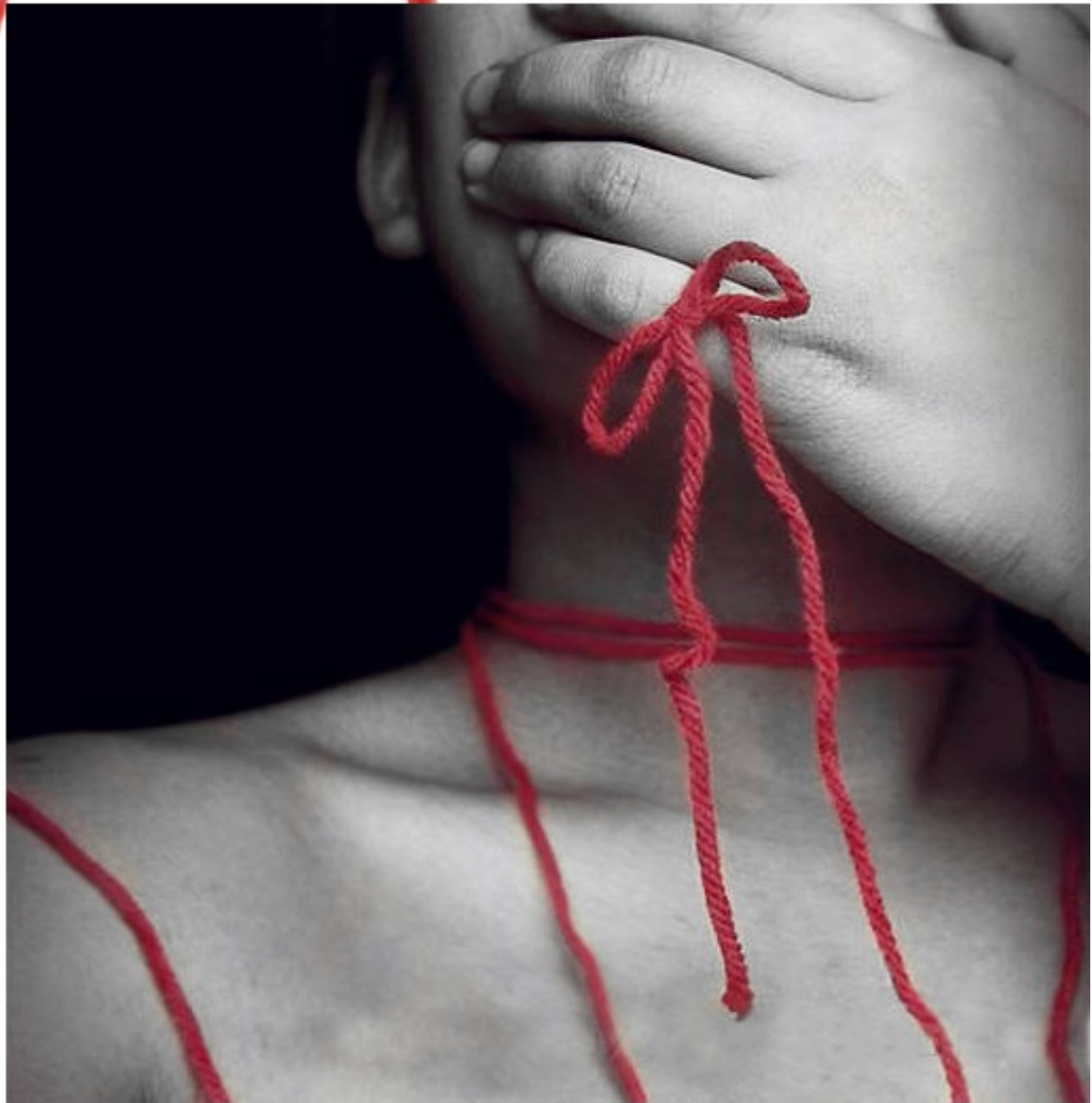


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Red Strings: 00

She thought her roommate was one of those few people that turned sad awfully young. Tiffany observed her over many moons and wondered why. There is no one reason she can pin-point, nothing in particular that could have been the source of sadness. She had a sad, stoic, serious air about her, it sets her apart from the others. Everyone thought it was a display of maturity, a kind that defies her youth and that made people feel she was someone that they could trust, rely, lean on.

