

Noise

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Mahim

Years earlier, the city had gotten into him. Every morning, Jonathan D'souza wore a blue shirt, grey tie, black trousers, and ate the same kind of egg. His mother Kay put forth a sunny side up to him. He liked breaking the yolk, seeing its stickiness spill out.

The noise from the roads below swelled with rush hour honking. Its screeching and beeping induced a liminal sonic pentameter in him. There was a rhythm in his steps as Jon walked to work. It would take 30 minutes from Mahim to Bandra if the footpaths and promenades were clear. But beggars and hawkers crowded the footpaths, the promenades were partly filled with second-hand cars *ready for sale*, and the traffic was unmoving at best, to the slow choreography of tricoloured signals. This made for an hour's long walk to Hill Road.

Today was the same march, like always. Jon felt the morning's heat over his skin. He could tell the time by the amount of sweat sprouting from his back, the way his vest and shirt were wet. He glanced at his watch. Same time, every morning. 9:20 am. Only today, he looked at the road leading to Bandra train station. He stopped and stared at the forked road for a while. Then slid off the sling of his bag, keeping it by the side of a lamp post. He rolled up his cuffs, loosened his tie and walked over to Bandra station, boarding the first train that came to his platform. The train was heading in the opposite direction of the business centres, but was just as crowded.

At Andheri, harried travellers pushed him out. He fell to the concrete on all fours and passers-by hurriedly helped him to his feet. From there, he went across the overhead bridge and boarded an outstation train.

In this long, blue train, were a few empty berths. The train began to pick up speed, and it rocked him into a trance. Before he knew it, Jon slid over the lowest berth and went to sleep. It was a deep sleep. When he woke, he went to the door and stood staring at the landscape. Tall buildings had changed to short buildings, small houses, and then just trees.

It had been 14 hours. The land was flat now, and green and brown. No tree. No thought. Just the amusement of being alive.

Jon went back to his berth and slept for all the times in his life he had missed sleeping, because of Wilson.

It was 7:30 and it had grown dark. Kay sat on her chair on the balcony, watching the liberty-blue of twilight dim into indigo. The lights outside every balcony burst into orange flowers with stars, lanterns, and fairy lights. Diwali was around the corner, and the air rife with smoke clouds from fire crackers. She put a handkerchief over her nose. For a change, the mosquitos had stopped buzzing. It was late for Jon today, thought Kay. Usually, he was home by 6:30. Maybe the crackers bursting on the roads had slowed him down.

Wilson watched TV, bouncing over his corner of the sofa. The spring on that side had given way – its cloth torn, foam spilling out of the rip, like a smile.

Wilson was thirty-seven, but four in his head. On most days, he would fall asleep at 5 pm and wake at 4 am, and yell or squeal for breakfast. He liked three things – *lopsi* (wheat porridge), banana fritters, and rice *kheer*, calling them lop lop, fritta, and kheer kheer. Kay had to understand that and make a dash into the kitchen. When he woke, he would rush to the toilet – she had taught him to untie and tie his pant strings. He would be back at the dining table banging his steel spoon on the plate. She had to have his food prepared in 10 minutes. She kept most of the batter ready in the fridge the previous night, and even a washed pan with a ladle in it on the stove.

The noises Wilson made did not disturb the neighbours of the building, but it would wake Jon up in that quiet hour, even if he used cardboard and thermocol bits as wedges in the gaps of his closed door. Kay felt sad about this. But she was never going to send Wilson to a care home. Giving him even half a sleeping pill gave him reactions – once he didn't wake until noon, once he didn't speak until noon, and once he didn't speak the whole day.

His head and mind were too soft, she concluded.

It was 10 pm now, and no sign of Jon. He would have, otherwise, at least called. Kay dug into the cabinet in the drawing room for the phone book and found his office number.

The watchman answered, "Sir, all have left for home."

"Do you know if Jon *baba*, Jonathan D'souza is still working or has he left?"

"No. Sir, he is not here."

Kay would have corrected the watchman that she was a lady, but her worried voice may have sounded like a man's.

