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Ivy

Ananya Dutta

The final L was short. She had wanted to count the steps following the previous conjunction, but did. She lost the tip of the thumb to friction on her palms rubbing her thumb up and down every finger. Her fingertips had run out of touch to leave a fingerprint on any surface. She was led through the air both arms short. Let *her* count for all the numbers she did not count. The third house on the right side, the address was intact. Rust had gathered a rufous Green design on the gates. Ian was standing so close to the house she wondered one more time if she had arrived at last. Working as an assistant recorder at a local studio invited chaos - chaos which seemed to concoct the way out after Ries had left her.

‘I cannot do it with the truth and you at the same time. I can come back if I move away right now’, he had whispered, pressing his face hard against her tight embrace of him, mourning the moment through Black and White lines of her hair. They had gone Grey finding flesh of each other.

Kavitha and Bari *pehi* were on the lawn. The creak of the gates had made them look at her, but recognise. They were winnowing the grains, thrashing against arms, sending husk high up in the air - to and fro, up and down, left to right - the air pulled ajar on the dust and then dot-grid.

‘Ian, is this... Ian, this is you.’ Ian heard her say. Flatness of that zigzag sound spread the air taut on her. ‘Ian, after long, Ian, is this you? Not a chance, oh not a chance. I must be going bonkers if this is you. Tell me this is you Ian!’ So Kavitha spilled her astonishment.

‘I... Is this... Are... No. No! Ian, is this you? Am I dreaming? I cannot believe my eyes. You are here. How... how did you know? I am sorry. I am nonplussed. I cannot figure this out. You are here. With us. Today. How did you know about the ceremony? Ian, are you

really here?’ Ian heard Sashi say who came running from the veranda. She was vivacious, Red cheeks full of colour and flesh.

Ian was about to repeat her response that Kavitha took a pre-emptive place.

‘Let her in Sashi. We should let her in before anyone sees us. Let us take the way through the backyard. She can enter the house that way.’

Ian heard her out loud, crystal clear sound that overlapped with each one of her footsteps beginning from the front yard of the house. This childhood home she had grown up in could welcome her merely from the rear end. She was not their kind anymore.

‘Ah, we will have to get back Ian. I will send someone to fetch you something to drink. It is too warm out there, and you walked the whole way. You can take some respite in this room. I... I...’, Bari *pehi* explained, pausing when she found the question on Ian’s face. She knew what Ian wanted to know. ‘Ian, I can only try. I will find her.’ Her voice tapered into a whisper to Ian.

‘Yes, I should be getting back as well. This will be too late otherwise. And we better leave before anyone notices our absences. Not to incite anything today. Today matters.’ Bari *pehi* extended both of their needs to go.

‘Ian, I... I believe I need not tell you how to prepare. I barely know what is coming. You can know better on your own. Do not sit on the bed. And can I ask you to not tell anyone that I was part of the trio who let you in?’ Came Bari *Pehi*’s request loud and clear.

The clouds were spreading the day away in the air. Half an hour saw no time with her. Her loneliness had thickened and gone transparent at the same time on the epidermis of her skin. Ian was not taken aback, but something was moribund about being locked in inside a house she could no longer find the teeth to call home. That was a pity she was so out of fight for

what knew no mercy on injury.

The door shut open to two voices about the panel. Arav and another feminine voice whom Ian had not heard before that day. Ian wondered who might come in first - him, or *her*. He went in first. His footsteps pressed parallel to Ian's shadow at right angles.

There they were, Arav and Ian after twenty years and twenty one days of temporal transition across terrestrial zones, there they stood upfront each other. They both took a few minutes to lift their heads up. Their gazes scattered the air into a Brown motion in the room.

'Um, this is Wistara, my wife. Wistara, she is Ian, my... she is from the family.' He composed, his tone cautious, and hinting away that his wife was unacquainted with Ian.

'Hello Ian. I am Wistara. I am glad to meet you. Arav wanted me to meet you, just the three of us. You are a special guest with us today, he says. I am sure. Are you having a good time? I believe you are staying with us to the end of the ceremonies through the weekend. We can arrange a room for you in here. I will be delighted to have you with us for a few days, won't you?' Wistara sent from her side. She extended the right hand carefully through the air, resting her left over her womb.

Ian did not look at her for a while. She was still searching for Arav despite his stance next to hers. Cold as she had expected him to be, he was proving ice.

