Over and over again

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Despair reigned. Anju's frail body lay cocooned in sheaths of soft cotton. Perched on top of the antique mahogany bed, I surveyed the room like an eagle scouting the land. I wanted to cry but my voice gently fizzled in the ambers of unspoken thoughts. I was mute, silent but alert. The carriage of women, older peers shrouded in white, floated through the rooms commiserating. *What a tragedy*, they whispered. *How can life be so cruel to such a young girl....it wasn't accidental...they say she was pushed* exclaimed others. *She was so beautiful...how could she have fallen from the roof like that...and when there were other people there too, they continued... what a misfortune! Look at the catatonic father curled in a corner in the bedroom. Look at the mother, despondently pleading to have her child returned. What a shame,* the women said....*what a dreadful tragedy!*

I was six when he started. It was never in a dark room. Shards of memories are my only proof. They rear their heads from the depths of an abysmal darkness to prick and pierce me with their truth. I can see and understand with a clarity that shields my shame. Random scenes unfold like parts of a narrative film that I cannot piece together yet am forced to replay over and over again.

I remember my pigtails bobbling up and down, my worn plaid dress brushing against me as I hurried to catch the commotion. *Oh Oh Oh*, I thought, I must see why the children were shouting outside. His bedroom opened out into the biggest and longest balcony overlooking our courtyard. One could stand there and glimpse the very boundaries of our neighborhood. The neighborhood, then, was bordered by lush vivid greenery that shimmered and shimmied under the sun's adoring gaze. Here and there were patches of masked white blocks of houses protruding from the earth, aesthetically complementing and blending within nature's dominance. Our house was the oldest. Our land the largest. Our family the foremost settlers on this once-fallow land.

I exploded through the doors, oblivious to his presence in his bedroom, and made a beeline for the balcony door. It was locked and I banged headlong into it. He laughed as he saw me rub my forehead wincing and befuddled. He materialized from the bathroom, adjusting his pajamas, and with one swift movement scooped me up to his chest. I wriggled and squirmed as he admonished me to be careful. *Open the door, oh open the door*, I pleaded. Laughing, he gently planted me on the floor, and unhinged the locks. Once my feet touched solid ground I plunged into the balcony fearing the commotion had dissipated just at my arrival. But it hadn't.

> I heard my name softly whispered. I turned back expecting him to conspiratorially wink at our bond in relishing in other's misfortune. But he didn't wink. He was staring at me. Oddly.

Someone had thrown a brick from our rooftop and it had landed on the brand new car that Sajid *bhaiya*, the dashing *boro bhai* of the neighborhood, had bought just the day before. It was prominently displayed at our courtyard, beaming its lustrous silver visage. The windshield was broken; a huge icy gash ran across its body with hundreds of little cracks branching out like small crooked fangs. The brick lay on top, halved, exposed, and shamed. The culprit was absconding. Sajid *bhaiya* stood silent next to his car, disbelief penetrating every pore of his face. His mother stood slightly apart screaming and accusing anyone in sight. Shouting and cursing obscenities over and over. I leaned against the wall of the balcony, teetering on my toes, brimming with unbridled excitement. What will happen next? Who is