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Those Words You Never Said to Me

Her hands, rough and cracked from experience, gently run over my scalp as they attempt to smooth the flyaway hairs that stubbornly stick up all over my head. Their method of attack, however, is slow and persistent, fingers pressing loving thoughts and coconut oil into my hair. After thirty minutes of undeterred determination, all two feet of my kohl-black hair is successfully tamed and braided neatly down my back. Her face is just like her hands, wrinkled yet beautiful as her eyes sparkle through her tortoise shell frames. She is everything the word grandmother represents, a woman with a mother's love and a child's mind. I recall a line from one of my favorite movies, "One of the greatest joys in life is to have one's hair brushed." The happiness is short-lived when I feel another pair of hands grab my hair; within seconds they undo my grandmother's efforts, pulling and tugging till my scalp is raw from the tension. It is not the same person as before, I know, because her hands are different, her touch is different. I don't feel any love seeping into my head, only the sharp teeth of the comb chomping down with a militaristic pragmatism. The braid is done once again, but this time it is taut and restrictive. As the ponytail snaps into place, I think about the person behind me and how she is not everything the word mother represents.

I'm getting onto a bus after the last seventh grade track meet of the year and most definitely the last of my short-lived track career. The coaches tell us to call our parents and relay to them the anticipated arrival time at school. As I stick my hand in my backpack, blindly

searching through the mess inside for my phone, I look towards an eighth grader sitting across from me who I had never talked to. Her long blonde hair is pushed back with a thin pink headband and is piled up in a bun above her head. She has one of those cool touch screen phones pressed up against her ear and is rolling her eyes at whatever the person on the other end of the line says. She groans, burying her face in the side of her seat. After a moment, she looks around carefully and hurriedly whispers, “Love you too. Bye mom!” I’m the only one who sees the small smile on her face as she shoves her phone into a side pocket of her bag and turns around to resume the conversation she had left behind. The moment may have seemed insignificant to her and perhaps the others around me, but it certainly was not trivial for me. I finally locate my phone and type in my mother’s number.

“Hello.”

“Hi Maa, my coach said we’ll be at school in about an hour.”

“Ok.”

“Bye Maa.”

She hangs up. I hold the phone up to my ear for a bit longer, contemplating a bit before softly saying “Love you” to the nonexistent person on the the receiving end of my one-sided phone call.

My gap-toothed smile broadens as cameras flash in front of me. It is my first time performing on stage, and I am absolutely loving the attention. Clad in a blue sequined halter top

and a white skirt, I am performing a dance routine to “Who Let the Dogs Out” with my forty identically dressed pre-school classmates at Sacred Heart Secondary School. Our audience is comprised of enthusiastic parents, tight-lipped nuns, and our number one fan: Jesus Christ, who is on the verge of falling off of our school’s roof from thirty-four years of peering over the edge of his perch. The performance ends all too soon, and we all head back to our respective rooms where we are greeted by chattering moms wearing brightly colored lipstick, bold shades Maa would never dare to wear. No fathers are present since it is still midday, and work will not let off till a few hours later. I scan the room for my best friend Anika and find her enveloped in her own mother’s embrace and decide not to intrude on their moment. Maa is not here because she is one of the few mothers who works during the day. I have gotten used to neither of my parents being present at my programs due to their busy schedules; however, something about that specific moment, sitting alone amidst a sea of cooing mothers and whining children, brought on a wave of emotions within me. I was jealous and hurt; I felt unwanted, as if I had been thoughtlessly cast away by the two people who meant the world to me.