'I... Hello Wistara. I am Ian. I have maintained an old acquaintance with the house. I am happy to meet you too, but I will leave right after the ceremony this evening. I do not want to encumber in any way. This is both of your day with your ...', she screeched midway when she saw Wistara opening her mouth.

'No, no way. Don't say that. This may be too late, beyond midnight in fact. You should stay. Why, don't you think Arav? She should stay. I am not taking a *no* if you will be leaving at midnight. This is not safe out there. You need not worry. I will make all the

arrangements. You will be comfortable with us.’ Wistara went again, the eyes shifted to the left, nudging at Arav in secrecy.

‘Ah, Wistara, we will see to that. We don’t know anything about the time yet. Shri Arbin is on his way. He will let us know how long the ritual will take when he arrives here. You should get some rest. You will have to sit down for straight long hours. I do not want you to be tired midway. I will join you in the living room later. You should go.’ He returned, the coldness in his voice palpable on Ian’s body next to him.

Wistara attempted again, giving in eventually.

The door closed to the level where the air kept it ajar again. Arav stepped back and closed it completely, pushing the bolt up. That was him and Ian in the room after that. He went around quickly after turning to face her. He was the first to begin again.

‘How are you?’

‘I am good. How have you been?’ Ian responded, surprisingly calm with herself.

‘Ian, I should have to tell you something, but I will give the time to you. I want to

know why you left us this way. You knew walking out like that would cut the lawn on you. You were not welcome after that. To be brutally true, you are not welcome here. I do not understand why you are visiting today. Why Ian?’ He directed at her. His eyes shifted their glances all over her face.

‘I had, I mean I believe we had promised to be present on the day of each other...’, Ian pulled to a halt again, almost saying it for the two of them. ‘I remember promising that I would be present when you would be a father for the first time - I remember saying that I would be present. This is the reason I am here to attend your wife’s baby shower. You did not even bother to tell me anything about her. Clearly, she does not know that you have a sister,

let alone a twin sister.’ Ian put out, her lips were trembling by the time she closed.

Saying that had taken more than she could have given away, just one more way to discover that they were defeated by the fight they had survived to keep in them.

‘I did not Ian, and I do not. I do not remember what you cling to. Whatever that is, well I believe we must have been kids, and after *what you did*, that should have reminded you more strongly not to come back whatsoever the cause, let alone an occasion, whatsoever the reason. You do not deserve to be part of this family. I did not want your presence on this day. This is *my* day. This is Wistara’s day for our baby on the way. She is in her final trimester now, extremely sensitive. I cannot want anything for her that can be harmful. I want you to know that you need to stay away from her. I won’t tell you not to touch her as *they* will, but for Ma’s sake, you should take what you should take in.’ He paused, breathed in, and came again. ‘Ian, I do not mean to cut you out. You could not have found a stranger way to meet me after decades of years, and today. You should have known that I could not want you on this day Ian. I cannot be sorry to you for not being able to say what I want to say in the right way. I expect myself to be out of composure. What do you do when your twin sister shows up after going invisible for over twenty years? No news, no note, nothing, but you remain alive in the same town, at the same place, in all of us. How the hell did you think that was going to be alright? Ian, I was right to resent you. You are the most selfish person I shared a big part of my life with. You have always cared about yourself the most, and been so good at escaping.

Well, I call you a coward for that. I know I sound harsh, but I am still not sorry. You deserve to hear a lot worse than this. You left us in the middle of a peril. I was beginning to find ground. I empathise with what happened to you. I cannot take it back. You should have tried harder. There are many other females who survive the loss. You were not going to die if you would have scrounged out some more strength from yourself. I do not know what Ma is

going to say to you. She has been told of your arrival. She nearly lost consciousness at this piece of news. You see, you bring this with you, the *nuisance*! I am tired of having to defend you, look after you, save you from him, from her. I have a life now! I am a husband, and am about to be a father. I want my day to be mine. Do not make this yours. I want my wife to have a good time with everyone. Please, do not do anything that can ruin everything here.’ He measured the volume of the room with his voice, throwing her name in the air.

‘Why did you want Wistara to meet me?’ Ian struggled out a few words, a lament heavy on her lips that sent the water of her mouth up her teeth; her face was slapped inside out on the epithelium.

