

BLEMISH

A collection of short stories



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PREFACE

This is a book of short stories that discusses the struggles of individuals who face discrimination based on their size, color, gender, class, and more on a *daily* basis. I strongly believe that through this book, one must be able to recognize the urgency of these social norms and act upon decrepit social constructs and stigmas that prevent any forms of change to occur in society.

My intention while writing this book was to make my readers realize that shaming and discrimination are real and happening things in multiple areas of society and that there are people suffering through a lot simply because they do not conform to the ideals. I sincerely hope that my readers understand and keep in mind this jarring reality while reading my book. I have thoroughly enjoyed writing this book and I hope that all my readers experience the same enthralling feeling while reading.

Her

“...and there was this moment”, she said, droplets of tears rising in her eyes, “when I felt free again.” As the volume increased, I spun around the room wearing an oversized sweater that shielded me from the falling sleet of snowing.

‘You’re so pretty and I love this view...We fell in love in October, that’s why I love fall’ I sang along, twirling to the music gently, as the song continued, *‘My girl, my girl, my girl!’* I never particularly understood these lyrics because I hadn’t ever felt that tingle in my stomach or the warmth of blush with crept onto your cheeks, yet there was this sensation in me which tore down my walls and let me breathe once more. The few nights before college or the times I slid onto the floor, clinging tightly to the ground during summery days were the rare memories I seem to recollect of the entirety of my high school. Why may one ask? Because I was lonely.

I was never the outgoing kind, mostly kept to myself and spoke in hushed tones but, admitting the fact that this behavior would get me nowhere in college was a hard pill to swallow. “Just have to get through this week” was practically my motto in high school, and I didn’t care for the parties or the social gatherings however, once the principal herself told me it would be a tedious journey throughout the next 3 years if my way of acting around others didn’t improve.

The skies turned the pages far too quickly for my liking and before my eyes opened, the glimmer of the blue sky met me, welcoming me to my new life, a fresh chapter named college.

There was an extraordinary whiz in the air, a quiet hum which called out to me, and nothing seemed more daunting than standing before some thousand odd people who looked to be so comfortable among themselves when I could hardly breathe.

“E-excuse me, could you direct me to Mr. Langford’s class--” I asked, rather softly to the security guard, “Could you repeat that, dear?” He asked loudly, “oh..yeah, I said could you direct me to Mr. Langford’s class?” I said a little louder, “Yeah, go to the second floor and the first classroom to your right would be his,” he said effortlessly as I thanked him and made my way to class.

Just as I stepped foot into class, I realized at that moment, that college was exactly what I expected it to be. The class was divided into several groups of boys and girls who couldn’t care less for the class had already begun; the professor struggled to shush down the crowd while I struggled to find a seat amidst the mess.

“It’s like a fish market in here...” someone said as I looked to my side to find myself looking at a girl sighing and scoffing about. “I know right,” I muttered, trying to make friendly conversation. “I assume you’re new?” she asked, “Isn’t everyone in this class new?” I asked as she gave out a

small laugh, “No.. not everyone, I’m repeating the year, the professor of this class failed me so I was forced to repeat.”

“I’m Jade Wright and I’ll be your friendly guide around this college for the rest of the term.” She joked as I introduced myself, “I’m May Lewis.”

It didn’t take long for someone like her to get to know me, I was eternally grateful to find her, that too on the first day. We spoke about all kinds of things, ranging from college assignments to making fun of professors in class. However, the one thing that made us so different was that she was outgoing and fun, she didn’t bother about things too much, she was calm on the inside when I was an unspeaking storm waiting for the worst to be unleashed.

I met all sorts of people in the next few months, all thanks to Jade, I got to know people from different backgrounds, races, people who projected their sexual identities and preferences proudly and so much more. It was enthralling to meet and learn so much about them but the only hurdle in the way was, I was too afraid to speak up when Jade wasn’t around.

As the term progressed, I found myself being pulled into different groups, some of which I’d never thought that I’d be a part of. There was this amazing sensation that took over my body when someone wanted to be around you or needed you to be there for them. It felt so marvelous to be wanted but somewhere, I felt so torn between the people I met.

Sometimes, I never knew what to say or how I felt about a certain topic when it was brought up. I would find myself being lost when someone would ask me questions about ‘who I liked?’ or ‘what type of guy was I looking for?’ There was an itch in the pit of my stomach every time I saw a couple walk past me or a chit which had been passed around the room during class and every single time, I’d find myself looking at Jade and I never knew why.

“May!” she called out as she ushered me to a group of people. As a few friendly greetings were exchanged between myself and others, “Hi, I’m Tristan and you must be May, Wright has told me a lot about you,” he said as the others went on talking about. Jade’s phone was pinging with text messages as the atmosphere began to pace up slightly. “Hello, Tristan... I hope whatever Jade told you are nice things about me..” I mumbled softly as he gave out a small chuckle.

“I have to rush guys, I’ll see you later, May,” Jade announced before walking away as a small smile crept up her face. Almost immediately, I asked “Do you know where Jade’s going?” looking up at Tristan as he shrugged and answered, “Yeah, probably to meet her girlfriend.”

I would be lying if I said that I wasn’t shocked to know that she had a girlfriend. I never really saw her be someone who was interested in girls, not that, this changed the way I saw her. The day passed and as my mind filled up with its daily dose of important things, somewhere in the back of my head, I couldn’t stop picturing Jade with someone else. Just as I was returning back

home that evening, I got off near one of the cafes to buy myself a coffee before stopping in my tracks to see none other than Jade.

She entwined her hands with a tall, slender brunette who blushed as they interchanged looks with one another. I could practically feel my eyes turn green as I looked away, avoiding a pang in my chest that made me realize something so crucial about myself, I was having feelings for *her*.

Maybe it was because she was so welcoming and nice to me from the start, maybe it was because she helped me open up to so many others, or maybe it was because this is exactly *what she* wanted.

As the days passed, I couldn't look at Jade the same way. Either I viewed her with utter hate for she'd trapped me into this mess, somehow she'd manipulated me into liking girls or I'd see her with a passion that fueled my soul. This infuriating feeling would overcome me every time she'd say something, it seemed so unfair, so *wrong* what she did to me.

"Ms. Lewis! I'm such a fan, can I please get your autograph?" Jade asked rather joyfully as she scuttled from behind me, "What?" I asked as she laughed about, "You've gotten quite famous, people have been asking for you. See, I told you things would work out, that you'd make new friends!" Jade exclaimed while her eyes glanced my way, I remained quiet as sinful wrath peaked higher in me, "I didn't need your help, I never asked for this to happen!" I shouted as she stood still in her tracks, her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "What are you saying?" She asked, her tone still tender, "I mean *you're* the reason I've turned into someone else! Th-This isn't me, I-I'm not into girls like you are and it's your fault that I--" I ranted, letting out all the frustration built up in me.

"You're blaming me for *being nice* to you on your first day? This doesn't make any sense, I've been nothing but helpful and this is how you repay me?! And as for being bisexual, that's on you, not me! Just beca--" she screamed as I flinched away, "It's all your fault, that's what you wanted from the very start, you wanted me to join your little gang of gays so that I wouldn't feel alone or whatever but guess what, it's better to be alone than to be manipulated into someone I am not and will never be!" I found myself panting as she looked away, roughly running her fingers through her hair while she clenched her jaw.

"I..." she began softly, "am not surprised with your behavior. I mean, what was I thinking, being kind to a fresher?! I knew a person like you would eventually show their true color, you being so coy and gentle like you've been your entire life and so innocent an-and naive--you really need an excuse for coming out and you choose to blame it on me, the one person who has been supportive throughout!"

I couldn't bear to stand in front of her. It physically hurt me as she spat those words out. I sank back into this daze as she continued ranting as I stumbled a few steps back before walking far

away from here. Instantly, I found myself sobbing into my sweater, stifling my cries as the pain submerged into the velvety wool.

You have no right to cry. You're nothing but a self-absorbed freak who can't even admit to herself that you're bisexual!

My thoughts were burning up every last piece of my respect. I crossed a line today, I pushed her so far away from me, and to think that I'd still have a chance with Jade was nothing but derisory. This was all my fault, this entire mess I created was on me and I didn't deserve this self-pity I now wallowed in. Some part of me wanted to turn back and apologize, yet another part begged me to stay and mull over everything I did.

I called her as the phone rang straight to voicemail, "Jade..." I sobbed as I pathetically wiped my tears, "When I'm with you, all the hard things seem possible and that's why it's so easy being around you, talking to you...you're this wonderful person who accepts people who they are and I guess..." I hesitated, pressing my eyes shut, "I guess I'm jealous of that. You're *everything* I wished I could be, everything I'm afraid to show to everyone, and the pressure of that made me push you away because I couldn't stand the fact that you didn't care about what people thought of you." I finished as the tears kept streaming down my face. I closed my eyes for a mere second and the memories of her flashed before me. I realized something then, it's always the people that are closest to you who end up hurting you the most.

Just when my life seemed to have struck rock bottom, this heavy guilt of coming out as bisexual greeted me. I knew there was nothing wrong with being bisexual yet something weighed me down and made me feel so empty when I tried to admit it to myself.

Maybe you aren't bisexual, you're being pressured by Jade... you just want to be like her so that people like you. You aren't even original, you're nothing but a fake!

A few torturous months pranced by, Jade avoided me at all costs and I decided it would be time to focus more on college. It was hard, seeing the one person you once admired and respected who now didn't even want to look at your face. It was a lazy afternoon, the clouds mostly covering the skies and the slight chill of the day just creeping by when things seemed to pace down. I couldn't hold it in anymore, I needed her to know what I felt without judgment... so, I wrote her a letter which spoke about everything, from me being bi to me having a crush on her from the very start. That was also the day, I came out to my parents, they had a right to know too.

"You're....*what?*", mom asked as she scanned her eyes across me before shaking her head, "How did you know that you're... bisexual?", I looked at her and told her all about my feelings for Jade and that I'd always suspected it. "May, I don't understand. How can you be bisexual?! I didn't raise my only child to turn up like th--" she uttered furiously before being interrupted. "Linda! That's enough! She is our only daughter and you have no right to judge her like this."

Dad juttled in as I felt my eyes well up, "Mark. She doesn't know what she is, what she thinks she is, nowadays, most kids are gay and maybe she just wants to fit in--" Mom shouted back as she shook her head in denial.

Dad simply walked away, his lips tightly pursed as he led me into his study. The air was warmer, and it felt easier to breathe, I felt Dad's eyes scrutinizing my expression so I said, "I'm okay, Dad...really." His eyes were at ease before he heaved a sigh, "May, sweetie... you know that we love you, right? An-and I know that your mother might say things which may hurt but deep down she's just a little surprised. Sh-she's just confused but, she doesn't mean the things that she says--", He explained as I looked away, catching his attention as he placed his hand on my shoulder, gently caressing it, "I know but..." I started but my voice choked up as teardrops streamed down my face, "but... you're the only people in my life right now who can help me out, who can understand what I'm going through. Dad, I'm lost and confused and I-I don't know how I'm going to show my face tomorrow at college, and I'm so afraid to show everyone who I really am even when I know how much support people give to this community..." I finished as pulled me into a tight hug.

There was a certain reassurance that radiated through this moment and all I needed to know was that someone out there was always there to love and support me even when I felt overwhelmed.

