

# NISHITA

UPOMA AZIZ

Her name was Nishita, but in my head, I called her Ta.

Ta was our neighbour, but by no means was she the 'girl next door'. She had never showed up on our doorstep cradling an ice-cream box full of *pakor*s her mom made, perhaps in the very same box I had delivered to their home a week earlier. She never went up to their roof dragging a bucket of just-washed clothes behind her, never wrung them dry and hung them one after another as the sweet, clean scent of soap mixed with jasmine and lemon made the air humid. When all the kids were just kids and played together, or much later when the non binary group inexplicably divided into boys and girls – Ta wasn't there. Ta was an enigma to us.

Growing up, almost all of us went to the same school. Ta went to school too, just not in the same one we did. She would be seen disappearing behind the dark tinted glass of their car, a pink barbie schoolbag, then the height of fashion, hanging behind her, her hair done in two even braids. That's all I could catch in the split second that she got down from their building and into the car.

When we all got catapulted to teenage, the concept of attraction infiltrated our otherwise boring, two dimensional world. After listening to numerous tales of those around my age; how their hearts skipped beats and their stomachs would behave funny when a particular girl smiled, twisted a lock of her hair between her fingers, or even breathed, I realised I was in love with Ta. She had graced the world and humbled me simply

by existing. Why I would fall in love with a girl I was never introduced to was beyond me, but upon learning that a merciful, kind, wise man had stated that if it is meaningless, it was probably love, I was convinced that love it surely was.

One fall after the other went by, my peers fell in love, broke their hearts, vowed never to be in love again, and then fell in love with someone new, but I was still stuck in a sweet dilemma. One of the many advantages to being in love with a semi fictional girl was that there were no limitations to what I might imagine. But for the most part, I daydreamed about what she would be like. I imagined us holding hands for the first time, and that's as far as I'd imagine us together, so it was the first time, over and over again. People around me in long distance relationships constantly complained, and I sighed because the one and a half feet gap between our buildings had become insurmountable – she was right there, but was she really? I hoped that she was real, but I kind of also hoped she wasn't.

Ta became a memory, then she became the memory of a memory, like a feeling you remember but not the memory associated with it, just like the shadow of a person she was. I stepped out of my safe cocoon of a town, not exactly as a butterfly, and hoped not to get trampled by the people always on the go in the city. My father would ask about my studies when I called home, my mother would tell me about the new shopping mall that had taken up our old playground or a new housing estate that had eaten up half the riverbank. They would come visit me every few months,

and I'd started feeling that maybe it wasn't that bad after all.

On the last day of winter, I went home. My safe haven had been reduced down to my own home, the rest was unrecognisable, as the city expanded, it became a huge wild expanse of an urban area. I had hoped that the sky would be the same to say the least. Though spring was already in the air, the sky was not nearly as blue as I remembered it to be, it looked as if someone had powdered it down. It had aged as fast as I did.

My heart skipped a beat as I walked past the house next to us, and it took me awhile to remember the name of the girl who had me hooked for the entirety of my teen years. Still, I couldn't stop feeling hopeful. Every girl around my age had me throw a second, dubious glance at them. A while later, I was done with myself and decided to stop being the creep.

As the evening call for prayers sounded, I doubled my pace towards home, because that was the curfew back then. When I was just under our building, I stopped short at the sight of an older woman with her arm wrapped around a much younger girl. I stood dumbstruck as they walked slowly towards me, and then the girl looked at me.

I couldn't remember what emotions I'd expected to see from her the first time we locked eyes, but it surely wasn't the blank stare she gave me. Ta wasn't like us, after all. She was special.

"Nishita," the older woman tugged gently and she responded with a ghost of a smile, that of an innocent, and they went on walking. "Goodbye, Ta." I whispered to no one.



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