

Estranged in Entanglement

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This novella will always be a very cherished part of my university life. I am glad I have finished this task with care and dedication. I hope this novella brings joy to whoever reads it. And I hope the reader will look at my Neelambor, Joyeeta and Zohad with just as much care and adoration as that of a new mother of three ugly ducklings.

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“Nothing as raw as a newly painted picture can be tainted with malice unless the one seeing it has malice embedded in them. Human beings just existing is a performance. It is a form of art of the truest nature. Perhaps, this is why we don’t like it when someone else doesn’t see us for who we really are. Especially if that someone is a special person. The judgement-”

Neelambor is startled by a mysterious hand on their shoulder. The story has got them hooked. But they have to look up from it to see who this hand belongs to that caused the sudden distortion in their flow of imagination.

“Can I help you?”, Neelambor asks him.

The stranger stays silent. Naturally, Neelambor looks quizzically at this person.

“What are you reading?”

“Oh, it’s a new author. He hasn’t published yet.”

“Is it any good?”

Neelambor takes a second to look at the manuscript before they can answer.

“So far I’ve been enjoying it.”

“Fiction?” The stranger tries not to look too curious.

“Why, yes. Of course it is!”

Neelambor is taken aback by the displeased look of the stranger. “Do you have anything against it?” They quiz him.

“I guess it’s not for me”, he answers after a little pause and leaves immediately.

Neelambor turns to the copy of the unedited piece of writing in front of them. “This is the third time he has done this, hasn’t he?” they think to themselves. They try not to think much of this annoyingly unhinged stranger that has probably made it his mission to have unsolicited conversations like this. Does he do this with everyone?

Does he have any ulterior motive? What does he really want? Neelambor's gaze slowly moves toward the cup of coffee on the table which has now gone cold.

"Surely this was his fault!", they think to themselves. Last time, he made snarky comments about one of the writers they published. It was a travel anthology.

Apparently, the writer had no real knowledge of visiting the Bahamas, yet he made that place one of the themes of the book. Neelambor had argued that it didn't matter since he was writing fiction after all, and its allowed to have fictional details in the story. The argument lasted a while before the stranger acted like he suddenly remembered something and left as abruptly as he showed up. Neelambor found him mysterious and stupid at the same time. An indistinguishable stranger who is either a genius or just a plain idiot. Who knows?

Neelambor's trail of thoughts has to come to a halt as their phone dings. Their boss is calling them. They dread going back to work. That place makes them feel trapped. Constantly being mistaken for someone that everyone thinks you are is frustrating. Colleagues taunting them for every little visible detail about them gets the best of them. "What's their problem if I wear a *teep* with a *panjabi*?" They slowly get up and leave. The half empty coffee mug stays unattended.

Ring the bell of the bicycle is the best part of riding one. That's why Neelambor loves hitting the bell of their blue bicycle whenever a chance arises. They like to ring the bell exactly five times after they reach home to let everyone know of their arrival. "Cring cring cring cring cring", they say in their mind with each ring of the bell.

"You just love doing that, don't you?", a familiar voice comes from behind them. Neelambor doesn't even have to turn around to see who made the comment. They proceed to take their office files out of the rack, "Why, yes! Or else, how will my plants know I'm here?" They finally look up at the voice that was taunting them. A beautiful glint of the afternoon sunlight reflects from the person's eyes as a burst of snarky laughter comes out of this person. Relief takes over Neelambor's face as they realize they're in safe company now. "I don't know why I still get surprised every time I see you doing something quirky. You'd think I'll be used to it after four years. But you still somehow manage to invent new ways of amazing me", says the calming voice.

"Joyeeta, I can't be boring. I'm the wind!" Neelambor laughs. Joyeeta moves past Neelambor as she gets her keys out, still shaking her head in disbelief. Neelambor and Joyeeta quietly make their way through the lobby, careful not to make too much noise while stepping in the tiles. Last time it broke, the building manager blamed Neelambor. He was proven wrong obviously. But it wasn't about right or wrong. It was about acceptance. Neelambor and Joyeeta avoid eye contact with the manager on their way in. They feel an intensely judgemental stare from him.

"How was your day, love?", Neelambor asks as they finally enter their apartment. Both of them feel a rush of blood go down from their heads.

“Terrible”, Joyeeta says as she plops down on the beanbag. “The wind blew all the flyers away. I lost half of them.”

“Oh, no. Coffee?” Neelambor asks, already starting their caffeine magic at the counter.

“Yes, please. And what’s worse is, I cannot use the old flyers anymore. They had a huge printing mistake in it!”

“You didn’t check?”

“Clearly missed it. And I still wouldn’t have found out if it wasn’t for a nice stranger who happened to notice it right when we were picking them up from the street.”

“After the wind blew ‘em away?” Neelambor asks as they hand a cup to Joyeeta.

“Yes! It’s like the universe was sending me signals.” Joyeeta continues while taking the cup.

“It was me. I knew there was a mistake. So I blew those away.” Neelambor utters, as if stating the obvious.

“Haha! Very funny.” Joyeeta halts before sipping the coffee. “You took *these* ones out?”, she asks as she looks with disbelief at Neelambor, pointing at the tea cup. This set of clay kitchenware was a gift from Neelambor’s godmother, Seeta. She has become their guardian angel of sort ever since they started seeing each other. It was custom-made from local potters.

“Yes!”, Neelambor chirps with joy.

“What’s the occasion?”

“What do you mean?”, Neelambor utters casually as they pick up their cup.

“I know you always take these cups out on special occasions or when there’s good news”, Joyeeta says as she looks at them with narrow eyes. Neelambor acts as if they have been caught with a lie. “I’m just really happy”

“And why is that?”

“I found out something new about the weird stranger.”

“The one that asks you weird stuff about what you’re reading?”

“Yes!” Neelambor’s voice lilts again.

“You’re so random.” Joyeeta says as she is once again taken aback by Neelambor’s unusualness.

Neelambor continues while sipping coffee, “He probably has something against fiction.”

Joyeeta rolls her eyes while saying, “He won’t be saying that if he had dyslexia like me.”

“I will get him next time! You’ll see”, says Neelambor as if it’s their mission to defeat this stranger.

“Can you? Is that a good idea?”, Joyeeta retorts.

“Why not?”, Neelambor looks at Joyeeta. A moment of understanding passes as Neelambor recognizes the concern in Joyeeta’s eyes. Neelambor tries to reassure her by stroking the back of her hand. “Don’t worry. He can’t hurt me.” Joyeeta nods in understanding. She gets up from the beanbag as she says, “Enough chitchat. Come help me edit the flyers?”

“What would you do without me!”, Neelambor says as they follow Joyeeta to their study room.

Neelambor is sitting at the desk with a recorder and a copy of *The Fall* in their hand.

