

## Everlasting Echoes

Traces of golden decorations trail the living room, streamers and balloons looming over harmonies of glistening tinsel. Trays of food are scattered atop fabric-covered tabletops, embellishing the orchestration with platters of grilled meats. Its stifling odour drifts amiably, wafts of smoke hushing the fragrance of floral perfumes. The guests that occupy the room are as vibrant as ever, engaging in light gossip, laughter permeating the air on this New Year's Eve.

It is exactly my sort of scene. On any other occasion, I would indulge in the mindless chatter, uttering words of mundane complexion, humouring the likes of distant relatives. Instead, I find myself perched on the bathroom floor, door shut soundly. The hum of lively conversation carries on, unscathed by my absence.

I hear the familiar tone of Momma's voice, ushering guests in, no doubt insisting on yet another round of drinks. I can almost picture her compelling demeanour, inducing them with ardent spirits as she did to me with her words, ever so determined that hosting this party would help me 'heal'. The very thought seems absurd; as if feeble decorations and cheap punch could somehow dispel the anxiety that now consumes me, the ghosts that torment my sleepless nights. But Momma seemed certain, so I grudgingly agreed.

The time on my phone reads "11:58pm", the digits glaring at me, as if mocking me for my humiliating plight. It's almost laughable, how I've lost count of how many days have passed since it happened, but the memory is an everlasting presence in the forefront of my mind. *School lockers clanking against one another. Fearful screams echoing resoundingly. The shrill sound of fired gunshots.*

My hands begin to tremble ever so slightly, a faint quiver commanding its musculature.

*One gunshot, followed by another, and another one after that. The sound is deafening, projecting off the walls of the girls' bathroom, seeping into its cracks and crevices. My body seems to register the clangour before my mind even begins to grasp at the shock; it is as if it has surrendered all authority, and at that moment, I was nothing but a corpse of bones and flesh.*

It feels as though there is a hand pressed against my chest, bearing down on its frame, wrenching out air faster than I can draw any in.

*I run. I scamper into the nearest cubicle, pulling the door closed. My fingers grapple helplessly at the lock, as if newly acquainted with the metal structure, as if I haven't occupied these stalls countless times before. I prop myself up on the toilet seat, balancing precariously on the plastic surface. My twitching hands clutch at my face in a feeble attempt to remain silent, the desperate*

*sobs that wrack my body escaping in wretched whimpers. My heart is racing frantically, yet my pulse is coming to a standstill all at once. The gunshots do not stop.*

My phone screen beams proudly at me, and I simply cannot breathe. “11:59pm” it reads. I have been dreading this very moment since the break of dawn, wishing that it would dissipate, its existence no longer recognisable. A mere year ago, I would have found myself amongst the sea of onlookers outside, awaiting the countdown to midnight. I would watch with eyes bright and lips slightly parted in awe, enthralled by the sight before me. It seems as if I left a piece of me behind that very day, the essence of my youth finding its escape when I couldn't. I know that the inevitable is to occur any second now, the orchestra of chants confirming my thoughts.

“Three!”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Two!”

I breathe a silent prayer to a deity I do not believe in, for there is only so much a fifteen-year-old can endure.

“One!”

The moment the booming crackle of fireworks permeates the bathroom door feels like a sort of queasy static. The sound echoes against the walls in the most achingly familiar way, sparking a sort of déjà vu that excoriates my insides. I try to see it for what it is, try to envision dazzles of iridescent hues that dust the sky. I try picturing gushes of glimmering embers, bundles of blazing wonder that scatter playfully, whisking and spiraling in a symphony of cascading eruptions.

All I see are splatters of red, staining her shirt, staining mine.

My entire figure is undoubtedly shaking, my body held captive in a relentless grip. My hands clasp helplessly at my ears, a pathetic endeavour to suppress the blaring noise. I flinch unwillingly at each clap of thunder, drift further away from sanity at each clatter. It feels far too real, a miserable emulation of that very day. I reach for my mobile, fingers skidding frantically across its display. I type out three familiar words, eight dreadful letters.

*KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK.*

A sharp inhale.

“Honey, are you there?” a reassuring voice asks.

A shaky exhale.

I slip my phone into the rupture of my pocket, lingering for a just moment; as if the memories could seep out of my fingertips, weave their way into the threads of my jeans, tuck themselves beneath its folds.

A final deep breath.

The polished curvature of the doorknob is cool beneath my palm, the burnish trinket turning flimsily under my shaky grasp. The spectacle of my surroundings slowly reveals itself, each revelation rekindling my acquaintance with reality. It is not the battered rows of lockers that decorates the familiar hallway, but a composition of well-worn photo frames. Not a black-clad figure with a gun in hand, but my Momma, smiling ever so knowingly.

The fear is still a lingering presence, but as I catch a glimpse of fleeting sparks, alongside it is a momentary jolt of excitement. The most fleeting of moments, a fragment of my very being that could never truly disappear. Momma beckons me towards the spirited crowd, her hand a careful pressure on my lower back. This time, I follow.

By Amla