Tiffany thought so too in the beginning.

The way she held herself was interesting as well, Tiffany notes. Back ramrod straight, curt nods, measured smiles, careful replies. Sometimes, it was almost like she was bracing herself for a blow.

Later Tiffany discovered, there was a softer side to this hard shell Taeyeon displayed. She was so young and technically should be in the prime of her youth, but that girl was always sick. She held herself so strong outside, constructed barriers, walls that were tall and so dense that no one could see past it. But in reality, she bruised like anyone else and perhaps even more, she tire faster and cried too, curled up like a child, in the dark, when she thinks she is alone and therefore safe. Tiffany really wanted to reach out and hold Taeyeon in her arms, but she was still uncertain if Taeyeon would permit that, to lay bare her true self to someone she just befriended six months ago so she stayed behind that wall, holding her breath in, listening to the quiet sobs of her friend.

Taeyeon loved zoning out, thoughts, memories and daydreams were her firm friends and refuge and she remembers longer so much longer, even the things Tiffany thought were scant and little. But her friend sought significance in the insignificant. Tiffany once saw her from a distance picking up a tiny white flower and breathing in deeply its scent, it was probably a common wildflower, the hardy kind that grew abundantly by the roadside especially during springtime but the smile that it brought to Taeyeon's face, made Tiffany smile too.

The girl had a gentle sensitive soul Tiffany concluded. And though she also had a mischievous spirit, gamely partaking in daring pranks with the gag trio once stuffing Jessica's pillow with water balloons and when the ice princess dropped her head on it, wet her bed, it was a such a rare sight to see Jessi running angrily with a broom in her hand chasing after four laughing girls. Tiffany was still perplexed for she felt sometimes, as time passes, Taeyeon grows younger, sadder.

Still, with everything she learned of her friend, there was still this distance between them, Taeyeon would not let Tiffany in.

Then everything changed one day.

It was the day they sneaked out of the dorm, took a train to a beach and laid on a blanket under the stars.

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"That's Alpha Leonis there, and if you join it with that other five stars, you have Leo the constellation, your birth sign."

"Where?" Tiffany asked, her eyes searching the vast skies.

"There." Taeyeon took Tiffany's hand into her's and pointed towards the group of six stars."Do you see it now?"

"I think so," Tiffany said but not really, there were just too many stars out there.

Taeyeon hummed contented. "I'm glad you came with me."

“Me too. This is a nice break from training and the dorms. I’m glad we can spend this time together.”

Taeyeon smiled a little, “You know I’ve always wanted to know something.”

“What?”

“Why you never give up.”

“Give up? What?”

“You’re so persistent. In our friendship. You never back off, no matter what I do. You just keep coming back.”

Tiffany turned to her side and looked at Taeyeon, the older girl too, was on her side, facing Tiffany.

“I don’t know why myself. I just feel drawn to you. I guess deep down, I just knew, you’re a keeper. And that you’re worth it. Even though we’re so different and I don’t quite understand you sometimes, and there’s the language barrier and culture too, but I feel that, if, if we got over all those, we could be really great friends.”

Tiffany studied Taeyeon’s face, the girl seemed half-surprised, half-pleased, the pleased half growing by the second. The older girl had a lop-sided smile and Tiffany felt Taeyeon’s finger on her nose.

Taeyeon poked her nose.

“You’re cute you know.” Taeyeon said, with a full blown grin on her face. “Thank you. Thank you for telling me that, that’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. So I’m worth it eh? I warn you, once you got me, there’s no turning back,” Taeyeon laughed out loud, the laughter in her eyes made them crinkle.

“I think I can handle that. You know me, I don’t give up, I never give up especially when it comes to people.” Tiffany drew back her head smiling her own eye-reaching smile.

“Okay. Its a deal. You don’t give up on me. And in return, I won’t give you up either.”

“Pinky promise to seal the deal.”

“Pinky promise really? How old are you?”

“Almost seventeen and never too old for pinky promises with best friends.”

“So we’re best friends now too?”