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Jon woke up before the train reached Mathura. He slid open the glass window and iron grilles, watching the scenery whizz off. Swift air cross-stitched through his hair. He had never felt this liberated. He realized he was hungry, and looked around. Two berths had people sleeping in them. *When did they come?*

He asked for tea from a passing train-*chaiwala* and paid him the loose change in his pocket. He tapped his other pockets and soon realized he didn't have a wallet. He shut his eyes trying to remember how he reached here. He had come from Bombay, right? *Mama... Wilson...* they seemed like names more than people now, with the gush of fast-rushing air over his face.

He took off his belt, and left it on the berth. It had always felt tight and discomforting.

When the train stopped at Mathura, Jon got down.

He crossed a platform to a stall and asked for food. "I don't have money."

"What happened?" asked the stall owner, looking him up and down. "Have you been robbed?"

"Yes..." said Jon. From his clean-shaven but dishevelled looks, he looked thieved. The stall owner gave him the smallest cup of tea and two Glucose biscuits. Jon enjoyed it as much as he could, until a man in a black coat walked towards him. He hurried to board the next train. This one was set for Darjeeling. By the time it pulled onto its fast track, Jon had forgotten most of his life.

With the slumberous coughing of the train on the tracks, his life was a file of information.

Lies. A story.

It had been four worrisome, panic-stricken days. Kay had done everything – she told everyone about all that she knew. A few neighbours and relatives had gone to Jon's office and then the police station to lodge a missing-person's complaint. Someone had brought home his office bag that still had in it a tiffin of fish cutlets and mince chops – gone stale – and Jon's empty wallet. It seemed like the bag was found by the roadside.

They stuck posters of Jon on all the walls in Mahim and Bandra. Kay broke a fixed deposit to afford missing-person's ads in newspapers and magazines.

She bribed policemen for six months to keep matters urgent and pressing.

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A year later nothing had changed. What did take place was a long wait for Jon.

The only story Kay pieced together from all the reports was that a man in a blue shirt had left his bag by the side of a lamppost and gone towards Bandra station. Two people had seen him on that road. But a third person was sure she had seen him on Hill Road that same morning. A fourth person was certain he had met Jon in office. But that was still all about the morning. Nothing about Jon in the afternoon, evening, or night. Or the nights thereafter.

There was no news. Just no news.

The aeroplanes flying over the building made diverse sounds through their aerial inclinations and soon became a new way to count time. Kay began counting the aeroplanes between now and the last time she saw Jon.

Maybe she had said something to him and he had felt bad. Or he was sad? Something had happened in office? But they said he was due for a promotion. Something went wrong with a friend or girlfriend? But everything was fine. Maybe there were some tell-tale signs? If only she were to sift through time and thought properly, she would find something. His room?

But there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Over the years, stories took the form of theories – that Jon had become a *sadhu*, that he had gone off to a holy shrine to attain sainthood, that something untoward had happened to him in a hit-and-run accident under a speeding truck, or he had gotten kidnapped, or killed in a case of mistaken identity, or thrown off into the sea. Maybe it was about woman trouble.

Worry had now been cremated as sorrow inside Kay.

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Twenty years and even tears had dried up.

Now, every evening, she whispered a prayer at the hour Jon was to return home, and a morning prayer when he used to set out to office. She also prayed over the moment he turned towards the train station.

He had lived the prescribed life for far too long. He had done everything specified. He could see himself following the same pattern all around. Marriage. Children. Job. Being a good boy, man. For far too long.

There were missing reports filed across India, even in the Indian Railways' thick ledgers, but no one had a clue about him.

Sometimes, Jon would hear the city crowding in his breath, his beating heart and ears. Those machines making soft, ricocheting noises printing and xeroxing in the blur of ticks, clicks, telephone ringing sounds, snippets of conversation – all urgent and important, but disjointed – irrelevant the very next day. He turned over to his other side now in his sleep and those sounds vanished.

Jon stared at Mount Everest every morning. He had his place in Nagarkot full of jute sacks and cane mats. A life of reusable things. A coke bottle was a bulb shade, a crate – a chair, an earthen pot – a cooking pan. He wore a jute tunic with its sleeves shorn off. He ate from dustbins, or subsisted on leftovers. He grew a white beard and lost teeth.

For years, he wanted to embrace the mountain's skin with his naked chest. But most people told him he couldn't. He wasn't fit to scale it.