I gloomily changed back into my uniform: a crisp white blouse with our school logo sewn on it, a starched and pleated skirt, a satin blue sash, and a blue elastic headband. I sit down on the cool marble floor of the room, grumpily resting my pouting face on my forearms as my classmates continue with their reunions. Only a bit later do I notice that a figure has intruded my corner of sulking. Her name is Deepu and she sits in the back of my class. Her jet-black hair is plaited and elegantly looped twice around her ears as required by our school’s “hair code”. I wonder how long her hair would be if it was down. I feel a bit self-conscious next to her with my choppy bangs and baby hairs tickling the sides of my cheeks. She shoots me a bright and reassuring smile, which tells me that I am not alone in my situation. We sit together for the rest

of the afternoon on the floor talking about our parents, hair, and school. Deepu says her hair goes past her knees when unbraided. I go home and tell my parents that I would like to grow my hair out to my kidneys (kid “knees”) just like Deepu.

Ding. Ding. Ding. I sigh as I look down at my math homework and then at my phone lighting up on my bedside table. *Screw it*, I think as I reach for my phone and cast my graph paper aside, “Calculus can wait.” I unlock my screen to uncover a series of “Lol’s” and incoherent strings of capital letters from one of my good friends. I wonder if she was finished with her math homework yet. I scroll through the texts and my eyes land on the picture which instigated her amusement. It is a screenshot of a picture of me and some of my kindergarten classmates wearing beach clothes and singing on stage for our annual showcase titled “Commotion in the Ocean”. The photograph had been posted on Instagram and had many comments including sweet notes like “aww [insert name here] looks so cute” or “haha you were adorable.” I breeze through these comments until I see the one that had caught my friend’s eye; it reads “Is the leftmost person a male?” My eyes immediately find the image once again and attempt to locate the aforementioned leftmost person. My eyes land on my own self. My mother had dressed me in a gray tee shirt with a seahorse on it and navy checkered shorts. A tacky lei adorned my neck as I stuck my hands and hips out in attempt to make a hula dancer pose. The others around me were wearing various combinations of pink and purple tank tops and skirts; it is obvious that I stick out amongst them. However, my attire is not the most embarrassing aspect of my appearance. My ugly bowl cut contrasted the soft blonde and brown bobs that surrounded me. My face showed no signs of insecurity in the picture, but for some reason I feel a sense of shame as I look back at it. I did look like a boy. I immediately blame my mother for having

forced upon me her odd fashion sense. America was definitely not India; no bowl cuts would fly here. I text my friend back a series of laughing emojis, and turn back to my neglected math homework.

My mother stopped talking to me when I started growing my hair out. I grew my hair out for six years, getting trims here and there but never actually cutting my hair. Eventually, it reached a length of two feet. My relationship with my mother had always been a tense one. She was strict and conservative, qualities that were not exactly seen in a positive light in America. Even after moving to our new house in Cleveland, she would contact my former teachers at Sacred Heart and ask them for assignments, rejecting the American system of education. As a result, I had fully mastered cursive by kindergarten but did not learn how to print until first grade. She wore her traditional India clothes wherever she went and forced me into wearing them too, almost as if she was trying to hang on to every bit of home that she could. Eventually the angry teenager inside of me was unwilling to accept her ways. Nights of her yelling and me crying filled our first year in Cleveland. Growing out my hair was the last straw for Maa; it was as if she had given up on me. I would wear my hair down to school every day, a practice considered taboo in India. One day, almost after an entire year of disapproving looks and steely-eyed glares, Maa entered the kitchen with a comb in her hand and began silently braiding my long hair. The history of our fragile relationship made me perceive her action as an attempt of regaining control over me and not one of general kindness. It was, however, the first time in a while she had reached out to me in any way, so I bore through the pain and nodded at her in gratitude. The same unpleasant ritual occurred every morning thereafter for the next five years.

It's my first night in my new room. I let out a happy sigh as I glance around and take in the sight in front of me: a pink frilly comforter to complement my equally pink pillows, a lava lamp bubbling beside my bedside table, and a very carefully arranged plushie collection peeping out of my open cabinet door. I switch the lights off and snuggle into the warmth of my pillow. The darkness descends around me, but the sets of beaded eyes looking over me from the cabinet provide me with a sense of comfort. I fall asleep.