“After all, I know of others who have appearances on their side and are no more faithful or sincere.”, Neelambor reads aloud from the book into the microphone in front of them. “I knew a man who gave twenty years of his life to a scatterbrained woman, sacrificing everything to her, his friendships, his work, the very respectability of his life, and whom one evening recognized that he had never loved her. He had been bored, that’s all, bored like most people.” They pause with a raised eyebrow, before continuing to read out loud, “Hence he had made himself out of whole cloth a life full of complications and drama. Something must happen — and that explains most human commitments. Something must happen, even loveless slavery, even war or death. Hurray then for funerals!” Neelambor stops the recorder after finishing the paragraph. They turn to Joyeeta, who is looking at them with doe eyes from the chair beside them, with no sense of the surroundings, all of her focus on her beloved.

“Why?”, Neelambor asks with one eyebrow still raised.

“Why what?”, Joyeeta inquires back.

“Why did you tell me to record this book? I’ve never seen you take an interest in Albert Camus.”

“You can say, I’m trying to win an argument”, she replies before standing up.

“An argument? With whom?” Neelambor’s eyes travel with Joyeeta’s movement.

“Remember the stranger who pointed out the mistake in the flyers?”, Joyeeta says, advancing toward the window.

“Yeah, you mentioned there was someone.” Neelambor replies while trying to jog their memory.

“Well, he came to visit the art centre when I was teaching the other day.” Joyeeta continues with disbelief in her tone, “He said that love cannot be without purpose. That it stems from selfishness. Can you believe it?”

“And when did he say all of this?”, Neelambor asks as their gaze goes back to the book.

“He sat in my class. He said that I haven’t explored love yet”, Joyeeta says while frantically moving her hands.

“Somebody seems stuck up”, Neelambor says while shaking their head.

“Doesn’t he?”, Joyeeta’s voice raises a few scales.

“I didn’t mean only him.” Neelambor says in a snarky tone before a little laughter comes out of them.

Joyeeta looks at them in disbelief. “So you agree with him?”, she quizzes them at their taunt.

A gust of wind comes through the open window, blowing Joyeeta’s long black hair and the pages of the book on the desk.

“I think love has conditions. We love because we want to be loved in return.”

Neelambor explains while trying to rearrange the pages, “But that doesn’t mean it’s wrong.”

“So it can be selfish?”, Joyeeta says while pushing back a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Hm... I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.”, Neelambor retorts, careful not to hurt Joyeeta’s feelings.

“But love is supposed to be pure and authentic”, Joyeeta says in a fanciful voice while looking out the window.

Neelambor gets up from the desk and moves to stand beside Joyeeta.

“Of course!”, Neelambor says while holding her with one hand from the side. “What even is love if it does not come from the heart?”

Joyeeta whines and looks at Neelambor. They plant a kiss on her forehead. “What have you decided to do about this?”

“I will look into this more and use it for a new painting.” Joyeeta replies, still looking at them. Neelambor too looks her in the eye, “That will be great. Will you include it in your exhibition?”

“I don’t know yet”, Joyeeta turns away from the gaze.

“Well, darling, I think you should keep an open mind. But don’t forget your own belief either”, Neelambor finishes before planting another kiss on her head. They always have to be overtly careful with her, least she might misunderstand their intentions. Joyeeta leans into their embrace, “I’ll try.”

They stand there for a few silent minutes, in the evening breeze of autumn. Most of their weekends are spent like this. “Dolce far niente” as Neelambor likes to call it. So do the Italians, apparently. Uneventful and pleasant.

Joyeeta breaks the silence, “Go finish the recording. I’ll make us tea”

“Sure, love.”, Neelambor says before plastering another kiss on her cheek before leaving.

“What a windy day!”, Neelambor says out loud, with a tea cup in their hand. A usual number of people are bustling in the tea stall. The tea maker in one corner is listening to his broken radio while doing exactly what he gets paid for, stirring tea and giving out cigarettes. The ones who have come to indulge in it are mostly excited university students. A few middle-aged men are going on a jargon about failed politics of the country. Most of the others are busy admiring the awfully cloudy atmosphere.

“Do you think it will sell?”, asks the only elderly man in the stall. A brown shawl wrapped around his neck. Heavy grey and black beard all over his mouth. His aura screams writer.

“Do you have doubts?”, Neelambor retorts.

“You seem awfully calm about this.”

“I guess I have enough confidence in my writers.”, says Neelambor, proudly.

The old man rolls his eyes at Neelambor, “You say that every time.”

“You bet I do, Mr Khitish.”, Neelambor ends with a forced smile.

A gush of air blows away Mr Khitish’s shawl. He tries to keep it under control.

Neelambor takes his cup from his hand in order to help out. Once that is settled, their attention goes to a familiar face. The same face that makes Neelambor’s coffee stale with his abrupt interrogations.

“I’m here.”, says the mysterious stranger. Neelambor stays quiet as they cannot make sense of this sudden interaction.

“Oh, you made it!”, Mr Khitish chirps in joy, taking the young man in his embrace who reluctantly gives in to the older one. “How have you been? How’s your mum?”, Mr Khitish continues.

“Fine.”, the stranger replies.

“Did you get taller?”, he teases.

He looks away and then at Neelambor instead of answering.

“Man of few words as usual.”, Mr Khitish says as he pats the young man’s back. He turns to Neelambor. “Meet my nephew, Zohad. He’s a big fan of my writing.”, he ends with a loud sarcastic laughter.

“Sure”, he says sarcastically. “Hello.”

“Hi. I thought you don’t read fiction.”, Neelambor teases.

“I don’t.” Zohad says with a straight face.

Mr Khitish looks at them in confusion. “Do you two know each other?”

“We do.”

“Nope.”

They say in chorus.

They look at each other in all awkwardness possible. “We ran into each other, accidentally.”, Neelambor explains while handing Mr Khitish his cup back.

“That’s splendid.” Mr Khitish turns to Zohad, “Then you must know who this is.”

“Nope.”, Zohad quickly replies.

“I’m Neelambor. I’m an editor with Mr Khitish’s publisher.”

“I don’t know where I would’ve been if it wasn’t for Neelambor. She- uh- he, I mean, Neelambor is stunning at his job.”, he finishes, seemingly not concerned about the jumble he just made. The air around Zohad gets a bit tense.

“Are you just going to let him get away with that?”, Zohad asks Neelambor. His sudden interrogation takes Neelambor by surprise. No one has ever spoken up for them in public before. Not on this matter.

“It’s absolutely alright. She doesn’t mind.”, Mr Khitish interrupts.

“It’s fine”, Neelambor answers, giving Mr Khitish a look of disapproval.

“Sure, it was.”, Zohad replies under his breath while rolling his eyes.