“Of course!” Tiffany shoved Taeyeon’s shoulders, the older girl was laughing again. She grabbed Taeyeon’s hand, “Stick out your pinky.”

Taeyeon stuck out her pinky, “Okay fine. Demanding woman. I can’t believe I’m promising to put up with this for probably the rest of my life.”

“Taeyeon!”

“I’m just kidding, I love you okay? Best friends forever!” Taeyeon said before breaking into peals of more laughter.

They swore a promise that day not knowing it would seal their fate for the coming years. They did not foresee the many arguments to come, the tears and anger and countless slammed doors, the great many adventures they will have together with their seven best friends, and the laughter, oh the laughter of many happy years too. They did not know yet, of the broken hearts in the later years, of the pain that will accompany the disappointments and falling outs, of the distancing and the heart-wrenching separations and the many reconciliations as they try to figure out why they kept coming back to each other. It was too early to tell and they were too young to think. This was just the beginning.

The silk of your dress is all I felt as you waltz past me. The whiff of your perfume, the almost touch.

Music fills in the silence. As much as I love silence, it can be unbearable at times. Breathing in the still air, breathing in the dead cold air. It is making me deader inside.

The outtake is heavy, heavy breaths. Music, music, waltzy music. I close my eyes and lean back, sagging into the chair, breathing. Waltzy, waltzing in my head. Just you and I. Someplace deep in the recesses of my mind, you and me. That is as close as we can get. That is as close as I can allow you to get. An imaginary you and an imaginary me in this imaginary place.

Sinking slowly into the comforts of the leather, humming. Humming as the memories dance to and fro. This is one of those days, when I am filled with nostalgia, the days you draw near to me. When the eyes are closed, you cannot see what is before you, only the blank slate of darkness, the images in your head then, takes precedence. And so, some days I wish to close my eyes, forever and ever. I shall take the hands of the music that is calling me from far, and I shall leave, retreating further and further inwards to that sweet paradise.

But that is yet to come, for now I shall be contented with humming, just humming this sad old song.

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“Taeyeon.” Sunny called as she stood by the doorway. “Taeyeon.”

“Shhh. Just a while longer.” Taeyeon said, her eyes still closed.

It almost seem like she was dozing in that huge armchair, Sunny hoped her friend wasn’t too drunk. It was that time of the year again, her friend would play old jazz records or classics on an ancient phonograph and she would drink half a bottle of wine, ice wine and always of the sweet variant. And in the morning, the morning of her birthday, for the past seven years, she or one of the others would never fail to find her seemingly asleep on that old chair.

The first three years were the hardest, she remembered it was always her having to coax Taeyeon out of that chair, she and Sooyoung or Jessica on either side, each taking an arm, propping her friend up. Her friend’s anguish and never-ending tears were like a flood that threatened to drown the rest of the group. She had completely let herself go. It was a hard thing to witness, those years were hard.

The later years were easier, defeat had sunk in, she was quiet and she drank wine and listened to jazz and watched the window with a faraway look in her eye. When her thirst was quenched and her glass emptied, she always fell into a deep sleep, one that Sunny was sure Taeyeon did not want to wake up from. She dreamed the same dream every day, it was difficult to see her friend like this. While the world moved on, Taeyeon stayed rooted in that same spot. The stubborn clinginess, the staunch refusal to move, to give even an inch, was impressive but so stupid she just wanted to scream at her friend sometimes, look at yourself, do you see what you’re doing to yourself??

Love screws you up.

“What did you say Sunny?”

“Nothing.”

“I won’t cry today.”

“You can do anything you want today. Happy birthday Taeyeon.”

Taeyeon got up wine glass in hand, and then in an almost theatrical fashion, she dropped it, watching it

shatter into pieces and then briskly walked out of the room.

Sunny observed as Taeyeon brushed past her, her friend's face was blank, it wasn't twisted in pain or anger, it was smooth and clear, empty. It saddened her.

She made a mental note to inform the ahjumma house helper about the broken glass. Patience, Sunkyu, patience. It is only one day, only today. Every year, it was only once when Taeyeon allowed her numbness to thaw resulting in the appearance of this difficult disposition. For one day, she was a nightmare, a difficult broken child-person.

