

## I have needs

We'd pulled off Christmas rather nicely; my father, my brother and my nephew not being there. Ma left nostalgia behind her with the morning and put up her usual more-than-brave-face for the occasion. Of course there was a very convincing incentive to do so. No doubt sharing silent, strategic motives, we'd agreed on inviting a guest.

The guest beautifully fulfilled her unsuspected objective of decoy – for emotions carefully guarded so as to keep things from becoming unbearable – helping us on Christmas day to get the job done yet again. With an inner sigh of relief I'd never admit to, I of course conveniently thought I could safely let skeletons lie once more.

I carried on my merry life: calling every day, visiting as frequently as my schedule allowed, buying her fortitude. Then I was at my cousin's one day, a social luxury I rarely permitted myself. Aware through the family grapevine of my whereabouts, my aunt called, requesting that I check on her sister right away. Ma answered mid-ring, like I do when working, to – if not halt – at least silence the interruption. Silence was now also what followed.

“Ma?”

Twice. No reaction.

*Something stirs between my heart and my stomach area  
and seeps into my voice. My cousin looks up.*

“Ma, is everything okay?”

Then..

“Hi, honey. Is everything okay?”

*Mechanical. Tired. Forced.*

I can now picture her on my cousin's living room wall  
they use to project movies on:

*Side view of her in front of the television,  
close enough for the low volume that won't disturb the neighbors,  
in her secondhand reclining armchair that's  
beginning to unravel at the edges.*

*The TV is turned off.*

*Her face hidden by the old-fashioned side head rest,*

*I sense hung shoulders and a blank stare.*

*She hoists herself out of the chair, her phone-hand falls to her side.*

“Ma, what are you doing?”

*She measuredly heads for her bedroom with those drooping shoulders, face creased into an ancient, sunken wornness that I’ve never seen there before.*

“Ma!”

*Sits on the bed, shakes off her slippers, with one hand rearranges the pillows – piled high to ward against meniere-induced vertigo attacks – phone limp in the other. Then she just sits there like an appendage of the bed.*

“Ma, please, what’s going on?”

*The thing that stirred just over my stomach before is now definitely scorching a hole into it. My cousin has long since walked up to me. Thinking what to say next, I open my mouth.*

*Then Ma raises the phone like it’s costing her a million years. Has me on pins and needles for a century-equating moment. Squeezes the device’s handle tightly, as if trying to steady herself by the grace of its grip.*

*Then she hurls every syllable, wrought from her depths:*

“I.. have.. **needs!**”

*Her last word – snarled at me from between her teeth – still ringing in the ether, she drops the phone on the comforter, falls back into the pillows and closes her eyes to the world.*

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