

Silent Ghosts

“Why do you want to know”.

The girl looked to be in her early twenties, or perhaps even younger and had that distinct look of uncertainty in her eyes. She smiled and put her hands neatly on her lap as if attempting to look more confident than she was, “I- I am interested”, she paused, “I want to know-”.

I rolled my eyes. The action had become a habit at my age and I felt the girl’s smile slip as she realised that perhaps I wouldn’t be the kind old lady she had imagined. I watched her carefully, at the way she bit her lip wondering if she should leave. With age, I’d found that I’d become more attuned to how people reacted and for some strange reason I didn’t care if I caused any offence. In fact I liked the feeling of watching them tread like shadowy wisps around me. They were all so respectful, like silent ghosts and I smiled at the thought, I could do and say anything I wanted and they wouldn’t so much as say one word. In fact the girl had been the first to speak to me in a long time.

She cleared her throat then and I watched as her gaze darted from the floor to my face, “If you don’t wish to tell me-”.

I rolled my eyes again and straightened on the bed. Outside, the sun was almost at the end of its journey and its fading light made my room look even greyer than it was, more dreary and lacking in colour. They didn’t let you bring many personal effects; everything around me had been there when I’d first arrived.

I clicked my tongue, “Tell me what you want to know”.

My words surprised her, just as I knew they would and I heard myself chuckling at the expression on her smooth face.

“Thank you for-”, she started and I waved my hand to hurry her along, she mumbled something that I didn’t care to understand, “-what happened”.

There are specific instances in a life that pinpoint a moment of change. These moments collectively lead you to your present state. And you will find that if you go back in time and change these moments, your life will have an entirely different conclusion. And, as a result, you will have become a different person.

I was nineteen. I was married to a man who, despite his faults, loved me. And I’d just flown, by myself, from a country of fields to a city where the streets were rumoured to be paved with gold. Perhaps you can imagine the scene in your mind’s eye; grey clouds blocking out the midday sun and the chattering of fluent English that sounded so strange. And in the midst of it was me; a girl with a long black braid whose uncertainty was clear in the wideness of her eyes as she ran towards the portly figure of a man any would assume to be her father.

“Mr Jey”, I called.

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“You made it my dear”, he waved at me from his red car.

He was wearing a pinstriped suit and shoes with tiny copper buckles, and had a golden watch on his wrist. I remember he struck me as a very smart looking man; like someone who had vast amounts of wealth and would be nothing but courteous with me. But a young girl’s mind is a strange thing and I wonder now how I missed the slight stains on his shirt or the way his watch had turned silver where the gold paint had faded away. Mr Jey had been our neighbour; he had lived in the next house over in the village and had, as my mother always said, been lucky enough to marry a British bride. He’d settled in England around five years before me. And he’d agreed to house me until my husband joined me a month later.

I remember him being very attentive and rushing to put my bags in the back of his car. I think he even opened the door for me and asked if I was comfortable in the back. He was every bit the kind and polite gentleman I’d remembered him to be from my childhood and he smiled at me warmly before getting in the front and driving out of the vast car park.

“So how was your journey”, he said and I tore my gaze away from the car window to look at him.

“Good Mr Jey”, I answered, “but it is very cold here”.

He laughed and wound in to a tirade about the weather, comparing it to the scalding heat back home. I listened to him for a while before my mind became preoccupied with the views outside. You must recognise the wonder that I felt, I had always been a village girl and there I was; thrust in to a world of grey towers and an equally grey sun. Even the air I breathed felt different; full of order and industrialism. It was all so different and I remember feeling a jolt of yearning for everything I’d left behind. It was only by chance, that my gaze fell back on Mr Jey and I found the man’s clouded black eyes watching me in the car’s mirror.

I, being a girl brought up with strict teachings of respecting men; especially men that were older than me, smiled at him immediately. It was the only thing I could do and I saw Mr Jey smile back as a silence descended on us. And although I had found his eyes on me unsettling at the time, I ignored it and went back to the sights that each new street brought.

The sun had completely set by now and the darkness enveloped everything in its inky gloom. I switched on a small lamp and watched the shadows on the girl’s face ease in the dim light. The girl didn’t say anything. She looked vexed, as if there was something she didn’t quite understand. But I ignored her and reached for the glass of water beside my lamp, and took a sip.

