

## Fall in Love

(Short Story)

By Sonia Irum

We understood each other, and understanding is addictive.

My room is scattered with my half-finished articles. I know I never read enough to be able to write well. Sometimes I feel all the important things in life are half finished. I think they are beautiful that way. They would lose their charm if achieved. Perhaps that is why you loved me; I was never enough and there was always something to explore like an addiction.

I get up and start collecting the article papers from the floor laced with university papers; the messy floor, your voice echoes in my ears, "I want you here with me. It's a beautiful feeling to see the person you love lying beside you, breathing: I want to smell your skin, touch you and feel you." I grab a half-written page from under a book, you echo again, "Distance is awful for me. What is the point in living away, I don't believe in love that thrives on distance." I smiled and assured you, "I love you."

Egham Hills hear the giant clock strike eleven in the morning. Lisa, my housemate has ordered some groceries; no one else is here. I need to go and collect them. A lot of items. I wonder where she is going to store all this. The fridge is not big enough but admittedly, she does have fridge organising skills. How I find my food inside it, that is my skill. She has forgotten breakfast items. Closing the fridge door, I recall how I would leave a note on the dressing table mirror, in your office drawer, sometimes on the fridge door saying "Smile" but you never noticed because you wanted me there, smiling back at you.

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Remembering this I look at the weather report on my phone. It's October, and it's sunny. I pick up my keys and stroll to the grocery store to buy milk and yogurt for breakfast. I carefully read the details on milk bottles. I am new in Surrey; in fact, I am new in England. I am learning to adjust. I pay the bill and step outside to find beautiful skylines. This is my favorite weather – cold sunlight. Perhaps that is what I am composed of – cold and warm elements. My coldness disturbs you, but you can't leave me because I carry warmth too. Coldness lets you let go and warmth lets you go on. I sit at the bench near the bus stop where sunrays fall perfectly on me. The day reminds me of the hours spent waiting at Daewoo terminal. It starts sleeting. Weather is strange here. The ground is becoming wet, and the distinctive smell of earth takes me three years back and a thousand miles away to another time in Rawalpindi. I was at the busiest bus station in one of Pakistan's largest cities. It had rained the night before, so the air was fresh. I am not fond of rain, but I like it when the ground gives off that fresh earthy smell. Remember I told you how pleasant that day was?

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That day at Rawalpindi Daewoo Bus terminal the rush was relatively controlled (perhaps because advanced booking had arranged the flow of people to travel). As I waited, I observed the people around me. The hostess of one bus looked tired; she had come from Abbotabad and would be on her way to Lahore after a stay of 15 minutes or so. She met another hostess, giving her a usual courteous smile before they entered the office together. There were a lot of people that morning because of Eid holidays. People came and went; the way people come and go. "Going is a little harder than coming," you had once told me.

A young girl looked apprehensive. Maybe she was travelling alone for the first time; she clutched her bag tightly and looked around, fearful that someone might steal her bag or, worse, grab her.

A young boy with a shopping bag looked restlessly for his bus. He had bought shoes, from Sage, the bag declared. His worn-out jeans were ambiguous and didn't reveal whether this was his youthful style or whether he couldn't afford new ones. A woman in uncomfortable stilettos tried to walk casually, but the agony in her face, contrasted with the shine of her shoes, told a different story. Her long brittle nails and cracked heels conjured an image of primitive caveman. It seemed obvious to an observer, though not to her, that at least half of the pain in her life right now was due to heels she wore. A middle-aged village woman in intricately patterned tea-pink print *shalwar qameez* and white *malmal ka dupatta* alighted from a Multan bus. She carried a small steel bucket of *desi ghee* or *sooji ka halwa*, or maybe *gur wala halwa*. She looked like a headstrong woman from Punjab; she was alone and seemed confident to travel, but now she looked anxious as her eyes roved, waiting for someone, or something. She carried the small bucket determinedly – her only possession. A chubby guy hurriedly paid his taxi driver and looked for his bus. Late? I became anxious, I didn't want him to miss it. At least he was trying to reach to honour the waiting.

After checking two, three buses, his movements slowed, a visible contentment lulled his steps. He had his bus. He felt relieved. To celebrate this moment, he lit a cigarette and released the pleasure in puffs. He leaned back on the wall staring at his destination bus. Another man, old-school with a nice English hair-cut, stood in camel-coloured corduroy pants and gave occasional glances to people sitting on the bench. He had an 80s-style suitcase. Taking some measured steps, he moved towards the tuck shop and slowly examined the displayed items. He eventually settled on a hot coffee, but suddenly looked disturbed, as though he felt my eyes watching him. He didn't like being observed. This memory reminds me how one fine day you kept looking at me with a curious gaze and complained that I ignored what you felt though you knew how deep I felt too. I remember how passionate you would become when I responded to your non-verbal

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communication with words, “Don’t imagine me – it’s an aphrodisiac. When you wrap me in your thoughts, you become irresistible to me.”

