

Light Eyes

by Ajay Nair

"People with light eyes are shift. They are not to be trusted."

He looked up at his sister when she said this. She uttered the words casually but there was a quiet firmness about the way she said it. Her hair was tied loosely, thin strands spilling onto her face, defending it from unknown dangers. They were walking home and a weak evening light was falling on the road. It smelled like it would never rain again. He believed her as he usually did.

She was seventeen then; he was fourteen. She left the next day.

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By the time he walked into the living room, he knew what he was going to do. All the rage had been distilled into a crisp, white sliver of action. He found his wife in the bedroom, stretching up to pull something down from a shelf. The first punch knocked her down but did not hurt her much.

When he started hitting her, he felt he was inhabiting a place of peace. It was how he used to feel while playing cricket when he was a kid. Some days, he tried to hit the ball with all his might and failed. Other days, he knew he could just time it well with minimal energy expended, and the ball would sail out of the ground. Those days, he knew he was in the zone. He felt the same way as he landed punches on her - in the zone. The insides of his skin felt like it was being rubbed with a hard, bristly slab of righteous anger. It was the easiest thing.

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For thirty two years, he did not see his sister. Sometimes, she sent a

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postcard. Once, when he had been married for a year, she sent him a card which said, "If you have seen a cat smoke a pipe, you have got it made." There was an illustration of a big, black panther, standing up on its hind legs, smoking what looked like a big tub of tobacco. A few years later, she wrote: "The man asked the ape, 'What gives? All this blood, eh?' The ape considered him for a moment, then swallowed him whole. Beware of apes, brother." There was no illustration.

The last thing she'd sent to him was a painting of two kids on a beach, walking away. The boy was taller than the girl, which was weird because he'd always been shorter than his sister - at least till the time she left.

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When his sister walked into his hospital room, he wanted to cry out, but he held himself back. She'd found out that he'd got the virus from his wife. She sat next to him and cradled his head in her arms. She looked fierce and tired. They avoided talking about the big questions - where she'd been, why she'd left, how their lives turned out. Instead, she talked about animals.

When his wife, who was hospitalized in the next room, walked in, her face sunken, her body a patchwork of welts and scars, the siblings looked up at her. For a moment, they held their peace. Then, they laughed and laughed, unable to hold anything back. His wife's querulous light, gray eyes looked at them with a malignant idiocy. But they just couldn't care, they couldn't stop. Even as her fingers dug into his palm under the blanket that covered him.

