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Smudge

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There is a place where people never die.

Sunshine stretches in every direction. Birds of various types bathe in endless blue. Large mountains fill whatever remains untouched by the sky.

There's an electric air that hums throughout the land; it warms you, senses you, and breathes with you. Your hairs stand on end, but no storm approaches. There is nothing to fear. Your body is telling you that you are alive and that life is beautiful.

Here every need is met, every sickness cured. No wars, no conflicts, no battles ensnare this place. There are no people rich or poor, intelligent or dumb. Differences have long been forgotten, lost somewhere in the sunlight and sky. Instead, all are equal because all is equal.

The place is real. It is the inevitable whisper caught on a dying man's breath, the thump-thump-thumping of a baby's kick inside a womb, the cricket's violin played on a hesitant soldier's trigger, the crackle of wood in a fire, the silent religion of a sunflower bowing toward the sun. It is in every laugh and every cry that ever was, every

baseball swing missed and all the home runs that have struck out of the park, every little boy's ice cream cone and every grown man's promotion, every smile, kiss, and song that makes you snap your fingers back then forth then back again.

It is in me. It is here in these words, and here too, and if only I try hard enough I might just be able to reach it and nestle among the birds and drink the ocean of a sky and bask in the sunlig ...

"Vee, 'member hun. You gotta very 'portant job."

But there is no sun, no sky. A dim, hungry light greets me instead. Much of the rest of the room is dark. The little lamp placed in the corner creates long shadows. They are pointed my way. I stare at the light, but feel no warmer.

"Translate please Vi."

My eyes move toward the monotone voice. A tall white male with gray hair, soft hands, and a steady face looks back at me. A brief smile surfaces. He nods.

"You're going to do great. Let's get going, shall we?"

I open my mouth but close it. There's a bit of shuffling in the room. I can hear the faint *beep-beep* now.

"Ya Vee. Doc Schoulz knows best. You'za supa' star."

"Yes, Nurse Jenna. She is."

Nurse Jenna beams at me. Despite the poorly lit room, her teeth shine.

"I..." My lips quiver. Even "I" sounds clunky in my mouth. I look down to the tiled floor.

"*Gu'lash ki bounaka?*"

The light flickers as the words echo. My eyes continue to glance to the ground, unable to look at the voice.

It repeats in a softer tone, almost as though the words were breathed rather than spoken.

“*Gu’lash ki bounaka?*”

Each word is carefully weighed. Each syllable individually warms me like a hug. Even here, they almost make me feel happy.

I try to breathe out. The stress seems to escape with my exhalation.

“*Ka dhubic guana plo,*” I answer.

Though my eyes anchor themselves to the floor, I know that worn leather for lips crack into a faint grin. The *beep-beep* recedes. I can no longer hear it.

“*Heti oblala ko?*” Again, the question comes like an orchestra playing to me alone. In that dark little room, the rhythm is nurturing.

“*Heti.*”

I gaze to Dr. Schoulz as I reply. His stoicism fades, and he looks sad all of a sudden; a wrinkle has appeared on his otherwise unblemished face. A light hum escapes him, and he writes something down on the clipboard in front of him.

“See, look at dat. She want’za to speak. Yo Ma ...”

“Please, Jenna, let’s let Vi decide that.” Dr. Schoulz’s face has warped back into its fixed state, and his speech has regained its streamline.

I dart my eyes back to the floor just as the *beep-beep* returns. There’s a little black smudge on the ground I didn’t notice before. With my foot, I try to rub it out. Nothing changes. I rub harder but still the smudge remains.

A cough booms above the *beep-beep*. I hear Nurse Jenna shuffle to the voice. She whispers something and begins to click an assortment of buttons.

I scrub more furiously.

The *beep-beep* climbs in intensity until the mashing of buttons can no longer be heard.

I scrape my foot on the floor faster and faster.

Dr. Schoulz kicks into action; I can make out his feet marching toward the now silent voice. He says something. Jenna replies. The *beep-beep* is screeching now.

Suddenly I feel hands dragging me out of the dark room. They are Nurse Jenna's. She says something, but I can't hear it over top of the wailing beeps.

"Wait, wait." I scream. We stop before we are about to exit the room. With my eyes still stuck to the floor, I run to where I was standing and slam my foot on the smudge. It finally disappears.

Then, I collapse to the squealing of *beep-beep*.

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I awake. Nurse Jenna is sitting across from me, greeting me with that same endless smile she had in the dark room.

"You'za had a hard fall. Happens." She shrugs her shoulders gently.

I feel stiff, except for a migraine creeping its way to my skull. Still a bit disoriented, I snail my hands toward my forehead. Two large bumps find

themselves underneath my fingertips. I look to Nurse Jenna.

Again, she shrugs, “You’za bounced.” Her smile recedes, and for the first time, I notice how stretched the area around her mouth is.

