



KNOCK ON WOOD

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The sounds of my nail cutters from my room echo through the house. I sigh in defeat as I hear my mother's footsteps rush to my room.

"Namya, Namya," she shouts. Her footsteps get louder and louder. "Are you insane?" she gasps. "What are you thinking? Cutting your nails at this hour?"

I quickly put the nail cutter down on the table. After all these years, I should've known better. According to my mom, if I cut my nails at night, I'm bound to have bad luck.

Why does this even matter?

Superstitions have shaped my upbringing and influenced me in how I lead my life. Cultural values were intertwined with superstitions. Growing up, I used to view them as useless, but looking back now, I realize they have subconsciously guided my viewpoint on how I approach life. Specifically in South Asian and Middle Eastern culture, everything ties back to the "evil eye," or *Nazar*, a belief that a negative gaze can cause great misfortune, illness, or injury. Growing up, I knew I wasn't allowed to brag about anything or speak of good things unless they actually happened. I was careful with my words and rarely spoke about myself.

There would be things that I was forced to grow out of. My sister, on the other hand, was left-handed. She wasn't allowed to use her left hand for certain things, such as praying or accepting offerings. She wasn't allowed to eat with her left hand during religious ceremonies.

Everything seemed to be a sign. Bad test grades, my clumsiness, or random injuries, everything seemed to lead to my not following the superstitions. I grew to be annoyed with my mother's paranoia, but little did I know that I'd start to adapt to it as well.

At a certain point in my life, the superstitions became overwhelming. It was at the peak of my anxieties junior year of high school—school, college, and life was the opposite of what I wanted it to be. Hence, I'd be worried about the evil eye or bad fortune. Over and over again, I'd be checking my stride, making sure I don't step on a crack, and I'd constantly knock on wood if I said anything remotely close to "jinxing." I was incapable of not thinking about superstitions at any point, because everything in my life seemed to be out of my control. The only things I could control were these small rituals that somewhat brought me a sense of power that I felt I had lacked.

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At the beginning of senior year, during the peak of my anxiety with college applications, my parents decided to move houses. I was too preoccupied, but looking





back, my parents were joyous with the new home, the home they knew they would retire in. They were finally living in their dream house, and they deserved it. The day we moved in, we, of course, demanded a ritual to remove any signs of bad luck. The first thing we did as a family was boil milk on our new stove. The milk overflowed, serving as a powerful omen of wealth and happiness.

That very day, three crows came walking on our front lawn.

“Namya! Namya!” my parents rushed me over to the window. I saw the three crows flocking around, surrounding each corner of our house. My parents gleamed with excitement.

In Indian culture, crows are the messengers of your loved ones who have passed. They serve as a passage between the physical and spiritual world.

“That must be your two *tatas*¹ and your *bamma*²,” my dad gleamed. This is one of the few times I saw my parents so at peace, for once not concerned with routine or order. The clarity the crows brought them made them so youthful. I knew they felt confident that they made the right decision with the new house; they saw this as their parents blessing them.

My mom quickly went outside and put the blessed ritual offerings on the ground for the crows. The crows nibbled at the offerings, flying away after they finished. My parents still kept their grins plastered on their faces—their happiness was unmistakable.

After that day, I realized: the superstitions weren’t just annoying. As immigrant parents, my parents had faced a lot of uncertainty throughout their lives. Sometimes, their rituals were the only way for them to feel as if they had control over the unpredictability of their lives. With them, my parents could mediate how many risks they had to take. Although we grew up hushed at many moments, it was our parents’ way of ensuring our safety in a world where nothing is predictable.

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Namya Kasturi is a freshman studying Liberal Studies, going into Psychology afterwards. She wrote this piece to reflect on how superstitions have surrounded her during her childhood.

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¹ Telugu word for grandfather

² Telugu word for grandmother on father’s side