‘I want her to know whom to not meet anymore today.’ Came his voice in a brisk drift. Not one part to waste too much on hers, their human matter had bought their bones for a cheap economy of their bodies. ‘Ian, I cannot make this any easier for you. You are giving all the reasons not to. I do not hold out for whatever practice had to follow with you after... after you lost the baby; I do not hold any belief the way *they* do even now. But Wistara is my wife, and she is expecting any moment now. Ma will make this seem necessary, as will everyone else in this house, in this town, make this so undeniable that you stay away from the ritual as far as you can in this house for all the reasons you already know. I will get -’, he was saying that Ian cut in, her voice willing to pick up a crescendo.

‘No Arav, you cannot say that. I mean... *you* cannot say that without a weight on your tongue, with words that can go out just like that, like they extend from any other sentence hovering in your mouth because in mine, they are always watering. The occasion today will see the baby shower of your child. I am a body that lost one. *I, only I* get to say that. You cannot take this from me. How could you just say that? How dare you say that to me?’

‘I, I do not want to make this complicated, but I need you to understand that I cannot do this Ian. Do not, you do not ask me to get off your back, but I am dying to. I want to get

the hell off your back. I am tired Ian. I am so tired protecting you from this and that, being a brother. I am not asking to cut ties, but I do not know what I want otherwise. You have pushed me to the edge. I did not want you here today. And look at you, you are making this so much about yourself within an hour of your arrival. We are both broken Ian. Our lives have been twin tragedies. Make it your own. Can you make your part your own? I want to live what is my part. Let my life to me. How worse do you want me to be until you understand that I want myself detached from you? I am biologically, only biologically your twin brother. I am hollow for you otherwise.’ So Arav clarified, running his hands into his hair up the nape. ‘Ian, I will go. I should go now. I should not want to in my own house, but you are too much to have for me, and I am biologically obliged to not ask you to leave. I need you to wait outside in the garden. Please, I am requesting you to do this for me. Let alone bother with the other injuries that will mar you with so many other bodies in here.’ Arav finished and saw his way out.

The afternoon had met the Evening, but the afterglow was dying hard into the twilight. Ian had found herself a comfortable seat on soft Grass under a Mango tree. The tangy smell was strong, speaking of the fruits both ripe and unripe. She was able to breathe through the Orange intensity of it all. Time slid on the Grass zigzag running right into the Earth. Seated there, Ian ran her fingers through the stalks of the Bermuda lawn Grass which had grown tall finding the trunk of the tree for support like small children learning to crawl into the height of their parents.

She looked at the pandal. Shri Arbin had taken the seat by the centre of the pandal.

He was quick to notice her. She reached the pandal in a few steps which escaped her feet. He was at the periphery of the pandal after all. Ian found the room to squeeze in.

Ian, this is you! How long girl! This has been so long my girl! Come, come to me.’

He said. His right hand extended out to touch her fingers just hanging by the left palm.

Ian stooped down before he was able to touch. She let her touch precede her body. 'Thank you, Shri Arbin, for blessing us with your presence. I look forward to the ceremony in your conduct. How have you been all this time?' Ian asked, her hands retreating. I have been full and healthy. How are you? *Where were you?* My girl, I have not seen you in years.' He came. He tapped the left side of his seat, gesturing to her to sit down next to him.

'I have been around here. I was...', Ian attempted to continue. 'I was living on the outskirts of the town. I have been living there for twenty years now, but to call that permanent. I am merely residing on tenancy after tenancy. How was your journey today? Are you keeping respite now?'

'I am good, my girl. I have been fine, been living in the district twenty one miles from here. Your mother could not send a car. I did not know how else to get here on time, and the ritual bears a temporal tenacity, demanding the conduct at the right time. The fruit must bear well.' So went his explanation.

Ian sighed and then enquired. 'How long before we begin today?'

'Not long. How is Ries? Is he also here?' Shri Arbin was too quick with the question. His hands reached out for an apple from the basket that was left for him.

'Have you had a cup of tea Ian? I can only feed on fruits. This is what I get to eat before every ceremony, you see. The house is so full of fruits that I wonder if I should begin giving away. Come visit me. You can have as many as you like. My house is full of fruits, as many as you like.'

Nothing followed from her. Her head held her down.

Ries, he is not here.' She replied, wondering, ruminating, and then churning if she should tell him the truth about where she was in her marriage with him. She did not. Let alone dig old ground.

