

GHOST CHILLI

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Nikkitha Bakshani



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For Mom, Dad, Roma and Ajay

Pentimento: the revealing of (part of) a painting beneath another painted over it at a later time. If the overpainting is not thick enough, ghostly figures will appear in the final image.

Johanna Hedva, *Your Love Is Not Good*

I

Erasers

Patrick was from Kansas, which made Muskan think of tornados and little else. He looked like he was from Kansas: no-nonsense handsome, like an oak cabinet. Cropped blond hair, blue eyes, etc. He pulled up Google Maps on his phone and zoomed out. A red pin hovered over the centre of the United States. 'Does Kansas feel as rectangular as it looks?' Muskan asked. Patrick said yes, without needing her to clarify what she meant.

She really liked him. Not just really, but un-really; it was spiritual, like they'd been lovers in a past life. She reminded herself that she'd been pleased with her reflection before she left her apartment. For once, the mirror matched the image she had of herself in made-up scenarios where she enchanted onlookers with her wit, beauty, talent and charisma, singing Nina Simone songs as if she herself was the High Priestess of Soul, and not some girl in Brooklyn. These daydreams made her consistently twenty minutes late to everything, including this first date. But she felt at ease the moment she saw Patrick. She was so accustomed to looking at other people, searching for signs that they liked her, that Muskan was taken aback when Patrick did the same to her.

Muskan took what looked like a small yellow matchbox out of her pocket. It was filled with ink-black liquorice shaped like fish.

'My boss went on a press trip to Iceland and brought these back for us,' Muskan said. She did not mention that her boss had given them to everyone in the office but her, and that she'd found the box on the floor of the elevator. 'Would you like one?'

Patrick took a liquorice fish out of the box and examined it before taking a bite. He immediately spat it out into his beer, where it bobbed on the surface.

'I didn't realise candy could be salty and bitter,' he said, trying to pinch the fish head out of the glass.

Patrick was the eldest of five brothers, and he designed websites for a living.

'No way!' Muskan said. 'I use them!'

He asked Muskan what she did for a living. She told him the public-facing version, and then the truth. She was an editor at a luxury lifestyle magazine called *The Arrival*. She copy-pasted print magazine text into TextEdit to undo the formatting, then input it in a CMS platform to re-do the formatting. She was instructed to never, ever change a word or a punctuation mark, just copy and paste, close any stray gaps and sudden line breaks. She was not an editor at all; she was a web producer.

'I don't even sit near my co-workers,' Muskan said. 'They've stuck me near the fact-checking team of our sister magazine, aka the other people who'll be replaced by robots. So I just read articles all day.'

They agreed that people who referred to the *New York Times* as 'The Times' were the worst. Muskan mentioned an article she'd read 'in the *NEWYORK Times*' about how nail salon owners got away with forcing employees into twelve-hour shifts for \$4 an hour. 'That's the TRUE price of a fifteen-dollar mani-pedi.'

Why did she say that? She'd reduced genuine struggle into a talking point, and not a very good one. It was shrill. It was random.

But it was what came to her mind so that's what she said. She was about to apologise when Patrick seized her left hand and pressed her fingernails.

'What's this colour?'

'I Don't Give a Rotterdam.'

'What?'

'That's what the colour is called.'

'I guess this is what the sky looks like there?'

'Yes, exactly like my nails.'

'Oh!' Patrick said. 'You've been to Rotterdam?'

Taken aback by his sincerity, Muskan lied and said yes.

'A play I wrote in college was put on stage there,' Muskan said.

It was put on in Amsterdam, not Rotterdam, but Patrick did not need to know that.

'Cool,' Patrick said, putting her hand back down. 'Very impressive.'

Muskan worried Patrick was being sarcastic. Perhaps he'd picked up on her lie. Or he thought she'd fabricated the play entirely.

'Eh,' she said, with a wavering hand. 'Nobody in New York wanted it.'

'They didn't give a Rotterdam?' he asked.

'They did not,' Muskan said, relieved.

Something major, something cosmic, shifted into place with a satisfying click. Finally Muskan understood what it meant to like someone. She was always so concerned with whether a date liked her that her own feelings became irrelevant or, she told herself, she would figure them out later, if there was a second date. But now, with Patrick, that ease with which she saw friends, colleagues and strangers receive and pursue love, it was finally letting her in.

