

Fingerprints

By Gyanepsaa Singh

The auto-rickshaw stops at the alley's entrance. Navigating the winding path would take an impossible amount of vehicular acrobatics on even the best of days, having to squeeze past the cows lounging luxuriously in the centre of the road and dodge the speeding motorbikes of grinning children definitely not old enough to own a driving license - much less in the middle of monsoon with the rain filling up the potholes and turning the dirt path into sludge. I don't mind - walking the last five minutes of the way back home means a chance to splash in the muddy puddles covering the road when Didi glances away. More importantly, it means that a few minutes into our walk, Didi will grab my hand and duck into the stationery store on the corner.

This is a well-established ritual of ours.

"*Bhaiya*, one ball-point pen," Didi always says, placing the ten-rupee note from the rickshaw driver on the grimy counter.

"What about me?", I must then ask, painting my most innocent expression on my face.

Didi puts on a disapproving frown for a cursory two seconds. I jut my lip out a bit more. A few moments and she gives in, heaving a sigh for appearances' sake and turning back to the shopkeeper.

"And a chocolate with the change."

As we leave the shop, Didi turns to me. She places the chocolate in my hand with a conspirational smile, carefully wrapping my fingers around the crinkly wrapper.

"Don't tell Papa, *na*?"

I grin back. Of course I won't.

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By the time we reach home, the chocolate and the ball-point pen both disappear. The former leaves behind no trace but the faint scent of chocolate on sticky fingers. I am no amateur; every last hint of chocolate is licked clean.

But Didi - she leaves blue fingerprints everywhere. She says it's natural, that if gardeners have green thumbs, then authors should get to have blue ones as well. I think she might just be messy. But whatever the reason, little trails of blue follow her around the house, tiptoeing across the rusty door handles and whispering over the yellowed plastic of the light switches. One even sneaks across the lid of the mango pickle jar, audacious in a way that Didi herself wouldn't dare to be. If her hair wasn't so dark, I am convinced that smudges of blue would line it as well, nestling into her neatly oiled braids.

The fingerprints I treasure the most, though, are the intentional ones. After dinner, when Didi and I can sneak away into our room, we huddle under a blanket, tucked safely in the little space between our *charpai* and the rickety cooler with a fickle temperament. Didi brings out her notebook and the week's ball-point pen - and for the rest of the evening, the only sounds I can hear are the scritch-scratch of the nib on paper and Didi's slow, halting voice transporting me to whatever imaginary realm she has dreamed up today.

When I start to yawn and my eyelids begin to droop, Didi pinches my cheek and drags me gently onto the *charpai*. I go to bed with blue fingerprints on my cheek and a smile on my face.

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Didi's notebook fills up with words and worlds until even the margins are packed to bursting.

We go to the stationery shop together after school, where the *bhaiya* manning the counter immediately starts reaching for the scratched up tin housing cheap plastic ball-point pens before we correct him.

We don't have enough money left to buy a chocolate today, but Didi's eyes are bright and her smile contagious as she rocks back and forth in excitement, so I don't really mind.

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That evening, Didi slowly and painstakingly inscribes her name in shaky letters on the front cover of her notebook.

She weaves a story about how someday, she will grow wings, huge, pretty ones like a butterfly, and she'll be able to fly anywhere and do anything and nobody could stop her. She grabs my hands with her own, ink-stained ones and promises me that she'll take me with her. And for those few hours, it doesn't matter that we're sitting huddled together, hidden underneath a hot, scratchy blanket, that we have to keep our voices low and laughter quiet, that the door must stay closed - because instead, we're flying over the city and bouncing on clouds in the cool night air.

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The door to our room is locked.

I was hanging out the clothes to dry, lugging the bucket underneath my arm and standing on my tiptoes to clumsily toss the wet fabric onto the clothesline. And when I walked back into the house, I found the door locked.

"*Didi?*" I call.

No reply. That doesn't mean much, sometimes it takes a few tries for Didi to realise that I'm speaking.

I try again. And again.

Didi yanks open the door.

"What do you want?"

She seems upset.

"It's evening, which means stories! I-"

"No. Go away."

I blink.

"But-"

"No. No, no, no."

I don't understand - we never miss storytime.

"But Didi, you-"

"I said go away!" she screams, rocking back on her heels with her eyes squeezed shut. "Go away, go away, go away!"

My *did*i has never truly yelled at me before - not like this. I didn't even do anything wrong. My eyes burn and my face feels hot; I slash away my tears and shout back.

"Fine, retard, it's not like I want to hear your stupid stories anyway!"

Retard. I'm not sure what that means, but I heard Papa yell it once, so I guess it must be bad. Didi's hands press even tighter on the sides of her head, and I feel a sense of vicious pride. I hope that the ink on her fingertips permanently stains her ears a bright blue, one that would make everyone laugh at her. It would serve her right.

I slip out of the house, climbing onto the railing and ignoring the sounds coming from inside the house.

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In the morning, I walk into the dining room to see a pile of notebooks dumped on the floor, their pages ripped and crumpled. Something cold and heavy settles in my gut.

Papa sits at the table. The newspaper is spread out in front of him and smoke steams out of his mouth as he tips his *hookah* pipe back.

Didi once told me how in ancient times, people used smoke signals to warn others of danger.

Papa flips a page. I walk back out of the room.

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Didi gets quieter. Her fingerprints get fainter.

Soon, we stop having our story nights.

I don't care. I'm older now, more mature. I don't have time to listen to silly tales about talking animals and samosa shops in the sky; kids' stories don't interest me anymore.

I don't know why Didi insists on acting so childish, but I'm growing up even if she doesn't want to.

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(I don't go to our little hiding place sometimes, don't curl up in the corner with a blanket and pretend that Didi is sitting there with me, and most certainly don't gently trace the blue fingerprints lining the wall like constellations, thinking of Didi's stories.)

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I leave.

A friend has offered to let me stay over for a while, and then - and then I'll figure it out. I whisper this to myself as I pack a bag in the middle of the night, stuffing in the money that I've been stowing away for months.

I don't care, I don't care as long as it's away from here - I'm done jumping at every sound, done second-guessing my every word, done tiptoeing and whispering and carefully trying not to exist. It all spills out, years of fear and anger and terror coming to a boil, and I run.

I don't tell Didi.

I'm never going back.

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The winding alleyways haven't changed much - there are still cows on the road, still reckless children with motorbikes, still endless potholes.

The stationery store is gone, though.

I have to duck my head to avoid hitting the doorframe as I enter the house. Everything is smaller than I remember - the *charpai* Didi and I slept on, the *hookah* pipe, the wooden walking stick hung up on the wall. Father.

We watch each other in silence. I take in the saggy wrinkles folding his dark skin, the patchy grey lacing his hair and beard, and the belly straining at his stained undershirt and spilling out over his trousers.

"So you came back."

I turn away without answering, walking further into my old room - our old room.

Didi's fingerprints are small too, and when I brush my fingertip against one it clings to me, the paint flaking off the wall.

I stare at the crumbling white powder that was shed onto the floor. A wave of emotions bubbles up within me, stinging at my eyes.

It isn't fair. He shouldn't get to be here - not when she isn't.

Didi's stories rise up in my mind, forgotten fragments piecing together from the cobwebbed depths of my memory. The good guy always won in those stories, an innocent certainty that the world would always right itself shining through. She deserved a better world than this, a better world than all of us.

I drop to my knees on the dusty floor with a muffled thump, and even after so many years, my eyes gravitate immediately to the faint smudges.

It isn't fair.

Didi leaves blue fingerprints everywhere - but these ones are red.