Sunny moved to catch up with Taeyeon. She will be back to normal tomorrow. Working, normal, mechanical Taeyeon will be back tomorrow.

Jeju Island.

It was the first time they were all meeting again after the long vacation, each girl had decided to spend it away from the group, they went back to their families, to school, or for the more adventurous – travel to some far off exotic land, the taste of languid leisure was like sinking into a hot bath after a long day, it felt so good after all the hard work they had put in.

They kept in touch of course, their phones were often buzzing from notifications of someone spamming the group chat, it was a very handy thing and it was through the chat they had arranged this little group vacation at a beach resort on Jeju Island.

Everyone arrived on time with Tiffany the earliest. The girl greeted each member warmly as they arrive at the resort's lobby. One by one they came and time ticked on, half-an-hour, an hour, two hours. Their little leader was late. They decided not to wait and checked-in, the resort had given them an entire floor of suites for their lodging. Sooyoung and Yoona decided to wait at the lobby as the others left for their rooms, the younger of the two had received a text from Taeyeon saying, "I'll be late. Don't wait."

The two food lovers swapped small talk over which restaurants they will be visiting on the island before Yoona delicately broached the subject that had been on her mind all this time, "Where did Taeyeon-unni go? She never sent word except when we finalized our group vacation. She just dropped a message saying, *I'll be there*. That's all, a month of absence and just three words. Its very sketchy."

"She went to Japan I think, her umma told me she bought an apartment there. I don't know what she did though, we'll know later when she shows up."

Another text arrived, "I'll meet you guys at the bar later at night."

Yoona and Sooyoung were unsure of what to make of this, but they got up and went to find the others telling them of Taeyeon's message. Tiffany was very nonchalant about the whole thing, she shrugged and said, "Okay, in the meantime, lets plan our itinerary..."

The planning took up half the day because everyone had different opinions, from Sunny's "Free and easy, everyone do what they want," to Yuri's "Water-sports please," and Jessica's "I just want to laze around at the beach." Tiffany objected to everyone's opinion arguing that they all ought to spend it doing something together, all 9 of them. "How about boating?"

It was almost dinnertime when they left the large suite exhausted from the arguing and compromising of plans. They headed to the resort's seafood restaurant and after having a scrumptious dinner left for the bar to wait for Taeyeon.

The minute Taeyeon walked into the bar, Yoona could sense a difference in her oldest unni. She was overflowing with swag and a kind of charisma she usually reserved for stage performances, which was odd because this wasn't the stage and they weren't fans so Yoona thought, something has changed. Why did she need to put her game persona on? It was really fishy. What happened in Japan, Yoona wondered.

After the usual greetings and thumping of backs with Sooyoung saying, "Shortie its been ages!" and Seohyun's reproachful "Unni... being late is not good," that ended in a hug and a, "I miss you unni," there was the exception of Tiffany. She was the last and when she came forward before Taeyeon, the others gave them wide berth. The atmosphere immediately changed.

"Its been awhile." Tiffany said as she looked at Taeyeon.

“Yeah.” Taeyeon defiantly looked back before her gaze faltered and she broke contact.

Tiffany moved first and pulled Taeyeon into a hug. The older girl stiffened, her body’s reflexes immediately acting on this invasion of space. Too close, we’re getting too close. Her defenses were up, resistance on high before she shut them all down and allowed herself to relax into Tiffany’s embrace. Too close but its okay, really its okay she reminded herself as she breathed in the scent of Tiffany’s hair. She felt herself sinking once again.

It was still an awkward hug, some things just don’t change Yoona thought. The two awkward unnis.

Later they caught up with news over cocktails – Cosmopolitans and Baileys, several rounds of margaritas and a Sex on My Face, “Mine.” Yuri said calmly as the others snickered when she claimed her drink. “It taste good okay.”

“Unni you’re not allowed to bring anyone to our room later.” Yoona told Yuri. They were sharing a suite, the girls had paired off in twos and threes with regards to their room arrangement. Yoona turned back to the conversation, Taeyeon was now sharing a funny story of how she scored a famous Japanese actress who was introduced to her by a composer she was working with in Japan.