At work the next day, Muskan's boss Astrid came to her desk. 'Wow, you're really far away,' she said, as if she had no control over

where Muskan was seated. Astrid unrolled a few large pieces of paper on the empty desk next to Muskan.

‘Behold,’ she said, ‘the first twenty pages of our next issue. EIC wants all articles to go live before print gets mailed to subscribers. But the PDFs won’t be ready in time for you to work with, so you’ll have to transcribe it page by page. Do you think you can do that?’

Muskan thought about how monks in the Middle Ages sat in their little scriptoriums to transcribe the Bible, inspiring magnificent frescos and epic poems. But here she was transcribing reviews of horsehair mattresses and \$1,200-a-night hotel rooms in former brothels.

‘Sure,’ she chirped.

Before Muskan could gather the courage to follow up about the article she’d pitched to Astrid a couple of weeks ago, Astrid walked away. Muskan clicked back into Twitter. The term #ByeFelicia was trending again. She read her horoscope: Saturn, the planet of restrictions and hard lessons, was leaving her seventh house of romantic relationships after an unusually long stint. Uncanny! Muskan made a playlist of love songs she never felt she could relate to until now and titled it ‘#ByeFelicia to Saturn’. She read the news. A boat of migrants had capsized in the Mediterranean – the third that month. There was an uproar in response to the tweet that broke the news. ‘And they say America is racist,’ said one tweet by a popular journalist with a blue check. A response to that tweet said: ‘All happy countries are racist. All unhappy countries are racist in their own way.’ Muskan wasn’t sure how the news was racist. The poor treatment of migrants was racist, but the boat itself capsizing? She worried she was not grasping something obvious. She opened a listicle of New York City’s best tacos. Patrick had yet to text her. Still, she smiled thinking of how, in her room a few hours ago, Patrick had lost a contact lens.

‘What’s your power?’ Muskan had asked.

‘My . . . power?’

‘Prescription,’ Muskan had clarified, with a laugh that hid her embarrassment. Why, after fifteen years in America, did a random Indian-ism suddenly announce itself?

She went to get lunch at a nearby deli and saw a man eating broccoli-cheddar soup out of a hollowed-out loaf of bread. ‘Only Americans think of such things!’ her father had said, upon his first encounter with a bread bowl. As she tried to formulate the thought into 140 characters, Muskan saw an incoming call from her friend Jo.

‘Just text him,’ Jo said, after listening to Muskan fret about Patrick for ten minutes. ‘Text him but don’t have expectations.’

Muskan didn’t think she expected that much. A reply would suffice.

‘Of course,’ Muskan said. ‘No expectations whatsoever.’

‘I’m glad you’re seeing people other than Noah,’ Jo said.

‘Me too,’ Muskan said, and quickly after: ‘Did you hear about Pinky and Geoff?’

‘Yeah,’ Jo said.

‘Of course you have,’ Muskan said. ‘She hasn’t talked about shit else.’

‘I’m happy for her!’ Jo said defensively.

‘I am too!’ Muskan said. ‘Of course I am. I introduced them.’

‘You did?’ Jo said.

‘She didn’t mention that?’

Muskan knew Geoff from high school. He was the ex-boyfriend of a friend she’d lost touch with. He reached out to her a few weeks ago to say he was moving back to New York. Since it was rather out of the blue, Muskan wondered if Geoff had had a thing for her back in high school but brushed the thought aside. She invited him out to drinks with her friends. At the end of the night, Muskan, Pinky and Geoff were the only ones left behind. While stumbling

down Avenue A eating cheese fries, a man in a purple dress shirt approached them and addressed Muskan directly.

‘Do you want to know something sad?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Muskan replied without thinking.

‘I lost my virginity at the age of thirty-three,’ he said, eyes bulging. ‘To a prostitute.’

‘Sex work is unfairly stigmatised,’ Muskan slurred. ‘It’s actually the oldest profession—’

Pinky yanked Muskan by the elbow and the three of them walked down a quiet cross street.

‘He wanted to lose his virginity to *you*,’ Pinky said.

‘He already lost it,’ Muskan said. ‘To a prostitute. Didn’t you hear?’

