The Mute Room

Chapter 1 - Podi Nona 1983

The darkness of the night sky coagulates outside Podi Nona's window. She has grown to know this square of the sky and its opinions for a while now—and she agrees. After all, these Colombo people with their TVs don't need stars. It's those who take the time to sit outside once their day is done to contemplate the skies along with their trials and tribulations who appreciate starlight.

She no longer has such luxuries. Felled by this beast of a stroke, for the last three years she only has this square of the city sky to watch. This view, this room, and this silence, this is how she will spend the rest of her life. While everything else has been foisted upon her, the silence—this muteness, is of her own choosing.

Despite the stationary view, it is unexpectedly pleasant here, in her son's home. A surprise, since she never expected pleasantness to be associated with her son. It helps that he has the means to hire a live-in nurse to care for her. But it is her daughter-in-law, Rukmani, who makes the difference, coming upstairs to visit every day, chatting as if Podi Nona wasn't mute, and when they are in-between nurses, as they are now, she can summon the cook with one tinkle of the bell hung by her bed.

Podi Nona hears footsteps coming up the stairs. She listens with a deepening frown, puzzled by the slow drag of the slipper-ed steps. Something is amiss. With her grandsons at their boarding school, only Rukmani or the cook comes upstairs. And Rukmani, the only slipper-wearer, has swift purposeful steps.

Podi Nona watches the doorway and is taken aback by the bent form that shuffles in, hugging a haphazard bundle of clothes to her chest.

Rukmani stumbles against the trailing clothes and her blotched face is wet with tears. She staggers to the nurse's bed and falls on it, clothes and all, her body shuddering in silent weeping.

Podi Nona swallows, trying to activate her voice and fails.

Knowing her son, she had been certain this day was coming, that it was just a matter of time. Her had hoped she'd be alive to comfort this daughter when it happened. But now she knows her real wish should have been that the heartbreak of her own life would never be perpetrated again, in the next generation.