

A Chai Shop and Contrasts

by Jo-Ann Sanu

My tongue burns as I take my first sip from the steaming hot chai. I look around for something cool to soothe my scorched tongue when my eyes fall upon a young woman's phone. She's looking longingly at a picture of a small girl with kajal smudged eyes and a cheeky toothless smile. She catches my eye.

"That's my daughter, Ammu. She's in Kerala," she tells me in Malayalam.

Somehow, when you are in Dubai, you can recognize a Malayali when you see one. I smile. That's also the beauty of chai shops. You can start a conversation with a complete stranger.

"How old is she?" I ask in Malayalam.

"Second grade," she replies proudly. "She sends me pictures every day of the stickers her teacher gives on her notebooks." She leans over to show me Ammu's neatly written handwriting and the fluorescent smiley faces. We begin to talk about how she came here.

She travelled 1600 miles from Kerala to Dubai to clean houses when her husband claimed he did not have sufficient money to send Ammu to school. He chose to spend that money on intoxicated nights that led to violent abuse. When I ask her how long she has been in Dubai, her voice gives away a slight quiver. "Five years."

This is also the number of years since she last saw her daughter.

"Ammu will get a better life," she tells me in a voice that holds both rage and sorrow. "I will build a house for both of us one day." I can tell that is a promise she will go to any lengths to keep.

"Mol," she begins to call me. It is the word for daughter in Malayalam. "You must study well, okay. This is the only time you have."

I promise her I will.

Through her words of advice, I sense her regret. Married off at 16, her childhood and education were snatched away too early.

The evening sun is almost setting and a calm breeze blows, cooling the chai that earlier burnt my tongue. I realize my cup is still full. But my new friend has to leave. She excitedly tells me that she has a call scheduled with Ammu. I look at her one last time. Her face is young but you can see the years of weariness through her lined forehead and dark circles. As she leaves, I picture her at a small, beautiful home in Kerala pushing Ammu on a swing as she laughs through her toothless smile and screams "higher, higher" to her mother.

It is an ambitious dream for a migrant worker. The cost of rent and visa sponsorship in Dubai would eat up half her earnings. Dubai might seem to be about skyscrapers and fancy cars on fast roads, but it is also a story of contrasts. It is a story of riches intertwined with stories of rags. It is a story of luxury and a story of struggles. It is the story of ordinary people living extraordinary lives all in the name of love. That is Dubai. And somehow, in a chai shop, just 15 minutes away from where I grew up, a conversation with a young woman taught me about life, struggle and the real essence of the place I call home.