“Where was he taking you”, she asked finally. And I looked up to find her wide eyes, almost eerily, fixed on me. I took my time swallowing my water. Mainly because I was imagining it; the red couch, the peeling wallpaper, the rusted drainpipes.

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Mr Jey lived in a flat inside a house. It was an old house, with creaking floorboards and damp patches on the walls. He and his wife lived at the very top, in the large attic that had been converted in to a living room with a kitchen and one bedroom. The bathroom was on the floor below, and it was shared by the other residents of the house. Mr Jey's wife had given me the living room to use while I stayed with them, so I had full access to the tiny kitchen across from the couch that I slept on. My couch was directly below a slanted window, and I would fall asleep looking at the tall street lamp just outside the house.

It had been almost a month that I'd been living with Mr Jey; although I rarely saw him or his wife. You see; Mr Jey would come home late from work and his wife, a kind but stern woman, worked night shifts in a peanut factory and during the day, Mr Jey's wife would sleep until she had to leave. It was around Christmas when the letter came. I remember it because the night before, I'd fallen asleep looking at the twinkling lights that had been strung from the lamp outside. It was the first and only letter that had been addressed to me and I ripped it open like a child, and burst in to tears as I read. It was from my husband, written in neat scrawls, telling me that he would be here before the month was up. I wept and wept. Everything flooded me; the grief of not feeling the sun on my skin, the loneliness of having none of my own with me and especially the growing fear I felt at the swell of my belly. I remember getting up and making myself some food. I remember brushing the floors and dusting the thick velvet curtains. And then I remember sitting on the couch and re-reading my letter.

It was some time after this that the latch on the door opening broke me out of my thoughts. And with my letter clutched in my hand, I looked up to see Mr Jey watching me. He stood at an angle, dressed in his pinstriped suit and buckled shoes. But he'd opened the top buttons of his shirt and I could see the thick black hairs of his chest. I didn't like being alone with him; you see the longer I stayed with them, the more I would feel the man's eyes on me, the more I would catch him smiling at me. And I remember feeling that instinctive sense of alertness as I greeted him. I asked him how his day had been, and then asked him if he'd like some food. But he answered vaguely before trudging towards me, and his thin legs were crooked because of the weight of his protruding belly as he sat on the couch.

"Tell me what you miss most of back home my dear", he said and I felt the couch move as his arm stretched out behind me.

"I-I-", I said, "I will make you some tea sir".

"No", and his voice was edgier than it had been, "tell me".

"I miss-", I stuttered as I felt his fleshy fingers stroke my hair and I took a sharp breath as I felt those same fingers on my neck a moment later. The human mind is an odd thing and gives us the oddest options in a stage of panic. Option number one would prepare us to run, or to resist until the danger has passed and most would agree these were the most sensible forms of action in any stressful situation. But I found myself, involuntarily, taking option two, an option that didn't really make any sense. I froze.

But that was the moment Mr Jey's wife emerged from her room. And in that second I sent up a prayer to god. A desperate plea. The woman's eyes saw her husband first, and then she

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saw me, sitting ramrod straight, next to him. She blinked a few times before her eyes took on a glint and a frown marked her face. To this day I do not know what controlled the woman; perhaps she saw the fear in my eyes or perhaps she felt suspicious, but her words felt as if god had answered me.

“I am not going to work today”, she said.

Instantly Mr Jey jumped up and cast an incredulous look at her. And I watched, cowering on the couch, as they launched in to an argument about needing money; about rent and all of their problems. He threatened her and she swore at his family’s name. But Mr Jey’s wife was one of those women who, once their mind was made up, not even god would be able to change it. So that night, without exchanging any words, Mr Jey’s wife and I ate our meal of dried bread and stew alone. And I quickly forgot about the situation the coming week but not once did I engage Mr Jey in any conversation after that. But I could never shake the feeling that his cloudy eyes were on me.

The girl looked at me sullenly; she looked gaunt, not unlike a skeleton. And for a second I saw something in her that I didn’t like, an old memory of someone I’d once known perhaps. Whatever it was it quickly dissipated as she spoke.

“Did you tell your husband”.