Muskan was being sincere, but Pinky and Geoff laughed, thinking she was making fun of him. They told her she was too drunk, hailed a taxi and pushed her into it. Muskan knew at that moment they just wanted her out of their way. She got angry and cried as the taxi drove her home. Muskan was just a facilitator. She connected people and, once they’d outgrown her use, they dumped her. Her entire existence was Pinky and Geoff’s foreplay. That’s why the man in the purple shirt addressed her directly. She had more in common with him than her friends.

‘I’m sure she didn’t mean to erase you,’ Jo said.

‘Of course not. I don’t expect – she doesn’t owe – you know what, I’m babbling. But I’m just going to say – I sensed something there. As soon as they said hi. This is my special talent in life, Jo. I can walk into any room, no matter how crowded, and tell you then and there who has already fucked or who is about to.’

‘You are ridiculous,’ Jo said with a laugh.

Jo mentioned that she and her boyfriend Carlos had put themselves on a waiting list to adopt a dog. Muskan said ‘aw’, but she was confused. First Jo evaded her attempt to gossip, now she liked

dogs? Jo railed against how people used an affinity for dogs as an excuse to act like children. ('Liking dogs is *not* a personality.') She called it a white people thing. They made fun of people who said 'doggo' and 'good boy'.

Jo said she had to go. Muskan said goodbye and hung up. She followed Jo's advice and texted Patrick. If she really thought about it, without letting cynicism get to her, there was a good chance Patrick liked her too. She'd felt something special; it wouldn't have been possible if it wasn't mutual. She'd deluded herself into thinking guys liked her many, many times before, but this was different. This feeling of confidence – semi-confidence – was new, and it had to come from somewhere. Or maybe she'd just found a more sophisticated way of deluding herself.

Muskan was invited to a press event for a craft tequila company. She felt guilty accepting the invite – the PR rep clearly had no idea how useless she was at the magazine – but Muskan couldn't turn down a night of free booze and 'two-finger tacos'. She invited her friend Leisel, who worked at an agricultural trade publication and arrived at the tequila event with the most delicious strawberries Muskan had ever tasted.

'Grown in a basement in Long Island City,' Leisel said.

The entrance to the tequila event had an enormous mural with a stencilled-out image of a bottle and the words WORTH A SHOT. Behind the main white image was a moving, kaleidoscopic background. A topless man rode a stationary cycle next to the mural.

'Is he . . . making it move?' asked Leisel, looking at the mural's shifting colours.

'I think so,' said Muskan.

'That is so depressing.'

'He's too perfect-looking.'

‘Like a marble statue.’

‘Maybe he *is* a marble statue,’ Muskan said, ‘but he made a deal with a dodgy sorcerer who promised him human life for a day.’

‘The sorcerer was, like, I’ll make you a fashion model, the thing every human wishes they could be.’

‘Without disclosing how people just assume you’re stupid.’

‘Is that what we’re doing now?’

‘Mm, yeah,’ Muskan admitted, lifting her shoulders and nodding.

‘We should probably stop staring.’

A male PR rep greeted them at the entrance, addressing Leisel first. Muskan had to clarify that she was the press invitee, and Leisel was her plus one. Once past him, Leisel turned to Muskan. She looked like she was about to cry.

‘I can’t believe he did that,’ she said.

‘Did what?’

‘That microaggression.’

‘Oh,’ Muskan said. ‘I didn’t realise.’

‘Really?’ Leisel said. ‘It was *ridiculous*. You should say something. Maybe send an email?’

Muskan was sure it was less of a microaggression than it was the way Leisel always looked a little bit lost, a little bit surprised that people might notice her at all. (‘That’s why guys love her,’ Jo once told Muskan in one of their Pinky-and-Leisel-less hang-outs. ‘They feel like they’re saving her.’) Leisel had big green eyes crowned by black, speared eyelashes; her mouth was small and heart shaped. The PR rep seated them at an arts and craft station where they could decorate empty tequila bottles with sequins, feathers and glitter. Muskan told Leisel about Patrick, who’d responded to her text. They were to meet for a second date on Friday.

‘I read this article about a woman who made a spreadsheet to record every man she dated, his characteristics and compatibility,

etc., and then met her husband a month later. And the response was generally “yaaas, queen”. But I thought it was just so *ugh*,” Muskan said. ‘Everything is *work*. Even dating.’

Muskan told Leisel how she’d googled Patrick’s name, university and profession, and managed to locate him on LinkedIn and Twitter, where she’d read everything he’d posted since he signed up four years ago. A lot of posts he liked or retweeted were by South Asian women.

