

I sat at my usual table with a newspaper in front of my face, waiting for the second protagonist of my story to arrive.

The two-seater table in the corner just where the window ended was their usual table. Probably because he could see everybody from there but nobody could see him—especially when he smoked and doped. He was there alone yesterday, much to my surprise. She never missed a chance to be with him. But, well, she was there today, waiting for him.

I have been coming to this cafe for my lunch for the last two months and so has this couple. From what I have been able to decipher from their conversations, they have been going out for half a year now. How, I really don't understand, because the boy is absolutely obnoxious while the girl is just too nice. He seems just short of being abusive sometimes but still, the two of them seem to like each other's company.

I noticed some changes if my first protagonist today. Anyone knowing her would probably say she looked the same. True, she looked like one of those 'cool' teenagers of today—baggy pants, t-shirt, jacket, sneakers, headphones in the ears, the absence of spectacles and a slightly careless, flyaway look about her. But they say old eyes are experienced and I observed that today, she didn't have that soft, vulnerable look she usually wore. She didn't look out of the window once either. She looked confident and set as she scribbled away at her notebook and slightly indifferent, which surprised me greatly.

The café door opened and in walked, correction: *slumped*, my second protagonist. Wearing a baggy t-shirt, baggy jacket, baggy pants (which ran over his sneakers and to the floor, taking up more dirt than the shoes), a cap and cigarette smoke as cologne, the boy looked towards their table, almost smiled and walked towards it. She didn't hear or see him and as he slid into the seat opposite her, he snatched the pen out of her grasp. Swiftly, she snatched it back, along with her notebook and CD-walkman and stuffed everything into her bag. He gave her a disdainful smile. She looked back steadily. His look softened and he looked at her a long time before placing an order for a pizza, fries and cold drinks, for once, not jeering at the waiter. He sensed the change in her as well.

"What're you writin'?" he asked her.

"Why? You aren't gonna read it, na! So why

Mystique



give a damn about it!" she replied.

He yawned disdainfully, stretched and lighted a cigarette. But he looked wary. She had never spoken to him like that.

"You trying to be moody or you had a fight?" he asked again, after several silent minutes. "No calls or sms for the last three days. And I noticed you didn't come yesterday too. What's up?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

She shrugged, "Extra class."

He tried to look bored and blew cigarette smoke on her face. She just blinked in response. Not her usual self at all. He tried very hard not to look surprised.

Several minutes later, two boys walked into the cafe talking excitedly about an ongoing India-Pakistan cricket match. "Yeah and you know when Tendulkar hit that..."

"Sachin Tendulkar! That bloody country." He suddenly growled. "After we'd fought nine whole months and lost half our people in that war did they decide to pop up and act like heroes. And the suckers also celebrate their Independence Day on the 16th of December. Such..."

"What're you talking about? You're mixing up our war with a game?" she retorted, with raised eyebrows. "And yeah, who told you that they celebrate their independence on 16

December. Their Independence Day is on the 15th of August. What..."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" he replied in a mock, apologetic tone. "I forgot who I was talking to! You love those monafiks, don't you? But those aren't the only things they did—they are still trying to conquer our country. Corrupting our people, dumping their low-quality goods on us."

"God, you are so confused!" she exclaimed. "They helped us win our war and you're saying they want to conquer us? Why would they want to do that? Look at us—we're at least fifty years behind them, let alone any developed country. And why should I love them? Anyway," he was interrupting, so she snapped, "Shut up! Why the hell are we talking about something about which you're practically ignorant? I've not time for this, so—"

"Yeah, yeah, you know when you're a loser..." An impatient look from her made him change the topic. They talked about his last concert and some new movie for a while. He tried being his usual funny self but he just couldn't force a laugh out of her today.

Finally he burst out, "What's *wrong* with you @&&*&%&? Look, if you're pissed at me for insulting you at the party the other day and expect me to say sorry, get this into your head—I AM NOT SORRY! The way you talk and dress up, I

swear," he suddenly stopped, probably realizing that he had said too much. But he still glared at her, as if daring her to reply.

She shrugged and stood up, reaching for her bag. She looked bored. "Well, I guess you're done," she was saying, but he interrupted her.

"Yeah? What're you gonna do, huh?"

It seemed like a random question, but everyone immediately knew what he was talking about.

"You always underestimate me. Saaaaad mistake!" She replied, in a mocking tone, looking back at him steadily.

He stood up too, looking angry and bewildered at the same time. By now, I wasn't the only one observing them. But he didn't care. He snatched away the bag and threw it at her face with all his force. What happened next made everyone give a collective gasp—she swung back her arm and punched him squarely on his nose.

She didn't look back and hardly seemed to have cared about the fact that he was bleeding.

He left immediately after that, without looking at anyone.

