

A Letter Home

Dear future self,

By the time you read this I'll be dead.

By the time you read this, the parts of me I used to call mine will have been ripped away completely, left to rot on the faded grey asphalt of the Boulder Park basketball court on north side.

Because last time, you got lucky.

Last time you were playing ball at Ritwik's shiny new apartment complex. He was the latest to make it out from the South Nashua hood, and you weren't thinking about how the August sun would further char your brown skin.

That was your first mistake.

You shot around and laughed as your body stuck out like a sore thumb on the white backdrop of Boulder Park Apartments. Thomas and Kyle separated themselves as far as they could from your people as they picked teams.

"Me and Thomas, against you and your friends," Kyle told Ritwik, pointing a long finger at you and Jit. You divided, white from brown, like modern-day Partition as you dribbled the ball to the top of the faded white arc.

"Check up," you told Thomas, tossing him the ball with a smile. He glared back before thrusting the ball into your chest.

That's when you should have realized.

But you didn't, and you played hard, thinking you were friends. You drained floaters, found Jiit for open 3s, and soon you were leading ten-six, game point.

"Game point, bro. Check." You grinned as you bounced Thomas the ball off the asphalt.

Thomas held the ball at his hip, back hunched as his cold blue eyes stared into yours. You'd seen the look in his eyes before, the same look the police give Baba at traffic stops, or the one your teachers give you when you fail tests, and your skin is the wrong color. He shoved the ball into your stomach, and grabbed your jersey as he held his icy glare.

You knew white people didn't like you. You knew they didn't like to lose to you, especially on their court on north side Nashua.

But you still whipped the ball into the Jiit's hands as he cut the basket, and he rose high for the floater from the paint – before Kyle shoved him hard in the back. He crashed to the ground as the ball clattered off the backboard and fell through the rusted chain-link net.

You helped Jiit to his feet as Kyle turned away, disgusted.

"Fucking curry boys." He jammed his pale fists into his pockets.

You froze the way you always do as Ritwik and Jiit started towards him. You looked down at the ground, and a shiver passed over your body. The world seemed to blur as gentle words came to your ears.

"It's only a matter of time before you blow up the place." You heard Thomas's voice call, but you didn't listen as it was drowned out by your mother's soft whisper.

"Raj. You are not white. You must remember," you heard her murmur. "Remember your place in this life."

There were three of you, and two of them. You could have beat their ass, no problem.

But Ma's voice is what lead to you see the police car parked behind the chain walls of the court. Ma's voice is what brought three brown boys home safe that night, what kept three mothers from crying, and society from forgetting. Ma's voice is what saved your life.

But it didn't save mine.

I died that day, so many years ago.

I was the part of you that could trust white people without hesitation, that could play ball without being nervous, that didn't live in fear. I was a part of your soul, and Kyle and Thomas took that away. Don't let them do it to you – don't let them take Ma's voice. Do it for you, do it for your people. Do it for Ma.

Because she'll read this letter when you die.

She'll read this one day after you're in town, maybe on north side again, your brown body sticking out like a sore thumb against the white neighborhood behind you.

Maybe you're with Kyle and Thomas again. You'll beat them in basketball like you did years ago, and they'll be angry the way white people have been for decades.

“Curry boys,” they'll probably say. Maybe they'll spice it up and call you ‘terrorist’. And you'll freeze like you always do, and wait for Ma to save you.

Only this time, you won't hear her.

And she'll read this letter when you don't come home.

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