“Would you take tea?”, Neelambor asks Zohad in hopes to change the subject.

“No”, he says inexpressively.

“Yes, he will.” Mr Khitish cuts in like the nosy uncle he is. “Hey, another milk tea here.” he orders the tea maker as he quickly turns to the man. Just as suddenly, Mr Khitish’s cell phone starts ringing. He excuses himself to the side.

“So, this is your back-story? Nephew hates fiction because of his uncle?”, Neelambor utters sarcastically.

“He’s not my uncle. He’s a family friend.” Zohad replies.

“I see.’ Neelambor dials up the sarcastic tone, “But influential enough to add to your dislike?”

“No, he’s not that important. He’s just another writer friend of my parents.”

“They are writers too?”

“No, they weren’t. They were... them. Nothing important.”

“What do you mean?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He says in hopes to shut Neelambor up, “They’re not here anymore.”

Zohad’s reply takes Neelambor by surprise. They quit the sarcastic tone quickly. “I’m sorry.” A hint of guilt in their tone.

“No need.”, Zohad replies with just as much inexpressiveness. The man in the tea stall calls for their order. Zohad takes the cup from him. Neelambor quietly sips on their tea.

“So, mind if I ask why you dislike fiction?”, Neelambor breaks the silence. Zohad stares at his cup for a moment before saying, “Why go on about what will never happen?”

“Why not?”, Neelambor retorts, their expression filled with doubt.

“It gives you false hope. Only causes more misery, more heart break.” Zohad moves his head side to side, “It’s silly. Childish.”

“I think it’s good to have some imaginary hope. Helps you keep going.” Neelambor tries to explain more when Zohad stops them. “Keep going for what exactly? Life is unbearable. Why would anyone want to keep going?” He finishes.

“Are you always this condescending?”, Neelambor retorts without a second thought, disbelief in their eyes.

“You tell me.” Zohad replies with the same expressionless face as before.

Neelambor’s cup is empty by now, opposite to the anger they’re feeling. “You’re really something.”, Neelambor turns from him to return the cup. “I guess I’ll leave you to deal with your not-uncle alone.”, they say before walking away from the tea stall. They spare him one last angry look before walking away completely. Zohad stays standing there. Alone with the cup full of tea in his hand. He looks at the cup and a hint of a sly smile perks up in his face. Neelambor misses it, of course. Perhaps the look was not for anyone to see. But destiny has some other plans.

“What are you smiling about, boy?” Mr Khitish is back from his phone call.

Zohad quickly fixes his face. “Nothing.”, he says before handing his cup to Mr Khitish. “I should go now.” He leaves without giving Mr Khitish the chance to say goodbye.

Mr Khitish looks at his best friend’s unreachable son who is walking away. He has a habit of walking away. He looks at the cup that was handed to him involuntarily. A dead fly is swimming in its content. He gets grossed out and hands it back to the man in the tea stall.

It's been four hours that Joyeeta has been sitting at a half done canvas in her studio. She tries to imagine what the painting should look like. In its current state, it looks like an amateur just threw random paint on the canvas. What more should she add? What should the end result look like? She tries to concentrate and mix colours in an attempt to trick her brain into doing something at least. But to no avail. Her thoughts keep going back to what the stranger had told her. He has been visiting her classes frequently. He doesn't interrupt her. But he tosses out questions at the end of her lectures as if he's a paparazzi attacking celebrities. Apparently, everyone loses to reality and nothing one intended to happen ever happens, he says. She shakes her head in denial. She disagrees with him strongly.

Four years ago, she found Neelambor and fell in love. She intended to get together with them and she did. She has become an artist like she always wanted to. She worked hard to achieve this moment in her career ever since she remembers. Her mother, despite being a poor single woman, raised her and climbed up the social ladder with her business single-handedly. She wanted, thus she has it now. She believes that the universe listens to your prayers only if you are willing to work for it. Joyeeta has never seen the opposite happen to anyone. Maybe this stranger is mistaken. His time to have what he wants hasn't come yet. Or he doesn't have the resilience one needs to achieve something.

"Is he twelve?", Joyeeta thinks out loud. She thinks this person is rather childish. She wants to prove him wrong. That's why she is painting this piece as an anti-thesis to his words. To show him that his know-all act doesn't scare her.

Joyeeta is obsessed with this now. It is true. She doesn't even know this person that well. Who cares what he thinks? Yet, she is so agitated by his arguments. She isn't

good at talking back at people. She can't come up with clever comebacks as Neelambor does. Perhaps that is why she thinks it's important she proves her point through this painting. But even after another hour, the canvas remains without a purpose.

"Time for a break", she exhales to herself and puts down the paint brushes. She helps herself to a cup of coffee and strolls to the balcony. Letting her hands rest on the railing, she takes in the morning breeze. A waft of the Jasmine vines is mixed with the air. "Such a beautiful smell!", she wonders. This scent always reminds her of her beloved because these were a gift from them. This was the reason, possibly.

Neelambor likes to think Joyeeta is head over heels for them. Joyeeta doesn't mind it. After all, "It is true", she thinks out loud again. She looks to her right and imagines Neelambor standing there carefully inspecting the vines.

"It is, isn't it?", says the imaginary Neel.

"Yes," she giggles. "You know exactly what I need."

Neelambor is a romantic. Joyeeta loves that about them. She imagines their beautiful face, and how tranquil their gaze always is when looking at her. She tries to remember how it feels to touch that face. The bridge of their pointy nose, their sharp jaw, the touch of their short brown frizzy hair. She gets shy from just imagining all of that.

"Always", the imaginary Neelambor cracks a smirk. "Wouldn't want you to think of anyone else.", they say. Joyeeta is taken aback by this sentence. She sees that the familiar face that she was imagining is turning into someone else's. A ghastly scar appears on one cheek. The pointy nose is replaced by a crooked one. The face with that peaceful smile dissolves into an expressionless pale face. She recognises this person right away. It's the stranger who has been creating turmoil in her thoughts with vile words all these days. She is horrified. Why would she imagine his face when she

is daydreaming about Neelambor? No one can take their place in her life. “Right?”, she thinks to herself.

She tries to wipe off all the thoughts she is having all at once. How could she do this? Was it just a mistake? She has never faced anything like that before.

“What do I do?”, she thinks while staring into the coffee mug in her hand. A waft of the Jasmines swirl in her nostrils again, as if an answer to her thoughts just came from the universe.

“Neel!”, she realizes that she wants to be with Neelambor right this instant. She takes out her mobile phone. She tries to type in a text as quickly as she can.

“where axe ou?” she clicks her mouth at the old thing. Her flip phone aesthetic might not stick any longer. “I’ll have to switch to those touchscreen phones maybe”, she thinks to herself in dismay. She presses send anyway in hopes that her soulmate would automatically know what she wants to say. And they do. A quick reply comes from the opposite end.

