

I Long For the Moon

The moon shines through the window.

It creates an ethereal glow, spilling into the room like liquid silver and weaving its enchanting spell through the foggy glass and off-white blinds. *It's beautiful*, I think, while my eyes glance at the shadows that come to life under these soft beams of moonlight. The shimmering silver brings about a sense of calm and peace. The air is charged with an energy, something brimming with promising opportunities and endless possibilities. This energy, this atmosphere—it feels a lot like hope.

Sometimes, I can't help but stare at the moon's glimmering beams, sneaking past my blinds, and stirring up vivid memories of wonder and nostalgia. Some nights, when the moon conceals itself behind brooding clouds, an uneasiness emerges within the atmosphere. This disquietude often dissipates my hope, leaving me disappointed. Disheartened. Frustrated. Bleak.

Yet, what remains most salient about this charming figure is its silver hue, reminiscent of my grandmother, my *ammamma's* hair—frizzy from the constant humidity of India. It mirrors her welcoming smile, as she patiently awaits our arrival, sitting on a dull-brown couch. It echoes within the steel plate she lovingly fills with authentic Indian cuisine, heaping on succulent rice until my stomach can bear no more.

Silver is the sensation of her hands, gently massaging my scalp, ushering me into a peaceful slumber after the day's events. It intertwines with the threads of her *saree* as well as the black-and-white movies she enjoys watching. Silver grows synonymous with the moon I gaze upon during sleepless, jet-lagged nights, anticipating the delicious *idli and dosa* my grandmother will prepare when the sun rises again.

Silver reflects the hazy outline of a FaceTime call, where a frail body battles the nightmarish effects of COVID-19 in a desolate hospital room. This color is the reminder of a merciless virus, one which has swept through our world like a relentless storm, leaving in its wake a trail of devastation and heartbreak. Silver is the words that falter from *ammamma's* lips, promising me she will recover soon enough to send me some *vadiyalu*, my favorite Indian chips. What a broken promise that had turned out to be.

On the night of August 18, 2020, as I lie in bed gazing at the twinkling moon and stars above, the color silver, so cruelly intertwined with the fate of my *ammamma*, occupies my thoughts. Outside the pale blue walls of what I dub my safe haven, a phone rings ominously, accompanied by the thundering footsteps of my father as he rushes into the hallway to respond. *Thump! Thump! Thump!*

Tearing my eyes away from the radiant circle in the night sky, I slide out of bed. Furtively, I advance toward the door and crack it open, the sudden light creating a striking juxtaposition with the prevailing darkness. My father sits on the stairwell, his phone pressed tightly against his ear.

He utters into the device, asking, "Madhu, emaindi?" *Madhu, what happened?*

My ears perk up. He is talking to my mother, who swiftly journeyed to India upon learning about my grandmother's critical condition. Though I silently hoped to join her, to visit my *ammamma* once more, I never expressed my feelings aloud.

My father clears his throat, asking yet again when he's met with silence, "Madhu, emaindi?"

The line remains silent for a long while before my mother softly cries the words out, "Ame vellipoyindi." *She's gone.*

My mind blanks. *What? What did she say?* My mother's voice, muffled over the staticy audio, suddenly blurs in my ears as I stumble backward into the darkness. Those heart-wrenching words echo in my ears again and again: *she's gone.*

Gone.

Away.

Expired.

Dead.

My sweet *ammamama*...I'll never lay eyes on her again.

I gaze blankly at the wall before me. Tears long to fall, and yearn to escape my eyes, yet my face remains dry. I crave the release of a good cry, feel an urge to scream, but I cannot. I don't understand why. Out of desperation, I pinch my hand, hoping the stinging pain will provoke tears. Yet, nothing. Just silence, a quietness that runs deep within my bones, allowing no release.

Why? Why can't I cry? With frustration and despair, I gaze up at the ceiling. My eyes wander to the window, where the moon, once brilliantly lit, is now obscured by the clouds. Suddenly, the floodgates open, and waves of tears begin to build.

Still, I hold the tears back, creeping my way out into the hallway. My father is sitting on the stairs, looking worn out. I glide over to him and tap him gently on the back. As soon as he sees the anguish written on my face, he knows I know.

Despite already knowing the answer, I ask him, my voice trembling, "I-Is she gone?"

He stares at me, sympathy weaving upon his face as he pulls me in for a hug. A tidal wave of emotion suddenly crashed over me, and within moments tears were streaming down my face. I couldn't control it. Each cry echoed the intensity of my pain and sorrow, unleashing repressed emotions that had been festering inside of me earlier. The tears cascaded down my face, and sobs began to wreak havoc through my body.

I didn't even get to say goodbye! Regret begins to blossom in the pit of my stomach. I had not bothered to learn Telugu, my mother tongue. Because of that, I wasn't able to communicate effectively with her. When she used to lovingly feed me with her hand, I groaned out loud and complained about the generous amount of food she provided for me. Even when she patiently combed out the tough tangles in my hair, I used to wince and cringe. *I never told her I loved her as much as I should've.*

“Do you think she knew I loved her?” I whisper, pressing the palms of my hands to my watering eyes. My father sighs, “Of course, she knew. She loved you too.”

I nod, letting him pull me into his embrace, tears starting to well up again. I close my eyes, thinking, *I love you, ammamama, and I'm sorry I didn't show it enough.*

When I wake up in the morning, the sunlight spills through the blinds, a wave of golden hues dancing across the sky. It penetrates through my shut eyes, the darkness converting into a painfully radiant white. In attempt to relive the stinging sensation, I abruptly open my eyes, the warmth of the room immediately engulfing me, enveloping me like a constricting snake. I turn to the window, glaring at the origin of my discomfort. As I stare at that shining sun, wicked in its livid brightness, one thought on my mind lingers...

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