

Burgundy Bindi

Third try. With a shaky hand, I place the burgundy bindi on my forehead. *Is it centred?*

You'd always put the bindi on for me; I couldn't do it. Then you'd braid my hair, finishing it with a delicate red ribbon. You'd help me with everything. I remember your crimson-red saree flowing behind you in the wind, your burgundy bindi a perfect circle on your forehead. I remember your red masala mix, making every dish a delicacy.

I'd run to the kitchen whenever I smelled your cooking. Saying that I could help. But you'd just laugh and give me a spoonful of scarlet sambar, knowing that's what I really came for. Amber-red was the colour of the sunset when you took me to Golconda Fort. You told me stories about how once upon a time, a princess was living in those walls. The day I got lost in the crowded market, I was surrounded by stalls of red chilli and tomatoes. Scarlet flames of fear rose. Just as tears began to well, I caught sight of a crimson saree rounding the corner. It was yours. Eyes red with regret, you held my arm until we got home. Blaming yourself for losing sight of me.

Ugh. Frustrated, I pick up another burgundy bindi from the packet.

You had a way of turning every moment into something I'll cherish forever. I was learning how to ride a bike. Blood-red pooled on my knee when I fell, but you said you could cure it. You could cure anything. You wiped the wound clean and put some red turmeric powder on it, telling me it was "fairy dust". You gave me a hug and a bowl of ice cream topped with red strawberry sauce. I came to you upset after the first day of school; someone had made fun of my accent. Wiping my tears away, you said that being able to speak two languages was special. That it made me talented. Your magenta embrace was all that was needed to heal me.

Magenta was the colour of your love. For all of your grandchildren. You taught us to have flaming-red passion; that it's the most important quality in our lives. You encouraged us to aim high and do all we can to reach our goals. Red is the colour of our determination and courage; you taught us to have confidence and step out of our comfort zones. To push

ourselves, even if we were afraid. Or felt like giving up. You said that we should ignore gender stereotypes; pursue a career of our interest. That women of our generation shouldn't fall into the tradition of being housewives. Red is the colour of our defiance.

It better work this time.

Suddenly, red became the colour of the ambulance's cross as I watched you being sent in. It was the colour of your eyes that morning. I wish I'd noticed. Red filled the tubes as they took your blood for testing, and your crimson saree was handed to me; they said you had to change. Red was my anxiety. The days and days spent by your bedside. I clung to the crimson cloth with my life. Hoping. Praying. That you'd be alright again.

I didn't know how I'd live without you.

Without your magenta love, without your crimson saree. Without your red masala mix.

Without your burgundy bindi.

When will I get it right?!

Red was my anguish when the doctor arrived too late. Just by two minutes, but still too late.

Without a medic in sight, we watched your heartbeat flatline.

If only we knew that red eyes were an indication. Maybe we could've done something – maybe it could've been prevented. If only I'd noticed. I still feel the regret, the burden.

Mostly searing red pain.

Everything reminds me of you.

I wish you were here to teach me how to wear a saree. I'm old enough now. Or to teach me how to cook. I've tried making your red masala mix, but it doesn't taste the same. Whenever I want to wear a burgundy bindi, I have to attempt it again and again. Twice. Thrice. But it never seems right.

Is it centred? I can't tell.