“At the book store. Some field work haha. Why? You need anything?”

“stay right therr im comin” Joyeeta presses send again before she shuts her flip phone off. She sprints out of the studio with her purse only. Couple of men in the street stare at her dishevelled state. It’s a quick walk to the bus stop. She starts panicking to see the bus standing at the stop. She’s afraid she will lose it. Just like she is losing her cool now. She trips a little on the folds of her *saree* before helping herself back up.

“Get your head straight Joyee!”, she thinks to herself as she lunges at the bus. She misses it. Now, she has to wait 10 more minutes before the next bus comes. Every second seems unbearable to her. Her palm starts sweating from anxiety. She feels her phone vibrate. The customised ringtone envelopes her by a sense of familiarity. She picks up the phone instantly. “Neel!”

Neelambor responds quickly as if they already know what is happening. “Are you at the studio?”

Joyeeta nods and hums.

“You stay there. I’m on my way.”

“Okay”, the call ends. Joyeeta, feeling relieved, starts walking back to her studio calmly. Her beloved is coming to get her. She knows everything will be alright now. She breaks down in tears as soon as she enters her studio room. She feels small in this room now. The glimpse of the half-done canvas reminds her of the horrific thoughts she has been having all morning. She puts a drape over the canvas and waits for the clock to take her to a different time. A time that isn’t difficult. A time that isn’t complicated. Is this what the stranger was talking about?

It's the fourth day of the book expo. Neelambor's stall is crowded. It's not the usual book-lover's crowd. It's a rabble of anxious and clueless people nibbling around the injured person lying in front of the stall. A group of unruly boys of the community gang came and did this. No one has the good heart to go and help the one injured. At a time like this, as a blessing disguised as a coincidence, Zohad arrives at the scene. He has been coming to the expo every day for a few unexpected minutes. He feels extremely puzzled at the unusual crowd in front of his uncle's stall. He's not that famous of a writer. He squirms his way in the crowd without thinking twice. His eyes grow bigger with the sight in front of him. Neelambor is lying unconscious. Blood is coming out of the side of their head. Mr Khitish is nowhere in the scene.

"Move!", Zohad growls. He immediately presses his hand on Neelambor's bleeding head and calls someone on his phone. He then tries to find an emergency contact in Neelambor's phone. It takes more time than necessary to unlock it. He overhears a few random passers-by discussing whatever happened.

"Oh no! Did it do something?"

"How did this happen?"

"It was talking too much. She deserves it."

"Why talk against the goons? He thinks he's a man?"

The conversation makes Zohad's blood boil. Before he could say anything to them, a familiar face of his scurries his way to the two on the ground.

"What happened? Who is this?", he asks.

"No time. Grab them. And get a taxi or something.", Zohad replies, as he shoves Neelambor's phone to his friend.

They both hoist Neelambor up and make their way to the road. Luckily, a rickshaw puller asks to help. Zohad gets up on it in one leap. His friend helps Neelambor up on it right after.

“We’ll go ahead. You take another one.”, Zohad replies as he motions for the rickshaw puller to go.

The other man bids them a short goodbye and catches another rickshaw quickly.

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The emergency room is as busy as ever. Nurses, doctors and worried relatives are flying in and out of the large room frequently. Seeing the amount of crowd, Zohad is standing outside of the room with his friend, continuously calling his uncle on the phone. But he doesn’t pick up. “I’m sure he has something to do with this.”, he mumbles to himself.

“Are you sure? It can be because of-”, the man hesitates as if he’s trying to find the right words. “What if the patient caused it himself?”

“Stop that.”, Zohad protests.

“Stop what?”, his friend retorts.

“Mixing up pronouns.”

“Do you know what it is that the person uses?”, his friend asks with a raised eyebrow.

Zohad stays silent for a few seconds before replying sternly, “No, Anik, I don’t.”

Anik gives a smirk in victory. A doctor comes out of the emergency room looking for who knows whom. Zohad and Anik look at each other, trying to figure out which patient did this doctor treat out of all the patients lined up in the emergency room.

“Who is with the patient in bed number 7?”, asks the doctor out loud.

“We are.”, Anik replies as they both get up and approach him. The doctor seems to be taken by surprise to see them. “Are you family to the patient?”

Zohad gives a quick reply, “No.”

The doctor seems amused, “Alright. It’s nothing serious. She- He... will be fine.”

Zohad looks at him cynically because of his choice of words. The doctor ignores it,

“No concussion thankfully. Dressing has been done. We need someone in the family to sign the discharge paper.”

Zohad stays quiet, seemingly angry. Anik quickly takes over, “We’ll call someone.”

The doctor leaves.

“See? Everyone’s confused.”, Anik says.

“I will kick you.”, Zohad replies, “Give me their phone.”

Anik hands over the phone he had been handed a while ago to Zohad. He manages to

dial a number on speed dial. A woman picks up after ringing twice, “Hey, love”

“Hi. The owner of this phone is in the hospital.”, Zohad replies calmly.

“What?”, the woman goes silent as if in shock.

“We need you to sign the discharge paper. It’s the hospital near the book expo.”

“Okay, but-”, Zohad cuts the call before the woman could finish.

“You could’ve at least told her the person is okay.”, Anik says snarkily.

Zohad doesn’t say anything. He makes his way to the emergency room to

Neelambor’s bed. They are resting. They open their eyes sensing the presence of another person. They stay silent, shocked seeing Zohad in front of them.

“You alright?”, Zohad asks unamusingly.

“You brought me here?”, Neelambor asks, their eyes filled with questions.

“I guess.” Zohad looks away.

“Are you shy?”, Neelambor quizzes sarcastically.

Their sudden change of tone takes Zohad by surprise. “Shut up and be grateful.” he retorts.

Anik arrives before Neelambor replies, “Oh my, yes! I am so thankful, my lord!”

Their eyes travel to the new person beside the bed. He looks at Zohad in hopes that he would introduce him, but he doesn’t.

“Hi, I’m Anik. Zohad’s friend. I see you’re having fun already.”

“Oh, it’s just fun to tease Zohad. It comes naturally. I’m Neelambor.”, they reply happily.

“Even when you’re lying down in pain?”, Zohad snaps at them.

“No, no. I really am grateful. Thanks, you two.”, Neelambor replies. Zohad gets a bit shy sensing the sincerity in their voice. Neelambor continues without noticing that,

“You didn’t, by any chance, call anyone for me. Did you?”

“We did.”, Anik replies.

“Your stupid phone was locked. Called the one on speed dial.”, Zohad explains.

“Oh no!”, Neelambor says, with a deep sigh and a hand on their forehead. “Now she will be worried for no reason.”

“He called. I didn’t”, Anik quickly adds pointing at Zohad.

