

32 WHITE TILES

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There are 32 large white tiles on this corridor. Tiles that smell of disinfectant when you first stand on them, but after you spend a week or so, they start to smell of something more sinister: despair, solitude, broken dreams, and empty promises.

My back aches from sitting in the unyielding plastic chair for an hour. The doctors almost shoved my sister and me out of the room when the monitor started beeping. We were sitting around mother's bed, engaged in our daily session of fussing over pointless things and ignoring matters of actual importance. Ignoring the arrows shooting into my chest with every one of mother's coughs, ignoring the grim line that father's lips seemed to be permanently set into, ignoring the increasingly worried looks the nurses shot at each other every day, ignoring, and ignoring, and ignoring. Until one of the many machines hooked up to mother started beeping, and we couldn't ignore the incessant noise, the sharp bursts of sound that signaled something too awful to dwell on. Doctors and nurses rushed in, a blur of figures clad in stark white lab coats. Before we knew it, we had been pushed out unceremoniously, left to stare at the 32 large white tiles on this corridor that no longer smell of disinfectant and instead reek of broken dreams and despair and solitude.

"What's going to happen to her?" my sister asks in a low voice. Her question shocks me to the core. Ever since mother had been admitted to the hospital, Sara hadn't asked many questions. She would be tight-lipped and silent during the car ride to the hospital. She'd be determinedly cheerful at mother's bedside. Then she'd be tight-lipped and silent during the car ride home. She had been the most optimistic one in the family, despite her being only ten-years-old. Now, though, she is looking at me for comfort, and perhaps assurances that her worst

fears weren't about to come true. "What's going to happen to mother?" she repeats, her eyes swimming with tears she had been holding in for the last few months. How do I reply to this question?

I am suddenly filled with undiluted fury. Why did my mother have to be dying? Why did I have to be the one to break the news to my kid sister? How was there a shred of fairness in the events that had occurred over the past months?

But as I look into my sister's eyes and see the raw fear in them, I realise I must answer. Right now. And I run through every single thing I could possibly say.

Scenario 1: I decide to lie. "She'll be fine," I tell her. "The doctors will find a way to make her healthy again, and we'll all go home, and everything will be alright." Sara blinks at me for half a second, and then her face scrunches up. "I'm not stupid, you know," she tells me, her voice way too cold for a ten-year-old. "I thought you, of all people, would tell the truth." The hurt and accusation in her words make me want to tear my own hair out, because she's right: how could I lie about something as big as this?

Scenario 2: I still decide to lie, and when I tell her mother will be fine and the doctors will sort it all out, she believes me. The expression of relief and hope that lights up her features is infinitely worse than the hurt I had imagined before.

Scenario 3: With a deep breath that does nothing to calm me down, I decide to stick to the truth.

"She's not doing well," I tell Sara,

"She's...she's..." She is coughing up blood, she is receiving 12 different kinds of medicine, she is delirious half the time, her heart just stopped, and soon she is going to move on to the next world or whatever lies beyond, and we will be left here to deal with her absence. We will no longer receive her love and warmth infused hugs, we will no longer hear her laughter or get shouted at by her or get advice from her or just sit next to her. There will be a large, gaping hole in our daily lives; we will be constantly haunted by her while we sleep and while we are awake. I can't say any of these words aloud, but it feels like they are pushing against my chest to burst out. As if bursting out will somehow make things better. As if the tears that start to cascade down my cheeks can somehow lessen the pain.

I decide to stick to the truth, and I break down completely.

The clock hanging at the far left of the wall opposite says it took me three seconds to go through all three scenarios. Sara is still looking at me, unaware of the battle raging in my head, waiting for me to speak. Waiting for me to tell her that her mother is about to leave her forever. I turn my gaze away from her and towards those 32 white tiles, which are still giving off that pungent scent of hopelessness.

What can I possibly say?

Despite being a hopeless fangirl, Marisha Aziz lives under delusions of awesomeness. Contact her at marisha.aziz@gmail.com to give her another excuse to ignore her teetering pile of life problems.