‘Will he be here?’ Shri Arbin insisted in knowing, his teeth biting into the centre of the apple.

‘No.’ Ian was quiet. ‘No, Shri Arbin, he will not be here. He will never be here. We separated after...’, she let the final word out in a whisper of a breath.

‘So are you. I mean, you are welcome here, but you must also be here anyway, especially today. This could not happen without you. You know, Wistara must have you next to her. You must sit with her next to the fire.’ He said.

Ian’s eyes rapidly enlarged. She could not believe what she had just heard him say. ‘Shri Arbin, what are you saying? I am, you know what I am. I cannot *sit* with her, never next to her. She is expecting, and I never will. This will be disgrace on her. I believed you knew about my state of being.’

‘I know my daughter, I am aware. But you must be here because, because my girl, you have given your womb to her in sacrifice. She is carrying the child because you miscarried -’, he was saying that Ian succumbed to fury.

‘Watch your mouth! How dare you speak to me like this? Shri Arbin, do not make me lose respect for you. You have been the celebrant of this family since ages. Ma counts on you. You dare not talk this way, serving God.’

‘Be still Ian. I do not know why you should have any reason to take offence. Surely, I never wanted miscarriage for you, only time for Arav to attain parenthood. I told your mother to be cautious. My visions carry weight, you see. I told her to draw care upon you. I think you know, don’t you? I am, I mean, she did. I am sure she did. Your mother Ian, why are you angry? I do not mean to claim the truth of my words, but you must not have defied. You will be blessed with another. You must sit next to her to cut the spell that haunts Wistara and which bothers you as well, from up and down to nullify the Black effect at the centre that will be the heart of the fire today. I will ensure the flames are Magnesium White. I will pray

for you today in conjunction with the ceremony.’ Shri Arbin said. His body flinched on his seat as he saw Ian leave hers.

Ian looked at him. She was rising up from her seat. ‘Shri Arbin, what did she know? I need to know. Tell me, tell me why I have to be here. Tell me Shri Arbin if you are really here to bless. You must tell me before another body knows this depth of emptiness. Save the damage. You can.’

‘Ian, sit down my girl. Everything’s alright. You are confusing me when there is no need to be -’, he expressed, running pale when Ian cut him off.

‘*You* are confusing me Shri Arbin! What do you know? Tell me everything right! Why does Wistara need me? Tell me Shri Arbin, tell me. Let this be the only blessing if I may pray for the truth. Bless me with the truth I pray.’

‘The truth is you were to wait Ian. That is the truth. You had to be here today because my girl, you had to wait for your turn to beget a child of your own. Your brother Arav, he is older than you are, be it by two minutes. He is twin to you, and still older. That is what has to follow with everything. He precedes you in the Universe my child. He should precede parenthood just as well. You can only take the second place. That is the normal order of things, the Universal order the way you two found it. Only the second child to take birth in this house should be yours; his must be the first. That is what this is about Ian. Your mother wanted to know if Wistara would ever conceive a healthy child. Her zodiac was troublesome with Arav’s and I sensed the hint of the complete absence of a child if you were to be a parent before him. I asked her to tell you that, to ask you to wait for your motherhood. Didn’t she tell you that? You were to wait Ian. Your wait in contrast to Wistara’s early conception would nullify her Black spell. She has conceived, and you will succeed the pattern likewise. Yours will be the reward now. Ian, you are free to be a mother now. You must join Wistara in the ceremony today. You are needed here. This will not go on without you. You

know this -'

Ian gathered her strength to ask before Wistara was walking down on the stile for the ceremony. 'Yes, I know, do I, Shri Arbin? My child, Shri Arbin, Neel, my child, oh my God! My child! Shri Arbin, you are right that she had to do this with care. She took care of me all the time when I was carrying Neel. Strange that I am heavy, so heavy only now. I have never been this heavy with Neel in me. My mother, oh Ma!'

Wistara walked down with extreme care. Shri Arbin noticed Ian was fidgeting, and sent a word for her Mother. Wistara joined him in the ceremony leaving Ian alone on the periphery of the pandal again. Ian ran inside, pushing past everyone, the margins of her touch drawing the air ajar on each one of them.

They were both in the living room in a momentary lapse - Ma and Ian. Ian was facing the wall. The Grey concrete offered nothing more than dry roughness on her palms. Her fingers pressed too hard on the walls as if trying to spread the house away with a simple touch. Ma stood right behind her.