Zohad gets annoyed at his overtly friendly behaviour. “Can you stop?”

Anik makes a mouth-zipping motion with his fingers. Neelambor sighs again. As if on cue, a woman with a blue *saree* roughly draped around her enters the emergency room completely dishevelled. She looks around searching restlessly, not noticing the stares she gets from the people around.

“Joyee!” Joyeeta turns her head at the familiar voice. She looks like a deer caught in a headlight. She hurries her way to Neelambor. As soon as she approaches closer, she finds herself confused at the sight of another familiar face by the bed. She eyes the

two strangers by the bed before completely focusing on the person that is currently demanding the attention. “Neel! What happened?”, she says restlessly.

“I’m fine, baby”, Neelambor replies calmly.

“How did this happen?”

“Mr Khitish got into a fight. Then I got beaten because, well, because I am me and I have a voice.”, Neelambor explains, as if it’s a very normal scenario. Joyeeta’s eyes fill with sympathy. This isn’t the first time this has happened to Neelambor.

Zohad sneaks in a line, “I knew he had something to do with this.” Anik looks at him in detest. This fellow is quite sympathetic towards Mr Khitish for some reason.

Joyeeta finally looks at Zohad. “What are you doing here?”

“I brought this person here.”, he replies averting his eyes. He seems just as shocked as Joyeeta.

“Joyee, this is Zohad. He’s related to one of our writers.”, says Neelambor gesturing at Zohad. He replies, “Yeah, we’ve met.”

“You have?”, Neelambor looks at Joyeeta in confusion.

Joyeeta swallows before answering, “He’s the one who keeps coming to my classes.”

Neelambor’s eyes light up in amusement. They look at Zohad and say, “Really?

You’re that mysterious guy who has been pushing my beloved girlfriend to read what she doesn’t like?”

Joyeeta seems embarrassed by Neelambor’s remark. “Shut up!”, she shrieks, getting a few stares from the nearby beds. She continues in a much lower voice, “Let’s get you home now.” She leaves them in order to find the reception.

Zohad seems disheartened by the sudden anxious behaviour of Joyeeta. Anik seems equally confused while Neelambor looks at everyone in amusement. A few moments pass in radio silence, and sounds of distant chatter from their surroundings take over.

“Care to explain what’s going on?”, Anik breaks the silence, dumbfounded.

Neelambor is a massive plant lover. They keep an array of plants in their home. They would have covered the whole building with plants if it wasn't for the other tenants. These people have been trying to get rid of Neelambor and Joyeeta since the beginning. They can't do anything directly about it since Neelambor owns the apartment. But the daily obstacles for the two of them to face never ends. Kids press their door bell and run away leaving dirt and plastic packets in front. Sometimes their packages go missing. Their trash won't be taken away. Or there would be other people's garbage bags in front of their door.

Even the caretakers and janitors look down on them. The manager of the building keeps pulling these notorious pranks on them to make it a living hell for them. But Neelambor and Joyeeta have created a safe space for themselves. With distinctive safety measures and customizations of small yet important details, they have made the inside of it a safe haven. Nothing can bother them in there. And nothing can be a nuisance when they're together.

Just like any other morning, Neelambor is tending to their lilies and other plants in the balcony. It's quite safe up here since they're on the seventh floor. No one can throw rocks at them anymore.

"Would you give it a rest already?", Joyeeta scoffs at them. Neelambor seems puzzled at her pissed off mood.

They reply as softly as possible, "I can't let them die on me, Joyee. They're my babies."

"You have to rest. The doctor said so.", Joyeeta nags.

"I will. After I'm done with this."

“No. You have to rest now.” Joyeeta says this time with much more stubbornness.

Neelambor gets annoyed at her nagging. They finally snap back, “Will you stop? I can do what I want.”

Joyeeta goes quiet. She turns and goes inside. She plops on her beanbag quietly.

Neelambor continues watering the plants. Once they’re finished, they slowly make their way to where Joyeeta is sitting.

“What’s up?”, they say as if they didn’t just quarrel. Joyeeta stays quiet.

“Giving me the silent treatment, huh?” Neelambor plops down on the floor in front of their angry girlfriend. “Why are you so pissed this early?”, they ask as gently as they can.

“I just wanted you to rest.”, Joyeeta replies. Neelambor takes a deep breath. This is a common scenario for them. Joyeeta is very sensitive. Neelambor has to be extra careful around her most of the time. It gets exhausting sometimes and they end up snapping at her. But they’ve figured out how to make amends too.

“I know, love. I am resting. But I cannot just sit around doing nothing all day.” They continue as they place their hand on Joyeeta’s, “And I wasn’t doing any heavy work either, right?” They look at Joyeeta amorously. They say as they nudge at her,

“C’mon! Don’t be upset over this.” Neelambor snorts and acts like falling asleep on Joyeeta’s arms.

She finally breaks in laughter. “I’m sorry. I was just... paranoid.”, she replies calmly.

“Why so?”

“I was worried.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“It must be something.”, Neelambor nudges her again. “C’mon, tell me”

Joyeeta sheepishly says, “That Zohad guy.”

“Yes?”, Neelambor encourages her as she continues, “He’s weird.”

“That he is. I’m not surprised to find out he’s your weird guy too”, Neelambor utters as a matter of factly. Joyeeta gets defensive, “What do you mean my weird guy?”

“You know, we both were having unique encounters with strangers. What are the chances of them being the same person?”, they explain.

“I see”, Joyeeta sighs. “Yes, it is weird.” she pauses before finally asking what has been circling in her head ever since they left the hospital three days ago, “What do you think of him?” Neelambor recognizes the worried face she is making. Isn’t she a bit too bothered about this? Maybe. Neelambor replies honestly, “I like him. He’s fun to tease.”

“Do you feel safe with him?”, Joyeeta asks even more worried.

“I do, actually. In fact, he spoke up about my pronouns in my defense once. I’ve never had anyone do that for me.”, Neel replies with even more honesty. “Except you.”, they add.

Joyeeta stays silent. She takes a second to think.

“What do you think about him?”, Neelambor questions back.

“What?”, Joyeeta acts as if she didn’t hear them.

“Zohad. Do you like him?”

Joyeeta startles, “Like him? Impossible. I don’t like him.”

She takes a second to look at Neelambor. They’re as amused as ever. “Really?”, they ask.

“Yes. I don’t like him at all.”

Seeing Joyeeta’s frustration, Neelambor decides it’s better to let it go than to pester her further about it. But they do feel that something is off about her. They cannot help

but be curious about it. They try to get Joyeeta's defences down first. It's going to take a while for her to open up. "Would you make me some coffee?" they ask as nicely as possible. Joyeeta gets up from the beanbag and replies, "Of course, love."