I am running through a dark tunnel with some sort of creature chasing me. It's raining, but I'm simultaneously crying, so I cannot distinguish whether the droplets streaming down my face are tears or rain drops. I do not remember with clear detail the sequence of events in my nightmare, but I do remember the perturbed feeling that crawled its way into my six-year-old heart. I awaken from my restless sleep with a jolt and scream when I see a figure hovering over me. It's just my father, Baba, trying to console me. He soothingly hushes me and envelops me into a hug. I realize that my mouth is dry from yelling. Baba tells me that I had been screaming the word "Maa" over and over again.

My middle school art teacher had assigned our class the task of decorating our sketchbooks for homework. I have always loved art, a passion which I imbibed from my mother, so it was not surprising that I was very excited to get started on the aforementioned project.

I'm rummaging through a series of drawers containing my mother's art supplies for a pair of scissors. I sigh as I pull on another tarnished handle, peering inside the wooden drawer and

hoping to see the greatly coveted scissors before my eyes. Instead I was greeted by another collection of paint palettes and oil pastels. I am about to close the drawer, when a piece of green paper catches my eye. Maa never lets me look at her artwork; I'm not sure if it's the insecurity within her or her wish to keep certain matters of her life private. Often, I wake up at some ungodly hour in the morning and see a narrow strip of light coming from the first floor dining room and reflecting on to the wall opposite of my doorway. My mother is probably working through the night on another project; it's a recurring event, so, unfazed and weary, I go back to sleep every time. I know what the right thing to do is, but curiosity gets the best of me. I quickly pull out the canvas paper crinkled from the dampness of what appears to be water coloring. I peer down to see my own face looking back at me. There were a few differences here and there; the portrait was obviously of me at a younger age. I am wearing a red jumper and a white polo, and my hair reaches just below my ears as my lips stretch into a shy smile. My hair is neatly parted to the side and combed behind my ears. I do not know how long I have been staring, but at some point I feel a tear slipping down my cheek. It's that feeling you experience after watching a movie that takes you through so many twists and turns and then ends with some sort of profound and uplifting conclusion that makes the emotional journey you went through seem so unfair.

It is February 24th, 2008. I only know because I wrote it down in my diary. My father and I are watching the annual Academy Awards on television. We stare at the screen as the camera scans over Cate Blanchett and Daniel Day Lewis reacting to the antics of Jon Stewart who was hosting the show. My mother never really adapted to American culture after moving to the United States in 2004, so she never joined our yearly father-daughter tradition of watching the Oscars. I run upstairs to use the bathroom during a commercial break, but pause when I hear

quiet sobs in the master bedroom. I peek in and see my mother crying alone in the dark. It is the first time I have seen her this vulnerable; gone was her steely-eyed glare and firmly set jaw. She is so close to me, yet so far. I have the urge to hug her, but I fear that she would recoil from me. I fear that I can't pass through those invisible walls she has constructed around herself. Ones that I suspect she has built to keep me out and herself in. It takes courage to tiptoe over to the bed and stand in front of my mother. She croaks out a weak, "Go away," but I maintain my stance with a firm resolve. I sink to the bed and wrap my arms around her. I do not remember ever hugging my mother prior to this instance, and the sensations unfamiliar. I am surprised when she leans her head on my side and cries on my shoulder. "I want to go home," she says.

I run out of the changing room to show my mother a dress I had picked out for my singing recital. It is cobalt blue in color and flares down at the bottom by my knees. It is the fifth dress I am trying on; the others were either too short, too tight, or just plain ugly. I can see her critical gaze scanning me over head to toe. It only takes a curt nod from her for me to smile proudly with a sense of accomplishment. *It's progress*, I think to myself. Maa must be in a good mood today. We're at the cashier counter when Maa brings up the topic of my hair; "What are you going to do with your hair?" I roll my eyes; I should have seen the question coming. My hair is currently tied up in a ponytail, swinging side to side as I walk to the car with her. I smile and say, "How about a braid?"