So, over the bed of clouds, when it felt the ground had been free of the earth's magnetism, he made do with watching the glistening peaks. That was as close as he got.

He watched those peaks through all the seasons.

The snow melting once in a while, balding the crests, liberating silence. At first that was reassuring, then turned deeply disturbing. It rattled the insides of him.

He was used to some questions, some demands after enjoying long silences in office. Here it continued into nothingness and more nothingness. He heard his conscience confessing strange acts and thoughts. Below it his heart beat loud and clear, his stomach grumbled like furniture being moved around in a new house, a raspy wheezing of his breath pulled in.

The quiet had a noise. A slow hum and thaw. A crackle of slush. A beast waking and watching from the summits and its surroundings. This white calm had a noisy heart. And Jon could see his thoughts running in front of him in translucent fonts, whispering from etheric bibles. Somebody was reading from inside his head to him.

His scalp went itchy and dry.

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Wilson was now 57, though still four, and Kay found that redeeming. Time had stood still, at least somewhere.

She was 77. She could not sleep – only rest – when Wilson was asleep. What if she died? Who would take care of him? She could hardly shut her eyes with this thought in her head.

Her entire day revolved between her drawing room, kitchen, and their two bedrooms. She missed the crisp crackling of frying eggs. If not for Jon, no one ate eggs and *bombils*. She had not smelt a fried *papad* in a long while. She couldn't afford a maid and let the house go to dust. After a while, the dust stopped bothering her. She lived on Joseph's pension. She found comfort in the rapid hissing of the stove grate, the tapping noises the spoons made on cooking vessels, the abrupt cough of the toaster, the monstrous lectures of the *masala* mixer.

Wilson had wizened in his manners, grown a hunch, and permanent silver stubble. They sometimes went by bus to Santacruz, to meet Uncle Joe – her second cousin on her mother's side. He knew the names of all the stops now. In these rides, Kay glimpsed familiar children who had been of Wilson's age – now all grown, pot-bellied or squared-shouldered with children on their shoulders or around them, some as tall as them. Even boys of Jon's age were heading abroad to study, get a job or get married. They sent money back to their parents, like Mrs Dias' daughter Zenia did.

Every evening, Kay sat on a stool on the balcony, hoping and dreading to hear of someone's death – hers, Jon's or Wilson's. She would watch people walking in or out of the building compound from morning to night. Vendors screaming their wares, people going to work in freshness and haste, returning stale; children going to school and back, buses, trains in the rain, sun, and misty winds.

The sky changed in its cloud-shapes every day in the way it peeped, staple-pinned, between small and large buildings.

Kay had stopped thinking much about Jon now. Because they were the same thoughts, more or less, and had turned into prayers. Nothing more. Nothing new.

She preferred calling him Jonathan in front of the dust-laden altar, where Our Lady of Fatima had darkened from porcelain white to brown, the altar cloth filling with dust over its lace pores. She thought of Wilson who was nearer, in front of her, each passing day. He was there before and after her heart surgery, before and after her cataract operation, before and after her uterus removal operation.

How fine he had been until three. A healthy baby boy. Then he took a fascination in kites. He had first seen one dangling from their balcony. He wanted it and hadn't stopped crying, so Joseph brought home two kites the next evening.

Their balcony did not have grills, in those days. Who put them on the first floor anyway? So when Wilson began flying those kites of all shapes and colours, they would flutter and stutter in the wind around the balcony. One day, the pressure cooker with meat sang its final whistle. Kay ran to the kitchen. The kite got entangled in some branches. Wilson, standing over the sofa, ran and bent to rescue it – he hated torn kites. He leapt over and landed on the ground below with a heavy *thud*.

Kay hoped that Wilson would recover. She cursed the small houses of Bombay. There wasn't even a proper deck or a slab to arrest the fall. She blamed herself the most. Her need for orderliness and perfection. But she was going to make things alright. They would surely find the part of his brain that was damaged, and make him okay. He would catch up with life, if not with an education and a job. A little late was okay.

Five years late was okay.

Ten years late was no big deal.

Twenty years late was acceptable.

