a say. She was to be reunited with her husband, who had left more than 40 years earlier, and her two sons, taken by illness too soon; leaving an army of daughters and grandchildren to carry on the legacy she'd built on her tiny shoulders.

In front of her house, people from all classes sit on plastic chairs lined along her walls. Calls to prayer blasting from her rooftop alert the whole village of her imminent departure. Death fresh on the doorstep, still everyone she crossed paths with flocks to her home to bid her a final farewell. Her family, stricken, are now put through her final hospitality test, setting up rooms for visitors, assigning beds for distant relatives, preparing food for those who have travelled from afar and making sure the sweet hot mint tea is continually poured. Her home now a waiting room of mourners.

The little ones are all huddled together in a corner, left to entertain themselves, some playing, some staring, not quite sure what to make of this strange spectacle in their Mima's house. Her house in which they cooked with her, picked oranges in her garden with her, fed the chickens with her and learned the simplicity of life from her. The last few years she'd started to fade, wanting to die; God had gifted her enough, she'd say. She didn't fear death; she awaited the afterlife, a bittersweet loss for the rest of us. We all realised losing her meant losing us. We wouldn't visit her empty house, share her soulful food, no more religious gatherings fussing around her. This was the end of our era; it was all weddings and funerals for us too now.

When the hour comes for her to leave her only home, we are all hushed. Grown women, heartbroken, can't let her go, clinging on to her shrouded corpse. Men lift her up to the skies, settling her onto their proud shoulders to carry her away. Her daughters, daughters' daughters and their daughters all left behind, for females are deprived of the last holy rituals. They now must carry out the 40 days of mourning, keeping Mima proud, receiving and feeding the condolence messengers, making sure every soul who steps over her threshold leaves at peace.

Her remaining son and all other men who had known her kindness precede the cortege the rest of the way. She would be taken care of by them, surrounded until the last handful of dirt; no one ever dies alone here.