Neelambor has been feeling suspicious about Joyeeta. Ever since she took them from the hospital, she has been acting strange. She has been obnoxiously jumpy. She has been hesitant about work. She isn't going to the art studio anymore. "What's wrong with her?", they whisper. They get their phone out to text Joyeeta. They're supposed to have lunch together at the cafe downstairs from Neel's office. It's a neat little place with a regular interior. Nothing too expensive. Very cozy otherwise.

"I'm heading to the cafe. Meet you there?", they hit send. Joyeeta replies in moments, "almos hhere". Neelambor smirks at the very obvious typo of her message. She really needs a new phone. Neelambor wanted to buy her one that has suitable features for people with dyslexia, but she wouldn't take it. They don't know why.

Neelambor makes their way to the cafe. A few regulars who are often rude to them are also there. Neel ignores them. They recognise the man with the most mundane yet known face sitting there. They make their way to him.

"Hi Zohad", they say as they pull out the chair in front of him. Zohad nods in response.

"What brings you here?", Neelambor asks curiously.

"I can't be here?", Zohad snaps.

"Oh boy! Spare me. I'm still recovering!", Neelambor says jokingly referring to the incident they last faced together. Zohad is very blunt. That's what makes it so easy to be with him. Neelambor doesn't need to tiptoe around him. And they get to make jokes that Joyeeta doesn't approve of.

Neelambor calmly states, "I'm waiting for my girlfriend. We have lunch plans."

Zohad seems alarmed at this news. "You should sit somewhere else then."

Neelambor doesn't pay heed to him. He's probably just being an introvert. "I'll wait here", they say.

Zohad seems even more restless. He motions to get up from his seat, "Then, I'll leave." "What's going on?" Joyeeta pops out of nowhere. She's standing at the side of the table Neelambor and Zohad are sitting at. It takes Neelambor a second to realize that Joyeeta is speaking in a rather accusatory tone. They stand up immediately and place a hand on hers gently, "What's wrong, love?"

"Why are you sitting with him?", she continues her tone.

Neelambor explains as calmly as they can, "I was waiting for you when I ran into him." Joyeeta shoots Zohad a glare. He feels insulted and gets up immediately. "I'm leaving." Neelambor stops him, "Zohad, wait. She didn't mean it." Neelambor looks at Joyeeta, "Say you're sorry."

Joyeeta stays silent refusing to apologise. "Joyee!", Neelambor speaks again in hopes to make amends of the situation. But something comes over Joyeeta. She leaves immediately. She hears Neelambor calling her name behind her. But she doesn't pay heed to them. Her mind is filled with anxious thoughts. Why is her lover so happy whenever they're around this man? Who is he? Is she losing Neelambor? She can't. Neelambor is her everything. Is this really about Neel at all? What does Zohad want? Zohad. Recalling his name feels suffocating to her. She remembers the times she has been having overlapping thoughts about Neelambor and Zohad. "What is wrong with me?", she thinks to herself. This is not like her. She gets on the first cab in front of her. Back in the cafe, Neelambor and Zohad stay behind. Neel seems angry and embarrassed. Why would their partner act like this? Did she misunderstand something? They sit in silence. People from surrounding tables are still giving them awkward stares. Zohad breaks the silence between them, "Shouldn't you follow her?"

“No. Not after what she did just now.”

A few more silent seconds pass. Neelambor starts as softly as they could, the embarrassment evident in their tone, “I’m sorry on her behalf. I don’t know what’s wrong with her. But I’m sorry.”

Zohad nods in understanding. “You should talk to her.”

“I will. Not now.”

They sit in silence again for a while. Suddenly, Zohad starts looking at the menu intensely. “You like coffee, right? Let me get you a cup.” he states.

“No thanks. I’m fine.” Neelambor replies as causally they can.

“I insist.”

“No really. I’m fine.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been here.” says Zohad with his head down. Neelambor is shocked at the sudden confession. “What do you mean?”, they ask in curiosity.

He continues explaining, “I came here in hopes to see you.”

This time, Neelambor seems shocked. “To see me? Why?” they retort.

Zohad stammers before replying honestly, “I have made a mistake.”

Neelambor looks at him confused. “What do you mean?”

Zohad continues with his head still down, “I have been thinking about you and your girlfriend.” He takes a quick glance at Neelambor. “I may have crossed the line. I think your girlfriend misunderstood my intentions.”

“What did you do?” they retort defensively.

“I don’t know what I did. I like you both. That’s why I approached both of you.” He looks at Neelambor in apology. “I swear, I didn’t have anything weird in mind.”

Neelambor takes a deep breath. “I need to speak to my girlfriend about this first.” they say, as they shift their posture in the chair. Zohad slips in a note to them, “If you need

me”, he explains. Neelambor takes it and leaves. Unlike the other two, Neelambor still has to go back to work. A few strangers stare at them as they leave the cafe. The nice lady behind the counter also gives them a judgmental look. Only Zohad looks at them longingly, in hopes that everything will be alright.

“I’m home”, Neel announces their arrival while entering their apartment. This is the place where they come to feel safe. But today it is a bit different. Neelambor hasn’t been home since yesterday. They nested at aunt Seeta’s place after the incident at the cafe. There’s a distinct uneasiness in the air. Their shoe feels heavier while taking off. They look out the window. The sun is already down. They stayed back at work longer than usual because home isn’t exactly where they wanted to be for the time being. Despite the taunting and harassment of the outside, the inside didn’t feel particularly welcoming today. The whole time they were thinking about the rudeness Joyeeta showed. This is the first time they have seen her acting like this. They feel disrespected because it feels like she is questioning their integrity. What’s really the matter? They have to know.

The living room is empty. The ceiling fan runs round on its own. Joyeeta must have forgotten to turn it off. Neelambor goes to the kitchen to make themselves a cup of tea only to realize Joyeeta already has some ready for them in the kettle. They serve themselves a cup and move to the balcony with it. They take in the freshness of their plants while sipping on the cup. A few silent moments pass before they hear a soft sobbing noise coming from the bedroom.

Neelambor quietly finishes their tea first. They need preparation to face this obstacle ahead. It feels much more difficult than the hardships they have faced before. Perhaps because there is lack of unity on this one. Is this what love supposed to feel like? After collecting their thoughts, Neelambor makes their way to the source of the sobs. No doubt, it’s Joyeeta. Crying on one corner of the bed, all by herself, trying not to let anyone know someone’s even there. Neelambor clears their throat. “Joyeeta.” They call her. She stiffens hearing their voice. Her voice gets muffled in the pillow. She

takes a few minutes to collect herself before turning to face Neelambor. Neel takes a seat on the other corner of the bed.

“Hey.” Joyeeta manages to say. A deep sigh comes out of both of them. Both exhausted from suffering alone.

“What happened back then?”, Neelambor gets to the point.

