

SCOTCH TAPE

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A crestfallen soldier at the end of his service, the spine of the book was not vertical. It had contorted and bent at strange angles; if this were a person everyone would look at him with rueful, pitying eyes. Pitying eyes are curious, sneering eyes, prying eyes. Pitying eyes are not kind eyes.

Books are not meant to have twisted spines; books are not the crooked man with a crooked smile. But books were not meant to be flipped through angrily, or be rolled up and used as a weapon. And yet, it had gone through these and more. Maybe purposes were as vague and mythical as fairy tales. Fairy tales are such a waste of time, so are books. I look away from the spine of the book with loose pages and at the miles between the lines.

Books are boring, I am too. Textbooks are worse than storybooks somehow, at least in storybooks they tell you that they are making it all up. Whether I am a textbook or a storybook, I do not know. Family, family, family – the book says, a family is a social unit made up of parents and their children. It does not say that the mother humming in the kitchen forgot how to sing, the father does not look his children in the eye. The children – half, two, three: in the evening they sit next to each other and flick through the pages of their books till they

land one that does not look like chaos. The faces of his children living under the same roof is a distant memory to the father. The mother does not wear her hair down anymore; the one-sided game of tug of war has left her with insufficient hair. The children whisper even outside the house, one can never be too cautious.

I know what I don't want to be when I grow up. I don't want to be an author; I don't want to write about my life, or others' lives. I was not born for it; I was not made for it. I know what I was born for. I know that, because in school essays I wrote I wanted to be Charlie in his chocolate factory, a doctor, a painter, a teacher, a dreamer. In my home, or outside, whenever I came across a relative, those were rare, the family members, not many people visited us – after a few minutes of boring small talk, their fingers, bony or sturdy, would dig into my neck. They lowered their voice, and never looked me in the eye. They glanced sideways and would whisper into my ear, they would ask if my parents fought. I'd been taught the answer to this one, so I'd shake my head no. Then they would ask me if I could fix my parents. Yes, I could, I told them. It made them happy; they'd pat my back in appreciation, or slip cash into my hands.

Yes, I could fix my parents and all their problems, I told myself. I didn't know how, but I knew that I was destined to. I tried to interfere, it didn't

help, I tried to stay out of it, and it didn't help. When our family was, once again on the brink of demolition, my sister was born. I looked at her and felt the hope that maybe she could fix all of us.

I tiptoe across the dining to reach the kitchen, where my mother with her dead fish eyes is butchering a fish. My mother stares at the fish's eyes. The fish stares back at me. I try to read beyond the dead fish membrane of my mother's eyes, I fail.

"Amma," I call out to her. She flinches, she does not look at me, but she makes it clear that she is listening.

"My book is falling apart," I hold up my defeated book from earlier. "Will you sew it up for me?"

"There should be a roll of tape in the drawer. Use that."

I take the tape. A roll of scotch tape – Scotch Tape – *kostep*, different versions of the word blurs and emulsifies into a single slab of sound. I try to straighten out the creases in the cover. It tears in my hands. I layer yet another piece of translucent tape on the book, forming a plastic shroud. The letters are no longer visible. I put the book down. The pages fall apart and shed like autumn leaves, and only a skeleton of what it used to be remains.

Upoma Aziz is now a slouching, crouching, grouchy diffused bomb that is too tired to go off. Reach her at www.facebook.com/upoma.aziz

