

ROUGE

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I was adopted on October 19, 1996.

I had a drawing. All done with the one third of a crayon I managed to wrestle from the other kids in Baba Salim's orphanage. All my pouch had was that and two dried moths, much to the horror of my new parents. I held the pouch close as they guided my arms into a new jacket, speaking of a new life and new toys.

The jacket did not fit.

Do you like it? Do you want it zipped up? Look, it also has a hood. Do you want it up?

No, I want my *ma* and *baba*.

This city burned no lights for me. It didn't stand, it did not stop. It never searched for two individuals who disappeared one night after kissing their child goodnight, nor did it mourn for the girl dropped off at an orphanage when she was sleeping.

Why?

Hush now. We shouldn't talk. We shouldn't think.

I saw the other kids piling at the windows, eyes wide, shining with pity and resounding awe; their faces bleak and pulled tight over bones. The Baba himself. No one much bothered about the papers, or the lack thereof. A bright red car with a nazar ornament.

There wasn't much I registered.

Back then, the city would get impossibly hot even when November rolled around. We used to beg for ice chips and hoard

them till our cheeks could hold no more. Cars kicked up dust like moths scared off by an action too rogue. I arrived at their home. They held promises of love, and to a younger me, parched of affection, it spelt hope.

Just like that, I had a family again.

It was as if I had never left. A bed of my own, photographs by the table, a whole new box of crayons. Even a new name. All I remembered of a time before Baba Salim's were wisps of cobwebs in a brand new house.

Oh my my, what are we drawing today?

I am drawing our house. I am a very good artist, right? Look, there's ma and you, and, and that's me. I once drew this at the other place-

He had to wipe his eyes afterwards. That's how good of an artist I was.

It was freedom I hadn't known for long. I could laugh at the dinner table, and still go to sleep with a full stomach.

But they were sad, my new parents. I'd hear them cry, often finding them in the aftermath of a storm, holding my toys, crying of a phantom pain I couldn't understand.

Ma would ask me to go to my room, and I would comply. I never knew how to handle people crying. Hours later, I would hear her footsteps, lighting the stove, hauling a pot, and the cascade of a few more falling. Her swatting at the moths and mosquitos, and him setting the table.

I knew they would come get me. I once overheard them talking about

moving to a new place. Someone had said it would be good for the family.

Family includes me, right? I got scared for a second there.

Summer was intrepid, and homework was quickly forgotten when I came back home that day. *Ma* and *baba* weren't home, and drunk in my newfound liberty, I went ahead and put on rouge, rubbing kohl like those ladies on TV, and a long string of pearls. I pretended a pencil was a cigar and the spare curtains were a shawl.

I was a lady in a parlour, sipping on watery tea, and hearing the ice melt and fall inside the fridge. The electricity had gone again.

Should I open the windows?

It would only invite insects in.

But it's so hot.

I just can't do it babe; the heat just gets to me. It gives me the morbs, old sport.

The pane knocked a glass and a few papers off the table.

Papers with ticket confirmations for two.

For the first time in years, I went to sleep without food.

They knew I knew. I knew the girl in the pictures wasn't me. I knew I hadn't been enough.

I packed my bag, as they packed theirs. I wish I could fit there, that they would take me with them.

Did they have any regrets?

Ma cried. *Baba* cried.

Who they were crying for, I would never know.

Baba Salim opened the gates for the car, and unloaded my bag. He looked at me, blinking as his eyes adjusted. I was here again, a moth pushed from the light.

They took you because you looked like their daughter.

Pity, pity, pity. Pities galore.

We will come get you. Let us settle first, and we will.

In the days that follow, I know they will call me, voices strained, trying to explain how they are working to bring me into their home. The smaller kids would pile at the windows to the office, an audience to a facade taken too far.

In the transition from autumn to winter, when these dull moths flock to the lights, their wings play shadow puppets on the walls, a reel spinning out of control. Their presence is unprecedented, much to the chagrin of anyone around. So, in the twilight of the mornings, there are always millions, as it seems, of wings littering the floor. Just wings, like petals of an extinct flower, shed as a final attempt to stay alive.

I shed my name. I shed everything I knew about living to live a life with people I could call *ma* and *baba*.

There were no more calls after I threw the telephone out the window.

I was left on October 9, 2000.

Sarah Wasifa sees life as a math equation: problematic, perhaps with a solution, and maybe sometimes with a sign to tear off a page and start over again. Help her find 'y' at sarah-wf77@gmail.com



ILLUSTRATION: RIDWAN NOOR NAFIS