“No”, I answered and reached towards my desk to find my rosary. I’d never actually prayed using the blue beads but it had been a present from a forgotten friend and now it bought a strange comfort, nostalgia maybe, “-I couldn’t have”.

“What about Mr Jey’s wife”.

I fiddled with my prayer beads, the smooth glassy balls were cold to the touch, “No- I didn’t tell anyone”, I glanced out of my window at the shadowy figure of the moon, “And she is most likely dead now- she was almost twenty years older than me”.

My baby was born on the second of May that next year. She was healthy, with warm brown eyes and thick brown hair; she’d taken after my husband in appearance. But I knew that she would inherit my temperance; she would be strong and smart, but most importantly she’d be patient. For patience is a woman’s greatest virtue. And my husband and I would spend many sleepless nights speaking about what the future held for our daughter. You see a week after that particular incident with Mr Jey, my husband had arrived in England, and within a day he’d whisked me away to a small flat in a tower block and I felt rid of Mr Jey’s clouded eyes. The next two years were pure bliss, and even the constant worry of money didn’t dampen my mood. I painted the whole flat orange and put vases full of fresh flowers on every window sill. I wanted my baby girl to grow up surrounded by colour.

So it was a shock when one night, as I sat on our bed putting my daughter to sleep, that an

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almost ominous knock sounded on our door. I remember it was well in to the night and my husband had looked at me with a frown.

I thought I'd never see the man again but as my husband opened the door, there he stood.

He wore the same pinstriped suit and the same buckled shoes. Nothing about him had changed and I recoiled as I saw his face, I wanted to tell him to leave. I would've wept from the pit of angst that had opened up in my gut. But I didn't. Instead my manners, drilled in to me from youth, made me get up and make him some tea. I think I counted it as a blessing that he didn't converse much with me,

"Beautiful flowers my dear", was the only thing he said but I learned, after he'd left, that he'd come because his wife was divorcing him and he wanted to inform us he would be returning to our homeland. He didn't tell us the reason for their divorce but I had a dreadful feeling about it.

Regardless, before long everything returned to normal, and I even felt foolish at the hysterics I'd felt. I even remember discussing nursery's for our daughter the next day.

"He came back", the girl whispered.

He came back. He came back a month later. My husband was at work and my daughter was in her cot.

"I need your forgiveness my dear", he said as I opened the door.

And I'd let him in. I left him sitting in the living room. I'd only gone to make some tea in the kitchen and I remember the sun was shining outside; a beautiful spring day. I could hear my daughter in the cot playing with some bells. I was humming as I worked and I'd just put the kettle on when I felt a cold breeze. It was as I turned that his fingers wrapped around my wrist. He ripped me away from the kettle, and that was the exact moment I inhaled the bitter smell on his breath.

"What are you doing", I remember saying.

Mr Jey smiled at me but it wasn't a kind smile, "you have become a *beautiful* young woman you know". And he said the word beautiful, not in our language, but in his heavily accented English. I tried to push him off me. But he was a man. And he was stronger than me. He ripped my frock; I heard the tear first and then felt his fingers next.

I am quite sure I screamed then. But it was no use; I felt the hard edge of the counter dig into my spine.

He was silent the entire time, only breathing in and out.

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He just breathed in.

and then out.

And then stopped.

“You shouldn’t have done it”; the girl broke me out of my trance.

“I didn’t mean to”.

“Your daughter grew up without a mother”.

The girl was looking at me; something like ice blazing in her eyes. I didn’t know what to say to her as she rose and stood above me, the moonlight shining on her black braid, her hands clenched as she watched me. I saw her move towards me and felt her cool fingers wipe my face. And then she looked quizzically at her hands; at the red liquid that had come off my face. Red like the pool of blood I’d been sitting in that day. Red that the motionless body of Mr Jey had been lying in. Red that had coated the knife I’d grabbed off the counter top.

With shaking fingers I wiped my eyes and looked at them; just as the girl had. But my tears were clear. Not red.

“Is everything alright in there”. I jumped at the voice. One of the men that patrolled the corridors outside banged on the bars of my cell with his baton, “go to sleep old woman”. And without looking in he went on his way.

“I didn’t mean to”, I mumbled.

But the girl was gone. I knew she’d be gone. Back to the countless shadows that roamed my cell; like silent ghosts. They never spoke to me.