

Issue 01



# FOYER

CONNECT



# Epiphany in the Shoe Department

*by Sumitra Mattai*

My remote therapy session with Dr. Badlani begins on the first floor of Bloomingdale's, the department store across the street from where I work in midtown Manhattan. Over a hundred years ago, Bloomingdale's was founded by two brothers selling hoop skirts in the lower east side. This winter, I spend forty-five minutes every week in the flagship store unpacking my issues, avoiding the cold, and window shopping.

Pre-pandemic, I met with my therapist in an office with potted plants and decorative throw pillows. We went remote in 2020 with the rest of the planet, and two years later, I'm not sure when I'll see her in person again.

I sync my earbuds in the sunglasses section, walking past racks of cashmere hats, leather gloves, and Hermes scarves to find a better signal. In the mirrored halls of makeup and perfume, Dr. Badlani and I exchange greetings. Amidst the shimmering bays of blush and bronzer, she asks me what's going on.

The question sounds casual, but it's what we're both here for. I shut my eyes, blocking out the advertisements strobing my peripheral vision, the celebrity faces on the walls, and the chrome surfaces where I am a distorted blur in my black winter coat, black mask and knitted hat. In the heart of the temple of glamor, I begin to ramble.

My husband is traveling, my kids have colds, and I am lonely and tired. The night before, my baby daughter was up most of the night coughing, and my son woke with a fever that left him limp. In the morning, I gave us yet another round of antigen tests, swabbing our six nostrils before my coffee.

At work, my body aches, and my eyes are bleary. I wish I was at home with them, making soup and watching movies in bed. Instead, I weep at my desk.

"You're dealing with a lot," Dr. Badlani affirms gently. The lilt of her South Asian accent reminds me of voices from my childhood.



“I think of my grandmothers, who were both seamstresses back in Guyana, South America, children of India displaced by British colonization and generations of indentured servitude.”

Part of me is embarrassed to complain about my life, abundant with a family, career and home. But it's also a relief to be honest. With colleagues and mom friends, I curate the details, careful to hide the ragged notes in my voice. With Dr. Badlani, I whine, wallow and flail, a weary beast stalking the aisles of luxury goods.

On the second floor of Bloomingdale's, white lacquer mannequins wear lace, leather and faux fur. Their plastic bodies are lean and distorted, with jaws and hips jutting out at opposing angles. I make note of the pieces I could wear if I finally lost the weight from my second child, plus the weight I gained over the holidays. I confess that I've been eating at night again while my kids are asleep, alternating between sweet and salty cravings. I don't track this extra food on the weightloss app on my phone, where I log my salads and homemade meals. What I put in my mouth after 9pm is a separate category of consumption not based on physical hunger, but some

other, nameless need. I don't throw up any more, like I did as a teenager, but the ritual hasn't changed much, nor the aftermath of self-loathing.

Dr. Badlani talks about how willpower is like a gas tank that is full in the morning, and drains throughout the day until there's almost nothing left. “Binging is one of your coping mechanisms right now, and I don't want to take that away from you,” The whistle on her tea kettle goes off in the background, merging with a siren from the street. “But maybe we can apply some mindfulness. The next time you are about to binge, set a timer for five minutes, then see how you feel. If you still want to eat, go for it. But that pause might help to reframe your actions,”

While she's talking, my husband calls from a hotel room on the other side of the world. Before we had kids, we used to travel together, our work lives weaving seamlessly with play. Now the distance between us far exceeds the number of miles. I decline his call, clicking on the



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prescribed text:

*Sorry I can't talk right now.*

In the denim section, I ask Dr. Badlani if I can share the essay I’ve been working on for the past few weeks. Writing is a secret, subterranean part of life, and therapy is one of the few places I talk about it. Her support may be biased, but it’s one of the reasons I keep going. When I begin to spiral into self-doubt, she reminds me of how my writing has grown from journal entries to published essays. She reminds me of how far I’ve come.

On the fourth level of the department store, I am wistful amidst Oscar de la Renta dresses printed with Dutch tulips and wispy, blue skies. There are sweaters embroidered with intricate flowers, and an emerald silk moiré gown that trails across the tiled floor. The woman who wears these clothes attends cocktail parties in penthouse apartments, picnics in the Hamptons, and galas at Lincoln Center. She sits on

several boards, vacations in St. Tropez, and employs a team to make sure she never looks a day over thirty-five. She doesn’t cry on the subway or forget to pay her credit card bill. This kind of woman always fits into her pants, and never finds a patch of dried snot where her toddler used her skirt as a tissue. In another lifetime, I would’ve been this woman’s maid, picking up her designer dresses from the dry cleaner, and raising her babies.

As I wander the aisles of couture, I think of my grandmothers, who were both seamstresses back in Guyana, South America, children of India displaced by British colonization and generations of indentured servitude. They were both married off in their teens and produced children in the double digits. They sewed in the spaces between cooking, cleaning and mothering. It was a way to make their own money, but I can imagine it was also a much needed escape. In another lifetime, these women would’ve been designers.



Two generations out of the village, I have the privilege of living this fate.

My own mother, who is divorced, retired, and now a full-time yogi, has traded a secular wardrobe for her “whites,” as she calls them - white drawstring pants, white kurta top, and white dupatta. When I tell my mother how I’m feeling, she gives me a mantra to chant one hundred and eight times, certain that the Sanskrit syllables will solve my problems.

On the escalator, I ask Dr. Badlani if she thinks I’m depressed. Mental health issues run in my family; my paternal grandfather passed away after a breakdown no one can explain. My older sister has been on medication for years, and even my father now jokes that he’s on the spectrum. Dr. Badlani doesn’t commit to a diagnosis, but we talk about the possibility of medication, as we have many times before. The truth is I’m too afraid to experiment with my body. I don’t see how drugs – prescribed or otherwise – will change my situation. Antidepressants won’t keep my kids healthy, and benzos won’t tether my husband to one zip code. Still, I try to imagine what it would be like to be numb, to protect my tender, broken places with a chemical force field.

In the shoe department, I weave around the pedestals of strappy sandals, the gold-plated amphitheater of designer sneakers, and the oversized sculptures of high heels, which look as though they were kicked off by some careless giant. “I just need something to change,” When I say the words out loud, I realize how much I mean them.

“What does that change look like?”



I think about what it would feel like to quit my job and leave the city. I think about what it would take to move to another country, and learn another language and culture. I think about how much I want to take action, to hold up a machete to my life and shatter it, if only to feel some sense of control. At that moment, I realize that the only thing I can actually change is the story in my head. The story starts with the words that float into my consciousness when I look at myself in the mirror: fat and ugly, lonely and tired, unloved and unlovable. I hardly recognize the insecure middle-aged woman I've become, wandering around a department store, crying to a stranger on a cell phone.

When Dr. Badlani suggests positive affirmations, I groan. But I know that I need new words in order to tell a new story. Kinder, brighter words that don't bruise, stab or scream. Words that will remove the harsh, black-and-white noir filter, and give everything around me a soft, warm glow. I don't know what these words are yet, but I promise Dr. Badlani I will try to find them.

"How are you feeling?" This question signifies the session is coming to an end.

I ease into one of the velvet settees, amidst the loafers, mules and boots. I take a deep breath and sigh it out, feeling the release of tension like poison sucked from a wound.

"I'm okay," I tell Dr. Badlani, like my toddler when she falls down and gets back up.

**"I'm going to be okay."**

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