

Untitled

TUZUK KOUL

Maya did not get into Harvard. The letter lay creased in her hands like a desiccated leaf, her thoughts fluttering soundlessly to the floor. Yellow cream tiles—one two three four five. She shifted her weight on the furry crimson toilet lid and prickly sensation blossomed in her legs. How long had she been sitting there?

It wasn't like this was breaking news. She had gotten the email weeks ago, read the sickly sweet lines of Thank you for applying to Harvard university; over twenty-seven thousand students, a record number, applied to the entering class. The great majority of the applicants could certainly have been successful here academically...but the words had turned into vague caterpillars before she could finish, and she reached for the bottle of Xanax waiting in a corner of her dresser drawer.

This was just her reminder. The reminder that she had failed—the Harvard admissions committee should have realized she wouldn't need any reminding, pretty much until she was dead and cold in her grave for at least a year or two. Their honey-tongued rejection clawed a hole into the bottom of her stomach, and the rushing air made her think of falling backwards into darkness, plummeting with her heart in her throat.

“Awesome.” The silence splintered and she slid off the toilet seat. Placing the sheet of paper back inside its envelop, she began to fold the entire thing into tiny asymmetrical squares, smaller and smaller until it hurt her fingers to make the dense folds. The Tampax box under the sink was fairly small, but the lump of once-rejection letter fit among the tampons without too much difficulty. Maya smiled in grim satisfaction. All the way in the back of the cabinet it went. When you spent twenty years in a household that giggled at the notion of “this American privacy,” you had to get creative.

She emerged from the bathroom, she thought, rather commendably, shoulders back, eyes dry as beached whale bone. The remaining mail formed a formidable stack on the brisk granite countertop of the kitchen—avoidance issues much? If this was middle school and report cards still timely arrived in the mail, the mail key would have been surgically attached to her parents' body like a fifth appendage during grading week; however, this was college and Maya managed to hoard the keys as casually as possible. But now, she might as well get this over with quickly. She was already screwed however you looked at it, so further screwing over wouldn't make much of a difference really. With a resigned sigh, she fell onto the tower of unopened mail.

Various coupon booklets. Maybe they should depict the acres of deforested land in Brazil they helped perpetuate alongside the glossy images of shoes and discounted jeans. Trash. Electricity bill. Internet bill. Victoria's Secret Catalogue, always fun to leaf through while procrastinating at actually doing something constructive in her life. Ads in deceptively official-looking envelops. Trash. Bank Statement. Another reminder to reconsider the Honors Society. Really, hadn't anyone heard of deforestation? Trash. UN trip for especially nominated Honors students. Trash. Bank Statement. New England Journal of Medicine. Fat package from University of Virginia. Trash. Fat package from Baylor College of Medicine. Trash. Journal of American Medical Association. Fat package from University of California, San Diego. Trash. Fat package from Vanderbilt University. Trash. Fat package from Cornell University. Trash. Health Science Report. Fat package from Mount Sinai School of Medicine. Trash.

“Productive.” The sarcasm felt flat, though, like a coke bottle whose tepid contents had thickened into sour soup, familiar but unsatisfying. She slapped the significantly culled mail stack back on the counter.

“Maya, is that you in the kitchen?” Maya gave a little jump at the thick-syllabled voice drifting down the hall, but quickly righted herself, toeing the trash can out of view.

“Yeah, it’s me Mummy, you scared me.” Despite a fond childhood in India, nowadays Hindi felt like a swollen serpent on her tongue, and her mouth fumbled with the heavy words whenever she tried to talk to her grandmother, whose English was as tentative as Maya’s Hindi. This time, though, she managed to respond without making herself sound like too idiotic in her halting speech.

A round woman shuffled into the kitchen, wielding a Swiffer Wet-Jet in ancient fingers that had not lost the tenacity in their grip. The combination looked distinctly ridiculous, but ever since her daughter-in-law had introduced her to this product of the new world, it was like a magical treasure, and the floors had never looked this good in years. “There you are Maya—” she paused, “Is that the mail? Anything important?”

“Nope.” Maya sidled around the counter to grab her iPod touch and made a bee-line for the stairs. “Just trash.”

