

Anna: Pronounced unn-na. Honorific for older brother or a close older male.

...

It was entirely unfair being the older sibling, he had decided.

When he tugged on his mom's chunni to tell her this, she just laughed. "So what? You are older than your brother. And that means you must take care of him."

...

This had probably been the maddest he had ever seen his mom.

"You just left him there?!" His mother hurriedly rushed towards him and slipped his backpack off his shoulders. "How did you just *forget* your brother?"

He grumbled something unintelligible, which his mother responded with by bonking him on his head, before pushing him out of the door and slamming the door on his back.

"Go get him *now*!"

Surya stood there for a few minutes, sulking, glancing towards the window to see if there was any motion of his mother looking back out at him. Maybe seeing him standing outside alone would arise some pity in her. *That would show her.*

But enough glances at the window had made it apparent that his mother didn't care to see if he was gone or not. He was pretty sure his brother had legs and could walk home himself. Kicking a pebble aside, he begrudgingly made his way out of the house, swinging the gate aside to produce a large screeching noise that sounded like someone had kicked a cat with a voice deeper than the drunk uncles that played *pachese* every Sunday after dinner. Actually, it sounded worse. When had it last been oiled? Hmm. He should oil it after he picked up his brother. But he

had spent too much time at the cricket grounds today and the lights would go out at ten... he probably wouldn't be able to finish his homework in time if he did both.

Mentally calculating what he would have to do by the time he got back home, the frown that marred Surya's face got deeper as he silently walked towards the school.

A smile broke out onto his brother's face as soon as he saw Surya. "*Anna!*"

Yohan threw his arms around him and hugged him like he hadn't seen his older brother in five years. Surya sighed and wrapped his arms back around his brother, before hastily extracting himself from the soon turned death hold.

"Cricket ran longer this time." He paused, holding the younger boy's shoulders. "I told you to go home."

His brother insisted Surya hadn't, and Surya was pretty sure he had, but he lacked the energy to argue back.

"Did amma get mad?" his brother asked on the way back. It was getting dark, and the faint pink of the sunset that bordered the horizon was fading out of vision. Their locked hands swung back and forth between them, more from Yohan's movement than Surya's.

"No," he lied. "Why would she?"

His brother shrugged. The silence that followed was only momentary before Yohan launched into chatter about his day at school. Surya stayed quiet, listening.

He hummed at specific things, flicked his brother's forehead when he said other things, and asked questions for more. He heard this every day – a rundown of Yohan's eventful day as a

3rd class student at Vasavi Public School. Compared to his brother, Surya had much less to talk about, even though he was a whole three years older.

The chatter only stopped when their house came into sight, and his brother slipped his hand from Surya's own, racing ahead of him.

He watched as his brother swung the front gate open. There was no screech in response.

...

One Saturday morning, his mother had woken the two of them early.

"It's time," amma ordered.

She set him to work cutting the meat. Yohan put the rice and fetched onions from the shed out back, and his mother opened the windows to release the heat and scent of boiling hot curry that smelled of garam masala, turmeric, and every other spice you could think of. When he turned to look at her, he saw a solemn face slicing through untold emotions. His brother mixed the curry in the corner of his eye.

Later, when the bowls of chicken, mutton, curd, puris, mirchi bhajis, pakoda, payasam and rice were placed on the table, the brothers watched as their mother placed large spoonfuls of each onto a singular plate and surrounding bowls.

She lit the incense in the corner of the kitchen and set the food in front of a small picture of a young man. Dark hair, light eyes, and tan skin were all printed in shades of black and white.

"Pray."

Surya went first, pressing his hands together and kneeling on the ground, bowing his head as far as it could reach the ground. Yohan went next, and he watched as his brother mimicked his actions. His mother went last, and she stayed down the longest.

Please accept the food.

They sat back at the table a little while later after washing their hands, as incense burned in the back and filled their nostrils with the smell of sandalwood. He wrinkled his nose. He had never liked the smell, but today was not a day to complain.

He watched as his mother split the same food they had offered to his father earlier between the three of them, before heaping even more.