The next few weeks were nothing less than hell for me but, I'd promised myself that whatever happens, I would not bend to the mercy of the world for that's exactly what they wanted, to see my fall. The lectures seemed to be excruciatingly long and I always felt at least a pair of eyes on me every time I'd looked away and it was then that same day, I came to know why.

"Look, there she is..." someone whispered as I walked past a crowd to my usual lunch spot in the cafe near my college, "Oh my god, just look at her go.." another said in hushed tones and just as I looked up to see what the fuss was all about, a group of livid girls marched into my way.

"Excuse me, would you mind moving out my way, I have to-" I started, sounding somewhat innocent since I had no plans of getting into a fight. "We know what *you* did." She interrupted, rather rudely, "What?" I asked back quickly, she scoffed and leaned closer to me before saying, "That *letter* you wrote not only broke up Jade and Melanie but it also showed everyone what an attention-seeking freak you really are."

I was stunned, my mouth went dry even when I had so much to say. They all knew about the letter, *my* letter to *her*. I could sense my surroundings numb down, I could feel every pair of eyes that now studied me from afar. How I begged for a little void of darkness to eat me up at that moment, all I wanted was to vanish away somewhere. I knew how fragile I felt, how close I was to falling onto my knees and bawling... I stopped running and stood very still, letting all the sounds around me drown out and there was this moment where everything slowed. I could hear

every little word they threw at me, I could feel it penetrate my mind, piercing through my soul ever so gently but I let it come.

“Stop kidding yourself, you know you’re straight, one little crush doesn’t mean that you’re bisexual,” one whispered menacingly.

“Awh, poor May doesn’t have a group to hang out with, guess being bisexual will get her a free ticket to the LGBTQ+ community so she feels like she belongs in this world,” another scoffed.

“May, you’re so selfish, you broke them up. Happy now, are we?”, the voice said, the guilt built up choking me softly.

“Who’s ever going to date such a freak like her? She can’t even talk in front of the class.”, one said again.

“Stop, please don’t” I whispered, pleading desperately. I wanted to break down, I wanted to feel myself give in to the weakness yet again because I didn’t know how much more I could take. I don’t quite recall what it was in the afternoon, maybe it was the stone-cold eyes of Jade that wore me down, maybe it was the fact that I had to sit in the same lecture as her on the first day we met, maybe it was the nervous tapping of my foot that led me to do what I did or maybe it was because I had had enough.

Presentations were going on, it was an economics class and all I needed was a chance, a window of opportunity. Soon enough, my name was called out and I brought myself out in front of the class, only this time, I wasn’t nervous about how many people looked at me or whispered behind my back because that had already been done.

“Forgive me, Mr. Langford but I will not be presenting my topic today and you have all the right to deduct my grades for this...” I began as he along with the rest of the class murmured and furrowed their eyebrows in dubiety. I cleared my throat, pressed my eyes shut for a second, and breathed out.

“I’ve always been a quiet, somewhat reserved kind of girl, and it’s been a long year for me. It’s been hard for me to change my fundamental characteristic but...” I hesitated, “on the first day when I met Jade, I knew nothing seemed as daunting as it felt. She was my first real friend, she was my friend for *me* and not for the *notes* or the answers on a test.” I admitted as she looked directly at me.

“Some of you may think that I’m doing this for clout, for meaningless attention. Some of you may think that I need a reason to be a part of a group and that’s why I’m doing this but, only a few of you know the truth... that I didn’t purposely *choose* to be bisexual. I am as confused and lost as anyone sitting in this room today, I don’t know what I’m going to do or be tomorrow, and being this person does not make me any different than the rest of you. I’m not faking this and neither

am I copying the girl that I like, *this* is who I am despite what you think of me.” I said, peering into the crowd as the silence grew a little loud.

“..and believe me when I say, I am truly sorry for breaking up Jade and Melanie, that was never my intention. I know this is going to be hard to recover from and maybe I may never fully recover from it but, all I wanted was for her, Jade, to know how much she means to me an-and how incredibly hard it is for me to talk about all this in front of everyone.” I said as a few faces glanced back and forth to Jade and back to me.

I held my tears back as some of the boys made faces at me and snickered under their breaths. Mr. Langford asked me to return to my seat as the class ended soon after. Just as the day ended, my body was sore from carrying all the weight of the day... I visited the park for a change and sat on one of the squeaky swings. A mob of feelings cornered me as I noticed no one was around to see my cry and so, I let it out.

“Hey...” a soft voice startled me as I frantically wiped away my tears only to find myself looking at Jade. “May, I’m sorry. I really am, I shut you out when you needed a friend and--” she stared as I interrupted, “No, don’t apologize, I was the one who dragged you into this mess. I liked you and didn’t care about your relationship whatsoever if anyone it’s me who should be apologizing.” I admitted. “I just came here to say that what you did today, really shocked me, you cared about me enough to speak up in front of everyone and that was bold of you. Look... I am proud of you for understanding and finding yourself, you being bisexual is such an amazing thing a-and no one should hide that. So, if you can be brave enough to come out in front of everyone, I think I can find it in my heart to forgive you.” She completed, looking a little flustered.

I was ecstatic, I looked at her with such glee that we broke into tears and hugged each other for what seemed like forever. As we walked into the setting sun of that magnificent evening, I remember sharing earphones and listening to an all too familiar song that seemed just right.

‘You’re so pretty and I love this view...We fell in love in October, that’s why I love fall, my girl, my girl, my girl, you will be my world, my world, my world.’

‘My girl, my girl, my girl, you will be my world, my world, my world...’

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No justice, No peace

The crowd’s wrath could be felt in every vein in my body, the steady drum of the march thundering louder as every second passed, unity had never been more real than this very moment. The simple outcry of hundreds of voices was all it took to break an injustice that had been going on for far too long.

"No Justice! No peace!" screamed another, as I stood up doing the same, shouting the words over and over till I couldn't breathe. "This fight will never last, the government will take us down, what's the point of all this?", a young boy said, fear dangling in his eyes as he turned towards me. "What is your name?" I asked, "Terrell" he muttered softly, "Now, Terrell, listen to me very carefully, the government will do everything in their power to put us down, they will use every opportunity they get to turn everything against us. If we don't speak up now, if we don't exhaust ourselves till we can get fairness and equality, tomorrow, our kids will suffer. This fight has been going on for centuries and there has to be a point when it stops. You and I may seem just like ordinary nobodies but when put together, we can send the whole world down with a crash." I said, kneeling to the ground to meet his eyes, a familiar fire burning in my chest as he stared at me in awe.

Standing up to his full height of 4 feet, he took in a deep breath and shouted, "No Justice!! No peace!!", I smiled a smile which I could feel in my heart. Little Terrell came running to me and gave me a tight hug before saying something I'll never forget, "We won't stop. We will fight till the whole world goes color blind."

Nothing felt more devastating than to see young children who had to witness the disgusting and revolting truths of this society from such a tender age. I recall that my world was pink-tainted till I turned 15, it was the day when dad had been arrested for DUI when he hadn't done anything wrong. My family always made sure to tell me that menial things like this may occur in the future, only because we were from the Black community but never did I imagine it taking place.

He was beaten till his limbs went blue and his mouth filled up with guiltless blood. The second he came home, he walked towards me and said "This is a battle that may never cease till I live, it is your responsibility to make sure it never happens to you. You go out there and make it loud and clear to everyone that we will not back down just cause' we're black. We are who we are and we are damn proud of that."

No one ever takes it seriously till it happens to you or when an innocent life is taken. Even at 18, nothing seemed to be as bad as I thought till a man, George Floyd, was suffocated and killed. Since that very moment, protests and riots were an everyday thing. I'd promised my father to never stop struggling for freedom but I had merely begun the journey.

3 months had flown by since the passing of George Floyd. He'd become a symbol for justice, he was much more than anyone could have ever anticipated. He was a gateway to thousands of stories about the unjust treatment of black, gay, and any community which had been previously oppressed. It was a revolution, standing up to the government with absolutely nothing to fear and only the sheer passion and dedication to this one movement had changed my life in so many ways.

However, it had caused uncertainty not only in my mind but also in the minds of millions of other people. A few weeks ago, a group of teenagers started a small body of people who are against communities that are non-caucasian, a group of white supremacists. This group had barely any significance or attention until a few days back.

"Darius! Come down quickly, look what these kids are doing now!" mom yelled as I rushed downstairs, finding my mother glued to the television.

"This morning at 9:32 am, a group of teenagers wearing white paper bags covering their faces, broke into a local grocery shop and destroyed property such as; shelves, counters and owned by Mr. Andre Williams, an African American, before frantically spray painting a message outside the shop. Here it is:

"This is just the start. Whoever dares to offend our race will pay."

My mother ground her teeth together just as I quietly sat opposite her, trying to understand what to make of this situation. "These kids..they don't know what they're getting into," my mother's remark played in my head before I said, "Ma, people my age are capable of doing a lot more than you think. If one community can host protests, speeches, and campaigns and stand up for the Black society, the other can destroy and completely wreck lives just to prove their point."

She looked away, pausing for a few seconds, "We were the same. Fighting for what we felt was right, it was us against the world. The only thing we didn't realize was the damage we'd caused to so many lives. Our small protests and sit-ins in college, skipping lectures just to make people understand that the melanin in our skins did not make us dangerous, we'd insulted our white friends, teachers and neighboring people," she said as her eyes darted across the floor before looking at me with a heaviness.

"You didn't insult anyone, Ma. You backed down, you stopped your struggle, just because you cared about what they thought of you. All you did was raise a small voice against the daily prejudicial actions people of our color faced. To them, everything was black and white, right or wrong when in truth, there is nothing right about differentiating individuals only and only because of their skin. So, please don't tell me that you insulted people by standing up against the ones who started and continued this bigotry of racism."

A few weeks drifted by, we didn't bother to waste our time on the newly formed group of white fanatics. The protests shrank a little every day, fewer and fewer people attended or even stayed back during the marches and speeches. We could feel it slipping out of our hands, we could feel our movement cracking apart little by little every day. The day finally came where less than 50 people showed up and it was that very day, all our effort, everything we worked for, came crashing down.

The evening began unfurling across the pastel sky, people packing up their banners and posters and wrapping things up like any other day. In a flash of a second, everything around me tore to shreds. A swarm of people barged through our crowd, pushing and kicking down anyone in sight. Some carried baseball bats and metal rods while others picked up stones from the path they marched upon. Many laid still, clenching onto the ground, taking their undeserving beating. Others shrieked in fear, begging for release as the horrors behind those white paper bags began unraveling themselves.

My hands shook, breath trembling as a single tear welled up in my eye. My body unmoving as my mind killed another second, trying to figure out how I ended up here. Quickly hiding behind an old car, I took cover for a few minutes. *'The same group of white supremacists, the same ones from the grocery shop.'* I thought as it all started falling into place.

Without wasting another second, I warily rushed back home, suddenly concerned. I underestimated them, those teenagers. I wasn't aware of their capability until that day. If they could barge in and beat up a crowd of innocent and unarmed people, they could do *anything*.

Inching closer to home, I found myself shocked, staring at an unrecognizable house, left in shambles. In the center of the ruins, stood a frightened mother, clutching onto the remains of her broken dwelling. "I-I don't understand--who--what happened?!" I fumbled as I ran towards Ma, hugging her as she wept in my arms.