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“She was very disoriented, completely out of it. I got to her just in time.” Maya’s father gave his rasma beans a poke for emphasis before neatly scooping them with his fingers and guiding them to his mouth. He must be in a good mood, to forget the American imposition of civilization in a spoon. He was like a zoo exhibit, caught fleetingly in its natural state when it thought the cameras had been stowed away.

The dining room reminded Maya of the dim underbelly of some skulking beast, one that had swallowed an overload of lavish wall decorations and arrangements and a too-bright chandelier that glinted narrow planes of light into the semi-darkness.

“Encephalitis is rare in someone that young, how unfortunate for her family.” Maya’s mom pushed the bowl of paalak paneer in her direction and surreptitiously knit her brows in a warning that had Maya pushing her cell phone and its half-written text a little further under her leg.

“Yes, well, the brain was saved. She’ll face some memory issues, of course, but function should be normal. Still, they seemed like a good family.”

Maya ladled the soupy spinach mixture onto her plate, and let the vegetable curries coalesce with the yogurt and rice into a big, wet riceball. Her dad hated this. She dug in with her spoon.

“A nice Indian family like that shouldn’t have to go through such things, it’s sad.”

“Yes, it was a difficult case. Maya.” Maya cringed inwardly and let the spoon fall out of her hand, intertwining her fingers hopefully in her lap.

“Hm?”

“Have you heard back from any schools yet? I thought you said you should be starting to get responses around this time.” Her father regarded her with calm expectation, but the look sent a shock of dread through her nervous system.

“Ah, yeah, I did, that they should start coming in a while, but, you know, it really just depends, it could be months from now that I actually hear anything back. It’s rolling admissions, you know?”

“Okay, well, just let me and your mom know as soon as you hear anything. We’re both very excited, Maya. You’ll make a great cardiologist.” He shared a look like a pleased cheshire cat with his wife. “And then I can retire early and let you take care of us in our old age.” Chortling at his own recycled joke, he plucked up aloo potato with expert fingers and popped it into his mouth. Talking about Maya following in his and his wife footsteps and joining the prestigious medical profession was always a reliable mood-booster, even though the effects were habitually short-lived.

Maya tugged her hair and managed a tight smile that she hoped resembled some sort of enthusiasm or agreement. Thank god her parents didn’t know anything about the university system in this country, otherwise she would never get away with this shit.

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It was a perfectly misty morning—dawn stretched lazy fingers of color into the horizon, coral on violet. Spartan’s breath formed evanescent clouds that unfurled about his muzzle before dissipating skyward into the cool day. Maya nudged him with her heels and he responded eagerly, the beat a quick one-two one-two one-two down the trail while the hills awakened around them with the sleepy buzz of life. Something about being on the back of a horse made life worth living, like everything before that was a gray smear through time, and only now, shapes and sounds came into focus.

Sitting up here, she was the captain of this ship. She held the reins. She straddled control. And it hadn’t been an easy journey getting to this point, when she had finally amassed the knowledge and competence to ride a horse and have him trust her judgment completely. In fact, this was a testament to her years of devotion to the sport, to the thousands of dollars spent, the hundreds of hours passed in the saddle, a lifetime of love and admiration for the horse. Not to mention, innumerable bruises, several broken bones, an often-checked ego, and unsurpassable happiness. No, it wouldn’t produce a six-figure pay check at the end of the year (the opposite seemed to be more accurate), but somehow it felt better than anything else she had done or accomplished in her life of scholarships, honors programs, medical internships, and immaculate undergraduate transcripts. Those were things stamped on paper, a pale white imitation of who she was, Maya Bhat, squeezed between four perfectly symmetrical planes. *This* was life.

Funny that, despite all these years, her parents had still refused to buy her a horse. They weren’t exactly strapped on cash. Maya pressed into Spartan’s sides and they leapt into a gallop, roaring sound enclosed her ears and, for a moment, her mind was shocked into blankness. A moment of bliss. Of course a horse would only distract her from her textbooks and lectures. It would be a roadblock on the path to her lucrative medical career, an insurmountable boulder that misdirected her onto a road of fruitless temptations and certain poverty. It would ruin her. She shouldn’t waste her time with all these thoughts when she had so much homework to do and that internship interview to schedule—when was she planning on doing that anyways, Dr. Mukarjee was a very busy man. At least, that’s what her parents said. This was a critical time in her life. It was always a critical time, even at eleven years old, when the words had been new.

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“Come out here.”