Yohan had tried to protest the extra food being placed on their plates, but amma had given him a sharp look before his brother had fallen silent again. Surya was smart enough to not say anything. They had to eat the food on their plate—now that they had offered it, they had to eat it on their father's behalf.

It was a strange tradition, he thought, celebrating the deaths of family members with their favorite foods. But as he ate the mutton, he couldn't help but think that his father had really good taste in food. The bhajis were delicious.

Later, when he had found his mom crying in the bedroom, he had tried his best to comfort her. She had just clutched him closer, trying to cover up her teary face. It didn't work though, since he could feel her tears melt through his shirt.

"If something ever happens to me," she began, and he aimed to cut her off right then but she beat him to it, "your brother is all you have."

That night, as his brother curled up in the arms of his sleeping mother on the bed, he wondered if his brother understood what was happening. They grew up in the same house, with

the same mother, went to the same school, wore the same clothes. Yet he seemed to understand and have to understand so much less than Surya.

“*Anna?*” Surya turned to see Yohan shift towards him. Their mother was now asleep, light breaths sounding in the background. Fear was laced in his eyes, and Surya felt his eyebrows dip in concern. “I think amma’s crying.”

Oh.

“She’s just a little sad, that’s all.” He muttered after contemplating what to say. “Now go to sleep.”

Ok, Yohan had responded, before curling up to him. Surya shifted to make space for his brother on his side.

“Can you tell me a story?”

Sigh. Not this again.

But Surya told him the story of a chicken, who lived in a shed, and was happy until the family that raised it had eaten it. He told him of the story of the wolf that had abducted the youngest brother of the seven sheep that lived in the house next door. He told him every story he could think of until his brother fell asleep against him.

Hmm. Maybe for right now, Yohan didn’t have to understand. He was still young.

All of a sudden, he felt so much older.

...

Many of their days were spent at the corner shop near their house, flicking pieces of leftover roti from lunch to the birds that festered on the ground. Yohan would sit with his knees up to his chest, pulling the piece of the flatbread until it was nothing but a pile of crumbs.

“Wasting food isn’t good.” Surya said out loud to no one in particular.

“But anna, it’s going to the birds!”

Good enough reason, Surya supposed, so he did the same thing.

As they sat there on the questionably clean steps of the shop, a head popped up in front of them, and the both of them looked up at the same time to see the infuriated face of the uncle who owned the shop.

“You rascals are always driving all the customers away!” Satish Uncle said, chasing them off.

Surya was pretty sure the uncle did most of the driving away by himself, but he and Yohan would run away as fast as they could, laughing unbearably by the time it was over. When their mother sent them over later to buy eggs, the uncle would always give them the stink eye and mutter something under his breath.

Except it wasn’t so funny when he said certain things. “Aiy, aiy, aiy.” He would shake his head. “I wonder how their mother raises them... no father, no character, no money.” He muttered under his breath one day as Surya walked away from the shop with his brother in one hand and a bag of eggs in the other. His hands clenched as he walked faster, but the uncle wasn’t done with his self-musings. “That’s just how all these low caste—”

“Yohan.” Surya spoke out loud.

Yohan looked up at him hopefully. Something entirely different was on his brother’s mind. “Do you think amma will be okay if we get some chocolate too?”

Surya sighed in relief. Hopefully he hadn’t heard.

He thought over his brother’s request for a moment... he didn’t know about his mother *approving*, but other than the leftover money from the eggs, he had about 10 rupees of pocket

change in his pocket from hard won marble games at school. That was more than enough for chocolate. He looked back at the corner shop they had just left.

But... “How about pani puri instead?”

His brother had brightened up in joy. Even better! He had rejoiced, and they trekked to the opposing street, crossing precariously amidst the bright lights of the oncoming cars and bikes. Yohan jumped and skipped in every step, and Surya felt like he was being infected with some of his brother’s energy as his own smile loosened. He almost forgot about the uncle’s comment.

They paid the stall vendor and stood in a line with their plates as the vendor quickly loaded up one after the other with one-hole poked puffy circles containing spicy mashed potatoes, onions, chickpeas, and sweet and sour tamarind broth. Five rounds later, they went home full, burping spices in creative ways.