"Some kids knocked our door open, they had weapons. They threatened to kill us if we didn't let them take what they wanted. I-I tried my best, but they held your father at gunpoint and I couldn't let anything happen to him." she explained as her face twisted in pain. "Ma.. did they cover their faces with white paper bags?"

"Yes. Just like the ones from the grocery shop", she announced as she gritted her, pressing her eyes shut in fury. I remained silent as I held her close, my heartbeat hastening as I shushed her down. "Don't worry, Ma. Is anyone hurt?" I asked softly, "No, but your father refuses to come out of his room."

"I'll take care of that," I said quickly as I helped her pick up broken pieces of porcelain and cement, biting back tears. It was an inexplicable feeling, my throat was closing as my eyes welled up. The pain was all I felt, nothing mattered more to me than my family.

"Shut the door," Dad commanded as soon as I entered the office. "Are you okay, dad?" I asked as he paced around the room, rubbing his temples. "What happened today... Was one of the few times in my life I was ashamed of who I was," his voice shaking as he continued, "To think that everything we sacrificed for *you* was enough..." he said, looking down.

His eyes fell onto the floor as his chest heaved with a deep sigh. The air seemed to have darkened as I looked into his eyes once again, "Dad, If you're ashamed of yourself, your color,

we have already lost this fight without even trying. You were the one who told me, never to stop. If someone can make you feel less than you deserve to be treated, then what is the point of trying to wrestle against something we know we can win. No one should make you feel like that, ever.” I said earnestly, pressing his shoulder lightly.

“I may have failed you and I am sorry. I didn’t try hard enough but, you will. You will keep trying, keep pushing yourself until people are afraid of ever speaking a word against *any and every* oppressed community.

The next few weeks were spent in complete radio silence, the number of people attending protests dropped drastically ever since the rampage. We were few of the fortunate people who lived to see the light of day but some weren’t. 4 people lost their lives including a 12-year-old girl who was killed as she hid behind her mother for support. They weren’t just a group of teenagers messing around anymore, they were sectarian murderers who refused to believe the other side of our story.

It was then my father’s words echoed in my mind; “*You will keep trying, keep pushing yourself until people are afraid of ever speaking a word against any and every oppressed community.*” The day gleamed brightly through the trees, the sky bluer than ever as I inhaled the free spirit of the people who had once again gathered for a BLM protest. Right before we began our march, I asked for a microphone, stepped onto a makeshift stage, and took a deep breath.

“Hi. I’m sure you must be wondering why I’m standing here, making a fool out of myself... to be honest, I’ve never done something like this before and the reason I chose to speak up about this is that I am *sick* and tired of all this. What we’re doing here, standing up and vocalizing the injustices, protesting for our right to live and to be treated fairly is something which has brought an immense amount of change that no action can ever undo, and for that, we deserve undeniable appreciation.” I said sincerely as the crowd broke into cheers and hurrahs of agreement.

“But why should we still have to fight, even in the 21st century where things were supposed to be better than yesterday? Why should we still have to endure the pain and undue torture our brothers and sisters face every day?! We aren’t fighting for one man whose passing caused this very moment, we are fighting so that tomorrow, our kids don’t have to bear the brunt of this mistreatment which prevails.” I said before continuing, “A few weeks ago, a bunch of people hiding their faces and the crimes they committed behind white paper bags caused chaos and harmed multiple Black individuals by breaking in, threatening to kill, stealing valuables from innocent households, and murdering 4 people including a 12-year-old girl. I was here, at the march, and I founded several people struggling to fight back, many screaming for help and few taking the beating they did not deserve. They think they can *frighten* us into submission and give up this fight?!...No. They think they can *make us feel lesser* than any other person walking the streets of freedom?!...No. We *won’t stop* till the whole world goes color blind, and I think we can make that happen if we really want to. No Justice! No peace!” I announced, loud enough for the expanding crowd to hear.

It was that day under the scorching sun when the masses of people, blazing with the same fire, ignited the path to independence. This fight was far from over, it had been going on for centuries and our goal was not only to make sure people understood the importance of every life that is lost simply because he or she was Black, but it was also to end any and every form of Racism.

Six months ago, a certain man's passing rekindled the fury of thousands of individuals who were not only from the Black community but also from the LGBTQ+, Feminist individuals, and several more who had been shut out and disfavoured for decades. It's caused pain and hurt to those who've lost someone they love. It's caused anger and frustration to those who've fought and fallen every day but most importantly, It's caused the entire world to die down for just a second, only to listen to the unwavering sound of our movement which resonated in every march, every fight, and every voice.

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Varna

As the air filled with the general chatter of the numerous students, I made my way through the crowd with a hopeful sense of pride. All that hard work, all those sleepless nights packed with countless assignments and submissions were finally paying off. This exhausting yet enthralling feeling dawdled upon my shoulders as I realized that the ground beneath me had changed. Just as I stood before those tall golden gates which flaunted the esteemed name of 'St. Xavier's College' in large lurid letters, my jaw parted open as I took a glimpse into my future.

The journey to reaching here was rough, especially since I was always treated slightly differently than the rest ever since school. Being a child who came from a lower caste had nearly cost me my life. Not long ago, when I was still a student at a local school, my mother who then worked as a housemaid for a wealthy household had been wrongly accused of stealing jewelry even when everyone knew that she was innocent.

As soon as she was fired, we had nowhere to go. Baba had left us long before mother began working so there was no other source of income that came in. Even today, I distinctly remember the time where we had nothing that we could call our own. Living under a tottering shack, using the dry water of the well which was about an hour away from our abode. Snatching away at my mother's sari as a bedsheet to keep warm at night. Mother used to tell me, now and then, "Don't lose heart. Things will get easier sometime, someday when you grow older. You will be the one to get us out of this."

"A warm and heartfelt welcome to the batch of 2016!" a young man, around the same age as mine, greeting the crowd as I perched on the ground as many others did. A sequence of strident hooting and yelling caused me to flinch back as I chimed in not long after, clapping with glee. "I am so very proud to see some old faces, kind of surprised that they were able to pass out into

this year.." he chuckled as the crowd broke into a short laugh. "Moreover, I am excited and overjoyed to see some new ones. Yes, that's right. Xaviers has now opened up novel methods to get in and enjoy this experience. We have new and higher level scholarship programs for your post-graduation and we also started allowing bright students from all castes and religions to apply and get into Xaviers!" he continued as the students cheered while some went mute. "This year, the faculty has decided to make this legendary school more diverse and sundry. So, prepare yourselves for various challenges that await your way and unleash your mind to an avant-garde experience, here at Xavier's!", he finished as the roaring claps of the students left my ears in splits.

"You're new, aren't you?" a high pitched voice inquired from behind me, turning around, I found myself looking at a short-heightened girl with the most peculiar hair I'd ever seen. "Oh, yes," I mumbled under my breath. "I'm Leah," she spoke a little louder. "Veer, nice to meet you," I commented politely.

"So tell me... How has Xaviers been treating you?", she asked just as I bumped into a group of people, "Oh god. I'm so very sorry! I wasn't paying attention." Apologizing profusely, I excused myself before receiving disgusted and dirty looks from them. "Eugh, I hope my clothes aren't contaminated from some disease *those people* carry," one muttered loud enough for me to hear as I began walking away.

"Gosh, are you okay?" Leah asked, making sure I was unaffected by their remarks. "Yeah.. doesn't bother me anymore," I said firmly, looking down, my eyes fixated on the ground as old memories began flooding my head.

Classes began immediately. Things felt simpler at college, not as tedious as school was. People seemed to be more broad-minded than the occasional glares and hushed expressions when I walked by them. After a few weeks of a laborious slog, things appeared to calm down a bit.

"Woah there, rookie. What do you think you're doing?", A towering figure announced himself from behind me, "I'm filling the form for the chess club..did I-I do something wrong?" I stuttered, conscious all of a sudden. He sneered, glowering down at me before saying, "Oh please, you and I both know that this club isn't meant for people *like you*."

"I don't understand. I am a well-to-do student at this college, I have every right to enroll myself in this club. I don't care whether you like it or not." I said, meeting his eye and taking a step forward. He scoffed, "Maybe I didn't make myself clear, I am the head of the chess club and I will *not allow* your kind of people in my club. Understood?" he said inching closer to me.

I didn't care that I wasn't allowed, it was the person who said it. He was *my* age. It shocked me how people this young had formed such a strong opinion about our out-dated and completely ridiculous caste-system. It was beyond me to think about how many people, full of talent and skill would be rejected or simply ignored only because of their caste. To know that people in this

era, this very time would consider a person's caste or religion before making relationships is something that kills me from within.

I gave up, walking away from him. Recognizing a familiar face in the horde, I called out, "Hey! Leah!", she looked flustered as she quickly avoided my gaze, "Oh hey Veer," she muttered as her eyes darted across the floor. "What's wrong?" I asked, sensing that she was feeling uncomfortable. "What? Nothing..it's just..could we please go somewhere else and hang? There are way too many people here," she said hastily. "Oh, alright," I replied, before following her into a less crowded area.

"How are you liking it here so far?" she asked, her expression twisting into a wary look, "Is uh--Is anyone..I don't know, bothering you? since you're new?.." she stuttered, obviously feeling concerned. "No. Everything's cool." I said curtly, I didn't want her to know about my problem just yet, not that it mattered a lot but still.

"Oh, good," She sighed as her eyes shut for a brief moment before we started talking about other things. There was this blissful feeling that grew a little every day in me, having a friend to talk to, having a person who'd be there for me. I felt incredibly lucky, finally fitting in.

Before anyone knew it, our midterms began and everything around us paced up, everyone was engrossed in one book or another, students rushing about to classes, mindlessly taking notes and mugging up the work like chants in a temple before God.

Just 10 minutes before our first paper, I was walking down to class, my head stuck in a history textbook which I held in one hand and a pile of notes in another. I collided against a hard surface, causing me to fall onto the ground, scattering my notes everywhere.

"Oh, *sorry*. Didn't see you there, rookie," a hoarse voice said through gritted teeth, the sarcasm lacing his words. "What's the problem? I haven't done anything to offend you since the first day, why--" I started getting agitated as my paper was about to begin but none of it mattered because the next thing I knew, a burning heat greeted my left cheek as little droplets of blood trickled down my face.

"Shut up, thief. You don't deserve any of this, you should go back home to whatever village you come from and stay there. How much ever you try, you will *never* belong here," he said in an are or what issue you have with me but I don't care. You have no right to--", he simply got up and left before I had a chance to finish.

I was 7 minutes late for the paper. Gathering my notes and my books off the floor, I dashed towards class, praying that they'd let me take the test. "Mr. Pallar, I cannot let you take the test. You are late and tardiness is not appreciated, especially during term papers. I'm afraid I-" she began as she escorted me outside the classroom. "Ma'am, someone pushed me and threatened me that's why I was late. I was on my way to class when it happe--" I explained

frantically, "If you are going to make excuses, can you at least make them believable?" she said sternly, "Look," I pointed at the newly formed bruise on my left cheek, "That's not enough proof, I'm sorry," she refused to believe me, "Please understand. This is real, the student who hit me accused me of being a thief and spoke lowly about the caste and I came from--" I started, "At Xavier's, we preach equality between every student. It is highly unlikely for a student to discriminate let alone physically bully a person like you. I will not accept your false accusation against this high institute. Now, I know that you were late for your first test, and with your behavior, I will not allow you to sit for any of your midterms."