‘He may have a thing for brown girls,’ Muskan said.

‘You say that about everyone,’ Leisel said. ‘But a guy doesn’t have to have a weird race thing to like you.’

As if you’d know, Muskan thought. Then again, she was the one willing to overlook a fetish for her own gain.

‘He’s not Noah, okay?’ Leisel said.

‘You know, in a way, it’s good if Patrick has a weird race thing for brown girls,’ Muskan said. ‘That means I don’t have to try as hard.’

Leisel threw a feather at Muskan.

‘You’re too much!’

Suddenly the lights dimmed and a group of trapeze dancers performed above them, wearing leotards representing the company’s different flavours of tequila. Muskan and Leisel dutifully clapped, then left the room to see the VR exhibit. They put on headsets and roamed the fields of Jalisco, touching the succulents but not being pricked. On the way to the station, holding the tequila bottles they’d decorated in the arts and crafts station, Leisel told Muskan that she had gotten confirmation of a job offer from ‘The Times’.

‘Leisel!’ Muskan said. ‘How did I not know about this until now?’

‘I didn’t want to jinx it,’ Leisel said.

‘That’s amazing,’ Muskan said. ‘I’m so jealous. Not jealous.’

Happy! I'm happy for you. You really deserve this. Just think – not long ago, we were toiling away at *The Digest Digest*.'

'I'm pretty sure this job wouldn't have happened if I didn't have the experience there,' Leisel said. 'So thank you for hooking me up with it.'

'Honestly, I think I preferred that shithole – and getting to hang out with you – than what I do now.'

'At least now we know it's not career suicide after all,' Leisel said.

Perhaps not for Leisel. Muskan had given up on trying to find a new job.

They couldn't find seats on the L train, so stood near the door. Muskan recognised a woman with dark red hair and glasses seated near them with her laptop open. She was an industry-famous food writer who'd once harangued *The Digest Digest* on social media for an article they'd published called 'You're Peeling a Banana All Wrong'. The article cited the food writer as the source of a clever tip, but did not contact her for comment. Everyone who worked at *The Digest Digest* was required to publish five articles a day – they did not have time to get quotes. Yet the food writer had managed to corral the support of what seemed like every famous food media personality in the country. Muskan's favourite recipe blogger announced they'd watch out for 'this bottom feeder of a writer': Muskan. After her boss shouted at her in front of the whole team, Muskan sent an email to the writer to apologise. The writer responded with three paragraphs explaining how hard she works – *So thanks for your apology but no thanks*.

'Could you ladies, like, move?' the writer said to Muskan and Leisel. 'You're getting glitter all over my laptop.'

Muskan bought a new dress for her second date with Patrick. On her way out the door, she worried it made her look like she was

trying too hard. To tone it down, she put on a pair of light blue socks dotted with coconut trees. Her hair was determined to look flat, as if she'd been wearing a hat all day. She pulled it back with a hairclip, which created an odd dome.

'I look like a basilica,' Muskan said to her roommate Georgie, who was looking at the hallway mirror at the same time. 'A *god-damn* basilica.'

She was twenty-five minutes late to their date. When she got off the train, she saw that Patrick had left her a voice note fifteen minutes ago. He said that the bar they'd chosen had been quiet at first, but got too crowded. He'd felt guilty hogging a seat and gave it up. Now he wasn't sure where to go, because everywhere else seemed equally loud and crowded. Muskan was so focused on writing an apologetic text that she did not realise she had walked right past him. He called her name and she turned around. She apologised profusely. They tried a few different bars, all of which had wait times of over an hour.

'We could go to a restaurant?' Muskan said. She pointed at a sign outside a Japanese restaurant: \$25 Bottomless Sushi – You Know You Want It!!

'I already ate,' Patrick said.

They found a quiet bar closer to the river, which smelled like whiskey and urine. The dampness cut through Muskan's clothes. There were only two other patrons, older and less stylish than the people from the bars they'd previously tried. They ordered drinks, found a table, and made small talk about living in the city – the skyscraper-high rent, restaurants with three-hour queues, their favourite subway buskers – but mostly Muskan spoke and Patrick nodded. Had she imagined the chemistry of their first date? A baseball game played on the TV: Yankees versus the Kansas City Royals. She asked Patrick if he liked baseball, knowing full well he did because his OKCupid handle was 'kansasroyalfan01'.

