

RAINWATER TEA

UPOMA AZIZ

Do we measure the leaves first? Or do we pour the water?

"Neither," he tells me. "We collect the water first."

So we climb. The sand kicked up by the hooves of the cars turned the sky into a dust coloured ceiling, descending over the earth slowly. And since there is not a way to escape, we climb towards it to see whether it gets us first or we do. Away from the plane lands, atop the small hill we ascend, there is a shroud of utensils. Kitchen pots and soup bowls to an old bathtub and the handle less bucket I threw away in the sea, several days ago, it's all there. Some filled halfway through and some brimming with rainwater, it seems as if someone packed up a pond to take away. I fill a mug and he fills a flask, careful to not let the sediments get in. Then we start our journey back. The sky twirls excitedly.

"I do not add anything to my tea," I inform him as we step inside. "You don't have the illusion of choice here," his eyes twinkle, "I'm out of sugar. But they, I don't know who, they say tea made from rainwater is sweet on its own." Of course, no one says that, because there is no one else, but I don't correct him. He knows that better than I do. I'm just a visitor in his place.

"It's funny," he chortles as he sits up on the counter, swinging his legs gleefully. "There is never any kindling, but the fire does not go out unless I turn it off," he points to the burner. The sight of the flames makes my neck crawl. "Don't worry, it won't burn you again," he says, and I impulsively reach my back. I cannot see or feel it but I know that there are patches of dark, grotesque skin underneath. I suddenly feel like running away. I feel his eyes on me – kind, curious eyes. I don't see his face, he is an amorphous entity, a single singular or numerous, but I know him or I am about to. His presence feels like aloe on burnt skin – it's medicinal.

He extracts the flask from my grasp and empties its contents into a long handled pot which he puts on the stove. Then he reduces the flame, and the temperature drops abruptly. "It's cold," I tell him. "It's cold," he confirms. "And now we measure the leaves," he says and gestures at an array of jars in every colour possible, and my junk collector self does a little pirouette. He picks up a crystal jar and I half expect to see a goldfish swimming inside, like the one I packed among essentials when I decided I'd run away from home. As he scoops up a spoon and a half of the black granules on his palm, the water starts to bubble. Tea leaves fall like snowflakes on an angry, boiling lake. The walls start sweating. And then we wait, we wait for the tea to turn the right colour. We grow older as we wait, the sky comes down to hang just above our noses, so close it produces a sensation of phantom tickling. The room fills up with smells of anticipation, melancholia and lethargy. Just as soon as it turns into one of bitter satisfaction, I know it is ready.

"Are you a ghost from my past, or my future?" I had asked him frantically on one of the first occasions that we met. I stopped asking after I realised that it was the other way around, and I was the ghost. Or maybe both of us were. He strains the

tea and hands me a perfectly sized mug – the one I often saw on the display of a shop on my way to work. I thought and over thought about buying it till it was gone from the window. But as I feel my hands clamp around the warm mug, the sense of futility goes away. I tip the mug and take a sip of the tea. Whoever they were, they were wrong. The tea itself is not sweet, but the aftertaste surely is.

"Will there be time?" I ask. "Only if you ask for it. And till we finish," he raises his mug. The sky hangs beneath my chin. I

down the tea in one gulp and throw the mug to a corner. The walls shatter.

We hold each other, standing our ground as the world around us begins to end.

Upoma Aziz is now a slouching, crouching, grouchy time bomb going off whenever. Reach out to her at your own risk at www.fb.com/upoma.aziz. You have been warned.



ILLUSTRATION: UPOMA AZIZ