

## VACANT

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I rest within a white room; he lies confined to a bed.

A palm imprint scars my cheek as I lean into my elbow, watching his chest move in perfect rhythm. Oversized pyjamas engulf his body; he lies under taut covers. I monitor his sealed eyelids, waiting for them to open. His hands, crafted from folds of creases, lay gently on his lap; a gold band hangs loosely on a shrivelled finger.

I remember when he could remember. He recollects memories rarely nowadays, brain infiltrated with contamination. I cherished those moments when he had just woken and could really see me. He would caress my lips, kiss the salt that sullied my cheeks.

Life had been erratic; our passion melting away our barriers – with him I could be myself. Never criticized, nor belittled, we'd spend days encased in each other's arms. At night I imagine him wrapped around me, his moist whispers clinging to my neck, fingers tracing my body.

Now, life is a pattern. Watch him sleep, witness his revival, watch him disintegrate. Some days he sits up in bed, mouth sewn shut in tumult; others he curses me, obscene insults penetrating my core. Once my protection, now I need protecting from him.

His eyes open. Dragging my haggard bones towards him, our ridged fingers entwine. I tell him everything, memory momentarily restored. He is proud of my work in his garden, the way I deal with his suffering. He is apologetic, I am reassuring. We watch birds sweep into the garden, dart across the grass, kidnap breadcrumbs.

I envy their contentment.

Looking back, my eyes yearn for recognition in his. In return, a quizzical glare. He is gone.

He slumps, like a puppet whose strings have been cut, body quivering as sobs wrench from his lips. Hurling abuse at me, saliva erupts from his vicious tongue, each word impaling me. I walk out and sink down the door; my burning eyes fasten shut, moist hands cling around my ears.

I pull the ring off my finger, run its golden rim across my body. I press the cool metal to my nape, my lips, before sliding it back.