Patrick gave her a half-hearted nod. She asked Patrick whether he thought his team would win this match. He said he already knew the Kansas City Royals had lost because it was a recorded game. He got up. He said he had to leave immediately.

Muskan assumed he was joking, then stopped mid-chuckle when he put on his scarf. He walked out of the bar and Muskan followed him down the street.

‘It’s not a good time,’ he said, still walking.

‘I’m sorry I was late,’ Muskan said.

‘It’s not that.’

‘Then what?’

‘I’m very anxious. I have an anxiety disorder.’

‘That’s okay!’ Muskan said. ‘I’m depressed!’ She was practically chasing him now. ‘A suicide line put me on hold once!’

Afterwards, Muskan couldn’t remember much from the thirty minutes she spent in Patrick’s apartment, except:

It was a large one-bedroom with a lofted bed and no colours. A hardwood floor; beige and grey textiles. She asked Patrick if this was what people called mid-century modern.

When she went to the bathroom, she noticed a copy of an award-winning book. She asked him if it was worth the hype. ‘Yeah, I know, it’s a really average choice of a book,’ he grumbled.

She told him she’d always felt a little depressed. She didn’t actively want to die, except for a few times, but she was ambivalent about whether she lived. Good times – and she had many good times, too many to claim she was clinically depressed – only reassured her that it would be okay to die, that she’d made the most out of life. She knew what it was

like to be anxious; maybe that's why she felt such a deep connection. Did he not feel it too?

He said nothing so she continued talking. A month ago, she'd become a US citizen. She was ten years old when she moved. She wished she could have moved when she was younger, like her brother, so she could feel more American; or when she was older, like her sister, who just wore multiculturalism better.

He said he was sorry, and that he felt bad because he did not have the struggles of women or people of colour. He was just anxious anyway. 'I wasn't trying to make it a contest,' Muskan said. 'It's not a sad-off.'

He asked her to leave. At the door, she took a deep breath and asked if he would let her stay. They wouldn't even have to do anything; she just wanted to be with him, and not alone.

'Please leave,' he said.

Muskan realised she had left her coat at the bar. She walked back, paid for both their drinks – 'My date ditched me,' she told the bartender, who did not care – and walked towards the subway on First Avenue. She did not bother trying to hide her tears. She passed two girls, one of whom was sitting on a stoop, balancing a box of pizza on her knees. The other was standing up, elbow on the railing. The girl who was standing followed Muskan.

'Stop! Wait a minute,' she said.

Muskan turned around, assuming she must have dropped something.

'Okay, sorry to be weird,' she said, 'but I just heard about this Swedish word called "sonder" that does not translate to English.'

It means the moment you realise a stranger's life is just as complex as yours, and I totally just had that with you. Crazy, right?' She turned to her friend. 'Weren't we just talking about that word?'

'We literally were.'

'Here, have some pizza, talk to us.'

The seated girl dangled a slice of pizza over the sidewalk, and Muskan took it just as a red drop of oil was about to fall to the ground. She told the girls discursive things – that she and Patrick first kissed while playing darts and the arrows were still in her hand; that she'd dreamed of this kind of encounter for ever, but now that it was finally here, it was over before it began, and she had no one to blame but herself.

'I was twenty-five minutes late. That probably triggered his anxiety? I had expectations. I look like a basilica. I suggested bottomless sushi, on a second date – why would I do that? There is no connection between my brain and my mouth. If I even have a brain!'

The upright girl, who had long, curly hair, assured Muskan that it was not her fault; 'sometimes the timing is just off'. She invited Muskan to join her friends at a nearby bar, so she could stop overthinking and just have a good time. Muskan, desperate to change the course of her night, agreed; at least she'd have a better story to tell her friends. The girls were undergrads at NYU, three months into their first year and drunk on freedom. It occurred to Muskan that they too were probably using her as an anecdote to package up for later. She took kamikaze shots with them, and when a few more undergrads joined, Muskan bought the whole party a round of tequila shots. She spent \$95.

'I've just been on so many dates that end,' Muskan shouted at one of the girls over the music. 'Badly. Dates that end badly.'

'Oh my God, me too,' she said.

'My heart just feels like an eraser, you know?' Muskan said, even

louder. ‘The pink ones from elementary school. You know the ones, they’re shaped like parallelograms?’