Before they went back inside, Surya pulled his brother aside and pressed his brows together as seriously as he could convince. “Don’t tell amma okay?”

Yohan nodded, the eagerness and pride in his eyes betraying the most serious face he could muster.

His brother held record time for this secret though, a whole three days before he had babbled incoherently about pani puri during their bedtime when their mom had put them to sleep. Amma had looked at them with a stern look before laughing when Surya had shrugged his shoulders.

Hopefully if his brother had heard, he had at least forgotten.

...

Sometimes he wondered why his parents had named him Surya, after the sun, after something so bright, when his brother was so much more so.

...

Surya unfortunately had to retract his previous statement.

Ever since Yohan had entered secondary school, Surya was convinced his mouth had smarted. Gone was the starry-eyed boy who asked him for chocolate after school, and now there was just constant whining.

They had been walking home from school when his brother had called him by his first name. He had stopped, and Yohan had frozen. “*Surya?*” He had repeated. “Did you call me *Surya?*”

Yohan audibly gulped. “No...”

“I’m telling amma.”

“Wait, please, no! I won’t do it again!” His brother said, chasing after him.

Yohan’s class had watched some sort of foreign tv show at school today, and he had tried to mimic one of the many mannerisms that had appeared on it, namely the one where he called Surya by name.

But nope. Unlike all the other things that the younger sibling could get away with it, they could never get away with calling their older sibling by name. Even his mom would get mad—honorifics were necessary.

“I won’t do it again *what?*”

“I meant anna, anna! I won’t do it again, *anna!*” Yohan begged. “Just don’t tell amma.”

“You owe me kulfi.”

Yohan grumbled and Surya mentally increased the punishment from one kulfi to two.

...

Sometime, between the middle of then and now, his brother had gotten a little older.

Every time the school bell rang, Surya was the most eager to leave. He closed his books shut and stuffed them into his bag before slipping it over his shoulders, racing out of class with his friend Sai.

Him, Sai, and a couple of others were planning to go play cricket after school today, and he didn't have to pick up his brother until afterwards. After Surya had started Inter, he ended earlier than Yohan. He still had to attend study sessions later in the afternoon afterwards though, had homework on top of *that* session work, and had to cook if his mom was too busy, or they'd have to eat mango pickle again. Surya thought about all of this, but it faded as Sai filled his head with talks of the last cricket game aired on TV along the way to the cricket grounds.

Only three hours later had he realized he had forgotten Yohan. He practically sprinted to Yohan's school, his backpack almost flying off his shoulders, but his brother wasn't sitting on the steps of the school in wait of him anymore. When he went back home, he had found his brother sitting in the living room, working on homework.

Yohan had looked up, and Surya must have looked out of breath because his brother snickered a little.

"I can walk myself home you know. Or to the cricket grounds." Yohan said later when they were eating dinner. They had settled for mango pickle again, with *ghee* and rice. "I'm in 8th class. You were walking me home from 6th class."

Yeah, Surya thought. But because he was the older one.

But he looked toward his mother instead, who was spooning curd into their plates. His mother remained quiet before she spoke up.

“Only if you come straight home. And only if you’re not going to be home alone.”

Yohan nodded in response, but Surya remained quiet.

...

They were walking home from the cricket grounds one day when he noticed his brother being unusually quiet. It had weirded Surya out so much that he had to speak up first, asking what Yohan had done at school.

“Nothing really.” His brother answered. Then he hesitated. “We got our test results back for math. I got a 100.”

Surya nodded in approval.

“One of my friends, he saw my test.” Yohan continued. “He said I did good.” He paused. “For my family background.”

Surya tensed.

“I don’t understand. Does it really matter that much?” His brother had stopped walking. “Did he really have to say that?”

“Yohan—”

“Why does everyone care? Why does everyone have to say something? Why does everyone look down on us? On amma for marrying naana? On naana for liking amma? Who cares about our caste—I don’t understand! Why does it even matter?”

“*Yohan.*” His brother looked up at him, eyes glassy. “It *doesn’t* matter.” Then Surya wrapped his arms around his brother, who returned the hug with full force.

Later, when they had sat down amidst the village fields looking up at the stars instead of going back home, Surya spoke up again. “We live somewhere where people say these things.

