



THE INDEX TOE

MYAT MOE KHAING

Once when my grandma came to visit us, I discovered a jewellery box beneath her pillow. It had the cutest hair clips. You know the ones with the butterflies. I thought they were hers. I was too young to understand that she was too old for these. But hey! Cute things don't follow an age frame.

Every evening I would go to her room and sit next to her bed. When we chatted, I would occasionally look at her pillow and wonder if the gift was still there. I was afraid she would give it to someone else. Though I was her only granddaughter, I imagined her giving all of it to my far-related cousins. This made me sad as a kid.

On the day she was leaving, she fit in a 100tk note in my fist before my parents could see. Then she brought out the jewellery box. "I have something for you". She opened it and showed me the best hair bands and clips that had ever crossed her eyes. I have grown up now and she still adores me, but that's the happiest she has ever made me.

"How many ma do I have?" Baba would bring up his everyday question after he had dinner.

As usual, I would answer "one" knowing my answer would be declared wrong.

"Two. I have two ma's: one who lives in the village and one who is my daughter. I don't call anyone else ma, ma"

I always wanted to ask him which ma he loved more, but I knew all the answers would make me equally happy. It never harmed me to think we were loved equally.

"Ah. Look at your index toe!" Baba exclaimed as if he had noticed it for the first time. "It's longer than your big toe"

"That means I am a witch, baba." I joked.

"Do you know what that means?" he looked for an answer.

"No" I said realizing I hadn't yet looked into the myths of having an index toe longer than the big one.

"Neither do I. Do you know who else has a longer index toe?" Baba's earnest eyes shone like usual whenever he asked this question.

"Grandma" I replied as I looked at his happy face.

"Y-e-e-e-e-e-s" Baba's long affirmation was an indication of an explanation he was going to give. "My span of life started with my mom. I know she is not going to be alive during my entire life. However, when she is not there and I am still alive, I can look at your index toe and know a part of one of my mas lives evidently in the other."

For the first time, I looked into the reiteration of his theory and made sense of it as we waited for grandma outside the x-ray room.

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VOICES

FATIMAH AKHTAR

Nights were generally silent. The last sound of the night was the sound of the prison gates shutting down. The collision of concrete and metal would resonate throughout the seemingly empty lobby. And I would try to sleep. The silence would hang over the jail cell, heavy and fragile and then would be popped like a bubble by the clamour of conversations from the other cells. That's when Sen would speak to me.

Her voice, high-pitched like nails on a chalkboard, would try to tell me *Let's leave. Let's run away. We can escape this place. Dig a hole. Cut through the windows. Listen to me.*

"We should escape," her voice rang in my year. I turned away towards the wall.

"We can't," I tried to rationalise; "We'll be caught."

She brought her lips to my ear and dug her nails into my shoulder. "Don't be a coward. Listen to me."

Poison dripped from her lips with every word she said. She poisoned the silence, she poisoned my sleep. But I needed quiet, I needed sleep. So, I silenced her, and I went to sleep.

The next morning was chaos, it disturbed my sleep and I found myself waking to the gate to my jail cell crashing down. Patches of sunlight from the window barely lit up the cell. The floor was soaking wet, and the guards apprehended me for the oddest reason. Not that I would've been able to tell the floor was wet if they hadn't held me down – I wouldn't know I was being apprehended either, otherwise. I couldn't imagine what I did. Sen was quiet

while all of it happened. She just stayed lying there on the ground, head against the wet floor. I couldn't tell why she would stay so quiet. She's always had something to say. Always had something to tell me to do – something that always ended up hurting me.

The clamour through the jail cells grew louder as they took me out of my cell. The inmates' voices from the other cells grew louder. Same conversations and words, said in different tones and sequences.

"Did you hear about it?"

"Hear about what?"

"She killed it".

"Killed what?"

"That wicked witch"

"Sen's dead?"

"Sen's dead."

I don't know how Sen could've died when she was in my head. That's what she said to me. She told me she was just a voice in my head. I tried to tell the authorities that but they had already thrown me into detainment.

"What did I do? I didn't do anything!" I cried out as the guard stared at me in disbelief.

"Make arrangements to send this one to the nuthouse," said one of the guards at the back.

"No, *listen to me!*" I screamed as the guards closed the gates on my face.

I couldn't kill Sen, how could I kill someone who's not real. I asked repeatedly, only to have my own voice echo back at me. There was silence. I liked silence. I settled down. It was nice there. The silence felt nice but the feeling soon faded with a sound. I heard Sen's voice, again.