*Really, right now?* The text’s electrical screech cut through the icy stone corridors of the land beyond the Wall and Maya paused on the page with momentary irresolution. He could not have picked a worse time to annoy her; the last chapters were always promising pearls, impossible to tear away from...

“Ugh...” She rolled over and dragged herself to her feet. Sorry Jon, duty calls. But her vantage point at the top of the spiral staircase showed that the isle before the doorway was abandoned as ever, no father to be found.

“Dad? Dad!” Her words plunged down from banister and broke against the polished floor, unanswered. He must be in the driveway with the groceries—why couldn’t he just have mom help bring them in? He always treated unloading groceries like family bonding time or something—they were just vegetables. With another disgruntled sniff she took the steps two at a time and lurched unsteadily onto the landing, finally flying to the front door and throwing it open.

“Happy birthday *beti!*” Hands clasped her arms, tugging like dry claws to wrap her in separate embraces. She felt disoriented in the chatter of shrill voices and self-important chuckling of her father, who was waiting anxiously outside the circle to hug her after her mom and grandmother had their turns. Maya’s birthday wasn’t for three more weeks.

“Uhh...” she tried to interject but her eyes connected with—*that* was a car. The front bumper bore the unmistakable BMW insignia, that beautiful, perfect circle of alternating blue and white that must have cost her parents god knows what kind of money to bring home today. Her dad kept patting it appreciatively—or perhaps protectively—and seemed unwilling to stray too far from its side, as if the luxuriantly curving rim of that bumper could open up and emit a wail of desolation at any moment. It occurred to her that she should say something, but her own throat felt so tight it didn’t seem possible that she could force words out.

“I know it’s a little early, but we thought it was just perfect, so we couldn’t pass it up!”

“I told your dad not to do it,” her mother chimed in, “but you know him, he just wouldn’t listen. He said you deserved it, he was set on it. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Maya struggled to formulate a response, but scattered thoughts monopolized her mind, murmuring (though abashedly) the possibility that she would really rather this BMW had four legs and ate hay. She stamped down on these thoughts savagely just as they began to form on the brink of her consciousness. But the damage was done. She could feel them oozing from the grey matter of her brain even as she struggled to suck them back in. It was official: Not only was she completely undeserving of this car, but she was also apparently the most ungrateful daughter ever. *I didn’t get into Harvard.*

“Wow, I can’t believe you guys actually got this for me! Thank you so much, dad, mom...wow! Mummy, did you know?” Her grandmother just clasped her hand in her own two age-worn palms and smiled ambiguously. “You guys, I love it, thank you so much, really!”

“You can drive it to med school every morning! It will help you with your networking—you can’t make friends in high places driving around that old piece of junk.” Her dad chuckled again, forever cracking his signature jokes, so carefully marinated in a hint (or more) of truth.

Maya’s lips quirked into a smile, and yearning and loathing rose like twin snakes in her stomach, the feelings such long companions that she could hardly tell one from the other anymore. “I think successful networking will take more than a nice car dad, but thank you for this, I love you guys.”

“Just make us proud honey. May god be with you.”

It seemed strange to Maya how quickly life could shape-shift from one creature to another without warning. It didn’t seem long ago that she was a teenager, a fresh graduate from high school yet probably

as naïve as most American eighth graders in the matters of life. In that brief division between high school and college, when summer felt sweet and eternal and time faded into irrelevancy, Maya had been a sponge. She had wanted to fill every empty pore with the experiences she never tasted in high school, to actually feel the touch of age and progression for once instead of the static arena of her home life, in which she remained a child forever.

But change was not an option for her. Maya remembered the day her father had made that loud and clear. She had known her parents couldn't bear the thought of her not being home safe and sound by 10 p.m., despite her best efforts to explain to them that in America being eighteen years old was your first step towards adulthood, which inherently encompassed being home by later than 10 p.m. if deemed socially necessary. But that night, the sting of rejection had hung a heavy wreath around her heart, and it was a late night parked by the playground, ensconced in brownie breath and girlish chatter about why boys were obviously the downfall of human society.

“Just text him back already! What's the worst that could happen? Rashad is an ass anyways,” Desiree slung her nut brown hair back over her shoulder and rolled her eyes emphatically. This guy actually likes you, and you don't even want to give him a chance?”