It took two days for the cafe to get back to normal after all the drama. The story was repeated, analyzed and expanded, until even those who had been eye witnesses to the incident became convinced that the girl had murdered her boyfriend in cold blood.

It was a fresh new story for my column in the weekend magazine. This was the most interesting couple I had seen in my 69 years and I had this soft spot for them. The girl interested me the most, as she seemed to have transformed overnight and I still found it difficult to believe that she had hit her boyfriend. So, even though my story seemed to have ended, I found myself being drawn to the cafe for the next few weeks for some grand finale. Although, I was sure that both of them, especially the boy, had moved on.

But I was in for a surprise. They boy actually started coming again everyday for two-three hours during their usual time and sat smoking and looking out of the window. He called and sent sms.

But there didn't seem to be any response. He didn't look anywhere but out of the window, possibly because he was aware of the many stares cast at him. He hadn't changed and his expression was inscrutable. But anyone could tell that he was missing her. Only, she never came again.

By Cassiopeia

Saved by the nick of time



11:35am

As I loaded my five huge suitcases behind and inside the cab, the driver whistled. "Going away for good?" she asked. "Yes," I replied as I got into the cab without bothering to look back at the godforsaken place which I had till now called my college. So long, I thought.

11:50pm

The bus was nowhere in sight when I arrived at the bus stop. My heart skipped a beat. I couldn't afford to miss this one. It would mean that I would miss my... I refused to go there. A quick question to the stop manager assured me that the bus hadn't arrived yet. Gathering my baggage I settled down on a bench outside and began to read one of the books I had bought at the town thrift shop while my headphones blared in my ears. Finally when the bus arrived, I

was on my feet instantly and waited as the driver got down. I asked which baggage box belonged to Albany and was about to tow everything in when he said, "I'm sorry but you're only allowed to put two in baggage and one inside." The world came crashing down. I was about to beg, plead, do anything when the driver said, "The rest will have to be weighed and paid for." Thank God, I thought. I went into the stop officer to ask the manager how I should weigh and pay when a lady with a backpack ingeniously volunteered to "pretend" that two of the suitcases were hers. When she approached the bus driver the only thing he asked was whether we were both headed to New York. Luckily we were. We loaded the bags and got on to the bus. I sat down and said a little prayer to god in gratitude.

2:30pm

I got down at Albany with Marilyn. That was her name. From here it was a one-hour wait till the New York bound bus arrived. We parked the luggage right next to the gate at which the bus would arrive and went in. I told her that I would sit near the door so that I could watch the luggage. I told her to go and freshen up. The time ticked by and this thought that I had forgotten to do something kept nagging me. Suddenly it hit me! I had forgotten to endorse my I-20. This time I felt like the world had really come crashing down on me. I mean without an endorsed I-20 how would I re-enter the country? The luggage forgotten, I ran to a pay phone and called up the International Student Office. They quickly asked me when was the last time I had gotten it endorsed. November, I told them. They assured me that that signature was valid for three months, so I was ok to leave. The palpitation subsided as I staggered back to where I was sitting. Thank you God, I said once again. Soon the bus arrived and Marilyn and I boarded.

7:00pm

As the bus pulled into Port Authority I made a mental calculation. We were exactly forty-five minutes late. Technically I should have been at JFK by now reporting for my flight. Instead I ushered a Red Cap who loaded my luggage and took me to the Cab Queue. I waited and waited. The line ahead of me was long. Finally at seven thirty I got into a cab and headed to Jamaica.

8:30pm

We finally arrived at my Grand-Uncle's house and I ran out and knocked frantically on their door. They opened and were surprised that I had

been so late. I quickly paid the driver and unloaded the luggage. We then loaded the suitcases I was going to fly with and started towards JFK.

8:50pm

When I got down from the car and tried to put dollar bills into the machine for a cart, my hands shook. Finally I managed to get one and as my Grand-Uncle urged me to go in and get check in. He'd bring the luggage. I ran in looking frantically for the Kuwait Airways check-in counter. Don't let it be closed, I prayed. When I finally located it my Grand-Aunt was right behind me with the luggage. The baggage suitcases were weighed in and fit the bill. It was the hand suitcase that gave us all trouble. It was way over-weight. I blindly started removing items from it and stuffed them into the grocery bags I had instructed my Grand-Aunt to bring with us. That being done, I grabbed the carry-on while she trailed with cart and urged me to run. She'd see to my luggage and make sure it got on to the plane she assured me.

9:15pm

I was panting for breath when I finally got to gate A1. I prayed frantically that the plane was still here. After all 9:15 was when it was supposed to take off. Check in security saw me on the verge of breakdown and asked which flight I was supposed to be on. They calmly told me the flight had been delayed...

9:30pm

As I settled into my seat, I prayed for a long while in gratitude to God. I had been saved by the nick of time.

By Tahiat-e-Mahboob