I think about my head hitting the tiled floor. Up and down. Up and down again. The welts on my head align with my imagination. I wonder how long I was on the floor. There was so much happening. The beeping. Dr. Schoulz’s frantic movements. The smudge.

I open my mouth to ask about the smudge—whether it was gone or not—but no words stumble out. A slight groan is all that escapes.

“Oh, it’za okay hunny. It’za okay.”

What were the last things I remembered? A single word stands out in my mind. *Heti*. It belonged to the voice.

Where is the voice now? Where is she? Is she okay? Is she healthy? Did the beeping stop? Did Dr. Schoulz take good care ...

“Don’t worry. Really. You’za hero. Mah hero.”

Jenna’s disconnected speaking interrupts my thoughts. I repeat *Heti* over and over in my head.

Jenna pats my hair, and for the first time, I absorb my surroundings. I’m in a hospital room, not too different from the one I was in before. An IV runs into my arm and a clear liquid runs through it. My clothes are folded onto a green plastic chair, and I am dressed in a pale hospital gown. The smell of antiseptic soaks my nostrils.

“Feelin’ uncomfortable?” Nurse Jenna reaches behind me and whirls a few buttons into action. All

of a sudden there's a faint, familiar *beep-beeping*. It is much calmer than before.

"We'za had to bring ya here," she leans back and grabs my hand. "You'za stressed iz all."

A sweeping tiredness rolls over me. The *beep-beep* grows louder.

"Rest. Rest, hun. It'za okay. I understand why you stressed with her being in da hospital n' all."

Her. I see the English word forming in my mind. By itself, it's a silly little thing meaning almost nothing at all. It's indistinct, a reference to a gender rather than someone in particular. Funny how the skeleton of the syllables fills up, though. The word's black ink becomes a bubble of cooked meals, *H'jashi* lessons, and long drives to sunny places. There in the H was a universe of moments touched by calloused hands whose fingertips I had travelled up and down with my own. E brimmed with large dishes of pork mixed with *jusho*—a stuffing of mashed up palm leaves and coconut—a mountain of sweets, and family yapping around a large plastic lawn table. The R held my first memory when I was three and she was wishing me a happy birthday in H'jashian. "*Go loomety, Viani. Go loom-ety.*" The last syllables stretched on and on. Ety. Ety. Ety. Day. Day. Day. The English and H'jashian mixed together in my mind. One was smooth, careful, and unique, while the English felt chunky, unfinished.

Her, I was reminded. It meant nothing at all.

I could do better. That's why I was here in the first place, wasn't I? To translate. Her in H'jashian? I searched my mind for the equivalent,

but I couldn't find it. Instead, all I found was a lovely face battered by the sea, a rat nest for hair that somehow maintained its gentleness, and a voice—the voice—singing me to sleep. *Heti*. It calls out.

Loud footsteps halt my thinking. Dr. Schoulz, with his still unperturbed face, stands at the end of the door. “Vi, are you ready to begin again?”

The *beep-beep* grows louder. I close my eyes. “Vi?”

The word comes to me. *Uluia*. In H'jashian, it means eternal. And it is the name of my mother.

*

The smudge hides underneath the heel of my shoe.

The room hasn't changed. The colours are still muted in a creeping black save for a single yellow glimmer of light. Dr. Schoulz and Jenna stand at the edge of the bed, looking at the machinery. And my mother's vitals are defined in coarse electronic hiccups. All that is different is me in my flimsy hospital gown.

“So, Vi. We need you to translate for us, alright?”

Dr. Schoulz's sentence is diced by the steady oscillations coming from behind my mother. The two congeal as though his voice is calibrated to the machine's tempo.

“Uluia? Uluia? You'za there?”

I want to tell Jenna that such a question is stupid because my mom is right there in front of her and look how she's breathing and look how nice

she looks with her eyes closed and in a few days it'll be fair to ask such a question because she'll have moved home and we'll be together, mother and daughter, and we'll fill the emptiness of the languages between us. We won't be here. Away from these walls, this room, and the beep-beeping, we'll find the words to describe the experience.

A moan escapes. Another wheeze follows. My mother opens her eyes, those green eyes tinted with yellow, and she looks around the room slowly. Once perceptive and aware, she seems disoriented, almost lost.

“Vi, her condition has worsened, unfortunately. We have put her on drugs that make it so she no longer knows where she is.”

Where she is. I look back to my mother with her green eyes. In H'jashia, green eyes are the sign of royalty. Those who have them are said to be sent by the seven spirits from *Kyun'um*, or heaven. After spending the better part of eternity there—in the place where people never die—they have seen every realm of the Earth. Every tree, plant, and bush is known personally. They are the connection to nature. Nothing escapes their eyes, for their eyes are everything. They are infinite. And they can never be in one place, just as my mother can't be now.

My mother coughs. Nurse Jenna applies a napkin to my mom's mouth; it slowly soaks to a light red.