Maya wondered if the matter was really this simple for 99.9% percent of the teenage population, or if her best friend was just a super freak. More likely, Maya had to admit, she was a more suitable candidate for the super freak category than anyone else. She didn't think there was a single other girl in the population of almost four thousand at their high school who had never felt a spark of interest towards a guy after four years of co-education. While some people would like to joke that she was an in-the-closet lesbian, Maya preferred the term asexual. Controversial, but far more accurate.

But at the ripe old age of eighteen, it was really getting awkward to explain to people why her love life was literally nonexistent, and getting even more awkward to explain to herself. She tried to expunge those images from her brain, broken into loosely fitting vignettes, like memories of memories. The alleyways had never seemed unfriendly—she had zoomed through them perched precariously on his bicycle often enough, a shortcut to buy mangoes as her mom instructed him, but don't forget to take care of Maya too if you want to get paid for the week. Her little servant boy, the caretaker and entertainer of her toddler self, with the sinister hands that fumbled over her in the familiar darkness of alleys that smelled like new rainwater. Her mind slipped out of her body and stepped out under the cooked-yellow Indian sky, wiping itself clean over and over.

Maya finally decided it was time to be a little more proactive. The next time the boy in Spanish class she had never noticed before turned around and shot her a dazzling smile as he copied her homework, she let herself fall. Or pushed herself, over a cliff, more rather. But Rashad had broken her heart, and while he graciously accepted the soccer ball-sized cookies she made him for Christmas, he never returned anything but a tepid thank you and a few not-so-furtive peeks down her shirt.

“Just reply to Jason, don't be such a bitch.” Maya glanced back at her phone doubtfully and bit back a yelp.

“Shit, Des, it's almost 12 a.m. already! My parents are going to kill me! I gotta get home!”

Desiree gave her a level how-old-are-you-again kind of look, but eventually opted for reassurance. “Don't worry, just tell your parents you were having a really bad day and were desperately in need for some Des therapy. They'll understand, you're a teenage girl, it happens.” Maya just slammed her foot against the gas pedal.

“Don’t tell me that actually works with your parents, Des.”

When Maya slithered into the house, her grandmother was waiting at the door, bathed in ominous shadows. Maya ducked her head to avoid meeting cold eyes and slipped around her, but there was no escaping the barrage. “What kind of friends do you associate with, Maya, that keep you out at all hours of the night, tell you not to listen to your parents?” Her voice was a low murmur that flowed without end, a conglomeration of words and laments strung together without the space of a breath, prayer-like in its fervent imploration to understand. “Why do you spend time with bad girls like Desiree, no decent girl would ever dare come home at this hour, your parents are awake, your poor father, look at his weary face, does she have no self-respect? Do her parents not care what she does? Does she go to school, is she going to college? She’s such a horrible child, that horrible Desiree.”

“You don’t know anything about her!” Maya growled above the pugnacious gnashing of her grandmother’s teeth as her own irritation spiked at this injustice.

“Just because she doesn’t want to do anything with her life, why is she trying to drag you down too? She won’t even go to college, her parents don’t care, she spends all night with boys, that horrible girl, why are you friends with her? Why are you such a horrible, immoral girl, why are we stuck with you, how did we deserve this fate? No decent girl would ever come home like this, her parents would die—“

“Mummy, shut up.”

“Your poor father...”

“Mummy, *shut up*.”

“Why are you such a bad girl with such horrible friends, we’ve never had a daughter like this—“

“Mummy...”

“Where did we go wrong—“

“*SHUT UP!*” Immediately, Maya realized her mistake. Her grandma was frozen, also recognizing that Maya had set into motion something irrevocable and terrible. Maya’s breath came in short, furious snorts, but the fear ingrained in her bones since childhood sent a sick wave of apprehension shooting through her veins, and she groped her way in the darkness to escape silently up the stairwell, but it was too late.

Her father’s form lumbered toward her from the kitchen at nausea-inducing speed, wrath in a compact bundle, his fists visible balls of unfiltered fury. Maya could already visualize the menacing scowl dug deeply into his face; the eyes would be wide, unseeing.

“You dare,” he roared in that spectacular way only he could manage, swiftly blocking her exit, “to come into this house at this time and *scream* at your grandmother?”

It was like a script every time: the triggers varied widely, but the fights were all the same, with the same conclusion, the same sense of mind-crushing sadness pressing over her like a pillow. It was too late to turn back. She had to play her part.

