

MY LOVE IS LOST, and I don't want it anymore

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They cooked the fries a different way today. The angle at which they drooped between my fingers and the precise sand-like texture that usually cuts across the surface of my tongue felt different. The same golden-brown appearance, the same aroma of fat-soaked goodness – and yet, different. I don't sigh in the face of the server who asks, "Madam, the food was good, no?" despite the overwhelming urge to do so. Instead, I extend a smile that can even be perceived as warm towards him before stuffing the leftovers in my already overflowing tote and exiting the bleakness of Arabian Fast Food.

My senses are not overwhelmed in the way they usually are on a late February day in another year. There is no hint of the upcoming heat wave and no pulsating weight in the air. The atmosphere tastes stagnant and stale. It carries itself with a flavour that would have made the insides of his nose dry and itchy – making him reach for the steroid nasal spray that he uses a little too much. He would have hated this day and would have hated the fries. He would have vowed to never set foot in the place again only to come crawling back the next time he felt the need to appease me but didn't want to burn a hole through his worn-out, hand-stitched leather wallet. Perhaps it is a good thing he isn't here.

I don't want to shuffle my way across the disproportionately wide footpath towards the drab foot over-bridge. I don't want to awkwardly brush my shoulder against the *alkhella* of the *hujur* who glances at my red-stained knuckles with intrigue. I don't want to clutch my cash-filled bag tightly to my chest while walking across

the floating, steel path over a disturbingly deserted road. I certainly don't want to anxiously fly towards the automated entrance of the glass edifice or tap my right foot aggressively while waiting for the elevator to arrive. But I still do it all. And I register, during each instance, the exact shade of emotions that shiver their way across my skin before falling off into the landfill where emotions rot after I fail to bury them in my body.

The elevator ride up is not a lonely one. There is the middle-aged couple in the corner, clasping each other's hands as tightly as they can manage.

Every time I enter it, this building carves out a tiny piece of my heart, leaving behind the sharp tang of hospital bleach and lemon-scented air freshener in its place. The sterile smell clings to the soft cotton of my *kameez* even when I am not here. The essence of the place grabs onto me like a needy child, dragging me along on a ride through its bacteria-ridden, suffocatingly melancholic halls till I can barely remember who I was when I started. I think he likes it this way. He likes me when I forget who I used to be. I just don't know how much of my heart I still have left to give.

The elevator ride up is not a lonely one. There is the middle-aged couple in the corner, clasping each other's

hands as tightly as they can manage. With her other hand, she brushes some stray strands back into his salt-and-pepper hair, neglecting to tidy up the wild black strands around her heart-shaped head. I know I will see them again in a couple of months or maybe in a few years. I know his hair will remain salt-and-pepper and hers will have decayed to a dirty, unwashed ash. I know, too, the teenage boy standing beside his mother, looking disinterestedly at his phone, won't be here for long. He will soon be gone to an unknown land, a distant city. Perhaps, he will remain in the same city but become lost with unknown people in an unknown world. As I step out onto the fifth-floor corridor, the newly formed wounds on my heart already feel distant and blunt. This floor is too vast, too all-consuming for there to be any space remaining for my hurt.

I don't have to labour too hard to pick up the gruff voice from the other side of the heavy-set, double doors. It sounds exactly as it always does: dissatisfied, impassionate, boiling with an inexplicable internal rage. I don't want to cross the threshold to the other side to see him, with the veins on his forehead popping out menacingly, shouting at the ill-fated nurse who drew the short straw today. There is an instinct of self-preservation in my head that is trying to pull every inch of my body away from those doors. But I am a mouse caught in an inescapable trap. I don't even bother bracing myself as I pull the doors open and step into the dull, fluorescent ward.

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