



The Galaxy in My Cup

MALIYAT ANIQA NOOR

The witch in my mirror had bed-hair and teeth the colour of wheat and sand in her sleepy eyes. I brushed her teeth every night and every day since I was five years old but never had I ever asked her for anything in return. One day out of her own volition she taught me how to invoke Happiness.

It was a simple spell. I would have to pluck a tear-soaked eyelash from when sorrow sprang to my eyes, and then place it in the centre of a drawing of what Happiness looked like. The picture would have to be made by etching on a layer of thick dust. The spell would be cast once I erased the drawing.

Happiness always felt soothingly warm and it was because of him my weighty bones knew the taste of flight. Therefore on a dust-crusting table in my backyard, I drew a sun with wings made of light. Afterwards I placed the eyelash in the core of the sun and blew the dust-drawing out of sight. I waited until the dying dusk swallowed the spell-kissed dust before making my way back into the house.

The magic took its sweet time, so I didn't recognize Happiness until he coerced me into conversation after conversation and then asked me out on a date. He turned out to be a short young man with a scruffy 5 o'clock shadow and perfect eyebrows and even teeth. When he smiled at me, on our first date, with his head tilted up and his eyes all scrunched up and all his even teeth laid bare I knew him for who he was. And I felt his warmth lifting the weight off my ribcage.

His name was Forty, which we often joked about. Actually we joked about just about everything. So when he first told me he wanted to kill himself one day, I burst out giggling. My darling Happiness was suicidal.

My relationship with Forty was an on-off thing. For years he deserted me, only keeping in touch with a few phone calls or the occasional email. Yet when we found ourselves in the same country again, we began living together. Some nights, I'd crawl into bed with him and his arms would wrap around me and I'd sleep peacefully ensconced in

his tenderness; other nights I'd cry myself to sleep all alone, freezing, because the world was cruel and I was a failure. Some mornings as I was reading the newspaper, he'd make me a cup of his galaxy. Those were my favourite days; he and I would drink his galaxy together, exploring its expanse of wondrous worlds filled with kindly creatures and auroras of adventure, while the newspaper I was reading would lay forgotten on the table.

But Forty grew depressed, he was a timid self-loathing man and eventually even I could not cheer him up anymore, in his eyes he was a worthless storyteller in a planet which didn't seem worth saving. We drifted apart and I became busy chasing things I deemed more important at the time. He was no longer a priority and when he moved out, I thought to myself, if needed, I could always find my way back to him later. A later that never came because I taught myself to drink coffee in the morning and started taking sleeping pills.

As I grew older I often wondered what Forty was up to. But I couldn't muster the conviction or courage to allow myself to be with him again. I was convinced that the wonder I'd felt in his galaxy and the peace his embrace brought me were fabricated by fond remembering. Nevertheless, I vowed to find him once I was prepared to give up all of me to him. I longed for that day and I kept putting it off.

Then one night, the witch in my mirror whose teeth was still the colour of wheat and whose bed-hair was now silver told me Forty had killed himself. I knew it even before she told me, for after feeling vacant for so long, I woke up that morning feeling cold inside.

Now that he was dead, later had come too late and there was no way I could be with him again. Unless...

...I was ready to relinquish reality.

My wrinkly hands trembled a lot those days, but after three failed attempts I was finally able to brew a galaxy and pour it into my cup. As I drank my galaxy and surrendered myself to it, I hoped with all that was left of my heart that I could find a storyline to Forty. There was nothing more I wanted, there was nothing more I could ever want.

HELL IS A CIRCUS

ISHRAT JAHAN

He knew where he was, just as he knew that the *thing* on the other end of darkness was a demon. His demon. And he was going to Hell.

The demon calls his name, it uses neither words nor a voice, it speaks the tongue of Fear, the sounds of which are all too familiar to Man. He starts to walk, following the Fear and the invitation of punishments. He walks for an eternity, carrying a lifetime on his back. The weight of his everything cracks his bones and rips his muscles.

The demon stands in front of him after an eternity of screams and pain. It has no face, no sex; there are pools of darkness where eyes may have been. His body is a forgotten patchwork of scars and elongated limbs. He was made from Man's sins and God's wrath.

He falls to the ground. There is a ground now and it is covered with dust, etched with blood.

He is in a circus tent, more precisely- the remnant of what was once a circus tent. The tent must have been swallowed by darkness, but black and white stripes are visible here and there. He stands in the centre of the ring facing his demon that has a whip of burning embers curled around its almost-hands.

Hell is the circus where you dance to the sound of fear – he was told in another lifetime.

This was his Hell.

"You begin here," his demon said.

"When will this end?"

"When there is nothing left."

The demon whips him, the pain begins. All his lies, sins and words crush his insides, guilt makes his heart bleed. He screams. Life is stripped from his skin, age by age, word by word, sin by sin for thousands of years.

And then a thousand more.