Joyeeta stays quiet for a few more seconds before replying, “I don’t know.”

“Did you think I would do something I shouldn’t?”, Neelambor says as calmly as they could. Its difficult to keep composure at a time like this. Joyeeta recognizes the hurt in their voice. She feels an urgency to comfort Neel, “No. Absolutely not.”

They gaze at each other softly. “Then what happened?”, Neelambor asks.

Joyeeta hesitates to answer, afraid she might say something that would hurt her beloved. Neelambor encourages her by scooting closer to her. “I’m listening.” Joyeeta lets out another sigh and starts, “I’m really sorry. I don’t understand what is happening either.” she pauses and looks at Neelambor who looks back at her with encouragement. “Go on”

“I think I am starting to have feelings- for... Zohad.” she finishes sheepishly. She looks at Neelambor to see why they are quiet. They seem hurt. Their expression a mix of anger and confusion.

“I love you. I really do. I haven’t lost feelings for you one bit.” She continues explaining, “I just don’t know why I feel a turmoil of emotions when I think about him. It’s added feelings, you can say.”

Joyeeta looks into Neelambor’s eyes as if to prove her honesty. It’s true. She loves Neelambor more than ever. She just doesn’t know what to do with these newer feelings. She can swear she hasn’t fallen out of love. Or else she wouldn’t have felt this guilt.

But Neelambor is hurt. It is showing in their eyes. They are feeling like the sky has broken loose on their head. What is this girl talking about? How can you love two people at once? How come it's Zohad? He's not even remotely good looking. Unsure of what to do, Neelambor gets up from the bed and walks towards the big bedroom window. They open the window. On cue, air comes in and fills the room, taking the stickiness of their despair out.

"I don't know what you mean." Neelambor says hesitantly, "But I trust you." They turn around to look at Joyeeta eye to eye. "I hope you will keep the value of my trust. I expect you to." Neelambor exits the room as soon as they finish. Joyeeta is left alone again. They usually handle their issues together. But this time, it's a test for her. She can't possibly do this alone, can she? She thinks it's best if they let this problem rest for the day. With her mind still racing with a thousand anxious thoughts, she tries to fall into slumber in hopes that the difficulties will also fall asleep with her. That's what Neelambor always says. Problems cannot hurt you when you're sleeping. Unfortunately, they were not destined to have a peaceful sleep that night. Both stay awake all night in separate rooms. The regular lively mood of the house has vanished. The touch me nots evident of their gloom. The only noise they could hear was of the clock ticking and the loud siren inside their heads signalling something negative. Soon it becomes dawn. Birds start chirping in melancholy. The new morning light seems heavy to both of them. Joyeeta comes to the living room to find Neelambor. She finds them picking at the cutlery on the table. She gently touches their hair, trying to take in the softness. Yes, she can never lose her Neel. Reassured once again, she says, "Call Zohad. Let's all talk."

Three droopy figures are sitting on a bench of the park. The pond opposite to them is under construction, much like them. This corner is quiet, unlike the spaces meant for kids to play. Occasionally, few old folks come here to walk. None of them really preferred to come here. But Zohad lives quite far from Joyeeta and Neelambor's place. So they agreed to meet in the middle. Now time will tell if they can do the same about their situation.

The fresh wind keeps blowing away their hair and scarves and dupattas. A depressed mood has taken over all of them despite the lovely weather.

"How are we all doing?", Neelambor starts trying to make light of the situation.

Joyeeta stays quiet. Zohad lets out a sarcastic laughter. "Cut to the chase, will ya?" he says

"Okay then." Neelambor starts, "What do we make of our situation?"

Joyeeta lets out a sigh, "I don't know."

"Me neither." says Neelambor.

"What situation is this anyway? Why am I here?" says Zohad with full confidence.

"I think you have some explaining to do which might help us tackle whatever this is", says Neelambor gesturing between all of them. Zohad takes a deep breath. It seems he has a lot to say.

"I think, I approached you two because I found something I liked in both of you. I just wanted friends." He explains, "I don't have any job so I stuck around you two a lot to pass the time. And I admit I might have crossed a line."

"I don't think so." Neelambor retorts, "We both let you in. That's why, you came to us more. So it's not all you, I think."

"I agree", says Joyeeta in a low voice.

Zohad doesn't seem like he agrees. He continues, "Anyways, I want to confess. I do like you guys." He points at Neelambor, "But I really want to be with you a lot."

Joyeeta seems hurt by this. Neelambor looks at Zohad amused. What is this boy saying?

"And I don't intend on giving up without trying." Zohad completes with another deep breath.

Neelambor and Zohad look at each other. Zohad's eyes have never been so kind while Neel still hangs in confusion. Not knowing what to do, they blurt out, "Well, I'm not the one who likes you." Instantly, Joyeeta feels a big lump in her throat. She can't speak. Blood rushes to her cheeks and ears. She did not expect Neel to throw her under the bus like this.

However, Zohad doesn't seem shocked at this news. He calmly looks at Joyeeta as if expecting an answer. Joyeeta stammers, "I- it's me." She prays for the gods to separate the soil beneath so she can enter underground to hide forever. Neel nudges her arm softly as if to signal that it's okay to speak up. So she does after mustering all the courage she has, "I'm embarrassed. But it's not as if I am done with Neel. I love them the same." She looks down in embarrassment. "I've just started liking you."

Zohad has been staring at Joyeeta intensely. He doesn't seem disappointed or surprised. It seems he was expecting this turn of events. He feels the need to ask Neelambor what they feel. He looks at Neelambor in expectation. Neelambor gets the cue and says, "Listen, I don't want any trouble. I love Joyeeta. And I love you as a friend too." They continue while brushing their hands through their hair, "And I don't want Joyeeta to be hurt. She is free to do what she wants." They say as they look at Joyeeta. "I don't mind her either", Zohad states very casually. Neelambor speaks up,

“But I have never seen love triangles succeed.” Zohad gets an idea from Neelambor’s dialogue. Three people in love?

“What if we tried something?”, Zohad proposes excitedly. Neelambor and Joyeeta look at him in confusion.

“Hear me out”, he says as he clears his voice. “What if we were free to date each other? If nothing comes out of it, then we can move on.” Neelambor laughs in disbelief, “Are you suggesting we become a throuple?”

Zohad nods his head. “We don’t have to if we all don’t agree. And I’m not going to tell you to risk your existing relationship for this.” He continues explaining while moving his hands frantically and scratching his head, “I mean, if you think about it, we all get what we desire without disturbing the original setting you two have.”

“And what if it doesn’t work? What will we do then?” Neelambor retorts. Joyeeta says in agreement, “What if we fall apart?”

Zohad takes a moment before answering, “Then we were never meant to be.”

