

## MYAY HMOE LWIN

### Spare me the Doubt

My hair? No, I've never had it cut. Ever. That's right. Not since I was born.

But wait. Why do you guys want to know so much about my hair? What's so peculiar about it anyway? You guys are so weird.

Hair grows and keeps growing because God meant it to. Why cut it off, I ask you. Is it a crime to let it grow? Does it *lead* to crime?

Yeah. That's me. Living in this same room since I was a kid. Not wanting to go anywhere. What for?

There's a clock in this room, have you noticed? And a window. Don't know if it opens. Haven't tried to in a while. Don't want to. Why let in the dust?

The clock, though. The clock is really useful. It gives me something to look at. I study the second hand, tick by tick. Sometimes I don't take my eyes off it until it has gone full circle – once, twice, thrice – around the timepiece. I tell you, it's so absorbing I hardly have time for anything else.

I am so curious. Curious and envious. When is the second hand going to stop? Does it ever get tired? I stare and stare, envious of the way it inches forward, round and round, an endless revolution.

What am I envious of? You won't understand. But it's like this: Second meets Minute oh so many times on its circular path, but Second never even stops to greet Minute. It just goes its own way. Second is never bothered by the fact that Minute gets to catch its breath and chill. Never bothered that it has to be the faster one always. Never says, Life is so unfair! Second just gets on with it.

Frankly, unlike you, Second has no curiosity about anything or anyone, not even about Minute.

So, yes, I stay in my room because I don't want to see anyone. But you – you keep wanting, keep trying desperately, to see me.

You ask so many questions. About this and that. About my fifteen-foot long hair.

And you'll go on making a big deal about it, telling everyone about me, as soon as you leave this room.

You're all so strange to me. So peculiar. Not that I care. I'd rather watch time, thank you. Watch the endless journey of the second hand around that globe of a clock.

Leave me be, why don't you? Go do your job. Go look for one if you don't have one yet. It's

never too late.

Enough now. Really. Please leave.

Translated from the Burmese by Bon Von; edited by Wendy Law-Yone

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## Doors

No one would believe such a thing – not unless they had been through the same thing themselves. Newlywed time. The most blissful and eventful time. Oh, to wake with your lover, after a lifetime of nights spent alone! Look. The veins on her cheeks. How exquisite. He touched them gently, so gently. Like touching a soap bubble.

Contentment. This was it. And to think all his mornings would be like this. Soft lips. Curling eyelashes. He was looking at a face at rest, at ease. Who would ever have thought he'd end up marrying such a flawless woman?

Having drunk in his wife's beauty, he got up quietly. The new door was still a bit jammed. He pushed with some force, and it opened with a squeal. He glanced at his wife, fearing the noise might have awakened her. Good. Her eyelids were closed.

He went into the bathroom and took half an hour to finish. The bathroom door was jammed as well. A little force. No effect. More force. Still nothing. He pushed harder, opening it with a bang.

He was sweating from the effort. He made a mental note to send someone from the office to grease the door. If not, his wife might be upset when she got up and the door was stuck. This day - wasn't it a day worth remembering for the rest of their lives? On such a day, he couldn't afford to have his wife upset for any reason.

He didn't want to spend the day sitting in the office, doing numbers. He couldn't avoid going in, though, because the meeting with the foreign partner could have a decisive impact on the company. He didn't want to take a single step out of his house.

From his luxury sedan he allowed himself a backward glance. The house was surrounded by an unusually high compound wall, and couldn't be seen clearly. He had had the wall raised to twice the normal height for security, for those times when his wife would be left alone in the house, so the building was invisible. Not satisfied with just a wall, he had topped it with two rolls of German-made barbed wire, over a layer of glass shards. A pair of Dobermans, ready to attack at the mere whiff of human scent, completed the security system.

But the grandest part of the wall was the main gate. Specially ordered and imported, it could only be opened with a touchpad code. No door handles. Just the door frame. For him, the door opened easily thanks to a remote in the car. While thinking about the main gate, he remembered his squeaky room door. Even if oiled properly, those doors would become difficult to with time. He made a note to write up a foreign-import order for them as well.

Arriving at the office, he was greeted by the staff with a round of applause. The manager brought in a big fragrant bouquet with a card that said, "Congratulations!" Pleased with himself, in the best of moods, he announced that there would be bonuses at the end of the month, and extra leave. An even louder explosion of applause than the one that greeted him.

A better morning could not be expected. He was happy and his staff was happy. Not for long, unfortunately. He started to open the door to his office – and met resistance. In full view of his employees, he struggled to get the door open. Nothing. He pushed harder. Still nothing. He turned the lock again. The door did not give.