"Please ma'am! I am truly sorry, please hear me out--" I really couldn't afford this kind of thing to reflect on my record so I insisted to meet with the head of the institute. A few days passed away and I got all sorts of looks and whispers my way, things like; *'Oh what a liar! He just wants to get away for being late to his exam', 'What a fake. Lying about being bullied is such an old excuse.'*

"Good evening, sir" I knocked on the door and he gestured me to come in, "First of all, I am sorry for any misunderstanding that is caused in the past week, I was late for my first paper because a student from here had physically attacked me and verbally threatened me on several occasions. That's all, sir. Please let me take--" I started as he scanned his eyes up and down me, before saying, "Mr. Pallar, how do we make sure that this happened and that you are not lying?"

"I guarantee you, sir, I do not lie. If you want, you can call the student who did this and ask him a few questions yourself." I assured him, "I don't usually do this however, as you are new and are a pretty bright student too, I will call him. What is this pupil's name?" he asked, "I don't know." I mumbled.

"To be fair, all this seems pretty made up to me. You were late. You were attacked by a student whose name you don't know and were accusing someone of discriminating against you based on your caste in an institute where we preach the justice and equality of all sons and daughters of God," he said, shushing me down.

A knock interrupted us, as an overly familiar face peered through the gap in the door. "May I come in?" he asked as tiny chills raced up my spine. "Yes, you may."

"Mr. Pallar, I believe that if you have a friend amongst the crowd whom you can talk to every now and then, it may help prepare you for the hardships at Xavier's. Lying is not acceptable, nor is your tardiness. A friendly face may help reinforce these rules better." Everything went black, my breath stopped for a mere second as muffled voices rang through my mind, "Mr. Pallar, this is Seth, my son. I think he would be good company, after all, he is one of the brightest students and I say that not because he is my son because he has an academic record which proves so and behavior has never been adrift."

It was him. He was the one who caused all this but even if I opened my mouth and said something against him, it would be of no use. It's no surprise that a father will always have a bias against his blood. If I filed a complaint against him, I'd dig myself a deeper grave. Therefore, I remained mum seeing that my case against him wasn't strong enough to win.

Time didn't seem to wait for anyone, the last day of the first semester greeted us before we all broke away into our individual vacations for 10 days. I had been lucky not to run into Seth ever since the meeting with the Head.

Just as I walked away from the campus, approaching the gate to the train station, two familiar voices stopped me in my tracks, I peered away from the ground and found myself looking at Leah who whispered certain things into Seth's ear. They seemed close, closer than I would've imagined. Her face twisted in concern like she was worried about him. He just stood there, a fit of particular anger radiating off him.

"She didn't deserve this, she's a good kid." He kept muttering over and over as Leah consoled him, stroking his back and gently nodding her head. "I know, but it isn't *his* fault if you would just listen to m--" she said in between before being disturbed by him, "No! It is his fault, If he and his dear friends who come from the disgusting sides of the country hadn't taken up so much space in this college, maybe she wouldn't ha-have--" he said, seething with rage as he clenched and unclenched his jaw.

I was beyond confused, I didn't understand what they said but as Leah hugged him into a comforting embrace, I knew she wasn't the person I thought she was. "Seth, there's nothing we can do about it now, you know how much I care about you and this behavior isn't helping your health, let's just drop it, please," she continued as he gave out a controlled sigh and pressed his eyes shut for a mere second.

"I know, Leah, but the next time I see him, I don't know if I will be able to control myself," he huffed as she took a step back, rubbing her temples, shaking her head. "Seth! He's here because he earned the grades that were needed to get admitted. He didn't come in through the caste quota. He's innocent and he doesn't know anything about her, why are you hell-bent on punishing the poor guy?!" she said, raising her voice.

It hit me then. They were talking about me.

"No matter how he got in, he will *always* be a part of them. *They* are the bigger enemy, the very reason, Thea moved out who now lives like a junkie somewhere, aberrant from our family. She kills herself every day, she dedicated her entire life to studying, only to be rejected and silenced while everyone else she knows and loves attends the one college she hoped to go to one day."

This sickening sensation began growing in me, a foul feeling which dragged me from within.

'Was I really a thief? Did I wrongfully take someone else's seat who was equally or more deserving than--?' My mind was swamped with thoughts that didn't seem to make sense to me, thoughts which were otherwise absurd now started imposing a certain kind of guilt in me, and there was *nothing* I could do about it.

After that day, this heaviness began forming on my shoulders, like a bulk of culpability which weighed me down every time I passed by Leah or Seth. I felt nothing less than a criminal, a thief even though it wasn't my fault.

The clock struck 1:31, our English lecture was just about over, the class dispersed into a jostling crowd, a small face standing very still, looking over in my direction. As our eyes met, I saw Leah wiping tears off her face as she waved towards me.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I asked, "You have to go, okay?" she said, suddenly panicked. "What d-do mean, go?" I asked again, shaking my head lightly. "He's coming for you any minute. I'm sorry, I wish there was--" she began, "something you could do about it?" I finished, as I scoffed and looked away in disgust.

I couldn't believe what I'd heard, and even though she was close to Seth, she'd given up on me.

As I walked alone in the hallway, hoping Seth didn't find me, scuttling footsteps followed me as a distinct fear greeted my body and numbed my mind. It was the kind of fear that crept onto me every time Baba returned home, all drunk and uncontrollable. It was that fear that kept me awake at night.

"There's nowhere to run now, Veer." He whispered spookily as I shook my head profusely, "I'm not the reason." I muttered loud enough for him to hear. "What's that, rookie?" he asked, towering over me, looking directly into my eyes. "I am not the reason that *she* didn't get in," I said vehemently.

He took a step back and said, "Maybe not but, your little friends who take-up more than 25% of the scheduled caste seats, and they ate up my sister's too. Your friends stole from her, from us. So, don't you dare tell me tha--" He ranted, grinding his teeth, seething with resentment.

"I am sorry for your sister, then! Why are you doing this to me? I-I don't understand, I didn't steal. Nor did the students who were admitted through the scheduled caste--" I said before he pushed me back. "No! Shut up! They didn't get the cut off marks, they didn't work hard for any of this. Sh-she did everything and yet, where is she now?" He screamed as I let out a small gasp as he hovered over me.

"What do you want me to do about this? We can come to some sort of agreement. D-do you want me to apologize to you o-or something?" I fumbled as he tightened his fist, ready to

plunge. "You can't do anything besides bear the brunt of your mistake," he completed before everything around me faded into a painful blackness.

As I lay on the soft white sheets, staring at the old rusty ceiling of the infirmary, a small smile cracking on my lips. "How are you feeling?" a gentle voice asked slowly. "Where is he?" I asked back, "Who?" the nurse questioned as I propped up on the bed, and frantically began looking around for him. "Please lay down, you aren't supposed to move so much, you haven't yet recovered from your fall," she requested as my eyebrows furrowed in confusion, "*Fall?* What *fall?*" I scoffed, pressing my head lightly.

"One of the teachers found you on the bottom of the stairs, they said that you'd had a pretty dire fall and you needed immediate medical attention as you've had multiple bruises and a fractured finger," she completed as I couldn't begin to fathom how he could just *leave* me on the bottom of the staircase? "Oh, right," I said, nodding my head.

My phone buzzed, several notifications from Twitter and Instagram kept popping up on my screen as I squinted to see what was going on...

- *'26-year-old student Rohith Vermula hangs himself. #JusticeForRohith'*
- *'Rohith Vermula, a student at the Hyderabad University, commits suicide to fight for Dalit rights!'*
- *'He claimed to be treated like a pariah by his own class peers and even teachers due to his caste.'*
- *'Rohith was a very bright student, loved to read poems, and was an avid rock climber. In his death note, he mentioned how his birth was a fatal accident.'*
- *#InstitutionalMurder #JusticeForRohith*

"Oh my god..." I muttered, unable to believe what this constant discrimination had led a young mind to do. It drove him crazy until he had no other option but to escape. I never wanted this for anyone, no matter which caste they came from. No one deserved to die.

A few days after passing, I was able to do most of my tasks without anyone's help, my body seemed to be tired and exhausted yet my mind was fueled with unusual energy that lit my every thought on fire. I couldn't help thinking of the Rohith case over and over. It had taken over my senses. In a blind fit of rage, I'd booked a slot for the open mic which was taking place in the upcoming week. I had no idea what I'd talk about but I knew that this unfairness and discrimination had to stop before another life was lost so, that's what I did.

"Good evening everyone, Welcome to our first open mic of this new semester. Today we have quite a few people who have volunteered and we hope everyone enjoys themselves, and please, remember if you're nervous, this is an open mic, you can do or say whatever you like!"

My breath trembled as my turn approached closer and closer and when it finally came, everything settled down, my heartbeat paced slower as I looked into the audience. Some faces encrusted with detestation while others paid little to no attention as I got onto the stage.

“My name is Veer Pallar and I am just another ordinary student who dedicates his life to achieving good grades and a credible reputation in front of teachers. There is nothing special about me when you talk to me one on one but when you notice me in a group of other students, I seem to stand out...” I began as some eyes turned towards me as others turned away.

“Why?” I questioned, gaining some scoffs and snickers from the crowd. “I’ll answer, simply because I am seen as a person who comes crawling from the other side of the tracks and not a student who is as deserving as anyone else who was admitted into this institute. Only a few days ago, a fellow student who studied at the Hyderabad University committed suicide...”, the people went silent, there was a slight buzz in the air that floated about.

“His name was Rohith Vermula, he was only 26 and he was a Ph.D. scholar, in his suicide note, he very clearly wrote how the people treated him li-like an outcast, a pariah and how he was worn out by the subtle acts of discrimination that were thrown his way by his peers and teachers,” I said loudly, a few of the people covered their mouth in horror, holding back tears.

“Do you see these bruises on my face?”, I pointed around my head and cheeks which were covered with little scratches and scars, “They are not from some fall down the steps, they come from the hatred and disgust certain people here have towards me. This is not a complaint, this is an example of how students from the scheduled caste quota are treated across the country. Yes, some students may not have the cut-off marks which are needed to make an entrance into well-respected colleges and universities but that is not a good enough reason for someone to be excluded to such an extent that it drives them wild.” I continued till every single of the people looked my way.

“Discrimination comes in many forms, for example; physical harassment where one is directly assaulted by another, mental persecution where one is socially excluded out of clubs, groups or even class projects, and lastly, victimizing someone who opposes discrimination of any form. Some of you may recognize this as you may have indirectly committed them and some of you may have witnessed these, either way, if you have, please voice it out, speak up, take action before someone loses hope and gives up.” I finished, my eyes surging with tears.

I stepped down from the stage, vaguely limping, my eyes connected to the ground as my breath shook. There was a chance that the people would ignore me and call me out for being nothing but an attention seeker but there was this impression that seemed to be hanging in the air which bought a glimmer of hope in my heart.

