

BACK TO YOU

Angad Sethi, Editor-in-Chief, 2021-22

I press a button, and the entire structure roars to life in a brilliantly timed visual and auditory spectacle. The swathe of lights is just short of blinding, and the roar just a decibel away from turning raucous. I fling the shifter to 'D'.

It is surreal, it truly is. The way your lips break into a smile. Emotions aren't meant to be tangible, yet, at this moment, I can't seem to think of anything more corporeal. It glimmers in your deep-set, dark-brown eyes. That's where the twinkle is born, the one that regally announces your oncoming slew of guffaws. The magic however lies in the pitch-perfect choreography of your emotions: the twinkling eyes, the parting lips, the booming laugh, the courage to continue despite the growing audience to our shenanigans. You grasp my shoulder and jerk back, allowing the filtered rays of sunlight to embellish one half of your comically contorted face, and in that moment, it seems that even the sun longs to participate in this dreamlike orchestra of emotions, piling onto the radiance that you emanate. And you let it, you've always loved the sun and its warm kiss; you are like a spectacle of nature, blossoming in its presence. You revel in this warmth. And truthfully, I do too. That's why we are so happy here, so blissfully ignorant of the lives we paused for a detour to this panacea. At some point, I look at you, brushing off the hair that the wind was whipping against your face, laughing, and squinting at me, and in that moment, I was free, free of the burden, free of the heartache and the helplessness, free because you, so graciously, set me free.

The engine is still not warm. If you listen closely, you can discern the typical sputter of a cold machine; the pistons are not in harmony with each other; each firing of its own volition, recklessly. I push down on the pedal, not heeding the metallic protest. The needle inches forwards, slowly at first, 15 then 20. I curve a banked road.

'It' happened in your office. That brown nosing colleague of yours did 'it' to you. It was your idea, your brainchild, but the boss didn't hear it from you, she heard it from him, that despicable blob of insecurity. You didn't show it though, you say, and I believe you. You played the game as it should be, diplomatically and precisely, smiling and nodding your way through the meeting, never shedding that veneer you've crafted so meticulously for public exhibition. Back at your place, you tell me about it as I play with your hair, everything, re-enacting every moment, re-uttering every word. I make a pretence of consoling you, a few soothing words for you and only the choicest, most vitriolic phrases for him. And then we fall silent, our minds humming with activity, busy at work, building multiple dystopias, futures where you render his life insignificant, futures where you subject him to abject humiliation, futures where he gets to partake in several glorious downfalls; all of them precipitated by us. There is a future where he gets caught with pornography on his work computer and is promptly frisked away by security as he kicks and screams, a future where his father finds himself on the receiving end of an unplanned downsizing and his sister's online business finds itself in the crosshairs of the tax department. An entire ecosystem, crippled and destroyed, all because he took what was not his to take. And the most gratifying element in this nefarious game of dominoes? We could make this happen. Out in the real world, both of us, with your father's connections and my mother's wealth, we could catalyse this morbid chain of subterfuge and deceit. We could be the king and queen of the dark, basking in the warmth as our

macabre fire enveloped the fragile lives that the people who crossed us have built, laughing gaily as the tongues of flames shot up to consume the ultimate, futile screams of its victims. If we had a little more time, if we had a few more years, we could have been that: the infernal king and queen.

The needle steadily climbs up. It points to fifty now, and that cacophony of metallic noises has now been replaced by a refined, comfortable hum. This is a smidge over the posted limit, and I can only imagine other riders' disgust at seeing a blur of black weave through these excruciating long lines. I don't really have a choice though; I can't stop now. My limbs operate as if not my own, an automated play of upshifting gears and flooring pedals. I stop resisting and give them full control of this ridiculously powered hunk of metal. The narrow road opens up to something that's more my speed, somewhere I don't have the vehicles stifling me, only my thoughts. I feel fluttery, and my mind reciprocates, compelling my foot to push harder on the pedal. 90...100...



The silence is abrupt and brash, washing over us like a particularly agitated wave. It's almost rude; the way we pluck ourselves from the gauche setting which we just shared with the fifty or so attendants; the disorienting strobe, thumping music, waving hands, and swaying bodies, sneakily robbing us of our senses. We drive out into the silence, adjusting to our new-found surroundings which are markedly different from the ones we left out in the majestic lobby. This city never sleeps, but at this moment, it seems to be tucked away like a baby, swaddled in its warm, fuzzy blanket. We've now acclimatised to this chamber of sensory deprivation, it almost feels like one, when the climate in this climate-controlled vehicle changes, leaping from one of pulsating electricity and naked energy to something else entirely, something more substantial, more primal. Our breathing has finally steadied, settling onto a rhythmic, meditative cycle. I can feel it in my heart now, pangs of excitement, flowing and ebbing in rhythm with the undulating asphalt. I steal a glance, and I am entranced. "You are beautiful, like light splitting from glass". Your skin, radiant, even in the pale moonlight; your brilliant locks supported by your shoulders. My heart is full, and this night seems intent on keeping it that way. We've reached your quaint home, and for a moment, we seem to have forgotten how to bid each other goodbye. Our rationality and etiquette, now underpinned by a rather intoxicating cocktail of emotions, the kind of potency that enslaves and rules. You break our belated hug and walk away to the great swinging gates, leaving me alone to sort through this debris and wreckage of thoughts. I can see you stroll towards the gates, your shadow flickering in and out of existence under the vagrant moonlight. You walk in and leave the gate open. The moon glares at me intently, like a stalker shrouded by a thin veil of darkness, as I follow you in.

The engine's roaring now, the needle at a cool hundred and thirty. I can't really distinguish between shapes now; all I see is a sprinting concoction of asphalt, metal, and light. My knuckles are white, wrapped around the leather of a steering wheel that wields tremendous power now, an imperceptible twist can now wreak havoc. I miss an exit; I don't know if it is deliberate. Down that road, lies a quaint home with towering iron gates. There is a full moon today, so the entire courtyard must be bathed in its light. Only now, there is nothing for the moon to glare at, no one to stalk. There is just an old couple and the memories of someone whose picture hangs in the hall, nestled in silver and flowers.

