



PEPPER TRIGGER

FATIUL HUQ SUJOY

"Hey girl, do you know why we're a rice based country?" I ask, retaining the smug face like it's the first time I'm asking. "Do I know you?" Tasnim replies, as usual. "Because every restaurant here has 15 percent VAT included." She stands up to leave. That's my cue. It's become muscle memory by now. I get up before she can leave and go up in front of her blocking her path. With all the determination I could muster I tell her, "Get it? Because, VAT ... bhaat ... they offer 15% bhaat?" She gets her pepper spray out, as expected. I prepare for the attack. I close my eyes and back away just in time to evade the full blow of the spray. Nevertheless, with a resounding thud I fall down and start screaming, pretending of course. The whole restaurant's eyes are on us. Awkward, yes, but this is necessary. As Dr. Ashfaq said, "She needs to experience it. Memories work in strange ways and retrieving them is tricky business. There's no certainty in our methods. But if you can make her re-experience something important, like when you two first met, as accurately as possible, maybe, just maybe, it will trigger the parts of her brains that has locked away memories of you."

But it hasn't so far. Tonight's the 14th try. As I lay on the ground writhing in fake agony she stares at

me, and I wait. Will this be the day? Will this pun-pepper-pain combo finally work? Will I finally get her back? Will she say, "Are you dead yet?" and try to pull me up, smiling? Will I say, "You wish" and try to think of another terrible joke?

Apparently not.

"I'm sorry, okay? But you deserved that, man," she mutters as she hurries out of the restaurant.

I sigh. I started sighing since the third try. I'm not a patient man. But for her, I can make an exception. I must. "The experience part is just the medicine, Nahian. You need the spoon to feed her the medicine. Perseverance is the medicine, I mean the spoon," Dr. Ashfaq would say every time I complained. It doesn't sound like a proper motivational quote, but he's just a psychiatrist, so I can go with that. I can keep on trying.

Today's the 15th time — a powerful number. Maybe not as powerful as 7, or 10, or 13. But, like, a multiple of 5 is typically better than its neighbours. And it's special for us too. I mean, it was 7.15 when I was supposed to meet her on our first date. Also like, her brother was 15 when we started going out. Or was it 16? Can't remember. Doesn't matter. Today's the day, Nahian.

I go up to her. She gives me a look colder than her palms on winter eves. "That look is reserved for any and every strangers. It's a defence

mechanism," she'd told me on one of our dates. She doesn't recognise me, not even the yesterday me.

I breathe in, tell her the same joke, wait for her to leave, stop her, wait for the pepper, it comes in full force. I duck, fall, howl and glance. She's gone. Not even the forced apology.

"Are you avoiding the pepper?" was the first thing Dr. Ashfaq says in our routine visit.

"Maybe. Why?"

"She's clearly not buying it — your act of agony. You need to actually get sprayed. She needs the most *accurate* experience."

"Have you considered that maybe I never got sprayed in the first place?"

"Oh really? Are you certain of it?"

"Yeah, I believe so. Yes"

"You believe or you *know*?"

"Isn't belief enough?"

"That's a theological argument we don't need right now. Just trust me. Be the man she needs you to be and face the pepper, Nahian. Face the pepper"

And so I did. I faced the pepper. And now I'm genuinely writhing on the floor. I'm not screaming. I can't. I'm just coughing, and crying, and wheezing when I'm not coughing. It burns. It burns *everywhere*. Is this enough? It better be. Tasnim better get her memories back. I wipe my eyes, get up on my knees and look up at her in longing.

She hits me with another round of spray.

Am I dead? No, I'm at a restaurant. *That doesn't really answer my question though.* I'm sitting on a chair.

Everything's a blur. My eyes are wet, and burning. So is my nose. I cough. My head's spinning. I'm a mess. *Well, death's rather uncomfortable.*

"You're not dead," declares Tasnuva, sitting in front of me. I can't see her through my tears, but I sure can recognise her voice.

"So, now you can read my mind?" I question.

"Oh how I wish I can."

I cough, again. Tasnuva hands me a handkerchief. It smells of soap. "We'll get through this, don't worry," she reassures me as she stands up, her voice heavier, "I promise."

"Wipe," instructs Dr. Ashfaq as he puts a hand on my shoulder. I obey. It feels better. The soap's working its magic. I can see clearer now.

"We're progressing, my man," Dr. Ashfaq ensures me, taking the seat in front of me.

"But she's going away," I tell him, pointing to Tasnim as she's leaving through the exit.

"No" — he looked at me dead in the eye — "she's still there."

Fatiul Huq Sujoy is a tired soul (mostly because of his frail body) who's patiently waiting for Hagrid to appear and tell him, "Ye're a saiyan, lord commander." Suggest him places to travel and food-ventures to take at fb.com/SyedSujoy