A friendly expression in the crowd looked up, eyes meeting and her face split into a small smile as a tear trickled down her face. She was the only one who clapped as the crowd remained

mum, she didn't break eye contact with me as she did, and before I knew it, everyone joined in. Hollering and clapping as I sputtered while I laughed, yet something didn't feel right.

A pair of stone-cold eyes fixated on me from behind the crowd. Seth made his way towards me, "Why didn't you take my name?" he asked looking down, a sense of guilt reflecting in his tone. "Even aft-after I left you...left you on the bottom of the staircase," he said, admitting it to himself more than me. "Why?!" he urged on, still looking away from me.

"Because I don't want people to make you feel the same way you made me feel, like a castaway. If they found out, you were the one who ragged me, they'd never see you the same way again, just like I felt. Besides, you need to learn how to live with the guilt which I'm sure you feel already." I said as his face twisted in regret.

"I'm sorry, Veer. I was so blinded by the fact that my sister wasn't able to get in, I lost control of my boundaries. I really am sorry, I mean it. I never should have hit you, I never--" he began as I clutched his shoulder and said, "I accept your apology, Seth... but if you want to redeem yourself and your mistakes, from now on, I hope you help support and reduce the kind of discrimination that happens to students who come from different castes if you ever witness any take place."

As the rest of the year continued to seep by all of us slowly, month by month, people seemed to have taken an interest in me right after the open mic. Anytime a person was excluded, he or she was never really alone. Together, we collectively made sure that discrimination and prejudice against caste were kept to a minimum. Since the teachers never believed that discrimination can occur, even at an institute like Xavier's, we planned to set up more open mics and speeches which would allow free discussion of social issues and problems that students face today.

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The Mannequin

As my whole body roared from within, a sudden upheaval of pain distressing my mind minute by minute slowly seemed to take over my consciousness. 'I can't hold it inside of me anymore..' I muttered to myself, trying to convince my body to listen to my mind for once. I felt my fight for the restraint grow weaker, slipping out of my hands by the passing second, my eyes growing heavy and my body quivering at the sight of my face in the dusty mirror. 'More time was what I needed' I thought, but then again, how could I ask for the one thing that was completely and utterly out of my reach?

“Madam! Look here! Gorgeous, you’re just perfect!”, another photographer exclaimed as my mother smiled gently, waving in an excellently poised manner. I looked away, thinking that I’d seen this act one too many times now. “Just one more question, mam. How does it feel to have so many young followers who look up to you and aspire to be a supermodel one day?”, a woman asked loudly, as the crowd around our car grew larger. “In my 15 years of experience, I have never once seen such a young and beautiful fanbase who regularly motivate me to advocate my experiences and teach to our youth the importance of true beauty..” mother said clearly, shushing the flock of photographers and journalists.

“I think that being a model does not in any way mean that having better features or a better body than the rest is more important than who you are. It does not define you as a person. I was and still am grateful for your support throughout my working years however, in my view, don’t aspire to be a model. Aspire to be the best version of you.” Mother finished as the crowd began clapping and chanting “Char-lotte! Char-lotte!” until all you could feel was the pure veneration and love for my mother, that the people stored securely in their hearts.

I was on the brink of turning 17 years old, almost the same age my mother began her career as a teenage face model but the only difference between us was that she was the living definition of conventional beauty who was made for the camera, and I was nothing like her. Every morning was the same for me, each passing moment was spent in front of the mirror, scrutinizing every fine point of my body. I was what you could call skinny but I could never think of one day where I felt satisfied with myself.

The days flipped quicker than ever, one moment it was the last day of Junior year, and the next, the first day of Senior year. Never had I felt a glint of nervousness before school began but I had to prepare myself for a lot of strange and unusual events to happen this year.

“Lydia! Over here!” Fiona and a group of petite looking girls waved frantically, calling my name. “Heyy! we missed you so much!!” she panted as she hugged me tightly, squeezing the breath out of me. “I missed you too..” I said softly, feeling distracted by the little groups, standing closeby, whispering and eyeing me suspiciously. “How was summer?” Kayla asked eagerly, “Did you meet anyone at the Fashion Awards?! I heard so much about your mother--” Fiona started as I interrupted at the mention of my mother. “Can we talk about something else, I’m not really in the mood to talk about this right now.” Fiona’s face fell for a moment before she gave me a reassuring smirk.

I’d never really interacted with the rest of the group, and I guess one could call me that popular girl at school, my reputation had certainly never ceased to amaze people. It was a sad thing for me to do, keep up a facade, just like my mother, but the one thing people never saw was that, all glamorous looking things from the outside could only be gained by paying a hefty price...it was the basic law of nature.

I told Fiona everything there was to know about me, all the little things I was too afraid to say to my mother. Even though my life seemed to be as clear as glass to anyone who knew me... there was one thing, I could never say out loud, even to myself.

A week had passed by and many students at school often glanced at me in either complete awe or absolute disgust. I never fully understood why.

It was the second day of a fresh month and a new season partly began engulfing the skies and the nature around me, the air seemed thick and a bizarre feeling lulled me into a daze, as I looked out the window, quietly admiring the faint snow falling on the ground, wetting the dry orange and yellow leaves.

I found myself yanked away from my menial thoughts when a crumpled piece of paper with something shabbily scribbled on it, softly hit my shoulder.

“How does it feel being a wannabe?! At least your mother is an original, you’re ruining her reputation looking like that!”

Hastily looking around the room, I tried to spot the person who’d written this nasty remark but as soon as I looked up, everyone looked down at their hands and stifled their giggles and snickers between their teeth. I bit back my emotions till the end of school before storming into the girl’s washroom where I could collect my thoughts. ‘They don’t know you, stop letting this affect you this much! It doesn’t matter what you look like,’ I repeated over and over in my head.

“Is mama’s little girl crying?” a slimy, nasally voice mocked from behind me. I looked back without missing a beat, “What do you want from me, Cynthia?” I sneered aggressively. “Gained a couple of pounds over summer, haven’t we? I’m sure your mother doesn’t approve of it,” she taunted, her face breaking into a small smile as she raked her little eyes over me. “Just leave me alone!” I cried out, feeling a familiar pain in my stomach.

She scoffed at me before rolling her eyes and walking out, leaving me and my guilt alone in the washroom. ‘I told you not to eat so much over the summer! I knew it would reflect on your body sooner or later’ a small voice echoed in my head, yelling at me as I shut my eyes, unable to look at myself in the mirror. I was disgusted and repulsed at this feeling, I knew being skinny didn’t matter but what was the harm in losing a few pounds to feel better?

A month passed, then another and before I knew it, Christmas break began. The sun merely gleamed under the frosty sky and dark clouds prevented any rays of the mellow sun from reaching the ground, the air filled with a sweet scent of cinnamon and honey and every corner had reflected white and red, the cheer in the people was surreal but I didn’t enjoy it. Not one bit of it.

The day of Christmas arrived sooner than anticipated, and mother had planned a party along with another one of her grandeur feasts; setting up extravagant decorations and inviting hundreds of guests was her signature move every single year. I knew what this meant, I would be introduced to many of her contacts including modeling agencies all in the hopes for an early start on my modeling career.

"Merry Christmas, beautiful!" someone called out from behind me, as a soft blush crept up my face, I realized he wasn't looking at me, it was my mother. She giggled gingerly and went back to entertaining her guests as I stood in the corner, praying the evening gets over quickly.

"..hmm and who do we have here?" asked a weak, coarse voice. I found myself looking at an elderly gentleman, beside whom my mother stood in all her glory, smiling sweetly before saying, "Mr. Tampala, this is my daughter, Lydia Belshaw."

"Ravishing name, Ms. Lydia but..." he paused, running his eyes on my body before landing back on my eyes, "not quite suited for your face, now, is it?" he joked rather boorishly, "Oh, trust me, I've been in this business for 20 years now, I can tell if a girl is model material or not...but, you mustn't be disheartened at my comment, I'm saying this for your own good, darling" he continued as a pang of agony struck my chest, I bit back a scoff and looked at mother, who seemed to be distracted.

"Now then, I could try to work something out if you were able to lose a few pounds, get fitter maybe? You have such a beautiful face, just like your mother, why waste such potential on overeating and looking like that..?" he raved on and on until I excused myself and escaped into my room.

My mind was in a frenzy, all I could think of was that day in school, those snide and cruel remarks that were thrown at me. I couldn't help but wonder about that time during summer when I fainted after throwing up all my food for 2 days, it made me feel weak but my body looked skinnier and slimmer. I recall feeling pleased with myself, for once.

The aroma of the mouth-watering food, lingered around my nose, begging for a taste but, just as I sat down, ready to munch down the food, I thought of Mr. Tampala's words, his humiliating words..the moment I sat down to eat, several eyes raked up and down my body, judging my every move. I froze, my hands fumbling and my eyes fixated to the down, I could feel the tension in the air grow denser, the ringing in my ear amplifying by the second. Taking small, cautious bites, I excused myself in the middle, rushing to the bathroom and locking myself up in it. A sudden feeling of sullenness came over me, I clamped my mouth shut, pressing every ounce of food inside of me. The taunting guilt of mistakes I made abruptly broke loose before I felt myself gagging out all my emotions down the toilet. I clenched my hair tightly in my fist, screwing my eyes shut, a sharp burn ran down my throat.

Nothing felt more exhausting yet relieving, I let out a meek sigh, wiping the corners of my mouth and rubbing the thin drops of tears off my cheeks, I picked myself off the floor and stared at the mirror, silently resenting every decision I ever made in my life to get here. 'I needed to do this', I thought. 'I really needed to look better' I repeated in my head.

Every waking moment was a new surprise for me at school, some would continue to discredit me for being the daughter of the great Charlotte Belshaw when others would worship me, idolize me. My visits to the washroom became more often, I would stuff myself till it was hard to breathe and bolt to the toilet, retching up everything down the drain.

Every time I did so, I'd take a moment to look at my body, hoping it would shrink a little further in, making me look a little more graceful, a little more svelte than yesterday.

It was somewhere in the middle of February when a school counselor approached me. She had long brown hair, a pair of round glasses, and a small nose, "Hello, Lydia. How are we doing today?", "I'm good." I replied shortly, "So, I'm going to cut to the chase here, I've been noticing you lately, your constant visits to the girl's restroom after snack and lunch have been worrying me", she said making sure I knew what she was talking about. "I don't understand. Is it a crime to go to the washroom?" I asked, irritated.

"That's not what worries me, it's the fact that you've been looking pale, weak even. I don't know what's going on with you but--" she started, "No. You don't get to interfere, this is my life and I will take care of it however I please. You don't know me and have no right to worry or not worry for me. I don't have a problem, and if I do, I will ask for it", I said sternly, getting up from the seat and leaving Ms. Johnson behind as she collected herself.

The crispness of the air swirled around as a cool breeze played with my hair, I felt dizzy, everything around me, slowing down, swaying from one side to another, I blinked my eyes rapidly, the corners of my vision going black until I felt my body being eaten away into a void of darkness.

"It's normal!" a tiny voice echoed from within. "At least people will notice you now!" another began, "you're not special anymore, you're just another one of those wannabe girls who kill their bodies for social status--", My eyes flung open just as breathed in a loud gasp, letting my consciousness regain control over my body. "She's awake!" a blurred out face of my mother appeared before her frail arms tightly wrapped themselves around me.