“It’s not right. They shouldn’t say them, it *shouldn’t* matter. But to them it does.” He looked back at his brother. “And *none* of it is true.”

Yohan had just remained quiet.

...

When his brother entered 9th class, Surya taught him how to drive a bike. He would have taught Yohan earlier if he had remembered to, but Surya had honestly forgotten because there never seemed to be a need when he himself had been driving from 6th class after he learnt from a friend. If his father had still been around, Surya would have had learned from him instead.

“The main thing is learning the clutch.” Surya explained, turning off the bike. “And the gear shifting.” He slid off the family motorcycle, which had been given to them by their old landlord a few years ago. It was red and black and shiny, and he was extremely dedicated to keeping it that way.

“Never shift it when you’re still or turning.” He ordered. “And shift down to first gear when you’re stopping.” He handed the keys over to his brother. “Your turn.”

Yohan nodded, and slid on unsurely, before clicking on the engine. It revved to life, and his eyes brightened. Surya sat down behind him, patting his shoulder as a motion for him to go on.

It took a few tries, but Yohan was a natural. He had breezed through the roads, hair whipping in the wind and the slight chill sticking to both of their skins. Every time Yohan tried

looking back at him, he had to yell at him over the wind to look forward. His brother would grin so hard that Surya had thought it would stick on his face.

“I’m not trying to die today.” He commented, and Yohan just laughed.

They only stopped for a minute to pick up jalebi at the street market, watching as the vendor wrapped freshly fried dough dipped in gooey orange syrup, before they were on the bike and off again.

They drove on the dirt roads between villages, where everything was dark except for the stars in the sky. Hoots of monkeys echoed, and the chill of the air seemed to be engraved in his bones by the time they stopped at a banyan tree on the dirt road that connected their town to the next one over.

They leaned their heads back on the tree as they sat down and ate the jalebi that the vendor had packaged for them in newspaper. Comforting silence and crinkles of paper filled the air between them.

Yohan licked his fingers and reached for another one when Surya had swatted his hand away. “Save some for amma.” His brother hmped and took one anyway.

“It feels different sitting in the front than it did in the back.” Yohan said after he finished the jalebi in hand. “Better.”

Surya could understand. Sitting in the front meant you could feel the wind in your face, the thrill of speeding down the roads with the scenery spinning around you. You felt so in *control* but also free.

But in all honestly, he would rather sit in the back. There was nothing like the days he would get off after school hours and roam around wherever he wanted with friends in tow, but letting someone else drive for once felt like a nice change of pace.

“Only if you’re *not* the designated driver.” He said to his brother instead.

“It can’t be that bad. You get to do everything.”

Surya shook his head. “I’d rather not be the one driving at all, honestly.”

His brother just shrugged. “I’ll drive from now on anyway.” Surya raised an eyebrow.

“Now that you’re going to go to University and all.” Yohan added.

“Those are some big statements right there from a first-time driver.” He commented dryly. “Maybe amma could just keep on using the scooter.”

“You’re saying I didn’t do good?” Yohan said, raising his own eyebrow.

“Pretty decent. For a first timer.” He added.

“Sure.” His brother said dryly. “I bet I did better than when *you* first learned.”

“I started in 6th grade, so *not* a fair comparison.”

“You started driving in 6th grade?” Yohan asked, surprised. He nodded, and his brother’s eyes widened. “Who taught you?”

“Sai.” He grimaced and his brother laughed. “Not exactly the best teacher.”

“Well, the time he crashed into a coconut stand *was* amazing.” Yohan said grinning.

“You’re lucky I’m teaching you. What if you had a friend named *Bai* teach you instead?” Surya said cracking a smile.

“Oh god, I would rather ask *Satish* Uncle.”

Surya just smiled and rested his head on the top of his hands. If Sai hadn’t offered to teach him first, he probably would have had tried to learn by himself. He didn’t really have any other relatives or annas to teach him this type of stuff.

At least his brother had him.

...

Surya had gone to university the following year. He had had his reservations before going, about how amma and Yohan would fare without him, but amma had pushed him to go.

“You have to go.” His mother said. “You have to show them.”

