

DRAW

UPOMA AZIZ

"You know, he never really stopped loving you."

My reflexes seem to have dulled away completely, I don't freeze or whip around, though the lack of dramatic flair was probably caused by the arthritic pain in my joints, and I respond long after the words crawl into my ears. Maybe it was because this wasn't what I had expected, or had wished it were directed toward someone else? Oh, who am I trying to fool. I'm just awed at my own naivety that all the reasons I had stacked up against me coming here, this one I never even thought of. I definitely should have, but it's surprising that she remembers what I look like. Or has she kept track of me?

I turn around to face Sylvie, and wonder if women revert to their maiden names once their husbands pass away. Veins scream out from underneath her pale, sepia skin and her cheeks have hollowed out; but I suspect it has little to do with Newaz being gone. I look into her eyes and cower a bit, feeling guilty all of a sudden.

He loved me? He did? I didn't know what to feel or if this information was of any value anymore. Part of me wanted to wave the statement away, pay my condolences and leave, but the curiosity tugging at the pit of my stomach was too intense, and by the way she stared right through me, it seemed that she might not be in the exact mood to let things go just like that. So we stare at

each other, wordlessly, and aeons pass.

"Would you like to come inside?" she asks me, and strides away. I am slightly startled, and then I scurry after her. I wonder what I am getting myself into. The obvious lack of display of sorrow as expected from a recently widowed person was causing people to whisper and elbow each other, though some voices were empathetic and had decided that she was too shocked to act.

I follow her into a room – *their* room previously, though I wouldn't have guessed it. The Newaz I knew wouldn't allow such scandalous choice of curtains. But my Newaz had died before her Newaz did, so it was hard to tell. She floats around the room as if in a half dream and I stand at the door.

"Do tell me, Shuchishmita, did you love him as well?" she asks, and to my relief, she doesn't wait for an answer. She drifts around the room, tidying things, straightening photos on the wall and folding clothes. I consider fleeing, but I just stand there watching her work.

"It took me ten-something years to realise that he never loved me. You could call me stupid, but he was always so sincere in his duties as a father to my children and to me." Sylvie muses lightly.

"He was a good man," I interject. Sylvie sighs. "Of course he was. But do you know how much I envied you for all these years? For it has always been you. What an unhappy man he must have been spending years with me, a

person he never loved."

"He was quite, practical, as I recall," I say. "Love was perhaps not on his list of top five priorities to selecting the person to spend his life with."

"But he still loved you, didn't he? He lived loving you, he died loving you, and I was just the responsibility he had gotten himself into. It takes love to love, and without love you cannot love. You loved him and he loved you, I have never received any from him, and these years have been a prison to me as well."

"But I envied you so," I blurt out. Sylvie smiles but it doesn't reach her eyes, just stretches out along the lines of her chapped lips. "None of us were truly ever happy, were we?" she says, eyeing a photograph on the wall, one of the family together, and I don't know if it is because of what Sylvie just told me, but the eyes of Newaz and Sylvie in the photo look hollowed out of any emotion to me.

I walk out leaving her alone in the room, and see a couple of motivational phrases in bright pastels put up on the wall. A turquoise-coloured one says something about life being a game, which makes me look at all the people at his funeral, and imagine if they'd walk out patting each other on the back, discussing the game, congratulating one another on the win of the team they supported, muttering "Good game" or "Close miss". The match was a draw. No one won at the end.