A couple of hours were wasted in a series of questions that were supposed to determine the cause of my faintness even though I knew what caused it.

"Excuse me, I said have you been eating properly in these past few weeks?" the nurse asked repeatedly as a lie rolled off my tongue, "Yes, I've been eating well."

Things went quiet. Mom decided to have a word with the nurse as a small sense of panic came over my body, chills running up and down my limbs. Faint sobs and desperate consolations could be heard from behind the door, "Sh-she's really got it?" mother asked in hushed tones.

"I'm afraid so, but it can be treated if she cooperates," the nurse said softly, "I don't understand what made her--why would she ever do something like this to her body?" mother insisted as the nurse completed before excusing herself, "Maybe you should have a chat with her..it might help."

"Anorexia," Mother stated her face as blank and pale as her words. "Anorexia.." she repeated before letting a small scoff and rubbing her temples gently. "I am in pain, Lydia. Seeing you like this hurts me and frankly, I don't get why in the world you would do such a thing to harm--" she started, "I didn't do it to harm myself, mom," I defended.

"Why, then? To prove something to people? Li-like you're worthy enough or thin enough? Don't you try to hide it from me, Lydia? I saw what happened the other night when Mr. Tampala made a snarky little comment on you," she said, "You know what's been happening with me, and yet you choose to keep your mouth shut!" I exclaim, exasperated. "If I hand-hold you every step of the way, how do you expect yourself to grow?" she muttered, lowering her tone as her eyes softened. "What-what do you mean?" I asked, confused.

"Lydia, listen to me very carefully. Being a model from a young age was not easy for me, yes, I may have had the body and face for the camera but that didn't mean I was perfect. People joked about my body too. How skinny or bony I looked, I was treated like a stranger in my own house, with my own friends", she said, softly caressing my hand to comfort me.

"You don't understand, mom. It's not what people said about me, it's what they thought of you. I didn't want to ruin your reputation by looking like the real me... the ugly me. I wanted to look as graceful and elegant as you did. I know I sound like a complete wannabe but I couldn't afford to be treated like dirt with the people who I'm closest to."

"Being beautiful does not come from starving yourself. I don't care about how you look, Lydia... I care for you and I will do everything in my power to make you realize the fact that you do not have to protect my reputation or worry about what people think of your body" she began, the concern evident in her eyes, "You are the God of you. You control everything in your life and if anyone ever makes you feel less than a goddess, they don't deserve even a second of your time."

I was stunned. My eyes welling up as my mouth parted open slightly, I let out a small sigh before saying, "Thank you, mom."

Before leaving the hospital, I gave myself a good hard stare in the mirror, noticing all the little things; blemishes and marks, on my body. My arms gangling down my torso, my stomach completely sucked in, highlighting my ribs, my legs barely standing together, so rangy and bony.

I stood there for a while, understanding what the circumstances had pushed me to do. This mistake could be undone, yet it would be one of the few unforgettable moments in my life.

Around 6 months had passed, I found a small support group which I'd attend every week. Mom got more involved in my life, making sure she'd help me every time I'd make a mistake. Things were difficult, it felt impossible even.

I know how this must feel to you, that this story had a cliched and inane ending, but there are still millions of people out there who suffer from multiple eating disorders only and only because of being shamed for how they look. This is just a small, mere narrative that barely scratches the surface of the horrors people face every single day. I was fortunate to have a peaceful ending to my tale, not many as lucky as me, as every day is a battle for them. Treat yourself with kindness.

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Aberrance

"I-I don't understand." He stuttered, "What? What do you not understand?" I asked as he began fidgeting with his fingers yet again. "What does this mean? I can't come to work tomorrow?" He asked as the tapping of his foot seemed to grow louder. His eyes fixated elsewhere as I replied, "I'm afraid so...". He looked up at me for a mere second before asking, "W-why? What did I do?", there was a certain fear in his eyes as I tried my hardest to break it to him as gently as possible, "There have been frequent complaints about you...uh, complaints regarding yo-your general behavior around the office." I hesitated, contemplating if I should tell him.

"I don't understand, Steve. Could you specifically tell me what it is that I did for me to be fired?" He asked, his face as straight as ever. "Now, look here, Elliot, I'm going to be as direct as I can so try to understand. You see, you've been behaving rather strangely with your colleagues and must I add, your clients too. They've been telling me about how you don't smile back o-or how you seem to seep into your obsession of paper clips whenever someone approaches you and--" I began as slowly as I could.

"Yes, paper clips are my favorite thing in the world. They're the most fascinating things ever made in human history. Did you know that the invention of paper clips was never patented so it is still not known today who or when this genius invention was made and--?" He interrupted me

as the clicking of the pen in his hand grew faster, "Elliot, Elliot." I stopped him as I twisted my eyebrows in confusion as I ran my fingers down my temple, realizing that letting him go was going to be tricky.

"I am going to have to let you go. You cannot come to work anymore since your colleagues aren't comfortable with your social behavior and your clients, which are one of the *most important investors* of this company, are not happy with the way to engage with them. Do you understand, Elliot?" I asked, practically spelling it out for him.

I never really understood what was wrong with Elliot. He was a bizarre man, he was efficient in almost everything else but his assigned job. It was tedious getting any work done from him and often, I'd find him sitting by himself in a bathroom, eating lunch, or even fidgeting with paper clips. It was my mistake really, hiring a person like him in the first place but now that I think about it, I recall hiring him over a lousy cafeteria dare with James, the copier guy. Oh yes, Elliot was one of the new interns and James had dared me to hire him for laughs, and yet, I don't see anyone laughing now.

I sighed in frustration and paced about the room as the clicking of the pen and the tapping of the foot continued shamelessly. "Elliot, oh lord, read the damn room. I cannot explain more elaborately. I need you to leave, you are fired, for God's sake." I yelled as he tilted his head and said, "How can I read the room, Steve? That is physically impossible, how do you expect me to--" He started as my festering anger boiled over the edge before I asked him to get out, rather harshly. "Alright, sir." He said, softly and I caught a glimpse of a tear in his eye before he turned about and left. It had left me vexed, seeing him leave like that, whether it'd be the best guy in the office or someone like Elliot, it still hurt me to let them go... and sometimes, I wished I didn't.

I peeked out of my window, watching the sunset down as something peculiar struck my eye. Elliot's car was still there, parked right across the street like it was in the morning but that wasn't all... Elliot himself was sitting in the car, looking forlorn and beating up as the day seemed to transcend into a quiet evening. Out of nowhere, the silence was broken by the persistent loud honks of a car, before I realized that it was none other than Elliot's car. I squinted hard, gazing down at his car, trying to understand what in the world he was doing.

He sobbed into his shirt painfully and kept banging onto the steering wheel of his car repeatedly as the guilt I feared welcomed me. I couldn't take him back, my superiors wouldn't allow it but I needed to help him, seeing him harm himself this way made me drown in my guilt.

I rushed down to his car, letting my feelings cloud over my logic. He was an ex-employee and I could certainly not take him back but maybe, I could help in other ways...

"Elliot, hey, listen to me." I said as calmly as I could, "No. Go away." He said firmly as he rocked back and forth in the seat of his car as I stood outside his window, shivering in the cold. *That's*

when it hit me, my cousin's daughter used to do the same thing whenever she was upset. She would bang her head against a wall or pace around the room while fidgeting with her hands. She was an autistic child. I knew a thing or two about autism since my cousin briefed me about it when I had to babysit her daughter. Everything I knew about Elliot seemed to fall into place, his general understanding about social constructs like; small talk or understanding people's emotions before taking an action was weak, he was unable to concentrate for long periods, he lacks eye contact, and most of all, his desk was squeaky clean 365 a year. However, I'd never encountered an autistic adult. It all seemed rather overwhelming to me...

"Elliot, I am deeply sorry for firing you. I wish I could take you back but I can't since I would be going against the company policy." I said clearly. "Can I talk to you? Would you let me inside your car, just for a few minutes?" I pleaded as the guilt kept gnawing at what seemed to be the last ounce of self-respect left.

Reluctantly, he unlocked the car and let me in... he rocked back and forth in his car seat and tapped his foot over and over, he didn't look me in the eye even once. "Alright, I am sorry Elliot... for the way I treated you this afternoon. I turned a blind eye towards your behavior in these past few months--" I began as he cut me off, "How can someone turn a blind eye? That makes no sense at all."

"Right, I meant, I *ignored* your behavior and it was never my intention to upset you," I said, suddenly realizing I didn't know how to deal with this situation. "Yes, you did." He answered. "Elliot, ha-have you been to any therapist or mental health professional lately?" I asked gently, making sure that I didn't offend him in any way. The rocking of his body has slowed and the tapping of his foot was nearly over as he looked at me for a brief second, "No, I've never been to one, why do you ask?" he asked, intrigued by my intrusiveness. "Oh..um, I just wanted to know how you coped up in school or college, you know with everything?", I asked.

"I was a bright child, I would understand every subject except for drama and English. English required a lot of in-depth analysis of characters which were so complicated especially when you were expected to understand a character's thoughts or feelings in a passage. It's impossible, you know... trying to understand what a person thinks or feels. Similarly, with acting, how am I supposed to know what to say next solely based on random words given on a piece of paper with no prior context?" He inquired rather monotonously, as I looked away nodding my head.

"I'd like to help." I said as he tilted his head in confusion, "How can you help me when I won't be seeing you again since I can't come to the office anymore?" he asked with a certain genuineness. "Well, I-I guess we can meet up after office hours 2 times a week for a month," I said, hoping he'd agree. "What will you help me with?" Elliot asked again, "Well, I would like you to help me with certain aspects of your social life so that the next company who hires you will understand how lucky they are to have you as their employee." I said, the feeling of hope rising in me again.

I couldn't believe the fact that I was helping one of my ex-employees help cope up with his undiagnosed autism so that he could do better in his next job. I'm pretty sure that this was against some of the other company policies but, all I could think of was helping out Elliot. So, as promised, we decided to meet at 9:45 every Tuesday and Friday for one hour. I talk to him about all sorts of things there is to know when dealing with people in public. Now, I was no doctor but I had encouraged Elliot to go see one as soon as he could... I hoped that some medication would ease his episodes.

"Remember what we talked about last time, the importance of greeting people and smiling. Okay so, I'm going to ask you a few questions on this and I want you to answer them as much as you remember..." I began as he nodded gently, "When you see someone who smiles at you, what is the first thing you do?" I asked as he pressed his eyes shut tightly before answering, "You maintain eye contact and smile back." Elliot was good at remembering things that were important to him. "Why do we do this?" I asked, "Because it's a way of showing positivity and being kind, it is also a pleasant gesture to someone you don't know."

"Good." I answered, "Now, what is it called when someone begins talking about the weather or generic topics like the movies or their hobbies?" I asked again, "It's commonly known as 'small talk'", "Correct."

"Steve, I don't get it. How do you guess what the other person is thinking or feeling in a conversation?" He asked, his voice as straight as a metal rod. "Okay.. now, that's known as *empathy*. It's when you're able to infer or understand the other person's thoughts or emotions at a given time." I finished as he started, "But, that's exactly what I don't get, how can someone be empathetic? It doesn't make sense how a person can just guess someone's emotions or thoughts." He said. I felt helpless, Empathy was one of the things that couldn't be taught, it was someone a person would learn through enough social interactions but in this case, it couldn't.