He had remained quiet, nodding.

“My darling boy.” She kissed his forehead, resting his head on her shoulder. “Just when I think I’m already proud, you make me even prouder.”

And for Surya, that was enough.

He came home some weekends, before anyone was home, slipping the gate open as quietly as he could and heading to the kitchen. He would cook something up for the three of them with whatever groceries he had gotten on the way home or whatever was left in the kitchen.

One particular weekend, he was greeted with the loud screech of the gate opening and closing as he poured rice into a bowl. Note to self to fix the gate, *again*.

“Yohan?” He called absentmindedly while washing the rice. The tomato lentil curry he had set earlier boiled in the corner of his eye, wafting a delicious aroma into the air. Maybe he should make chapati too.

No response.

“Yohan!” Surya called again.

Placing the rice on the stove, he lit the gas stove and slipped a lid over it before heading over to see who was at the gate. Yohan always responded by the second call, so it couldn’t have been him. He was mistaken though, because the first thing he saw at the gate was the figure of his brother’s back to his face.

“I’ll fix it later.” He explained, referring to the gate and breaking his brother out of whatever trance he was in.

“That’s fine.” His brother murmured. “I can do it.”

“You have homework. Go do that instead.” He turned to walk back inside when Yohan spoke up again.

“I finished it. And I said I would do it, alright?”

Surya stared at his brother. Alright, he amended. But his brother still didn’t turn. “Well, don’t just stand there. I’m making your favorite.”

“Mutton?” Yohan turned slightly, his voice brightening, and the tips of Surya’s mouth twitched.

“Close. Dahl.”

His brother rolled his eyes, and the slight action brought attention to a bloom of color on the underside of his brother’s jaw.

“What is that?” His brows dipped almost immediately, but Yohan jerked his head to the side.

“What is what?” Yohan’s voice lilted as he looked away, but the strategic movements of his face away from Surya had not quite worked when he had grabbed Yohan by the shoulder and pulled him around.

“What happened?” A slightly colored purple bruise covered the side of his brother’s face, and it seemed to be changing color by the second.

“Nothing.” Yohan said quickly, but Surya glared at him. “I just fell down.”

“So now you’re lying to me?”

His brother frowned.

He had gotten into a fight with his friends. That was what had happened.

“They did *what*?” He seethed. Yohan’s face had remained carefully blank, while his mother remained quiet between them.

“Anna, it’s okay.” Yohan murmured. “It’s over now.”

No, it wasn’t okay.

He knew his brother had befriended upper caste friends before. He knew some of them had said off the shoulder derogatory remarks before too. But not *this*. The worst part was, since Yohan had started the fight first, Surya couldn’t make them apologize even if they were in the wrong.

“This is why.” He ground out. “This is why you shouldn’t hang out with those kids!”

“But—”

“They’ll say they don’t think that way, but they always do.” Surya turned to look at his brother again. “They’re not worth losing your dignity over.”

“Ok anna.” His brother had said quietly.

...

Soon, Yohan had decided to go to the same university as well. He had told them over dinner one day, when silence was just about to set in the room.

The both of them had looked up to their mother, waiting. Surya knew what this meant for the family. Neither him nor his brother would be at home as frequently anymore.

“Alright.” His mother had said.

Amma had still teared up the day they left. She had hugged the both of them closer, whispering in their ears. “So grown up... both of you’re leaving me now, huh?” She spoke. Surya couldn’t tell if she was joking or not.

Never, the both of them had said.

He still saw his brother around campus sometimes. It wasn’t far and few between, and Yohan would hang out with him and his friends now and then, but they usually stuck to separate crowds. It might have been because of the three-year difference, or because Yohan was definitely more well-known than he was, even though Surya had been there a whole three years longer.

The weekends they went home, Yohan would wait outside his hostel before they headed to the bus stop together. The sun would cast an orange afternoon glow on the world, as the chatter of some more tens of students accompanied them. They would stand at the bus stop, talking incessantly about what had happened in the past weeks at uni, about how Yohan’s professor had made him sit in the front after he couldn’t stop talking in the back, and about how Sai had once again crashed into a coconut stand. His brother could not get over the last one.

