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The washerboy

A myna cries as Nita peers from the peeper on the door, waiting for the boy to come.

A few minutes before:

Her husband was polishing his shoes and tying its lace into butterflies. He rises from the chair, staring at her and then the shoes before walking towards the kitchen. She leans against the door with her eyes closed, listening: the thump from the shoes, the faucet, the gurgle and then the thump again. She doesn't realize the thump becoming a song in her head, a hand over her fingers and a soft breath of air plugging at the ears. Her eyes open and catch the shoe, an animal before but now just her face in a circus mirror. She looks up and it's her husband, staring.

"I've to go," he says, working at the latch.

She nods.

"You'll be okay."

She nods again.

"Is that for him?" he asks, pointing at a pile of clothes.

She opens the door and goes to call for the elevator, barefoot. He follows her and watches her press the button.

"Was that for him?"

She pokes at the button again. He adjusts his tie and plays with the clasps on the cufflinks. Nita closes her eyes again and hums. He looks up at the lights on the ceiling.

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"They seem dim..." he mumbles, his voice an echo from a well. He can hear a myna cry, probably from the nursery on their balcony. Nita had always wanted that. "Clean air for our son," she said, watching Aryan play near the birdwatcher. She took such good care of both that he jokingly called the plants their second child.

Suddenly, the corridor bursts with a crack. Still humming, Nita opens her eyes and looks at her husband. Together, they look to the sound.

Neighbors. A boy and his cocker spaniel trot towards out of the door, the mother not far behind. The mother sees them and smiles, her hand slipping over the boy's shoulder.

"Good morning," the mother says. He nods at the mother while Nita hums louder, her eyes on the boy. The boy looks at Nita and smiles. Nita's finger is now tapping a hole through the elevator button.

The dog yelps when the indicator pings. It tugs the boy into the elevator. Nita watches her husband go in last, his fingers brushing her arm.

"Don't forget your pills. I'll call you later, after the meeting. I'll be home early. And you know, he's not coming..." his voice disappearing as the doors slide back. Nita touches her arm with her finger. She knows he will call her; he knows she won't talk.

A myna cries as Nita peers from the peeper on the door, waiting for the boy to come.

The week before:

She's in the nursery, staring at the plants when the doorbell rings scaring the myna away. She doesn't move. The bell rings again. She sighs and walks to the living room. She opens the door and sees a boy.

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"Any clothes to be washed?" the boy asks.

She just stares at him.

"Any clothes to be washed?" he asks again.

She nods.

"Wait," she says. Nita goes into her son's room and takes out a yellow t-shirt. She unfolds it, searching for something. Then, she folds it again and goes to the living room.

"Here," she says.

"Just one?"

"It's for you."

Now the boy stares at her. She puts the shirt in his hand and closes the door. She watches him through the peeper: he simply looks at the shirt, and after a long time, smiles. He's at the doorbell again but she doesn't open.

The next day, she hands him another t-shirt and watches him through the peeper.

On the third day, she hands him a trouser and a jacket along with the t-shirt. Today, she doesn't close the door. She watches him put the clothes into a plastic bag. He thanks her and she smiles at him, almost reaching out to ruffle his hair when she catches the neighbor watching her.

On the fourth day, she gives him a bag with coloring pencils and some books. He takes the pencils but returns the books. "I can't read," he says. She gives him the books anyway.

On the fifth day, he wears the yellow t-shirt. She takes a photograph and shows him the nursery. That evening, she tells her husband about the boy and shows him the photograph.

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The next day, her husband stays back and watches Nita talking to the boy, giving him a pair of shoes. Later, he talks to the neighbor before making the phone call.

Now:

The myna flies away as Nita peers from the peeper on the door, waiting for the boy to come.