“She was saying *horrible* things to me! Or do you not care what anyone does but *me*?”

“*SHUT UP!*”

“I didn’t do anything wrong!” she shrieked. The tears were already swimming in her eyes in anticipation.

“You come into this house at one in the morning and dare scream at ME!”

“It’s twelve, and I was with Desiree, I was just having a bad day, why can’t you guys ever understand? I’m eighteen, I *graduated*, let me just BREATHE!”

But she saw it encroaching in his eyes, the madness that gripped him so violently that his yells splintered like animal howls, threatening to rip his body asunder with the dark-red hatred that flared in his intestines like sudden rocket-fire. Her father, doctorate degree hung up on the wall, the brain a perplexing toy that he probed like a Playschool puzzle: always straddling the edge of sanity. Every perfunctory breath fell like the ticking of a time bomb, and the family treaded carefully around him, nervous gazelles whose limbs ached to run at the slightest indication of trouble. Everyone except Maya.

“I don’t care what your friend Desiree does with her life, BUT I WON’T HAVE A WHORE INSIDE MY HOUSE! YOU’RE A LITTLE BITCH WHORE, RUINING OUR LIVES! *I won’t have it!* Coming home at one, you SLUT.”

Maya felt like someone had driven an elbow into her stomach, and the tears finally rose above red brims and dropped down in fat, sticky blobs...How could he be calling her a whore? It just didn’t make any sense. It wasn’t fair. She didn’t *deserve* this.

“Shut up,” she screamed with the force of every broken piece inside her, “I didn’t do anything! I didn’t do anything! What’s wrong with you! You’re crazy!”

Before she could blink, his fist connected with her jaw, and it snapped shut with a neat *click*. The scene around her was sucked into hazy spheres of white that flickered into darkness as she reeled backwards onto the stairs, so cold and sharp under the delicately folding bones of her body. *I wish I deserved this. Would be better...*

“You ruined my life,” he spat with indescribable venom, a general statement to the room. Then he turned away and left her there, ashamed of his own mess.

Maya jumped at the pleased jingle of car keys and let them drop into her hands. Her father was a small and innocuous creature before her, his face split wide with dimples and laugh lines like he had never hated her a moment of his life. She turned with the intent to give her little car a ceremonial test drive, but her grandmother reached for her hand under her many layers of loosely-slung shawl, casting her granddaughter a surreptitious glance from beneath luxuriant still-black eyelashes. “Number one,” she whispered with an indulgent smile. The hand squeezed in what could only have been meant as encouragement, and the dry skin rasped against her own in an inaudible snake-rattle. “You’ll be number one out of all others; it’s my heart’s wish.”

Tall order Granny.

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Jon stood alone on the wall. The forest was a sunless chasm that sprawled before him, devouring the land like scar tissue—he wondered if there was an end to this darkness, which fused into the horizon in semblance of eternity. The air was thick from snow, and dread. This quiet was disconcerting when he knew somewhere—not far—war drums were beating. The earth trembled with their march.

The thing about hardwood floors was that they really sucked for sneaking out. A series of clunks rang clearly through the hallway, and Maya lowered her book. The clamor of the stairs was unmistakable. She quickly slid the book unmarked under the blanket, and closed her eyes. The image of sleeping beauty vaguely flickered through her head. Her door creaked open. She could already hear the words—*why do you always have to close this door*—exasperated. *We're a family.*

“Maya.”

She lay inert. Inert gases. She preferred noble gas to inert gas. Halogens. Fluorine.

“It’s interesting how you always seem to be asleep when I walk into your room. Maybe we should get your iron checked.”

“I’m napping.” Her eyes remained stubbornly shut.

“Maya, your dad needs to talk to you.” Maya’s stomach curdled like it had been flung twenty stories off a Chicago Skyscraper and plunged into a bucket of ice water. Her eyes snapped open from the shock. “He’s waiting for you downstairs.”

“Mom...” The walls folded, revealing a quaver of a voice, the doe-eyed vulnerability, a perchant to flee.

“You shouldn’t have done this, beti. You lied to both of us. Now there’s nothing to be done. You need to go to him—*don’t* argue. Go apologize.”

“I’m sorry mom—“

“I know, go. Don’t make him wait.”

Shit. Could this be the worst idea she’d ever had? Yes, yes it could.