"I visited a therapist. She is a nice lady, her name is Octavia and she always keeps her paper clips neatly stacked up in a blue drawer next to her, that's why I like her." Elliot muttered, "I guess that's good." I said, "Steve..." He said, still looking away, "Why are you helping me after you fired me?" He asked, rather bluntly. I gave him a long, hard look.

I didn't know why I wanted to help him. I truly didn't... but, I guess it had something to do with the fact that I was a slow learner all throughout my school and college and I was the punching bag of so many toxic people who picked on me without me realizing it. I guess it was something to do with dealing with the after-effects of the insecurities and all the pain that it's caused me. I guess I saw a part of me as Elliot and I guess, that's why.

"It's because I know how it feels when you're different than most people around you and, I know how it is when everything seems too much...when you feel lost sometimes. I want to help you because I know the kind of people you will meet out there and I want you to be prepared." I said as he furrowed his eyebrows, "Out where?" he asked, "Oh.. out there means um... in the real

world.” I said, “But, aren’t we already in the real world. Everything around us is real so how can--” he started as I spent the rest of the evening explaining to him the meaning of ‘out there.’

Our sessions went on for around two months before, Elliot was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD Level 2. Octavia, his therapist had prescribed him mild doses of Risperidone which seemed to help him out.

It was the day when he was diagnosed, when James, the copier guy saw me talking to Elliot outside the park close to the office and decided to open his mouth in front of my boss, Matthew. He very well knew that I could get fired for engaging with ex-employees yet, he decided to follow through with it.

“Steven. What is this I hear? You’ve been talking to a certain Elliot Wilson.” Matthew had called me into his office the following evening to talk about the same, “You are aware that you are not supposed to communicate with ex-employees, right?” he asked as I looked at the floor intently. “Yes, but it’s not what it looks like, I was talking to Elliot to finish the signing of some documents for his leave,” I said, confidence covering my face as my voice shook ever so gently.

“Alright, you know I believe you, Steven. You’re one of my best here and it would be a shame if I caught you lying to me.” He said as I chuckled along with him. I knew I couldn’t tell him the truth as I would not only lose my job but, he was one of those insensitive individuals who would pick on people’s weaknesses.

“Did you know that paper clips were invented by several people across the globe at approximately around the same time and that’s why they were the first few inventions that didn’t have a sole inventor and so--”, Elliot started, rather eagerly as he twisted and untwisted his fingers together. “Elliot, did Octavia talk to you about using replacement behavior during your meltdowns instead of hitting or banging things, today?” I cut in and asked. “Yes, Steve. She spoke to me about all kinds of things like, pacing around the room when I feel anxious or stressed or even making circles on a piece of paper would help.” He replied before going back to talking about paper clips.

“Elliot.” I said as he began tapping his foot, “Yes, Steve?” He said, “I am glad that you’ve found Octavia and I am happy for you and the fact that therapy is going well for you, however...” I hesitated, “However, it’s time for me to focus more on myself and my work now so, I’m afraid, I’m going to have to ask us to stop meeting every Tuesday and Friday and end our sessions. I hope that you will take care of yourself now. It has been wonderful getting to know you, Elliot.” I said, before getting up and walking away, not giving him a chance to complete.

As the next morning rose, the day proceeded to be nothing more than a normal day at work. The people gossiped, the meetings were long, the bosses yelled about and I made sure everything and everyone looked busy even when I knew that no one really cared about their jobs. It was the afternoon which was rather odd, a group of people gathered around one of the

cafeteria tables, and a series of 'oohs and ahhs' were exchanged while a few people snickered about.

"What is it? Why is everyone crowding around here?" one of them asked as my interest was too, peaked. "It's that paper clip weirdo. He left the boss a letter and they're trying to read the letter before the boss can... if you ask me, it's just another topic for gossip really. Did you know that the weirdo was recently fired for being weird?" They gossiped about and giggled around like little school girls.

That's when I entered to see what's all the fuss about.

"What's going on?" I asked, specifically using my commanding tone. Everyone backed away while making a clear pathway between me and the letter. "I said, what is this?" I repeated, making it clear that a workplace was not made for fun and games all the time. "Uh.. sir, it's a letter from um, paper clip gu-- I mean, Elliot Wilson, sir." He fumbled as the others scoffed.

"I don't know, sir. He's written a lot of loony things in that letter, apparently, he thanks you for everything and wishes you a good life or something when you just fired him. I guess not only is he a complete freak, but he's also delusional." Timmy, who was in the research and analysis team, commented snidely.

"Uh..it's Timmy, right?" I asked mockingly as he nodded.

"Did I ask for your opinion because quite frankly I don't know what you're doing talking back to the boss? Besides, your research skills are pretty weak for being in the research and analysis sector since you don't know the first thing about Elliot Wilson and what he goes through on an everyday basis. Who in the world are *you*, reading your boss' letter and making such derogatory comments about one of your ex-colleagues while simultaneously being insensitive to a whole community and *embarrassing* yourself in front of your team and your boss?" I said, panting slightly as his eyes widened and many people covered their mouths in disbelief.

"uh-I- but--I-uh" he stuttered as people began laughing and all eyes turned to me. I looked away, shutting my eyes, and before deciding to do something I'd never dream of before. Walking back a few steps, I stood in front of the cafeteria as everyone waited for me to say something marvelous... so, I did.

"Making fun of people with a disability is one of the cheapest and lowest things that you can do. For all the people who do not know or were not previously aware of it, let me make it clear... Elliot Wilson who was an employee here has recently been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Level 2. How do I know that? It's because I have been helping him out with his struggles. I urged him to visit a professional therapist so that he can cope up better with it. Unfortunately, Autism is an incurable disorder, so it's something that you have to deal with daily..." I paused as a few gasps were passed about in the crowd.

“Yes, I know that it's against the company policy to visit an ex-employee, and fairly, I'm no one to talk about this issue. I admit I have been contemptible and filthy and made fun of people like Elliot in this very office before and I know how unfair and wrong it is for me to say this and blame certain people in this office but, I've realized something over the past few weeks, I once may have been a low and disgusting person but now, I know that if you don't have something supportive to say, *then don't say it* simply because, we don't know what is going on in that person's life. No one ever thinks about what it's like to be the other person, no one cares anymore and that's what bothers me. Just the mere fact that everything and everyone who is different is either considered to be dangerous or hilarious, there's no middle ground, no boundaries.” I finished as many looked away, thinking hard over my words.

“And that's the very reason, I now, announce my resignation from this company. I do not wish to be a part of a group, of a company that has no limits, no kind of a shame, or even a policy that protects the rights of disabled individuals. I quit.” I ended, rather dramatically before walking back into my office and beginning to pack things.

It had been a few months, I'd found a new job which was different from any other job I'd had. I was working in an NGO that supported and protected the rights of differently-abled individuals and spread awareness about the same. After those few sessions with Elliot, I knew, somewhere deep down that this is what the world needed to see more of, a community on its feet but this could only be possible with the constant help of people and their voices.

We need to stop the laughs and the jokes and listen for a second. We need to stop the whines and the complaints and be grateful for a second. We need to stop the hate and give respect to every individual of every kind out there, for just a second.

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Dolls

He ran his pale, bony fingers through his hair as he snickered turning around in his chair. “Oh, please, why are you wasting your time and energy when you could actually be doing real work?” He said mockingly, trying to provoke me, push me over the edge.

“I *am* working. This is my job and it's hardly fair that I get paid less than what promise--” I started, and anger fueling up my words as I felt my patience fester, “Oh dearie, there you go *again* with your complaints, with your ‘right and wrong’ rubbish! I'll tell you what's fair and unfair, okay... for starters, don't talk when it's not required.” He sneered, rolling his eyes as I felt my fist

clench into a tight ball. “*Understand?*” he asked, looking directly at me as I hesitantly nodded and passed him a rather forced smile. “Good, now be a darling and get me a cup of coffee.” He muttered slyly as I gritted my teeth and followed his orders.

It was a colorless life if you were a newly recruited HR head as a *woman*, but you had it worse when you had just been demoted as an assistant to one of your juniors simply because your superiors felt *threatened* if you’d do too well at your job. That kind of stuff still happened and no matter how much the world progressed further, developing new kinds of technologies and bringing new ideologies into society, I was convinced that some things would remain the same, oppression of the female gender being *one* of them.

It was a mere Tuesday afternoon and I had just finished filing a few documents for Mr. Cohen, once known as only Benjamin to me when I noticed Carol and Ruth whispering things by the water cooler, they looked rather worried and kept glancing over to Mr. Cohen’s office. “...yes, but is it worth *losing* our jobs?” I overheard as I walked over to them asking what had happened. “What’s going on?” I asked gently as they pulled me in closer and told me to act natural, it seemed funny, really... “Okay, okay. Now, will someone tell me what’s happening?” I pushed further.

“There’s been talk a-about reducing all the women’s salaries if they don’t go home with Mr. Johnson...” Ruth said, her breath trembling as I shook my head in disbelief. “And if we don’t..?” I asked, wearily, already knowing the answer. “If you don’t then he’d fire you and give you a bad recommendation letter.” She said as I noticed Carol had been quiet since the start, she hadn’t moved a muscle on her face.

“Carol, are you alright?” I asked as she looked back at me gently, “Olivia, if you don’t listen to these men, they could potentially destroy our lives. Now, I don’t know about you but I have a son at home and it’s been a while since Pete has been home, I know I need the money and I cannot afford for it to be reduced.” She said, determined. A feeling of utter disgust came over me, I stepped back and said, “I don’t understa-stand,- what is wrong with you people? I get that you have a family to look after b-but doing *this*...have you no self-respect?”, they stared at me in awe, somewhere fighting inside, hoping they’d gain the courage too.

“I can’t, Olivia. I need the money for his school fee--” she began, her tone desperate as her eyes averted my gaze. “I know... I just wish there was another way,” I muttered as the day retreated back to its original self and all I could think of was Mr. Johnson.

He was the head of this department, always wore a pressed black suit with too much gel in his blonde hair with polished, tip-top shoes, clicking and clacking every time he passed by, flagrantly staring at some poor woman. There was a certain charm about Mr. Johnson yet, that seemed to be overpowered by his indecent manners and most of all his disrespect for women. Now, I wasn’t a feminist but, I knew that any woman must be treated and given respect regardless of her age, ethnicity, race, or appearance.

"Olivia, in my office now!" Mr. Cohen yelled as I grunted and went in, "Yes...sir?" I said, deliberately pausing before saying 'sir', "My coffee doesn't have enough cream in it and where are the bagels I ordered, it's been over 20 minutes!" He screamed as I flinched quite visibly. He was in a pretty bad mood today which was unlike him. "Sorry, sir. I'll get those b-" I said quickly not before being cut off by a loud bang on the table. "Damn it, Olivia! Your sorry doesn't mean anything!" he yelled as I swiftly left his office, baffled.

That's when I saw Carol and Ruth standing outside the ladies' restroom, looking rather concerned. "What happened?" I asked as they continued knocking profusely, "Marie, open up before Mr. Cohen notices!" Carol whispered sharply as I shook my head, "Did something happen?" I asked, suddenly worried too. "Mr. Cohen--he tried something with her this morning by her desk, but she ended up pushing him away." Ruth explained to me in hushed tones, "... Ever since she's been locked in," Ruth completed as I felt my teeth grind together and a familiar feeling of anger took over me. It all made sense now, the reason he was frustrated this morning.