'Ian, why did you enter the house from the front yard? How many times do I have to tell you to be aware of your restrictions? You could have told someone if you needed anything. I told you Ian, I told you to not make this day about yourself. But there you go again! Ian! This is Arav's! This should be his. The day is his. Let him have it. You should not envy your own twin sibling this way, not today. You are resentful, bitter, darker... Oh look at how dark you have become nurturing this toxic corner -', Ian barged in on Ma right there.

'*In my womb*, that is the corner Ma. What corner, what other corner is there? In me, this is only the womb for a corner that can turn toxic! Tell me if I am wrong. My womb is toxic in me Ma! Is this how you *intended* to finish *him* in me? But you have finished already, haven't you? This toxic corner *in my womb*.' She turned around.

Her face was wet Red skin. Two steps and she was close enough to make a whisper too loud.

‘In my womb, I said in my womb Ma, a toxic corner. *What did you do? Ma, what did you do to me?*’

The response was sheer silence.

‘Ma,’ Ian came again, ‘What did you do to me?’

Her hands ran a delicate touch up Ma’s arms. Her head hung by Ma’s collar bones, her skull right under Ma’s chin, she was thin on her. Ma’s tears poured down the midrib of Ian’s head, flowing further into her forehead until Ian was spreading them down her cheeks. Gradual grasp of her shoulders and Ian was breaking knees at angles with Ma’s limbs. Two bones of the body that separated them too much to be parallel to each other anymore.

‘What did you do to me Ma? What did you do? Ma, what, what did... Why did you...’, Ian sobbed out the sound until she was screaming, ‘Ma, why? Why did you do this to me? Ma, *he* is not coming back. Ries will never come back to me, and Neel never did. My child Ma! Neel, my child will never be born again. My Neel is so dead in me, but to me. You killed him in me, but for me. I lost my child to my own mother, I lost my womb to you! What did you do to me Ma? Ma?! Oh MA!’ She broke down, her palms left their lines alone all over the yarns of Ma’s fabric. Tearing down, she was flat on her fingertips.

Her voice shivered in sound. Their shadows could shake into skin on stucco in that rhythm of disturbance.

Ma ran cold on her spine. Her fragile frame froze all over Ian’s liquid bones. Ian’s fingers printed into Ma’s body. She did not know she was willing to coerce her fingers into Ma’s blood just to scatter the colour Red dot-grid in her. Prostrate and supine, they floated on each other’s shapes.

Ma was quiet. Ian was at Ma’s feet, completely quiet. Ma’s footprints were without

feet.

The ritual had begun outside. Ian pulled up when Sashi was entering the room. She stopped at the doorway.

‘Pehi, he is asking for Ian.’ Sashi informed, her voice startled through her speech. She was taken aback to find Ian prostrate on Ma’s feet.

‘I am needed. I am also needed Ma! I am needed! I needed you; I am needed now. How am I needed now?! What parts of me do you need? Where does my body need me? I don’t know. I don’t know, oh Ma! I don’t know!’ Ian shouted in between both of Ma’s feet right into the floor, but the Earth.

The drift was the fastest that Ian’s feet had ever run. She went out running, peeling off Ma’s footprints from the floor with her face. Sashi ran to Ma to hold her.

Ian knew no end of speed, nor how to keep running anymore. She strode down the patio, the foyer, the garden, and the front yard, her dress undoing itself on the thorns of the bushes into threads on the flowers. She reached the pandal in the time of a breath in.

She fell on her knees upfront Wistara. Her right hand was first to go. She placed the palm gently on Wistara’s womb. Bringing in her left hand, she smeared her fingers away on her fabric.

She had lost her hands to the lines of her palms.

‘I am needed. I needed my child. We needed our child. Now I am needed. We should be needed for life. Life should need us a little more. I need... Ries and Neel, Ma, me, how much should I need? I need me so much now, and I have run astray in my spirit. I am needed now. My child, I need you now.’ Saying so, she was heard one last time, asking, ‘This is about me again, and I did not even know it. My Neel will have me now. Let my daughter find a mother if she will be. If you have a daughter Wistara, will you name her Ivy?’

Steps preceded the sacred seat. Running up vertical until she was finally, finally

an amorphous shape in between the flames of the fire. Red, what Red blood coloured out into thick Grey ash all over the Brown Earth.