‘Erasers! I forgot those existed!’

‘You know how they shred when you use them? They start out solid then become nothing. I have a crush, it becomes nothing. I have a job, it becomes nothing. My friends are fountain pens. But I am an eraser!’

‘What’s a fountain pen?’ the curly-haired girl asked, before turning around to hug a friend who’d greeted her.

Muskan left, realising her decision to go out with the undergrads could not mask her humiliation. She took a taxi home, wasting even more money. As it drove across the Williamsburg Bridge, she turned back to look at Manhattan. It didn’t lift her spirits, but there was no denying its magnificence. She once had a dream where the island lifted from the water and tipped to the left, its buildings sliding down like toys and crashing to the bottom where the Twin Towers once stood. All this happened as Muskan watched calmly from a rooftop bar across the river.

Muskan woke up the next afternoon and realised she’d be late for brunch with her mother. She took a taxi back across the bridge to Manhattan. She saw that she’d texted Patrick late last night, a tall bubble that mentioned the undergrads, the skyline and the word ‘sonder’, which she’d discovered was not a Swedish word but something someone on the internet made up so it would go viral. One of the undergrads left her a voice note – ‘It was so fun hanging out, thank you for buying all those shots, let’s hang out again sometime’ – but Muskan deleted it. She sent another text to Patrick apologising for her previous text.

The restaurant had glass walls that overlooked the traffic on 14th Street. When Muskan approached her mother, who was seated at a table with a glass of white wine, she braced herself. *Late as usual,*

and for what? Hair looks frizzy; dark circles – why haven't you been using the cream I got you? Why haven't you been going to the gym?

'Darling, this wine is so refreshing,' her mother said. 'It tastes like frangipane. I ordered you a glass.'

Great, Muskan thought. Now she couldn't even blame her mother for her life's problems.

'Let's share the sea bass crudo and a salad?'

'Sure.'

Her mother, still wearing sunglasses, told Muskan about the niece of a friend of a friend, whom she'd met earlier that week. 'Her mother and father died in the Bombay terrorist attacks. They were sitting right there in the hotel lobby. She was hiding under her mother's sari, clinging on as she died.'

'That's terrible,' Muskan said, mouth full of bread.

'What a brave and resilient girl,' her mother said. 'She's studying at Yale. Neuroscience. I gave her your number so you can meet next time she is in the city.'

Her mother always did this – offer her time and friendship to random Indian people. But Muskan wasn't in the mood to pick a fight. She could probably learn a thing or two about bravery and resilience from this girl. She thought of Patrick's parting words. *Please leave.*

'I'm seeing Pinky tomorrow,' Muskan said, trying to change the subject.

'Lovely!' her mother said. 'That Pinky is so beautiful. Is she still taking Bharatanatyam classes?'

'I'm not sure,' Muskan said.

'I hope so. You kids shouldn't lose touch with these things. Radha Aunty was such a beautiful dancer when she was young, travelled all over the country. And you can tell, even today. She moves with such grace.'

'Yeah.'

They ran out of things to talk about. Muskan pushed a boat-shaped crust of bread around a puddle of olive oil, which her mother had salted and peppered prior to her arrival.

‘Where is our food?’ her mother asked.

Muskan burst into tears. Her mother asked what was wrong and Muskan condensed the story: a boy she liked did not like her back.

‘That’s okay.’ Her mother shrugged. ‘Sometimes people like you and sometimes they don’t.’

This was inarguably true, but Muskan kept crying.

‘When did this happen?’ her mother asked. ‘Last night?’

Muskan nodded. The waiter took away the empty bread basket. Her mother took off her sunglasses.

‘Everything happens for a reason,’ she said, reaching for Muskan’s hand. ‘Look out this window. All you see is all there is. That boy has turned around the corner, no longer in your vision. He is no longer relevant. You have to work with what’s in front of you. If you chase him down whatever side street he takes, you might get hit by a bus. You have to believe everything happens for a reason. But tell me, did you at least put your hair in a ponytail?’

Muskan stopped crying, as if paused. Her mother was being serious. Muskan let out a laugh, which her mother didn’t notice because their food had just arrived. Muskan tied her hair back, satisfied that her mother at least tried to be helpful. Yes, excellent crudo, Muskan agreed. She was wrong about Patrick. Their connection was completely one-sided. But she was right to expect at least one of her mother’s small insults.