The three of them feel as if they’re standing at a zigzag crossroad. Neelambor always has to be extra careful around Joyeeta. It gets suffocating sometimes. They don’t have to be like that with Zohad. It’s very easy to be with him for them. Joyeeta already likes him so it’s normal she would want to try dating him. She’s also very needy. Maybe a second partner might be a good idea for her. It will take the burden off of Neelambor a little. And Zohad doesn’t seem like he minds dating both of them. After all, he struggles with loneliness the most among them. With no friends and family around and his unemployment, it must be hell for him to live alone in this manner. He could really use a friend.

Love cannot always be planned. Most of the time, you have to wing it. From that perspective, the new arrangement is nothing different from a traditional one. They

juggled their burden with only one person all this time. Now they'll have two people to share their problems. Neelambor and Joyeeta's existing relationship is also not perfect. Something was always missing but they didn't know what. Maybe this will give them a chance to grow.

At least twenty minutes pass in silence. Three of them sit in the park, thinking quietly to themselves while taking in the soft breeze. Zohad's idea has given all three of them a complicated brain exercise with real life consequences.

"I think we can think about it", says Neelambor. They reassure Joyeeta once more by squeezing her hand. They continue, "But let's not decide in a rush."

"I guess we should decide after spending some time together", says Joyeeta. Zohad hums and adds, "Separately too"

The three of them seem content with their new decision. They all walk away with the phone number of the person they didn't already have. The cold breeze finally feels free.

It's finally monsoon. Joyeeta's favourite season of the year. She loves looking at rain while painting. Although she doesn't like getting wet in the rain. Mostly because she will either be on her way somewhere when she will accidentally get stuck in the rain and maybe get wet unexpectedly. She concentrates on the painting in front of her.

After spending time with Zohad more, she understood what he actually meant by all those harsh arguments he had made. Now she is painting a different piece. It's still about love. But a different kind. It's raining heavily outside. She has kept the windows open so the cold breeze can pass through.

"Joyeeta!"

"Joyee!"

Two familiar voices call out to her. She recognizes them immediately. She runs to the balcony to see what the fuzz is about. Down in the yard, Neelambor and Zohad are waiting for her, both of them soaking wet from the rain. A wisp of wind blows patterns of rain in Joyeeta's face. She braces herself.

"What are you guys doing there? Come in", she screams out.

"No, you come down here." Neelambor shouts back. Zohad looks at her expectantly.

"What?" Joyeeta retorts, "I'll get wet"

"That's the point, dummy", says Neel. She senses the sarcasm in their voice even in this chaos.

"No, I'm painting."

"Paint later", Zohad insists.

Joyeeta looks around in hopes of finding an excuse.

"What about the neighbours?", she asks.

"They're not coming. We asked.", shouts Neel sarcastically.

Joyeeta rolls her eyes. Defeated, she slowly makes her way downstairs. What is up with those two? They have been quite the adventurers lately.

Joyeeta puts on her cyan raincoat over her *saree* and proceeds downstairs. She ignores the caretaker at the lobby who gives her a perverted look. She peeks out of the main door towards the yard. Neel and Zohad are playing in the rain. Why would anyone want to get wet voluntarily? Neelambor runs to her as soon as they spot her. They pull her under the big *kodom* tree. She squints up at the flowers. Those are her favourite. Zohad comes toward her, “Thought you weren’t coming.”

She looks at him. Raindrops are rolling down over his scar. He has a kind gaze in his eyes. He looks beautiful. Neelambor approaches them with a bunch of *kodom* flowers in their hand.

“I found them lying around”, they explain.

Joyeeta takes a good look at Neelambor this time. Their carefully groomed eyebrows, beautiful eyes, perfect jawline. They’re also beautiful. From the inside too. She realizes how much she adores these two. Perhaps this is how love should be. It is an art. But not just art. It is a form of prayer. It makes every dull moment beautiful. It helps you discover yourself anew.

Joyeeta realizes she can just choose to play in the rain. No one can stop her. She can do it because she feels like it. Right now, she does feel like it. She faces up while closing her eyes, trying to take in the moment. When she looks back down, Neel and Zohad are running around already. She gathers some rain water in her palm and throws it at Zohad, the closest person to her at the moment. She misses and it hits Neelambor. Neelambor gets mischievous and starts chasing her. The rain really is fun. Joyeeta realizes her love for rain anew.

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The exhibition is finally open. Loads of people are here for the opening ceremony. Even the artists were surprised by the crowd. A certain amount of people are jammed beside the temporary food stall. Artists are giving interviews left and right. A teenager in a red dress is also here to see the exhibition. She roams around the halls of the auditorium looking at all the art pieces she doesn't understand. She overhears some passers-by.

"The exhibit over there is extraordinary."

"Yeah, it really touched me. Heard it's from a big name artist."

"She's the host of this exhibition, you didn't know?"

Their chatter disappears in the air slowly. The piece in question piques the girl's interest. She advances toward the framed painting in the middle of the room. It's an alluring mixture of colours. Three figures are dancing around or probably playing. It's also raining. She is amazed by how the artist has played with bold and soft colours, and how they've played with the lighting. The painting amuses her. She looks at the tab beneath the painting. It is dated 15 years back from now. She reads the artist's statement to herself,

"Love is much like performance art. It is always changing. It is pure and divine. But it is also purposeful. It needs effort and intent. It's also selfish sometimes. Love is fun. Love is nurturing. Love also hurts. But you'll never know what love has to offer if you don't give it a chance. Remember to not let the rain wash away the parts you intend to keep. Yourself. Hold on to it tightly.

- Joyeeta"

Epilogue

Perhaps love can take such turns that we do not expect. That's how it is supposed to be, I believe. It is an irony that sometimes people who are different from others find love that is also different in nature. I don't find it reasonable to hate a love that is peculiar to me. All kinds of love is necessary. It doesn't always have to be romantic or sexual explicitly. And it doesn't have a certain map to follow. My love doesn't have to look like everyone else's. What it has to be is intentional.

As isolation pursues me, I have realized how alienated the world makes me feel. Perverted gazes from unknown men in the street, being ridiculed because of my gender, getting shamed for not being able to find sustainable love, being pestered because I'm wasting my potentials, I have wondered why they cannot just let me be. Then I realized, I wasn't letting myself be. I have always tried to find love that falls outside of this chaos. But I was only successful when I started looking inside the chaos. The key is to love despite it.

I make it about love because everything greater in life is about love. Everything we do in life is because we want to be loved. Be it romance of a lover, or undivided attention of a dear friend, letters from millions of fans, or even just a cup of tea with your sister in the afternoon, everyone wants love in one form or the other. Love is what brings ultimate peace. If I didn't have the capacity to love, I won't be human. My love makes me immortal. While all that is true in my tongue, be careful! Love gives us and it also takes from us.