“Hasn’t he been driving for years now?” Yohan had said, bending over laughing.

Once enough weekends had passed, it was time for Surya to graduate. His mother had insisted on them getting a photo taken that day, so they had gone to a studio to get professionally taken photos. Dressed up in their neatest shirts and ties, they stood in front of the photographer, who peered through the camera lense. The camera shuttered, and the photographer grinned.

“What a good-looking family,” he remarked later as he handed the photos in an envelope.

They went back home that night, Yohan driving the bike as him and amma sat in the back. As the smell of freshly plowed fields filled his nose, the chill of the air and the sting against his eyelids had woken him up from the exhaustion that had overtaken him over the day.

It wasn't too late when they got home, so the three of them set to work in the kitchen, making food that made his belly burn.

After they ate and the power went out, they settled around the front of the house with sweets and each other's company, smiling up at the stars. The crickets creaked until late into the night, and the soft sigh of the wind rustled their ears till as long as they stayed outside. Their hands stayed hot from the sticky food and *dia* candles they had lit.

Surya wanted to stay there forever.

...

One weekend, when Yohan had announced that he was going out, Surya had asked where he was going. Yohan had just shrugged.

"I'm meeting a friend who's in town."

"Invite them over for dinner if they're free." He offered. "Amma's making chicken."

His brother hesitated, but nodded.

Later, when Yohan had come home alone, Surya had offhandedly asked if his friend was coming.

He had shaken his head. "They can't make it."

...

Surya clicked off his bike, swinging his leg off and unclasping the plastic bag from the bike hold as pots of red mango pickle clunked together. He had a business trip in Hyderabad, where their college was located, and so amma had made him go and drop off some pickle for his brother alongside it. Sai had come with him too, for no other reason than because he was bored and wanted to eat biryani.

“Nope, *Central Palace* has the best biryani.” Sai said, shaking his head as they waited outside his brother’s dorm. “Forget *Dhaba’s Place*.” Surya opened his mouth to retort to this obviously heinous statement when someone bumped into him, and his bag of pickle flew into the air. He and Sai watched, horrified, as the clay pot wrapped in plastic slowly arced its way down to the ground, but it was swiftly caught by a girl, who also stared on, in shock. Silence swept over them.

“I am so sorry!” The girl burst out. She looked about his brother’s age, young with dark eyes, and a horrified expression on her face. She stepped back immediately and bowed slightly, the pickle bag still dangling in her hands.

Sai and he stared at it.

“It’s fine.” He said slowly. The pot didn’t seem to be broken in the slightest.

She held the bag out to him. “I’m so sorry about your... uh—”

“Pickle.” He said, taking the bag from her.

“It smells really good,” she said smiling, before her face wrinkled as if she had recalled something. “Don’t tell my mom, but her pickle kind of sucks. I can never bring it anywhere because it smells.”

Sai snickered behind him. Insulting a family’s pickle recipe, especially your own, was a death sentence from every ancestor cook in the family.

His lips twitched as a smile formed on his face, and some sort of recognition slowly filled her eyes. She grinned brighter all of a sudden, bowing again slightly before she made her goodbye and walked away.

A few moments later, his brother finally arrived, hugging him and Sai while taking the plastic bag in hand. “What happened?” He asked as he saw Sai’s pondering face.

“Nothing really, but hey, has your pickle ever smelled weird before?”

...

Surya was sitting at the steps of their small courtyard with a newspaper in one hand and a cup of steaming chai in the other. Yohan was out with a friend, and his mother was sewing jasmine flowers in the entryway.

“*Nani?*” He turned, and amma stood there with a letter in hand. Her expression was hesitant. “The mail came.”

It was already open when she passed it over to him. He unfurled the paper.

It was from his mother’s extended family, and they had extended the invitation over to a family gathering. Namely because he had gotten an education.

He frowned.

“No.”

His mother had frowned. “Think it over.”

“*No*. They’ve never contacted us before, why now?” He threw the letter aside, but his mom had picked it up and smoothed it out. He looked at her bizarrely.

He didn't understand. They had never treated them like family since his mother had married his father, but now they were willing to "reconnect?" It was nonsense, and he knew his mother knew it as well.

