

Dear Aunty,

I don't remember the exact date you said it, but I remember the rest of it with an embarrassing amount of clarity.

The house was bursting in that particular way it gets when speech grows and fills each corner. The television murmured from the living room, cycling through another distant headline. The fan whirled and clicked, synchronizing with the clock to keep time like a small, patient metronome. Footsteps slid past and away again.

I was barefoot on the kitchen tile, standing to read because sitting in chairs shut my brain down. The cold crept up into me, so I rocked up onto my heels and back down again, stitching a rhythm into the afternoon.

You were at the counter, peeling a mango with the slow, economical grace of someone who has done a thousand small kindnesses. Each strip of skin fell away in a soft ribbon on the board. There was a smear of mango juice on your wrist that you wiped off with the back of your hand. Light slanted sharply through the window and caught the silver steel bowls, turning them brighter than they were. The air smelled faintly sweet and clean with the mango and lemon hand soap lingering.

When you looked up, your eyes moved over me as if checking a recipe book, from face, arms, and stomach, so fast it could've been nothing. So fast it could've been a habit. You didn't sound angry or even mean. The words came out casually, line by line, certain to be helpful, like reminding someone to drink more water or take a jacket. And you smiled, just a little, the way people do when they think they've handed someone a favor.

The warmth that spread across my face was not the kind that makes you glow after a face mask. It deliberately crept in by degrees like frost mapping the shape of a leaf in peak wintertime. I don't remember moving, or maybe I did. I was walking, but stagnant. I was playing, but paused. I was talking, but muted. I was frozen, while the rest of the room stayed warm and alive. People continued debating stocks, school rankings, and whether the Packers would fold this season.

I think I smiled that one small, careful smile. The one I perfected in sixth grade by adjusting its depth until my braces disappeared through the pursed lips. Your mouth methodically shaped words like the lines practiced for my school's production of *High School Musical*.

Me? I later found myself standing in front of my bathroom mirror after the house had gone quiet again. It depicted the stillness of an ocean after a tsunami. The fluorescent yellow lights flooded harshly through the bathroom, making the marble counter look almost clinical.

I studied myself as if from a distance, turned slightly, tugged at the hem of my skirt, smoothed it, and let it fall. I then leaned closer. Then stepped back. I hoped a better angle might conjure a different truth. With the pad of my finger, I traced the path your eyes had taken earlier. The X's I placed on the map were precise enough to leave a phantom ache. Standing there on the cool tile, I thought, not with panic, not even sadness, but with quiet certainty, that if you had noticed, then the world might have been noticing all along.

After that, I began to inspect every day. Classroom windows became mirrors for me to peer at when the lights dimmed. In the black flash of a Chromebook screen, I watched my face appear in the corner before it shut down. Washing my hands before class three times, four times, long enough to wish my jawline was sharper. Your comment replayed constantly like a catchy song that never left. Sometimes it played in your voice, and sometimes in mine. It followed me like a

tail through the narrow hallways and sat with me in class. It told me something was wrong. That something needed fixing. And it convinced me this was normal. Right?

By the end of sixth grade, I had rearranged my actions and thoughts around that idea. I chose seats carefully and crossed my arms before I laughed. I learned how to sit forward at just the right angle so nothing pressed or folded in the wrong way. My mom would say my posture was “simply immaculate.” Little did she know it took “simply forever” to perfect.

I started observing others. How some girls were invited to things while others jumped in too late, like tripping over a jump rope. During lunch, some girls ate without giving a second thought, while others hesitated to swallow the spoonful of soup.

I slowly watched the numbers drop every day, and at first, it felt like pride. But then, it started to feel closer to fear. I convinced myself it was all a matter of discipline. I paid myself a penny every time I refused an afternoon snack. To this day, they’re stored in a tall pink Hello Kitty jar. On my birthday, there was a tall tres leches cake with milk soaking the sponge and sweetness pooling on the plate. I ate one slice that I regretted immediately after. Later that night, I did pushups until sweat dripped slowly down my neck, promising myself I would do better tomorrow.

After countless Chloe Ting ab workouts, dill pickle salad packets, and oversized Costco hoodies, my clothes finally fit the way I wanted them to. I stood in my room and turned side to side, wondering if this version of me was finally the right one.

As always, the aunties noticed first. Their compliments came quickly, like syrupy-sweet gulab jamun that had soaked too long. Next, invitations to sleepovers were sent, giggling through BuzzFeed quizzes and lying silently while *Murder on the Orient Express* played in the

background. And I remember thinking, with a dull kind of sadness, *So this was all it took*. And honestly, that was the worst part.

What no one saw was the quiet arithmetic of reduction. How carefully everything was monitored and investigated. How joy could be revoked as a punishment. It no longer felt like my life; it felt like managing someone else's.

Years later, I was standing in a Karate potluck, when I heard it again, not the same words, but a similar idea. A younger girl from my karate class stood nearby with shoulders drawn inward and eyes flicking toward the floor as someone laughed and compared her to her sister.

I felt my old instinct rise immediately to stay quiet and keep the peace so that things don't become awkward. I felt the familiarity of it settle in my chest. But then I thought of the mirror. The pennies. The cake. I felt the cost of speaking line itself up in my throat.

And still I spoke.

Not loudly. Not perfectly. But they're all the same. I said, carefully, that comments like that do more harm than good. The auntie cleared their throat and rapidly moved on to a different conversation, but not before the moment could announce itself. It was small. It was uncomfortable. It was enough.

I never told you any of this. I never said your sentence became the opening dialogue of a long, private conversation I would have with myself for years. I never said how much I wanted to raise my voice until it scraped my throat raw. We prize harmony here. We choose our words so the elder will not be wounded, even when their words wound us. Because respect is prized over honesty. Because elders are not questioned. Because harmony is valued, even when someone loses their peace.

I have learned that silence can be pledge allegiance to something I don't agree with. That politeness can be the glue that holds harm in place. When we refuse to name what has been said under the guise of care, we teach ourselves to disappear. Because I don't want younger versions of me or the girls watching quietly beside me to believe their worth is something that can be negotiated or debated.

So I am writing because I have decided to commit a small, unruly act. Certainly not a spectacle. Not a rebellion anyone will applaud. The quieter disobedience of naming what was said and what it did. Calling a thing by its name is because that, for me, is a defiance.

If there is cost like awkward meals, comments on my audacity, so be it.

This is my good trouble.

Not mistaking quiet for grace or poise.

Learning, slowly, to take up the space my body has rightfully always held,

Because my body was never the problem.

Yours Truly,

Saanvi Lanke