

ASHTRAY

SHREYOSI ENDOW

There was a ceramic teacup tucked between the pots of money plant and bougainvillea. It had an intricately designed golden rim around the top and was taken from a set of five identical ones. Rony used it as an ashtray. He would lean against the iron grills of the balcony, puff on the stick for a while and then neatly flick the ash on the teacup. I remembered asking him if I should buy him a real ashtray. He said it wasn't necessary.

When monsoon brought the rains, the teacup would overflow and the grey, powdery ash would turn into this mucky brown that looked so much like tea itself. My brother would then walk over to the edge of the balcony and pour its contents outside and place it carefully back into its spot in a way no one would even notice it was there. Except I noticed.

I had suggested my father that he let Rony and I swap rooms. I felt he would be more comfortable if he had the balcony all to himself and he wouldn't have to see the disappointment and sympathy in my eyes every time he went in for a drag and I would be spared from the guilt and sadness that adorned his face every time he did. Father disagreed. He said the air in my room was too thick with memories that he didn't need to remember (as if he had forgotten them already) and having easy access to the balcony wouldn't help him wean off the habit anyway. I was pretty sure keeping him at a distance from the balcony wasn't helping either. There really wasn't anything we could do to make him stop ever since the incident.

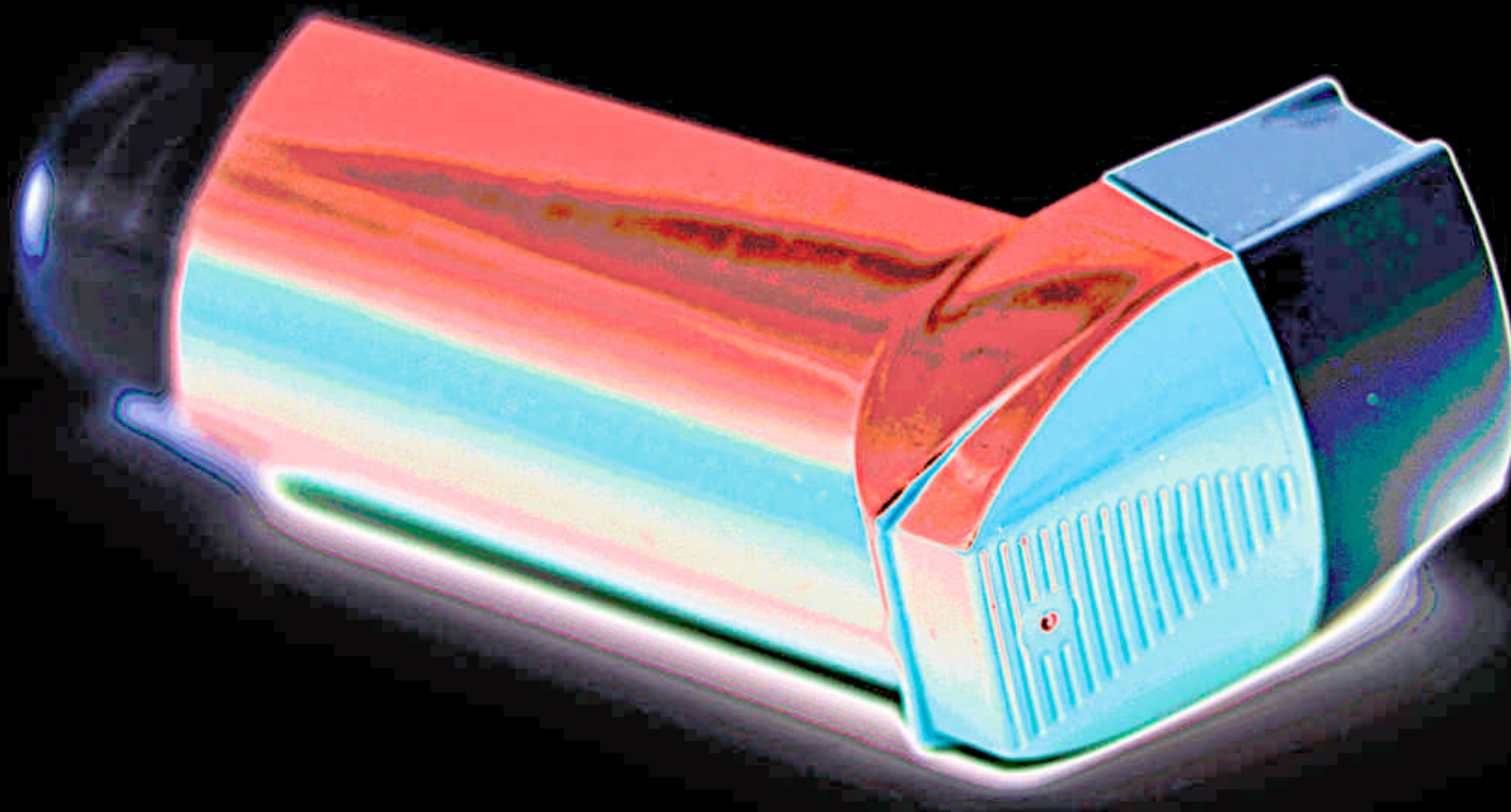
There was a smaller bed in my room, right on the other side of the bedside table. It was Bobo's. There were posters of Barney and Mickey Mouse on the wall above and a small, purple stuffed dinosaur rested next to the fluffy pillows. Boy was that kid obsessed with Barney! Rony said it was creepy after which Bobo gave him a half an hour lecture on why it wasn't and I must admit, he did have some pretty good logic for a five year old.