“I hope she isn’t an AV actress,” Tiffany remarked as she downed a big gulp of vodka on the rocks.

“She isn’t. She’s very good at what she’s doing, her new movie will be out in theaters in August. And she’s very pretty,” Taeyeon said. She was frowning, her irritation at Tiffany’s comment visible.

A sense of foreboding fell on Yoona. Her two unnis will be sharing a room. The other seven aware that they both were going through a bad patch had conspire to fix that. As Jessica succinctly puts it, “They’re both fucking the wrong people. That’s the root of the problem. Just throw them both into a room and let them fuck each other. Problem solved.” Seohyun had disapprove of the choice of words but the plan received an unanimous vote from all seven. So that’s that.

It was almost 3:00 AM and Hyoyeon was flat out drunk and making funny, nonsensical comments about the spherical patterns on the carpet as they left the bar. Most of them were tipsy except for Seo Juhyun the group’s moral authority who only had a glass of wine. She was currently lecturing Hyoyeon on self-restraint as she half-carried her roommate to their room. Yoona trailed behind Taeyeon and Tiffany. Both had a bit too much to drink and they were arguing. Nothing new. The news of their room arrangement did not pleased them.

“Stop it Taeyeon, we meet after so long and the first thing we do is argue? Really? That is all we seem to be doing, argue and fight, even the last time. I’m so tired of this.”

“Are you tired of me then? I wasn’t the one who started this.” Taeyeon replied heatedly as she fumbled for the keycard.

“Don’t lie, did you forget what you did to him?”

“He deserved it. I was drunk so sue me. I never liked him, he’s a rotten scumbag.” Taeyeon pushed the door open and stumbled in.

“You say that–” Tiffany voice trailed off as she followed Taeyeon in. The door slammed shut.

Yoona stopped outside their door and wondered if it was alright to leave them two alone. She pressed her ear to the door. The voices were muffled but she could hear snatches of the conversation.

“We’re not good for each other.”

“That’s not good enough! Tell me you don’t feel the same, tell me you don’t love me, say it and I’ll leave and I’ll never bother you again!”

Yoona pulled away in mild shock when she heard Taeyeon raising her voice. Sunny and Sooyoung were coming down the corridors, “What are you doing?” Sooyoung asked her dongsaeng.

Yoona put a finger to her lips shushing them. *Listen.*

“I.. I..” Yoona could hear Tiffany stuttering.

On the other side of the door, Taeyeon made a bold gamble. Tiffany’s hesitance, her pent-up feelings and she would later blame, liquid courage led to a very regrettable decision. Taeyeon misread the signs and launched herself onto the younger girl kissing her forcefully. They stumbled backwards until they hit the wall. There was a loud crash.

The sound of something breaking in Taeyeon and Tiffany’s room startled the others outside, Jessica whose room was beside theirs came out, her brows knitted in worry. She turned to the others and asked, “Do you think we should intervene?”

The words barely left her lips when all of them heard a loud slap. The door then opened abruptly and Tiffany ran out. Her face was pale and she was breathing heavily. She ran past them.

Yoona stood there in shock, her mouth opened, she looked at her unnis for directions, what should she do? Sooyoung left chasing after Tiffany so she, Sunny and Jessica approached the opened door.

There they found Taeyeon crumpled and on her knees. She looked dazed, her left cheek bright red, stinging with pain. She closed her eyes and a tear slipped out.

Sunny rushed to her friend’s side and Taeyeon fell into her arms crying her heart out. “All we ever do is hurt each other.” She kept asking why and repeated again and again that they only ever hurt each other. She cried and cried. When you can’t say something, you either keep silent and let the words torment you inside or you cry as most humans wont to do. The cry the shaking sobbing girl let out was incoherent and incomprehensible except for the fact that it resembled the sound of a wounded animal. Taeyeon’s tears spoke for her. She was hurt, she was so very hurt.

Later when she had calmed down a little, she felt empty. The outpouring of pain and bitterness had left her hollow and weak. She did not even have the strength to feel ashamed of her emotional breakdown and barely protested when Yoona lifted her up and carried her to Jessica’s room. She was tired, so tired of fighting this war.