"Retaining family connections are important." She had insisted halfheartedly.

"Retaining? I've never even *talked* to them before."

His mother grew quiet in resignation.

Later that night, as he laid on the bed trying to go to sleep, he thought he could maybe understand. His mother hadn't seen her family in over 20 years. Surya couldn't even imagine not seeing his mother or Yohan for even a month.

He set his mind to telling his mother he would go with her just this once.

Walking over to their mother's ancestral home, Surya felt as if they had shifted worlds. Roads became gradually cleaner, litter disappeared, dirt paved into a smooth clay. Their mother lead them, her eyes shining with an unknown longing he had never seen before as she stood before the biggest house he had ever seen. A buzzing settled in his ears, and he faintly identified it as the chatter of hundreds emanating from the house.

He tried not to be self-aware as he took off his slippers and stepped into the house, right foot forward. He tried to hide his shock at the sheer number of family members sitting inside. He tried his best to register his brother muttering about how the room they were in could probably fit twenty of their kitchens. Even more, he tried to ignore the low hush that spread over as soon as all their sights were set on him, with his mother in hand and his brother in the other.

It was like everything, *everyone*, shifted as they walked towards an elder singular figure sitting in the front of the household, the back of his chair to them. The rocking chair creaked as the old man stood, turning to view his daughter and her two sons.

Surya's stomach clenched as he looked towards him. A pale buttery face, accompanied with round glasses that sat high on the bridge of his nose, stared back at him. His gray hair seeped into black, smoothed back with oil.

This was the man who had kicked his mother out of his house when she had decided to marry his father. This was the man who had gone after their father.

"Sarayu." Amma's home name. His voice was rumbly and deep. Surya hated it immediately.

"*Naana*." His mother greeted. *Father*.

She gestured towards him and Yohan. "My sons, Surya and Yohan."

It took all of his willpower to get the words out. "*Thatha*." He greeted, bowing.

His grandfather had nodded.

They had been accepted back into the family.

"He'll find a good wife." His aunts had chattered away when they had seated him and his brother among them. They had been sitting here for the past hour, and Surya fought the urge to hurl as he viewed the waning smile of their mother every second one of the aunts dismissed something she said.

"Both of them." One of the aunts winked at him, and he tried his best to smile. Or he hadn't because the same aunt looked away now with a slightly scared expression.

"Or maybe not... now."

That was better.

...

Him and his brother were arguing over who was better at badminton when amma sent them out after she decided she had had enough of their bickering.

“I’m better than the both of you combined,” their mother had commented about their badminton skills as she pushed them out the door. “Pick up some eggs too.” She said, handing him a ten-rupee bill. He took it, even though he already had more than enough of his own pocket change to buy them.

Yohan had rolled his eyes and challenged amma to a match as they swung open the gate, and his mother had said something along the lines of “We’ll see you try” as they walked out.

They laughed and decided to walk through the mart before stopping at the corner shop, and so that’s what they did. On the way back, they got some kulfi, sitting on the steps of the neighboring temple as they licked the ice-cream.

Surya had asked his brother how university was, but Yohan had just shrugged, putting his kulfi stick aside.

“Actually—” Yohan paused, and his lips pulled into a tight-lipped smile. “It’s nothing.”

Ok? Well, his brother couldn’t just say that and *not* tell him what had happened, so Surya pestered more.

“I have a friend.” He said slowly, pausing. Surya cocked an eyebrow. “I like her.”

Oh.

“We like each other.” He corrected, looking away.

“You like each other.” Surya repeated.

His brother nodded slowly, and silence fell over them.

“Who?” He asked, recovering from his shock.

“Her name is Esha.” Yohan said.

Esha. Ok.

“I want to marry her.”

Wait what?

“Marry her? How long have you even *known* her for?” He had burst out. When had he even met this, this *girl*?

“Since first year.” His brother had said quietly.

Four years. And Surya had never known. Silence once again fell over them.

“She’s, ah, not from our caste.” Yohan paused. “She’s from a higher caste.” He gulped.

“A much higher caste.”

Surya’s blood froze.

“No.”