I had decided to meet with the board of directors regarding all the demeaning and unjust actions that had happened over the past few months with the women but, the one thing I did not anticipate was the lack of support I hoped to get from Ruth, Carol, and Marie.

"Good afternoon respected chairpersons..." I began as my hands fidgeted with my hair and my fingers shook slightly. Clearing my throat, I looked over across the lengthy table where every occupied seat sat a man, I noticed that I was suddenly nervous. "My name is Olivia Sanders and I'm here to address the unfair treatment of women in my department along with a case of possible sexual assault." I started as they started whispering amongst themselves, passing me queer looks. "Over the course of these few months, Benjamin Cohen and Peter Johnson have not only been demeaning women by threatening to reduce their salaries if the--" I started as one of them chuckled in an uncivil manner as I looked at him sharply, "E-excuse me, is there something that you'd like to say...sir?" I said as he cleared his throat. "Sanders, was it?" he asked, rudely as I forcefully nodded, "You come in to meet with some of the most important members of the board in this company to discuss a petty issue involving Mr. Peter Johnson and Benjamin Cohen who might I remind you, are a few of the best employees this year?" He said, mocking me as I looked away, a pained expression covering my face.

"With all due respect sir, this issue is *not* petty, Mr. Cohen's and Mr. Johnson's performances at their jobs may be spectacular but that has *nothing* to do with the kind of people they are and the way they treat other employees at a workplace." I finished, raising my voice to emphasize my point further. One of the other board members looked away, disinterested as a piece of my hope chipped away.

"What is it you *want*, Sanders?" he asked as I tilted my head in confusion, "A promotion? More money? A bigger desk?" he stated his tone was utterly bored, as the whole table broke out into laughter. "Sir--" I began as he interrupted again, "Now, I want you to be a nice young woman and *drop* this topic. Go finish filing papers or whatever it is you do, we have much more

important tasks at hand.” He shooed me off as I slammed the door on my way out. It was a hopeless case, thousands of thoughts crossed my mind in that singular second and there was a part of me that had convinced itself to quit and just leave this company.

“Olivia! What did the board members say? They are going to get involved, right?” Ruth asked, eagerly waiting for my reply as I looked down at my feet and returned to my desk, “No one is going to do anything. I guess it’s true then, being a working woman in a large firm means that you’re invisible.” I muttered as a disheartened look came over her. “I tried, I’m sorry..” I said, as my shoulders visibly slumped.

Weeks had passed by since the meeting with the board members, Mr. Johnson continued to uphold his disgusting reputation of shameless gawking and flocking at women and Mr. Cohen didn’t seem to quit his inappropriate flirting and several attempts to get other female employees to go home with him. I, on the observer’s end, remained quiet.

While my mind urged me to leave this awful company which does give any attention to female employees for their genuine concerns and problems, a part of my mind told me something entirely different if I were to leave this company and go, not only would receive an abhorrent recommendation letter but, no one would be up to stand up to bullies like Mr. Cohen if I’m gone, someone needed to get this issue out in the open. As the brewing conflict in my head continued, I wondered about the pressures and difficulties a person like Carol had to endure, with a child waiting for you alone and with no external support from family members let alone a husband... it must be maddening not being paid enough. Therefore, for the sake of women like Carol, I decided to stay and fight for what we deserved.

It had been a few days since Mr. Johnson had harassed another woman and it made me question whether meeting the board members had finally worked. Maybe Mr. Johnson was shifted to another department or maybe--

“Sanders, didn’t think you’d get rid of me this easily, eh?” someone completed my thoughts as I turned around only to find myself facing Peter Johnson with a scowl on his face, chuckling rather sarcastically. “I heard all about your little meeting with the board... “Did you really think one tiny meeting was going to change anything? That I was going to quit?” He said, as he inched closer to my desk, I shifted uncomfortably.

“Now, listen here..” he dropped his voice to a dangerously low volume, “This is *my* office, I can do whatever I want, whenever I like and *you*...” he chuckled, “you are practically nobody compared to me and if I want, I can fire you this instant.” He said, glowering down at me as my eyes widened at his threat. “I--you--this is...” I trailed off, stuttering as if words had been stolen away from my mouth, just as he scoffed before slyly retreating back into his cabin.

I was at a crossroad, one way pointed towards remeeting with the board members and trying my luck, the other said something entirely different, the other way urged me to use this situation

to advantage which could either result in a complete disaster or a future which ensures safety and equality for all women.

“What happened?” asked Ruth as I motioned her to meet me near the water cooler, “I have a plan which could help stop this situation... it could stop Cohen and Johnson from harassing women,” I said, as I heard her gasp slightly.

We decided to use the odds to our favor, since Cohen and Johnson were desperate to take women back to their apartment, Ruth and I decided to say yes. It seemed as though this plan had a real shot for the betterment of the women’s futures. It was a Friday evening, the clock ticked leisurely as I knocked on Mr. Cohen’s door, wary of what may happen next.

“What is it, Olivia?” he asked, boredom dripping his tone, “Mr. Cohen...I was just wondering if you were free this evening, I would like to discuss a few important matters regarding the new interns, say...would you be interested in dinner?” I asked, as he sharply lifted his gaze at the mention of ‘dinner.’ “Well, if the matter is so important, it would be rude to refuse dinner...” he said, as a smug smirk danced on his face.

“Alright, sir,” I said and simply left. Ruth and I discussed and went over this plan again and again before we seemed to have had memorized it, “This will work, yes?” Ruth said, nervously, “because if it doesn’t then we may not jobs and no one wi--” she started as I cut in, “It will work. It *has* to work otherwise we’re as good as dead to this and any other future companies that have a chance to hire us.” I said, keeping my trust high.

The time melted away into a placid evening as I was suddenly unsure of everything. “So, Olivia, what urgent matter is it that you want to....discuss?” he started, purposely pausing to intimidate me, “Uh...yes, sir. Many of the interns have questions concern--” I started not before he juttet in, “Tell me something, do you ever wonder about your old position in this office?” he asked, as I cautiously looked up and down him, “...sure, I do.” I answered, not breaking eye contact.

“You know...” he started as he lowered his gaze down as said, “you can still have that position if you want.” I looked at him in shock, not believing his offer, “but, you’ll have to come home with me. The position is yours if you do this one tiny thing... it’s that easy.” He said, his voice raspy as a repulsing taste welcomed my mouth. I clamped my fist shut as tightly as I could and exhaled softly.

“Is that so, sir?” I played innocent, “I’m sure there are *other ways* to get back my position back, is there not?” I said as he looked away for a second. “Let me put it this way, Olivia...either you do as I say or you say goodbye to your current job too and to be fair, who’s going to take you in if your recommendation letter is full of negative remarks..?” He pouted as I sneered internally.

The rest of the evening was spent in agony, I played naively and not only let him make demeaning comments and remarks about the women at the office but also, rank them based on

their appearance. It was the sheer confidence I had in the plan that held me together that night and soon enough, it would all be over.

As soon as the evening ended, an unexpected phone call from my mother required my presence at the hospital and Mr. Cohen had no option but to let me go and so, hurriedly I left. It felt relieving staying far away from Cohen. Though this evening was nothing less than torture for me, it would guarantee a more painless future for the ones who decide to join the company.

The one thing I didn't mention was that I had no emergency, that phone call was really Ruth pretending to be my mother to get me away from Cohen with all the required evidence recorded on my phone of Mr. Cohen and his disgusting talk about women in the department. You see, while he was too busy rambling about, he did not notice the fact that I was holding my phone underneath the table throughout. It contained enough evidence for him to get fired.

"You think this will work..?" Ruth asked again, "I guess we'll find out tomorrow." I said as a small smile appeared on my face. Tomorrow was performance evaluation day where all members of the board and department heads gather to discuss every individual's performance, usually, the ones who have improved performance are to go first and since, Mr. Cohen and Mr. Johnson were professionally well-polished, they will be the ones to go first.

As the meeting began, Ruth and I made sure to connect to the meeting room's system audio long before anyone had the chance so, at the right moment, we were to play Cohen's recording in front of everyone. This would not only provide enough evidence to support my previously failed argument about the unfair treatment of women but would also give us a chance to humiliate Mr. Benjamin Cohen and Peter Johnson in front of everyone. It wasn't my primary intention yet, I believed that people like them needed to feel what women feel every day they're harassed.

Just as the people were about to disperse into the break, we decided to play the recording. *"You can still have that position if you want but, you'll have to come home with me. Let me put it this way, Olivia...either you do as I say or you say goodbye to your current job too and to be fair, who's going to take you in if your recommendation letter is full of negative remarks..?"* It continued playing as Mr. Cohen sank into his seat, mouth parted open as he looked around the room to see the reaction of the board members.

"Take no offense Olivia but you see since I have made certain commitments to Peter, I have to win, now. You see..he and I made a silly one-time bet about how many women we can get together with and that's the reason why you see him frolicking around with a different woman every now and then, he thinks he can beat me! Say... won't you help out your poor little boss and pay me a visit home?" the recording finished as Ruth and I decided to walk into the meeting only to greet either shocked or appalled faces.

“My name is Olivia Sanders as some of you may already know and I’m the one who took this recording...I am both, ashamed and I’m not ashamed, standing here in front of you all. I am ashamed that I had to take such *vile* and repugnant audio of a man speak such low and cheap things about the employees in our department but, I am not ashamed to present it out in the open, in front of everyone.” I completed as Ruth picked up from there.

“We have gone through hell *every day*, there is a certain fear that comes along when you enter the office and see someone who sees you as nothing but an object to play with. We work hard, we earn and for what..? We go home to empty faces, our children and our husbands who don’t know and frankly, don’t understand the kind of pressure we carry with us. This is not a sob story and neither is it a cry for attention, it is the plain truth that somewhere, people, men are not ready to let go of the fact that women are just as deserving as men. That fact has been proven in many other fields. We are nothing but dolls to you but we will not be treated like one.” She completed as I stepped up again, “We have concrete evidence against Mr. Cohen and Mr. Johnson and we demand justice. Either this or we will have to go to the press.” I said as nervous looks were passed around in the room.

“Well...what is it you want?” one of the members asked, “Fairness. From this instant, we want all the women who were deserving of their jobs who were demoted to be promoted back and we want you to identify all the people who have demeaned women based on their appearance or have tried assault or any inappropriate movement or action to be either removed or demoted, but most of all, we want you to enforce company policy against anyone who tries to threaten someone into going home with them with their job. ” I said, confident in my answer as members nodded their heads and ensured everything would be taken care of.

So, they did. I was reoffered in my old position and so were Ruth and Carol. Mr. Johnson and Cohen were asked to leave immediately and their grotesque actions were imprinted on their fresh recommendation letters.

By the end of it all, I came to understand and realize the importance of one crucial thing and was fighting for what is rightfully yours. If one refuses to open up about their experiences and stories, one would never be able to achieve equality and total independence. I know that everyone has a different story but no matter how hard it is, staying silent in cases such as this, is never the answer. So, *don’t* let the fear of the outcome overpower the truth of the situation.

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I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