Nobody slept in Bobo's bed anymore. Sometimes when it was really late at night and I couldn't sleep, I could almost see a little

figure in blue pyjamas with unicorns printed on them slip in between the sheets. And as soon as he was done fluffing the pillows up and making himself comfortable, he would turn to me and say, 'Do you want me to sing you a nursery rhyme?' He always did that when I couldn't sleep when it was supposed to be the other way round but it always worked. God, he had such a squeaky little voice.

Rony blamed himself for whatever happened. So did my mother but she never let it show in fear that Rony would do something she didn't have the strength to withstand anymore. I knew Rony was not at fault. I knew he ransacked the whole house to find the inhaler when Bobo had the attack. I knew he drove as fast as he could to the hospital when he couldn't find it. I knew he did everything he was capable of doing. I knew how scared he was, how helpless he must have felt. But there were just some things that were not in his hands and even though I realised it, my father realised it, and although my mother didn't, she at least tried to understand it, Rony still couldn't.

Rony broke the teacup this morning. It was around five when I woke up to the sound of something shattering, and as I peeped in through the balcony door, I saw Rony kneeling on the ground with his back towards the door, shards of ceramic around him and from the way he shook, I could tell he was crying. I had never seen him cry. I had once thought but only for a moment that he was stone-hearted when mother, father and I came back from the hospital, bawling our eyes out and he didn't even shed a single tear.



"He's gone, Nina. He's gone," he whispered in between muffled cries. I didn't know what to say to him for I knew what he said was true. Nobody was going to sleep in the bed next to mine again. Nobody was going to call me Ninu anymore. Nobody was going to sing me a nursery rhyme when I couldn't sleep. Nobody was going

to repeat every single line after Barney, and there was nobody who was going to bring Bobo back.

I didn't say anything. I just leaned against the door and felt the tears trickle down my cheeks. And I let Rony cry. He had to let his feelings out. He had to let some things go. We all had to.

CRUSHER

RAIYAAN MAHBUB

I wonder how you make your decisions.
Do you just throw the dice?
How do you manage to crush my spirit professionally?
You're as cold as ice.

I know that the universe is enormous.
And that you probably got other things to do.
But once in a while pay attention to me.
Is it that hard to take a look?

You're like my deadbeat dad
In more ways than you realize.
My existence is absent to you.
Never do you heed my cries.

Over the years, I've grown wiser.
But you evolved into a miser.
Would it kill you to be a little nicer?
Oh wait, you don't die. You're not like us.

*The writer is 17 and is the founder of Thought Kitchen,
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