Scratches on Tiles

– Sanjana Vinod

Hi, hello there, I'm so glad you're here; come sit next to me. There's a story I want to tell you, but I'm unsure where exactly to start. How do I start? From where do I introduce you to it?

How about this–let me play you a video clip.

A man, grey of hair and wearing a faded polo shirt, walks around in circles in the living room, his arms knotted behind him and his eyes fixated onto the marble floors. A cricket match runs on the TV, and he vaguely registers the commentary being spoken. He's counting the scratches, little scars splitting the surface of the tiles. It records the clumsiness of his grandchildren, the instances when they rode their bikes indoors despite his warnings not to, and when he'd have to dab dettol onto the wounds they received when they inevitably fell. He used to buy dettol every few months back then, but his current bottle was bought years ago, and it still hasn't been used. His grandchildren rarely spend time in the living room, and he only sees them during dinner, when they are occupied using their phones.

The man spends most of his hours walking like this, just in case any guests arrive, just in case any grandchild comes downstairs to watch the match with him. It's his sixth time re-starting his counting of the scratches that day. He can't seem to pay attention. He keeps missing some of them, or he forgets his place in the count, or he double-counts. This sixth attempt is the highest he's gotten–he's been careful to pace his steps slowly, to scan the scratches carefully, to repeat the numbers in his head so he doesn't forget. He's nearly completed his circle, an oroborous joined, when his feet catch onto themselves.

This next scene happens in a few seconds, but to you, it feels like slow motion. The man trips on air, and his feet tangle together. His eyes do not widen, do not express surprise, but rather close in resignation. He falls headfirst. His glasses shatter, marking new scratches onto the tiles, and his head lands onto the ground like the beat of a drum. He labours to open his eyes, vision bleary as he focuses on those scratches, attempting to tally it and add it to his previous count, but it's too late: he can't recall the number he stopped at. He closes his eyes, defeated. And then, there's silence. We wait, and wait, and wait.

The man blinks, drowsily, and then brings his palms to face the tiles. He pushes himself up, and his face gets only a feet above the tiles before it crashes again. His second try doesn't lift his face off the tiles. His body laxes. He lays there. He can't remember what he was doing before he fell. He can't recognise where he fell.

He hears a gasp, and then a scream. He cannot turn. He feels arms grabbing him, nails gripping his shirt, but then he's released, and he's limp on the floor again. He hears the stomping of footsteps on stairs, the yelling of a name. He hears more shuffling of footsteps, feels more arms grasping his, and hoisting him up. He's being dragged, and then plopped onto a sofa. There's a cricket match being played on the television, but it's too far away from him to decipher which teams are playing. A young girl shoves her face in front of the man, and she looks frantic, holding his shoulders. A boy's face is pushed into view too, and his hands reach towards the man's forehead. The man winces, pulling his head back, and it's only then he understands that there's a bump forming on his forehead. It doesn't hurt unless it's touched, so the man shrugs it off and twists his neck sideways to look at the match, focusing on it. As though underwater, he hears distortion of sounds–of sobs, of ringtones, of more sobs.

The match slips into an ad-break, where a ginger-haired man stands below a spotlight in an amphitheatre, asking the audience, "Do you have a moment now?" The people in the ad soon start drinking coffee, and the grey-haired man's stomach tightens, longing for one too. Everything around him drowns into static–the crashing sound of a phone dropped, the cursing of another picking it up while shouting out directions, and the blaring sirens piercing through the neighbourhood, announcing the ambulance before you see it speed into view through the windows behind the television. The match resumes once more.—

Along with the video, I have three postcards to share with you. I dug them up from the corners of my memory, where they'd been buried under guilt.

Here is the first:

A man, grey of hair, attempting to walk in a circle around the living room. A physiotherapist walks beside him, catching him everytime he trips and holding him upright. Each stumble evokes a flinch from another man, black of hair, who is sitting on the sofa. On this second man's lap is a laptop, the screen opened to a half-drafted mail requesting unpaid leave for an indefinite period from his job. Next to this man is a medical file, containing a scan of the grey-haired man's brain, and various bills–from the hospital, from specialists, from physiotherapists, from caretaker agencies.

Postcard 2 is set in a room, clearly lived-in. There's pictures hung onto the walls, documentations of milestones–a black-and-white picture of an unsmiling bride and groom, another uncoloured picture of the couple carrying three children, and another one with the same people but grown up, each of them holding children of their own.

Stuck onto the metal cupboards with tape are messy drawings, coloured by crayons. What each sketch is supposed to be is unclear and based on interpretation, like the Rorschach test. Beside it

is a strip of wall marked with lines, measuring the evolution of heights.

Under an unlit tubelight, on a wooden chair, sits the same grey-haired man seen in the last postcard. His gaze is unfocused, but is forward. A young girl–the one introduced in the video–is seated on the ground, her legs folded. She has a Perry Mason book in her hands, and appears to be reading it aloud, her face smiling despite the tense mood of the book. The morning light filters in through the mesh of the windows.

The photograph featured on the next postcard was also taken on the same day, and is the same except for these little details: the tubelight is switched on, there is darkness outside the windows, the girl's face is gaunt. The number of pages read in the book is unchanged. The grey-haired man's face remains the same.

