Story: Strangers with Secrets

Malati grabbed the camera from my hand and asked me to pose with two of my friends beside me so that she can take our picture. I put my arm over the shoulder of the girl sitting on my left, leaned in and smiled at the camera.

Right after the flash of the camera was gone, my eyes fell on him and my smile disappeared. He was wearing that same blue check shirt I had seen him wearing so many times before. Everything was the same – his hair, his smile, his eloquent eyes, his laugh. It felt as if he just walked out of one of those uncountable photographs I have of him and walked into The Coffee House. That too exactly when I’m already here. It felt unreal to me.

My eyes followed him as he came and sat just two tables away from me. There was a girl with him. They were both laughing about something as they sat down. He sat facing me. When he was settled in his chair, his eyes caught mine. I had already made a mental note of looking away immediately if he looks at me, but now when he did, I couldn’t.

I felt the hair on my arm stand up, and a rush of heat in my neck and cheeks. But I couldn’t look away. Neither did he. His lower lip fell open slightly and he seemed to be frozen, as if he just saw a ghost.

I don’t know exactly for how long we were staring at each other, but now that we have seen each other, I knew there was no going back. We both clearly knew that everything was over between us years ago, but something was screaming inside me from the moment I laid my eyes on him. His eyes seemed to be screaming too.

But there was a girl with him.

(She was already looking at me when my eyes fell on her. I had noticed the chattering group of girls she was sitting with the moment I entered, it is kinda hard not to. But I didn’t notice her among them. She is still the mellow wallflower.

Or maybe if her new geek glasses weren’t hiding her dramatic eyes, I could have recognized her sooner.

Her cheeks became bright red when I looked at her. The sunlight from the window behind her lit up her wavy locks, framing her pale petite face, that was obviously too small for her bright smile. Even though she wasn’t smiling at that moment, she was still looking so beautiful I couldn’t breathe.

Something made me want to get up and leave The Coffee House that instant. I couldn’t understand why we both had to come here together. I couldn’t understand why she had to be here the exact time when I come to give my sister a treat before she goes off to her hostel again.

She kept staring at me as if I was some magic trick she couldn’t explain. It did seem like a magic trick, us being here, like this. I wish I could walk up to the magician and ask him why this is happening.

And ask him to make this the longest magic trick in the world.)

The girls managed to distract me. The girl he was sitting with started talking to him too. But his presence kept pulling on my attention and I found myself staring at him quite a few times. I couldn’t make myself concentrate on the food, or on the pointless gossip.

His thick curls, his bushy eyebrows, his clean cheeks, his full lips forming a smile that was as radiant as the sunlight falling on his table. I noticed he was wearing the same watch I gifted him on his last birthday we spent together. I noticed the little sideburns he had always wanted to keep but I never let him. I smiled to myself.

But the girls kept calling me to look at some picture or hear out how a couple broke up or some ridiculous thing. In spite of all this, I could feel his eyes on me sometimes. I pretended to be interested in the girls so that I don’t look at him and make him look away.

It felt like I was waiting for something to happen. And I hope he knew that.

(I was trying really hard to listen to my sister rant about her hostel and her college and her studies. I kept putting in a few words of advice once in a while so that she knows that I’m listening to her. But I know she noticed me looking at someone behind her when I thought she was eating. But I just couldn’t help it.

I wanted to drink her sight in. I wanted to feel her flawless skin with my eyes, I wanted to know if she still smelled like the most sweet smelling bouquet of flowers. I wanted to know what was going through her head every time she looked at me. I wanted to know how many times I crossed her mind all those years after we…

No, this shouldn’t be happening. The more I saw her the more I wanted to sprint out of here and never look back.)

Automatically, I started thinking why we are in this situation today. We were so happy together, and everyone thought we would last forever. But here we are, sitting tables apart from each other after years, and pretending to be strangers. We, who were always the “Meant To Be” couple, now don’t even have the courage to talk to each other.

And then it all started flooding back, all the distance, all the misunderstandings, all the fights, the shouting the screaming, the crying. The ache inside me when we both realized how we belonged to two parallel universes and how we will never be able to fit in each other’s lives, was unforgettable. The way everything in my life had turned bitter for that one grey year, had haunted me for too long.

Looking at him right now, all I could now think of was how much effort it had taken me to clean my own mess after he left. I don’t think I have it in me to do it again.

(I saw her realizing the inevitable truth. I was doing the same myself. As much as I wanted to go up to her and ask her how she’s been, I could not. I knew that if I did so, history would repeat itself, and I wasn’t going to let that happen.

Whatever beautiful moments we shared when we were together, I would treasure them my whole life. But I would never be able to ignore how much we had suffered when we couldn’t handle a few small issues. Every tiny thing exploded into an avalanche and we couldn’t do anything to prevent it. It was like we were poisonous for each other, only hurting each other more and more no matter what we did.

The goodbye had been painful, but I had to make sure that we don’t have to endure another one.)

We got up to leave, while he was still waiting for the bill. I caught his eye when he saw me leaving and I smiled at him. A small goodbye smile was all I could afford now. I silently wished him all the happiness in the world as I left The Coffee House with my friends, never looking back.

(I smiled back at her as I saw her smiling at me. I appreciated both our decisions to let things be as they are. Even though we were strangers, we were both in a good place right now, the main reason being that we weren’t with each other. I hope her dreams come true and we meet each other in some other life.)

The End.