

## Melon Child

She served them watermelon slices on a platter, each slice meticulously cut into triangular perfection.

Her face adorned a smile- stiff at the corners, like a napkin starched into precise folds. The guests looked up with doe eyes expressing gratitude. Outside, a low rumble echoed in the distance, its timbre reminiscent of a distant timpani drum, an unsettling undertone to the orchestrated performance. Sensing her penetrating gaze, I instinctively averted my eyes, seeking solace in the comforting embrace of the sofa. A smile plastered across my face, concealing the tempest brewing within- a facade of perfection. Precisely cut triangular perfection.

Conversation swirled around the room, directed at her, questions about her life, her family, and, inevitably, inquiries about me. *How was I faring in school? My favourite subject? What were my aspirations for university?* My mother, boredom etched into her features, replied methodically- sugar coating the answers with practiced ease. *Perfect grades. Science. Medicine.* What a remarkable daughter she has, they must have thought. But it was all a facade. One of those meticulously sculpted Japanese watermelons, flawlessly carved into squares, their every contour shaped to satisfy the exacting demands of the sculptor, intended to captivate buyers as the epitome of an ideal fruit. Perfect but fake.

My mother had always excelled in the realm of science. Her innate brilliance set her apart, raising her expectations to daunting heights. Each misstep, every faltered answer, endured her meticulous scrutiny, battering against my tender spirit. A harvest gone awry, a deformed watermelon unfit for discerning buyers, destined to be cast aside, bereft of admiration. Its innate desires to stretch its roots freely and unfurl its vibrant tendrils suppressed by the square-shaped mould, forged by the sculptors' unwavering grip. And so, as the seasons passed, a hardened rind had formed, polished and pristine, concealing the

roiling, mushy anger that pulsed within. But how much could the shell endure before the strain became too much, cracking the fragile facade it had meticulously constructed?

As the mould continued to compress against my core my mind wandered back to a time my mother had helped me with my science project- a watermelon rubber band experiment. Layer upon layer, we wrapped rubber bands around the watermelon, squeezing, manipulating, and reshaping it until it bore little resemblance to its former self. Despite, the immense pressure exerted by sixty-two rubber bands, the watermelon remained intact. Deformed but intact.

"You must be strong like this," my mother had whispered to me. But how much more pressure could the watermelon endure before it inevitably shattered?

As the guests persisted in their relentless assault of questions, a tempest of unease carved itself deep within my core- fissures sprouting across the hardened rind. The air grew heavy, stifling, as my mother deftly spun her intricate web of deceit- her words entwining around me like constricting vines. I had become a mere conduit, a vessel through which she lived vicariously, ruthlessly pruning and shaping every aspect of my existence. A delicate bonsai tree twisted and contorted to conform to her whims, its branches bending under the weight of her expectations. Another crack across my shell.

As the fractures within deepened, a rebellious seed sprouted, its tendrils unfurling with an insatiable yearning for sunlight. It carried a desire to spread its roots and unfurl its vibrant branches. A longing to embrace its curves and imperfections, to break free from the confines of the square-shaped mould, meticulously sculpted through relentless pruning. And as the unyielding stream of falsehoods spilled from my mother's lips, something snapped deep within me.

*It was the 63<sup>rd</sup> rubber band that had broken the watermelon.*

The watermelon erupted with unbridled force, fragments of its flesh propelling outward in a symphony of motion. Crimson-red pulp and dark seeds traced trajectories through the air. Every droplet of juice and seed pulsed with a life of its own, strewn into the air like a vibrant burst of confetti. Fragments of rind, tender flesh, pulpy remnants and scattered seeds adorned the floor in an intricate mosaic.

A palpable silence draped over the room. The flickering candles of false cheer extinguished by a gust of wind, leaving only the scent of watermelon lingering in the air—a bittersweet reminder of the facade that had shattered.

I had served my mother bitter melon on a platter.