“Anna—”

“Are you crazy? Yohan, *no*.” Did he not know how intercaste marriages were treated? Did he not know what could happen to him? Did he not know what they *did*?

Did he not see what had happened to their father? How he had been “accidentally” killed by his grandfather’s family?

“We’re going to get married.” His brother said, voice cold. Then, sighing. “We want to get married.”

“It’ll be all for nothing.” He ground out. “It’ll be meaningless. Their parents won’t agree.”

His brother just smiled sadly. “I know.”

As Surya stared, he didn’t understand. He didn’t understand why his brother looked that way, why he looked distraught over something that should be so simple, why he was willing to do so much for something so meaningless. Some vain effort that would never change anything.

“But it’s not meaningless.” His brother said, tapping his fingers on his knee. The faint glowing outline of a shadow followed as he did so.

Surya’s brow furrowed as he looked away. He could feel the pause on his brother’s breath, a word away from saying something, before he looked back to see glassy tears line his face. “It’s just not fair.” There was no emotion in the voice of his. Tears dropped slowly across his cheeks, but his mouth and face made no movement to reflect them.

He stared, and his mouth thinned into a hard line. “You *idiot*.”

A self-deprecating smile graced his brother’s face. “You told me it doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Surya said frustratedly. “But in society, it *does* matter. And so, if we want to live in this society, we can’t do... certain things.”

“But amma and naana—”

“And look where that got them.”

Yohan frowned. “It got them to us. To me and you. You can’t tell me amma would rather leave us and go back to *thatha* and *ammamma* than stay with us.”

His brother was right. He couldn’t say that because it wasn’t true. His mother would do anything for them.

But... “That doesn’t mean they should have done what they did.” It didn’t mean they deserved that much pain.

His brother fell quiet before speaking up. "...I can't believe you're saying that. From all people, *you*."

Surya stayed quiet. Yohan was right but saying it wouldn't make anything any different. Marrying someone not from your caste shouldn't matter, but it did.

His eyes narrowed as he looked back towards his brother. "I have a family to take care of. I don't, I *can't*, worry about things I *can* do or *should* be able to do, I do what I *have* to do."

His brother sat back stunned, before turning away. "And you are wrong for thinking that."

They went home ignoring each other.

Their mother had taken one look at them. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Surya had ground out, slamming the door shut behind him as he went to bed.

Yohan went back to university the following day.

...

He had gotten off his bike one late night from work, clicking off the engine, when he had heard clamoring outside of their gate. Surya had frowned, walking over.

"Ay *babu*! Your boy! They're looking for your boy!" The uncles had said.

His mother was crying. He had frozen. "Where?"

He was ready and off on his bike when he had gotten some semblance of directions.

Calling Sai and his other friends, the six of them had split up through the streets.

His brother didn't pick up.

Surya's heart hammered against his chest, and a tight cold feeling spread across.

They had looked through everywhere they could by the time Sai had called him back.

“Surya. You need to come home.” The voice slid through the phone, and his palms went slick.

He hadn’t quite registered the screech of the gate as it swung open, nor the tens of people who clamored in the courtyard, nor the scene of his mother hunched over a figure.

When he saw the still body of his brother laid out in front of him, nothing had quite registered. His knees folded as he keeled over. He found his brother’s hand, gripping it until his own turned white.

Wailings filled his ear, “*Aiyooo*, the poor boy!” Aunts and uncles who he had never seen before crowded his vision. But all he saw was him.

His brother’s face. Long eyelashes closed, tan and beautiful skin, hair that fell as wisps onto his forehead. Eyelids that covered honey brown eyes that had looked up at him with laughter.

Surya cried. He cried so that tears pulled at his cheeks and blurred his vision. He cried so that his brother’s face faded from view. He cried because his brother’s hand was cold. He cried because he said nothing.

He cried because his mother had lost one of her sons. He cried because he had lost his only brother. He cried because he had never said bye. He cried because he would never wake up. He cried because he would never talk to him again. He cried because no one else mattered.

Tears dripped over their intertwined hands, and he wished that his brother would wake up, at that one very second, would open his eyes and call him “*anna*.”

And then he cried because that would never happen.