



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

STRING TELEPHONES

SARAH WASIFA

"It's late."

Of all the pieces of her that he ever caught, he hates this habit the most – forgetting that she has made tea. Cups on the dresser, cups on the railing, cups forgotten until the taste was boiled down to the acerb of the particles at the bottom. He hears her swear and on cue, the brief spill of the liquid. In hindsight, startling her might not have been the best decision.

"You're one to talk. Isn't it 3 AM for you too?"

The city heat swells and dips between the concrete as he scours for an excuse. I'm here for the view. There isn't one. Only the filament from the odd neighbours' window, and the scintillation of the flies over the streetlight.

In the distance, the nightguard whistles away.

"How was your day?"

In all honesty, I'm tired.

She looks to her left, and to her right, and quietly steals an hour off the clock into her purse. There's inherent shame in wanting. Daytime tears too much off of her, plastering silly putty over the gaping holes in poor imitation of her old self. I'm tired.

It was hers, and hers alone.

She wasn't expecting anyone to catch her, much less him, that too willingly carrying the burden of a conversation. He's played numerous roles in the time their lives have intersected, but this was new. The night owl. Auditions open.

"Yeah, it was okay." Do I bother reciprocating the question? Why?

Courtesy, she thinks.

Longing, her mind supplies.

"How-um-how was yours? Your day?"

I'm doing okay.

Maybe okay was an understatement. Thursday evening traffic, a true creature of habit, had been horrendous. His nerves were frayed; the casual cruelty of monotony seeping into his socks as another hour passed at the same intersection. Days passed without much substance, the in-be-

tween filled with raw cotton. How little he has amounted to at the expense of the same count of days his peers have lived.

"You didn't burn yourself with the tea, right?"

She wore the same sandals, and took the same bus. And right now, she is going to drink her tea and watch the flies, and pretend to be anywhere but in her tired shell. All day long she peered into her purse with glee, but he's here, and she realises her bounty is as good as gone.

The tea is stale. Loneliness is an acquired taste.

"How'd you know I'm here?"

He heaves out a sigh. There's familiarity in this, familiarity he can sink his toes into, muscles unfurling from leather confines, a conversation, what ifs, parallel lines slighting off from a moment of camaraderie. When the sun rose again, they would retreat to the indifferent familiarity of routine.

"Your door knocked the planter off."

He blindly presses for the switch. There's a new focal point for the flies.

"Looks like an open invite for the mosha."

"Actually, no. I can see them coming now. Gotta prepare for the-"

He realises she can't see his majestic karate chops.

"Does Auntie still grow orchids?"

He nods to himself.

"Could you thank her for the mango pickle? Ammu really liked it."

And you? Did you like it?

I liked it too.

Thanks. I helped stir it.

He's suddenly struck by the sheer awkwardness of it; how long it had been since they shared greetings, how quickly his role was boiled down to that of an acquaintance, and how tea still (still?) reminds him of her. There are times he thinks it still shows.

(When his facade of jokes fail and he's caught absentmindedly fidgeting with the ghost of a ring on his finger. He thinks they tune into his mind and they know. They

know. How close auntie came to being called ammu by her.)

She forgot to add sugar, she belatedly realises. He shuffles on the other side of the drywall. The silence swells and dips.

Love is, of all things, a verb. An endless glutton of compromise, time, effort, sorrows and iloveyous that dwindle and melt under the sun, and it's not enough. You're not enough. She knew she had to bring it up. It hadn't been that he hadn't been trying, but trying is rarely enough on its own. I think I want fresh tea. But the cup has long since cooled. She sees how his endearing drive burns her tongue, and it is no longer sweet. The atrophy of whatever they had since the ring fit her perfectly.

For his part, he listened. When he said he's sorry, and that things would change, he believed himself.

(And in other times, it would've been enough. But she's cold, and cold tea does little to warm her.)

Do you know him? She asks herself.

Of course. He's my fiancé.

She stopped asking more. Dawats he wouldn't show up to, dates he would miss. It's okay. Heat bled out faster than she can put in the effort to repair, and bitterness settled in. Tenacity looked like stubbornness without rose glasses, determination morphed into the inability to compromise.

(But it wasn't okay. It hadn't been for a while, and it took her too long to realise that. Career, over you and me.)

They got their usual table, and for his part, he had actually shown up. She briefly hesitated, is this the right thing to do? He's here, isn't he? At least he's here, it's him, she knows him, and the familiarity is addictive. The chill had settled in, the sugar forgotten; maybe she had forgotten it for a while. She saw him waiting for his tea to cool, one of the many parts of her scattered across him. The face she loved; the hair was longer, she hadn't faced him in so long.

I'm okay. We're okay. I can't do this anymore.

(You're supposed to be there when I need you. Am I not even worth the effort?)

She took off the ring, and quietly left. Months prior, she would have cried. She wished she was worth the effort it would have taken him to follow her.

When the new tenant uncle spotted him trying to apologise again, bless his soul, he stepped in.

Do you know him?

Of course. He's my neighbour.

"Are you happy?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, like in general. With life. With everything."

"I like to think so."

As for him, he mourned, moved on, moved back, steeped, stewed, and cooled down.

"Are you?"

In all honesty, he doesn't know. He knows whatever they had has been poured down the drain, and time has rinsed the rest of it out. Yet he finds himself with an extra mug of tea, a pastry he begrudgingly passes to his sister, and taking the longer route home so as to spare her the unease.

"Do you think I'm terrible?"

"Terrible men don't apologise. At least you know where it went wrong."

Her indifference is relieving. Gone are the days they could breathe in the resentment from everyone around. But indifference is a cruelty of its own kind. She's grown older, no longer in the starry-faced twenties, and hearts only grow more cautious with age. An act of self-preservation, really.

"Shouldn't you go to sleep?"

"I have time." For you.

(I hope one day we can forgive ourselves for not being what we wanted each other to be.)

"Sleep soon, okay?"

He makes sure to turn the light off as he goes.

Sarah Wasifa sees life as a maths equation: problematic, perhaps with a solution, and maybe sometimes with a sign to tear off a page and start over again. Help her find 'y' at sarah-wf77@gmail.com