Looking after him had become the purpose of her life. She left her job as an accountant in a watch company. In her frenzy to take Wilson to many doctors, to keep the house in order, and to get him through from dawn to dusk, she had no idea what Joseph had collected inside him. He died of a massive heart attack. He had been so quiet all the time.

Kay believed Jon would be fine. He seemed okay. He was growing normally – tall. He looked strapping at twenty, and many girls visited their home. To Kay, that was a relief – a sign of regular life. Soon Jon would marry and they would have a larger family. She was waiting for him to tell her when. He was now the captain of their ship.

Wilson wasn't growing much. He had grown very little in inches in three or four years. Keeping him clean, well-fed, groomed, teaching him to repeat his chores on a daily basis – pick up simple living etiquette – consumed all her breath, the living lights out of her.

But she had learned patience, and practiced it.

Her prayers were crafted by her own thoughts instead of parroted from a prayer book. Her oasis had come to be the ticking and chiming of clocks on different walls of the house. She never corrected them to synchronize. In one when it was 8 o'clock, it was half past eight in an alarm clock. Somewhere far around, bigger clocks told her when the city awoke, when it slept, when it took a break – an afternoon hush, and when it rushed. The city was a sea – the ebb and peak of

noise were its waves. And it was always there for her, awake in its factory sirens, vehicular blares and tyre shrieks.

An alarm clock in Wilson's bedroom was the only thing that mattered. It told him when to sleep. While the grousing flushes in the flats above gave Kay night-time company.

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It started slowly... the stiffness. With it she couldn't bring to boil one curry to its brim, before her knees weakened. She had to sit on a stool in front of the stove. Soon she couldn't find the stool in time and began falling. It took a while to get hold of the granite counter, to rise and stand. The knees would remain locked for hours.

It was time to think of a home for Wilson. And it was best while she could watch him go into good care. She phoned the church parishioners and they came. They had done their homework years ago, but she hadn't entertained their suggestions then.

Wilson was to go to a mental hospital in Thane. At Kay's insistence, she was taken to see his induction. She told the caretakers to be good to him there. She gave them 20 rupee notes. She told Wilson she would visit often.

Kay rocked in her chair for entire days after that. She had no need to keep track of the fridge and its emptiness. She began eating bananas, and rice *congee* cooked for days at a stretch.

The trumpeted stops and starts of BEST buses and the celebratory music from the nearby marriage hall on every national holiday, doorbells, and the telephone ringing, took her off her day-dreams and noon naps. The city egged her on to thaw her limbs.

She refused to leave the house and move to a home-for-the-aged, even though that had been the original plan, once Wilson moved out.

It was better to live and die in one's house.

"The day I stop answering the phone you shall know," she told Perpetual, the parishioner, who came with half a dozen mangoes in a polythene bag.

"Yes aunty, but I have to call three times until you pick up your phone..."

Wilson grew old in a matter of a few months. His hair turned white. His cheek and collar bones jutted out. He was always hungry – *bis bis biscuit, kee-kee-kee, lopsi*. His alarm clock had

gone missing. Sometimes bruises appeared over his skin and they hurt so much. He remembered that someone had taken the box of *chakklees* Kay had given him from under his bed. He began gulping food in nervousness.

Every day, something was taken from him.

No one told Kay that Wilson had died eight months later. She just knew.

The snow had finally melted. Jon was toothless in his top jaw. He was ready to climb and embrace Mount Everest with his naked chest. A silent eye was watching him from the clouds, as the sun froze in its routine. Some days, it hid behind the grey shadows for long.

Kay asked the parishioners if Wilson was alright. Just like they had not thought it advisable for her to go through a hip replacement and knee replacement surgery at this age, they were sure she would succumb to his loss within hours.

“You cannot get well from anything after a certain age.”

So, they lied that he was well and thriving.

Kay stood up and slowly walked into her kitchen. Horn-blasting cars, tyres continuously scraping over tar, the cawing of the noon-time crow followed her from balcony to windows.

She couldn't hear much, but a new sound began to make its presence felt. A train chugging every half an hour. Did they say a Metro or something was up? A new station built just nearby over the Western Express Highway, over a high bridge?

She would cook something before the next train blew its horn – grinding over its tracks above her left ear, like Joseph's miserable laughter when he didn't understand a joke, and she would catch him out on it.

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