

# STRANGER

**SHREYOSI ENDOW**

I think I'll just let the phone ring today.

Was it a coincidence that I was locked out of my own home yesterday in the pouring rain? Was it a coincidence I dashed into the café across the street for shelter and you just happened to be there? I had never seen you around before and I've lived in this neighbourhood for as long as I could remember. Did you live here too? Did you even belong to this part of town?

My aunt Linda says, nothing is ever a coincidence. I think this is the only time I believe her.

The inside of the café was dingy and suffocating and the fact that it was a full house this evening didn't help either. I was in the middle of ordering a club sandwich when I glanced at the other corner of the room and there you were, stranger. You made time stop for a while with your hazel eyes and your dark brown curls and the sleeves of your beige leather coat rolled up to your elbows. One by one, I saw the people around me disappear, followed by the chairs, the tables, the ceiling fans, the lights, the counter, everything—till it was just you and nothing else.

And then the second hand of the clock ticked and I found the waitress staring at me, confused. I ended up ordering a coffee; I wasn't even hungry anymore. I saw you get up from your seat, and I'm pretty sure I heard thunder strike although nobody else seemed to be bothered by it. I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer, asking God to make you stay. You had to stay.

And when I opened them, I found you walking in my direction. Stranger, did you know, your footsteps resonated louder than any other sound in the room—the guffaws of the teenagers who sat in the next

booth, the phones ringing, the ceramic dishes being dumped on stainless steel sinks, the clinks of forks, spoons and knives—all stood silent.

And you, stranger, took your spot on the other side of my table, telling me about your day like we had known each other all along. You didn't live in this part of town. You didn't even live in this country. You wrote a column in a not-so-popular travel magazine in your country, miles and miles away from mine, and it was a work assignment that had brought you here. You said you didn't like this land till now. I wonder what changed your mind.

I told you about how I hated going to college, how engineering was never my thing. How I'd rather leave this doomed city and flee to Paris to fulfil my dreams of being a filmmaker or a poet. I told you how I could never choose between the two and you said when the time came for me to make a choice, I should follow my heart and I'd be just fine. I think you were one of the first people to say that.

I showed you a little poem I had scribbled down on a tissue paper. Six lines of absolute nonsense and you said you had never read anything like that before. You asked me if I wrote about love and men. I said I did, all the time. And it was at that point I realised that all the men I had given life to in my thoughts and in my words, somehow resembled you. It was at that point I realised why your presence made my heart thump so loud.

We had been there for what seemed like hours. You told me about your family, your friends and your workplace, the little Persian cat of your neighbour's that you fed every day when she was away for work. You told me about the women you had been with, the ones who drove you mad with love and the ones who

didn't mean much to you. I told you about my favourite song, and how I was mortified of sharing it with people. You traced the lyrics on my wrists with your fingertips and hummed the tune slowly. You'll never really know what you did to me at that moment.

When we finally went out, the rain had stopped and a cool breeze blew and I watched it pick up on your curls. I jotted down my number on the tissue paper where I had written the poem and tucked it safely in your coat's pocket. And as I stood there, inches away from your face, I realised I didn't know your name.

Maybe I would have asked you but you told me you were leaving the next day. You kissed my cheek ever so gently and I watched you walking away in the yellow light from the sodium street lamps. You turned around halfway and said you'd call to say goodbye before you left.

My phone's been ringing all morning. As I lie here in my bed, I think of yesterday and it plays out in my head like a movie and I happen to be the person behind the camera. I look in through the tinted windows of the café and the camera focuses on us sitting in that corner booth, looking like we are having the time of our lives. It moves away from the windows onto the street as we walk out arm in arm and stand in the orange-ish glow on the pavement. The camera then zooms in as you kiss my cheek and then slowly takes its spot behind me, so that now, we are both watching you walk away with your hands in your pockets. You turn around halfway and the camera freezes.

I think this is where I'll yell 'Cut.' I think this is how I'll like to remember you.

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