If this was a video, through the timelapse between the two postcards, you could have seen the girl re-reading chapters again and again. The story doesn't move forward, because the man doesn't pay attention long enough to retain the clues of the mystery novel, and so the girl restarts the story.

In the middle of pauses, he'd ask her who she was, what was she doing, why was she doing it. She'd respond: she was his granddaughter, she was reading him his favourite mystery book, she's doing it because he used to read this to her when she was younger. He'd blink, nodding absently, and she'd continue reading, and he'd interrupt her again: where is he, does she know?

And she would set the book down, take his hands in hers and tell him again and again, that *he's home* each time he asks.

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There are things I don't have a record of, unfortunately. Empty pill packets, resignations of caretakers, and used bandages were tossed in the trashcan soon after. The grey-haired man's violent outbursts and cruel behaviour supported the literature on Parkinson's patients, but were so startling to witness, that my memory blocked it. I want to remember him only through the lollipops he'd pull out of his pockets like magic, and the numerous files inside his cupboards, each containing the certificates we'd won, the letters and cards we'd made for him, our drawings and photographs that could not be displayed on his cupboard and walls.

But I do have for you a video-called exchange between siblings–between the dark-haired man and his two sisters, all three of them in different cities. One of them had compiled a list of side-effects of the pills the grey-haired man, their father, was under, and was insisting that the dark-haired man demand the doctor to put their father on alternatives. The other was

yelling–when the dark-haired man had put their father on call yesterday, their father had complaint that the caretakers were starving him. Both women's voices overlapped, and the dark-haired man finally snapped, *Oh shut up!*

The women were stunned to silence.

I know about the side-effects, the man continued. His sisters' phone's camera had been unable to pick up the bags under his eyes. *I'm the one who texted you about it when the doctor prescribed them weeks ago. He's allergic to the other ones, so we can't–I told you about that too. And for god's sake, we're not starving him! He's eating five times a day, he just can't remember that he's eaten. I told you both about this too. I can see you're both very much concerned about him, and I'm sorry for my voice right now, but I'm the only one who's taking care of him. Neither of you are helping in any way, and unless you do, I don't want to hear your complaints.*

Well, that's unfair, said the oldest sister. *He's our father too. We have the right to know and care about him.*

Okay, said the man calmly. *I'll be sure to drop him at your house tomorrow so you can properly know and care about him.*

Her eyes widened. *No, that's not necessary, I was just–*

Then, said the man, his voice pleasant, *shut up.*

Next, I'd like to show you two pieces of paper.

The first is a permission slip excusing the girl's absence in class, signed by the college therapist.

How are you feeling? She'd been asked by the therapist, to which she'd replied: *He's gonna die soon.*

Have you started preparing yourself for it? The therapist had asked her.

The girl had paused. *Should I?* Her shoulders loosen. *But if I prepare myself, he's actually going to die then. He's still alive though. I don't want to mourn him when he's still here.*

The next is a tissue with the logo of a cafe at its corner, which had been wet with tears. She'd burst out crying at a cafe where she'd gone with people from college–ones she couldn't call her friends, yet, as she'd only met them a month ago–and they'd hugged her tightly and bought her

cake.

He doesn't remember me, she'd sobbed and arms tightened around her. *Sometimes it's like he's actually dead but he shouldn't die but he will.*

Another pair of arms wiped her tears. *It's going to be alright,* they told her, again and again, as if repetition would help with remembrance. As if it would make it true.

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We're almost done now. Hold on. I just have one last thing left for you to review. Here's a text message exchange of a family group chat, on a sunny afternoon, when the girl was walking home from the bus stop after college.

4:47 pm

Dad <3: Your grandfather is with god now.

Me: what
Me: appa what happened

Dad <3: Keep calm and pray.

Akka <3: appa what

Dad <3: Heart beat came down to zero. Just pray to God that he be with him.

Me: I'm omw. give me 20 mins I'll be there

11:19 pm

Dad <3 removed Granddad <3 from the group

When the girl went there, her grandfather was not there. He was at the mortuary now, transferred down from the ICU, which was only for the living.

The girl, of course, is me.

But I can’t talk about this with distance, because it feels fresh, even though it's been a few years.

The bond between my father and his sisters, who weren’t as close earlier, have gotten stronger after his death, reinforced by shared memories and regrets. The dynamics between my cousins and I too changed, but for the worse, marred by anger at them being unable to come for his funeral on account of pre-existing plans. But the people that I’d been tentatively acquaintances with in college helped me through my grief, and in the process, I found people who I now think of as more than friends, who I love and trust like they are family.

There will always be a void of my granddad, and I will always be haunted by his absence when I pass his empty room, when I think about all the time we could have spent together had I not prioritised something that was, in hindsight, meaningless above him. Taking new family photographs without him will hurt.

But I have my family, my friends, my granddad’s friends, a community of people who feel similar to how I do, who I can call to be reminded of stories he used to tell us, who I can text to be told stories about him, who I can cling onto as we grieve. It’s because of this community of people that, on the first birthday of his without him, I could walk in a circle around the living room, count the scratches on the tiles and, when I visited his grave, let him know the number that he couldn’t arrive to.