

*“How have you been?”*

***“Unlike you.”***

*by Shambhavi Sinha*

*For the Young Writers Awards Winners 2023*

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"*You know...*" she began slowly, each syllable interrupted by a brief, wet sound of food being chewed.

Saliva surrounded the peachy hues, drowning it in a warm embrace of amylase, as it disintegrated. Soon, all that remained was a mildly sweet taste; glucose as it formed from the once proud state of starch.

"*You always did eat like a Westerner.*"

She looked up, and so did I. I looked into her eyes with contempt, but all I received in return was a look marred with nostalgia, and something else. Perhaps my escapades with the dictionary have not been as successful as I thought they were.

Well, many of my personal escapades haven't been as successful as I thought they were. Not that it mattered. Those around me did not know about them. And these days, I cannot seem to remember too many of them.

"*You always used the spoon very...*", she trails off, briefly, thinking of the correct word to use.

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*"...elegantly, since you were a young one. Dunno who really taught you in the first place."* This revelation did not surprise me at all, I thought, as I looked up once more from her plate to look at her. She had matured, the brief lines of her history appearing on her face.

No matter how much I tried to forget, no matter how much I forgot, somehow— it was this I never forgot.

*"As a child, you always looked so..."* she trailed off once again.

**"Sombre?"** I suggested, biting my tongue as soon as I said it.

*"So mature. Look at you now though! Youthful as ever. Me, on the other hand?"* she continued, eyes vaguely glossy over the wine of nostalgia and wistfulness. A wine brewed for nearly 26 years of shared history. I sat, staring at the uncorked wine on the table, as she spoke of the past, drunk on the life I barely remember myself in.

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"*Oh, do you drink now?*" she stops suddenly, her gaze drifting from the bottle of wine to my lips.

"*Well, I always thought you would, when you'd grow up. It fits you— you know?*" She presumes, looking over to me in a rhetorical fashion. She always did jump too far, and too often. She'd announce her jumps— to anyone and everyone who'd listen.

"*It reeks of fancy elitism— talking of its mouthfeel, or its lingering taste. Some of them treat wine better than they treat humans. You aren't like that, though, right?*"

"*They talk on and on, never realising how it's going to kill them. Drink it every day—*" she sighs, and I felt somewhere on the spectrum of relief and disquiet as the conversation shifted from me, to somebody else.

"*How often do you? I feel like you'd be a celebratory drinker. Or a social one...*" she trails off, thinking to herself, hand cupping her cheek, hoisting her head on the armrest. Her cheek is devoid of the light acne of her nonage, but glistens in the warm light from above.

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**"I do not drink."** I say, as though I am repeating an apophthegm.

*"Is that so? I thought it was a must in your circles..."* she says, bemused by the silver teaspoon twirling in her hands. It spins, across each finger, and then ceases at the little finger. Readjusting, she holds it again, as though one would grip a pencil.

*"Then again, don't the celebratory drinkers often say that?"* she asks, once again rhetorically.

I sigh.

**"Is this all? If you are done with your food, as I am?"** I say, looking out at the evening blue outside, the yellow hues of the lights cascading throughout the streets. Setting down the serviette beside my plate and returning my gaze to her, I stare at her surprised face.

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She did not anticipate such an attack from my side. It was obvious, I thought, from the way her eyes widened briefly, clouds of nostalgia and wistfulness separating as the sun of the present asserted its dominance.

"*Yeah, um. Of course.*" she says, and it looks as though she is thinking faster than she ever had. Faster than anyone ever had.

*"I'll pay. How about we go out for a walk? I saw you looking out earlier."*

Well played, I thought.

**"Alright."** I watched as she stood up quickly, the elegant mahogany of the chair wincing as she rushed to the reception. I chuckle, briefly. She must've thought she won this round. A tall man, in neat black waistcoat and trousers, approached with a gentle smile. I sign the cheque and stand up. He expresses his thanks, and hands me my overcoat.

As I reached the reception, the light sound of walking on marble resonated across the lobby, albeit damped by the soft lilt of the violin. There she stood, the previous skip and ecstatic look lost. She always did sway easily to her

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emotions, from what I remembered. Rose to cloud nine at the smallest opportunities and sunk to the ninth circle at the smallest of adversities.

*"They said it was already paid for."* she huffed. *"You can't bear to see others win, not even for a moment, huh?"* she continued, walking out the door I barely held open for her. The blue of twilight was near fading, and the evening star was shining brightly next to the moon.

*"You always have to be the only one, no? Always have to be the only one doing everything. Always succeeding. Always happy. Always shining. Alone."* she said, stopping by an alleyway. The alleyway seemed to lack the blue-gold vibrancy of the exquisite streets, as though midnight had embraced it early.

*"You must've been— who was it again?"* she mutters, the anger in her eyes dulling as she thought.

*"Caesar, in your past life. Veni, Vidi, Vici. Wasn't it?"* she speaks, slowly, carefully pronouncing the Latin words, as though it wasn't the first time, that she had thought of it.

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I let out a deep chuckle, amused at the irony. Something felt tight in my chest as I clenched my hands, a brief moment of emotion, I rationalised.

***"What do you know? It's not like you were ever there, anyway."***

*"Shut up! I've seen you since you were born. I've seen the way melanin bloomed in your skin, and the way you couldn't pronounce words with a sh. You've always been like this, you bastard."* she turned away from me, walking into the alleyway. The sound of heels on the cobbled streets rang in my ears, as I kept pace.

*"You were never one of us. You never saw yourself as one of us. Isn't that right?"* she turned around suddenly, as though trying to stare through my eyes, into my soul.

She could never read me, anyway. Not in the way I could.

***"Did you all, ever? Think of me as a person—much less as your own? I was never one of you, so you managed to convince***



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***everyone. Even myself. But did you ever convince yourself? If you did, then why are you here?"*** She had turned away, couldn't bear to face me, or the truth.

*"Because I fucking hate you! You... don't belong."* she breathed heavily, and I stared, feeling empty inside. Or not, I thought, as a few tears left my eyes. I turned away from her, both our backs facing each other.

***"Because that was for you to decide, yes? If you feel so strongly about it, why don't I give you a real reason to show them I don't belong?"***

Silence enveloped us like midnight had enveloped the alley.

I turn around, and in the moments that I remember, I am speechless for the first time in my life. Possibly the last.

There she stood, tears running down her face, glistening pearlescent under the moonlight, hand gripping the shimmering dagger.

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And there I stood, facing her, blood running down my spine, painting the alley a glowing crimson as the evening star reflected upon it.

*"There's no need. There won't be any more of you, anyway. Spare me the mercy, the kindness. Spare me all the thinking."* she says. *"You've always thought too much. Too rational."*

**"Well, you've always been the opposite."** I said, voice airy, not a hint of pain leaking out. I couldn't remember much of her, anyway. Though I remain unsure, of how much, that was her doing.

*"You've always been too much. We wouldn't want the people to see what they could be if they just co-existed, do we?"*

**"The people will find out, anyway. You've never been much."**