

The Corners Fade

The world unfolds, slow as oil, too dense to see through. It expands from the core of me, from the womb, every morning, always taking its time.

Here I come.

My eyes open, just enough to let the light in, and I hear the swish of a curtain to one side. My mind is unhurried, deliberately holding back, to protect. But as the minutes pass, as comprehension fazes in, I remember. There was the crack as my neck broke, the dullness of snow, not cold but enveloping. Then unrelenting darkness until that very first awakening, and the alarming sensation of floating in liquid.

Each new day brings flashes of memory, fresh blows, until reality dawns. This is not some dull-ache passing hangover, payment for a good time. This is the rest of my life.

Hours merge into days and nights, no horizon or ground to form an anchor. I'm heavy and full of nothing. The weight of emptiness has set in.

Here's a muffled voice, accompanied by a blurred white image.

Did we have a nice sleep, Mina? Let's get our face wiped. There.

I'm a grown woman. I have an art studio, stretched canvas, an extensive collection of pastels. Look closely, now, and you'll see the real me in here, all knotted up. I've got plenty of strong opinions, and I create pictures with fierce colour and depth.

Oh dear, we've made a mess of the bed again. Let's get cleaned up, shall we, before your visitors come.

They'll be coming to sit, to be present for me. My sister will be anxious, my mother will attempt to project feelings of optimism, and Dad will have a solemn air about him. He keeps quiet, weeping from the inside, which is the worst kind of grief.

I try to protest, making a deep, guttural noise that reverberates out in waves. I can see the breakers inside my eyelids, orange and circular.

I know; it's not right. We don't like being pushed and pulled around, do we?

Here comes the spoon carrying a lukewarm substance to my mouth. Soup or oatmeal or something else mashed. There is no taste, the sensation of cold metal against my tongue the only pleasant thing. I can almost see the whole of it, the long handle with a hand holding one end. Not mine. Another few mouthfuls until my shrunken belly is full, and then I grunt for her to stop.

A mesh of colours appears in front of me, no sharp edges, an impression. I think of Monet and wonder if I'll ever see one of his paintings again, or if I'll have to be content with this imposter. Perhaps the vivid pink is a sari. I imagine it flowing across my mother's body, soft and elegant. If only I could feel its sheen across my skin. Her voice is wavering.

Hello, Mina. I know you can hear me, Baytee. It's your sister's birthday, darling girl. We wish you could come with us to dinner. If you could talk, I know you would say happy birthday to her.

Then it must be spring already, the next season, for Mindi's birthday is March sixteenth. My parents have always grumbled about the Canadian winter, but I love the freedom of the mountains, ice wind. I wish someone would take me up one of the peaks, right now, so I could feel something powerful again.

There is a sniff, followed by a deep clearing of a throat. Dad. I wish he would speak, but I know he cannot bring himself to. I understand.

My mother continues, offsetting his quiet.

That boy who let you tumble down the mountain in the fog; he has been trying to come here again, quite insistent. We've told him to keep away, don't you worry. He is recovered now, well bully for him. Look what he did to you.

Philippe isn't to blame, but they must channel their anger at someone. A low murmur as Dad tells her to stop, and she continues on a different tack.

Why don't you tell Mina what you got for your birthday, Mindi?

There is an uncomfortable pause before my sister speaks.

I got hair straighteners, the good ones that stylists use. It sounds silly now, pointless. I mean, our hair is already straight, but they make it glossy.

It isn't pointless, Mindi. She wants to know, what did you get, what you are doing. She's listening to you.

We're going out to dinner later, to the usual. Auntie and Uncle will be coming too.

The Mumbai, Dad's favourite. He knows all the staff, talks about the prices of things in this city compared with Delhi. We go there, went there, on every occasion. I try to imagine the taste of mint chutney, or Peshwari naan. My tongue is swollen, coated, and it's difficult to imagine the sweetness getting through.

They stay a while, until their duty is fulfilled. Then comes the best part, even though it is the quickest. They all kiss me on the forehead, because it's the most accessible place for them, not because they've thought about where I can sense their love. I want to scream at

them: anywhere above my neck, touch me with strength. Give me your skin and nails, anything but the tightness of this brace, the pinch of plastic.

Three short pecks are all I get, but they linger, and so I catch them inside, to keep for later, when I am in darkness again, inside myself. They seep into my mind, where I store them in the inner crevices, here and there, to keep warm. They are tiny globes, glowing.

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It was more than an accident; it was a collection of atoms that flew through time, space, in a kaleidoscope of happenstance. Such synchronicity is something that should surely be marveled at, and yet I'm unable to find the good in it. We were already on the mountain when the fog came down. 'Visibility limited,' it said on the chalked sign at the bottom of the chairlift. But we were experienced, invincible. We didn't need sight when we had such a feel for the undulations of the mountain, the pace and the lines of it.

Philippe wanted to get to the bowl before it got tracked out. We jumped off the chair at the top, strapping in our back feet as we slid across the snow. A swirl of mist appeared from below, the remnants of a witch's pot. I followed him down, my stomach lifting with the thrill of the first dip. Keep to the right until the second curve, then pick up speed and stay left to avoid the precipice. A thick cloud wrapped around me, damp on my face. The nausea of blind movement started and I slowed unintentionally. The silence was unnerving, without Philippe's comforting grind in front. I called out, but my voice was dulled, an alien muffled.

Don't stop.

I could feel the rise of the second curve under my board, wavering on hard packed snow. Stay left. I could partially see the ground ahead now, grey and flat. But along with murkiness and cloud comes a trick of the light, as corners fade and distances merge. The

ground disappeared from my feet, and I bent my knees to prepare for landing, the front tip of my board raised.

I flew for longer than I expected.

Then a shadow came towards me, from one side, a body. In a split second, the tips of our boards crashed together. The scraping noise, it was wretched, and yet I remember feeling comforted, to know that I wasn't alone. I briefly saw Philippe's frightened eyes behind frosted goggles before the impact sent us bouncing from each other. My board was sent upwards, my head down. There were sparks, silver and gold, fizzing from the flow of energy sent down from the universe to settle upon us. Philippe escaped with only a broken femur and severe bruising.

His board was sent downwards, his head up.

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A silent visitor comes, with different colours. The reds and blues come closer until I can smell him, the light wax he rubs into the top of his hair. He puts his hands on either side of my face, and presses my temples lightly. The relief of touch, it brings me to tears. He keeps his hands there, and his thumbs rub away the wet under my eyes. I long to hold him, to lash out with fury at what happened to me, to us. But I know I'll never clench his hands with love or with anger, stride away from him, or to him. How many seasons will pass until I can hold a paintbrush in my teeth, if not my hand, and see clearly what it brings to life? Flesh tones and muscled limbs. Blue-white terrain and chalk dust. And sparkles perhaps, silver and gold, colliding.