“Tauk!” He gnashed his teeth, frustrated. Gone was his composure. Gone was the merry office mood. Silence. The manager and staff rushed to lend assistance with the door, getting it to open at last.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, he threw himself into his swivel chair, leaned back and closed his eyes. And fell asleep. How long he was out of it he didn’t know. It was the phone that woke him with its insistent ring. He reached out. Picked up the receiver. Held it to his ear.

“Arrrrgh ...”

Blood spurted from the hand holding the phone. It wasn’t the phone that caused the bleeding. It was broken glass. He felt the shock of pain in his buttocks and looked down. What he was sitting on was not a sofa but a chair filled with glass shards.

He ran out of the room. Worse things were afoot on the other side of the door. The entire surface of the floor was strewn with iron cables. Caught knee-deep in the coils, he was unable to take a step in any direction. His feet hurt suddenly, and felt welt. Blood, he figured. There was nothing he could do about it right now. He must get out of the room, and fast.

When he finally broke free of the cables, he found the door to his office locked. Again. Only after pushing with his all his might, smearing blood on the frame all the while, was he able to get it open. He gaped at what had been his office until just a moment ago. He forgot the cuts and wounds in his hand and feet. He must be seeing things. In the place of his staff were beasts with snouts: foxes, wolves, seals, even. A tiger! Good lord. A tiger too, it looked like. A pack of savage beasts – how many he couldn’t tell, he couldn’t count – ready to tear him to pieces. Their teeth were bared, saliva dripped from their jaws.

What now? Hurry, hurry. But where to? Behind him was a room filled with broken glass and steel cables; in front of him were beasts ready to pounce. Which way to choose?

Eyes squeezed shut, jaws set, he braced himself and ran the gauntlet, sprinting past the beasts, out into the street. He knew this view, this road: it was his daily route connecting home to office. Being downtown, it was a busy road day and night. But not a single car or pedestrian could be seen at the moment.

The beasts showed up soon enough, though. He heard their growls, their snarls, their loud panting. Then he saw them as they rounded the bend behind him, swaying on two feet. Walking. Upright - like humans. He needed to stop, to examine his badly lacerated hands and feet. But not yet. The beasts were on his tail. Blood dripping, he ran.

The gravel road was long and straight, the sun merciless. The tar on the road was sticky from the heat. The imprint he left from his feet held little runnels of blood. His hands throbbled with pain, salted by the sweat in his palms. Onward he rushed, worried now about his bride. He couldn’t bear to imagine what might have befallen her. Crazed with apprehension, he ran without stopping, until he reached the corner of his road and could finally see his high compound wall. Broken glass and iron wires glistened in the sun.

The damned door! He realized he didn’t have the remote control with him. No problem; he had the code. He punched in numbers on the keypad. Nothing happened. He tried again, taking care to key in the right numbers. The door did not move. What on earth was wrong? The code he had was the right one. He was sure of it. The number sequence was a combination of their birthdates, hers and his. No, he was right. Only something wasn’t working. He punched in some random numbers, just in case. The beasts were not far behind. Climb the wall. That was all that was left to him. Heaving himself up with every ounce of strength in his limbs, he scaled the remaining height like a bug, an insect struggling to gain traction. Only, now that he was climbing he regretted building such a high wall. Never mind ... once he was inside the compound, he would be safe. Safe and sheltered in the green ...

The steel cables he'd had imported and the broken glass he'd ordered installed were piercing him all over; his arms and legs were slick with blood. But he had done it! He reached the top roll of the iron wires, leaned over, lost his balance, and fallen – into his blessed compound.

He tried to stand but couldn't. Shooting pains in his feet made him stumble, and fall on his face. His feet might be broken. So what? He could forget about the pain and the injuries, and rest now. He was in his own domain, safe at last. No chance of the beasts getting in. Such was his relief, he felt something like drowsiness come over him.

The dobermans. He'd almost forgotten about them. How would they recognise their master, covered as he was with blood and grime - the very master who had carefully selected and purchased them from the breeder? His strength had left him; there was nowhere to run to. "HELPPPPP!" he screamed. And screamed.

How can one explain such things to people with no such experience? Newlywed time. The most blissful and eventful time. Oh, to wake with your lover after a lifetime of nights alone! Look. He gently lifted the bed sheet "Arrrrrrr..."

What was this ... this thing that had taken the place of his wife? A shrivelled crone in an open coffin. No mistake. Skin like badly cured parchment: deep creases, liver blotches, overlarge moles and warts. Hair as white as a horse's mane.

Help me. What just happened?

He glanced at the door. Closed.

*Translated from the Burmese by WMH; edited by Wendy Law-Yone*

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