“Guess who'za 'ere, Uluia?”

Nothing changes. Not understanding Jenna's slurred speech, my mother continues to wheeze. Her eyes climb the ceiling of the room. Dr. Schoulz is right. She has forgotten where she is.

“Okay, Vi. Let’s begin. Please translate this:
Dear Mrs. Iggvim, I’m your doctor, Mr. Schoulz.”
“*Huto Uluia Iggvim. Yet’gh terl me quiked, Mr. Schoulz.*”

My mother moans again. Her eyes are still glued to the ceiling, searching for something only she can see.

“Now I know you’re disoriented; that happens with a case like yours.”

“*Jiji ubuw weft doopu parundom po ik hetu bunhm.*”

Another groan.

“There’s no easy way to say it: you have inoperable stage-four lymphatic cancer.”

The *beep-beep* picks up. Other than it, no other sound fills the room.

“Vi?”

I lift my foot to look back to the smudge. It surprises me that the janitorial staff wouldn’t clean it up. Isn’t that their job? Instead, here I am scrubbing it when no one else is looking.

“Vi? Do you want me to repeat that?”

My voice scratches out. “No.”

“Okay. Then can you transl ...”

“I can’t.”

“Is there no word for inoperable or lymphatic or cancer in Heejas ...”

“H’jashian.” I pick up my gaze from the floor.

“Right. Sorry. Yes, H’jashian.”

The *beep-beep* towers above the silence. Dr. Schoulz looks down at his clipboard, writes something, and looks back up. My mother erupts again, her breaths fading like wind hitting a windowsill.

“You khan do it, Vee.”

“Jenna, I don’t think it’s possi ...”

“*Opja tutu.*”

My voice rises above the clanking of the machines and my mother’s hacking. My mother’s wild stare stops at one point. I repeat.

“*Opja tutu.*”

My mother continues to look at the ceiling, unwavering in her focus.

A third time. “*Opja tutu.*”

“Wat you sayin’, Vee?”

“*Tutu,*” I whisper.

“What was that, Vi?”

I look to Dr. Schoulz then Jenna. “I’m telling my mom she is home.”

The *beep-beep* has quieted. It can no longer be heard. All three of us look to the floor.

“*Tu-tu.*” The voice is a struggled heave. My mother is staring directly at me.

“*Tutu,*” she breathes. “*Es ugga te hoper.*”

Somehow, I smile.

“Wat, Vee? Wat?”

“She said, ‘Home—that’s why you’re wearing my clothing.’” I fiddle with the hospital gown.

My mother coughs. “*Es gee toulka?*”

For the second time, I’m silent. The smudge tickles the sole of my shoe.

“Vi, was that a question?”

I shuffle my feet. “Yes.”

“Well?”

“She asked how much time?”

“Oh. I see.”

Dr. Schoulz peeks into the papers in his clipboard, ruffling a few. He scrutinizes one of them, scribbles something at its side, and continues. He lets out a hum on a red sheet, and then moves on to a yellow one. For a while, the only sound is his pen hitting parchment.

“Not much.” Dr. Schoulz’s eyes widen as though he is surprised at the words himself.

I peer at my mother with her hair in disarray, her red, worn hands, and her deep green eyes. How could Dr. Schoulz’s answer be true? Mom was healthy just a few weeks ago. There was a bit of coughing, but nothing too serious. She always said as much. Here, though, she had gotten worse. If she were home, maybe everything would be different. Maybe she wouldn’t seem so sick. Maybe she’d be okay. And maybe I’d be okay too.

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

The H’jashian have a word like the English “maybe”: *yuth*, which means “sadness in if.” It is used very infrequently back home. No one likes to be sad there, it’s often said. My mother was no exception. Even here, I think she looks as though she has just finished laughing from one of the greatest joke ever told and her mouth is loose as a result and her gut is heaving in a joyous spasm and there is a faint grin—red and wet—still licking her lips.

And yet after everything, “not much” is all Dr. Schoulz has. He cannot see my mother laughing. Instead he sees her tired, exhausted, and in pain. He sees her case, her clipboard. He sees her cancer.

My mother, with her eyes still tacked on to me, repeats her question. “*Es gee toulka?*” The words

are broken from before, almost as though she has understood Dr. Schoulz's answer and was just asking for clarification.

"Pil nun."

No one moves. Dr. Schoulz's clipboard remains still. Nurse Jenna doesn't shuffle her feet. And I stop trying to scrape the gunk on the floor. Even the machines stop their mumbles. We all wait.

My mother continues gazing at me. She moves slightly toward me but her arms drop soon after. A creak escapes the bed while she moves. The dim light in the room casts a shadow over her eyes now. Most of her face is veiled.

"Viani."

"Yu."

"Lut ..."

I rush to my mother and cry on her shoulder. The *beep-beep* comes back, eventually, until one day it doesn't.

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