I began looking at the terminal gate again. A family with five children entered the terminal, each child carrying a pack of crisps. The mother seemed tired. Perhaps she rose early to prepare for the journey while her husband and children stole a couple more hours of sleep. Behind them, another family with two boys. The woman in *abaya* seemed furious and admonished her husband, “Aamir! I cannot sit in such a dirty place,” she said, refusing to sit on the bench. She continued lambasting the filth of the station (she probably hadn’t seen the real bus stops and *dhaabay* there). They seemed to come from some Arab country. Maybe Dubai. Giving up and seeing she had little other choice, she sat on the bench. I could smell the strong fragrance of her perfume as if she had doused herself with the whole bottle. The man and sons seemed quite peaceful and ignored her concerns. They were busy watching a young couple arguing with the bus host about the alleged non-availability of seats. Perhaps they had been issued with wrong tickets. The host tried to assure them that the company was doing its utmost to accommodate them. A sweeper came to clean the floor. Passengers sitting nearby became incensed by the dust his broom whipped up. He said sorry to all, but what could he do? It’s all wrappers, juice packs and used tissues, thrown on the ground by educated people, civilized and cultured enough to travel by expensive bus service. He was there to clean the mess they had brought with them. He did it with a smile. As the weather was good, he did not mind. Most of the passengers preferred to sit outside as it was enjoyable out there. A newly-wed couple glided towards their bus with new suit cases. They were happy and so oblivious to the dirt, dust and rush around them. They looked forward to joyful days together. Oh, my own, this flashes across my mind: our beautiful happy days back in Islamabad when we first met. You were amused to discover that I could observe an abundance of love in the slightest movement of your eye, in thousandths of a second. I could connect. I

know why you loved me. You loved me because I observed. I noticed. I absorbed. I radiated. And because I was never enough.

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Sitting here in Egham Hills, I get lost in the voices of the people moving around that are mixed with the smell of flavored cigarettes, men's perfume and hamburgers. I close my eyes and picture the drive back to home from Margalla Hills. We discussed our busy lives that day. We hated weak and stringy relationships, and despite our happy lives I felt my life complicating; my schedule was always filled with work, you and goals. Sometimes I would hold my tears, trying not to cry when I was squeezed by all three of them. You knew it, you knew it all. I was all yours, yet not enough for you. We were silent after an argument and in that space of silence I started looking outside. I was lost in the past where we met. We met at a beautiful hill station just a short distance from concrete jungle of the capital. I was travelling to Islamabad lost in my thoughts. I saw a hand fading away in a distant view through the window, and with a jerk I came back to the life around. The bus had stopped. The passengers filed off the bus in search of a cup of tea at the sub-terminal in a hilly area with lush natural backdrop. I sat down to people watch in the garden of the restaurant next to a small cafeteria. The café speakers played a famous Hindi song in the most celestial female voice:

*Aaj phir jeenay ki tamanna hai, Aaj phir marnay ka irada hai*  
(*Today I want to live again; Today I again want to die*)

I was thinking years back – when I heard this song it did not inspire any significant thought. But that day it caught my attention as I recognised the intensified desire hidden in these lines recording a passion to live out one's own will and choice, to awaken in one's self a 'vibrational being.' While I was lost in my thoughts you came and sat next to me because that was the only chair left. It had been a long

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time since we met each other during the university days. You casually appreciated the song. I was already preoccupied because of an issue back home. To relax my mind, I started a journalistic conversation with you about a girl who wanted to rise. The family wanted her to read great thoughts but not think, they wanted her to meet people but not speak, they wanted her to learn but not practice. Such culture makes you excel in hypocrisy. You were listening to me bemused. You said, “You don’t talk much, right?” I felt alarmed by your insight; I had already observed that you could understand and that you knew I understood too. I was being examined the whole journey. I want you to do that again.

I didn’t answer, and you continued telling me how that melodious song made you wonder about your life span on earth. There was an urge in your eyes, in your speech. You said, “A few years? And we continue to shrink that short life span through unnecessary restrictions, sometimes for our own selves and often for others. People don’t realize how they deny someone their right to live life to its full. Can they imagine how much their soul is wounded when they deny them a full life...?” I picked up your thread and replied, “So, I left the world with restrictions behind...”. You had already understood my struggle. You smiled and gave me a deep look. I kept on telling you that there were social things I did differently, I broke constructed, unnecessary traditions and restrictions to live life to its full, people stood in the way, threw stones, put hurdles in the way, but I had to bull my way through it, and once in a life I just wanted to go my way differently – for it would complete who I was. You knew it and you loved me for that. You wanted to see me complete. It was you who taught me that if we want our passions around us, sometimes we should do it the hard way for our heart goes with it.

I looked at a boy who sipped his last drop of tea and I thought one would never want to be dead while still alive, one would never

choose to put herself in an endless misery which has no compensation. Once lost you can survive, but what is left behind is so much less of you. And then you came nearer and offered your heart, “Come with me!” So, I did not wait passively for something to happen. I left behind the darkness of false fears and tried to live just for once, at least with you. I chose you, believing and not knowing that you had already chosen me. Together we realized “Life is Beautiful.” The moment was seized, and I thought it would never tick back.

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A father in a waistcoat scolded his five-year-old son who insisted on buying snacks from the high-priced tuck shop, while his mother was busy scrutinising the dress of another woman who was busy texting. Announcements at the Daewoo Bus terminal informed of arrival and departure times, but the old loud speaker failed to make the message clear due to its gritty sound, so most people were hovering around their buses, none the wiser. Two young boys greeted each other warmly and looked surprised to be meeting. They walked towards the open area talking eagerly. A young mother carried a baby peacefully sleeping. The infant woke, and the mother put a Milk Pack in a small feeder and began feeding; the elderly woman with her seemed suspicious about it. Perhaps she was thinking it’s not good for a baby to drink such thick and artificial milk, that it might cause terrible constipation and stomach cramps. But why would a young mother care? She might hate traditional approaches and remedy. Dissatisfied, the elderly woman turned her face aside. It’s time to leave. Everyone with their luggage moved towards the bus. Kids having eaten their snacks left wrappers on the floor. A girl moving towards the bus stumbled upon an empty Milk Pack under her feet. While everyone moved, the sweeper came again to clean the mess the passengers had left behind. A half-smoked cigarette lay burning on the floor. I loved that small glow of a burning end as if a sigh was

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being released from deep within the chest. Burning with the range of bright colours; red, orange, yellow, amber...Colors always fascinated me.

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At Egham bus stop my train of thoughts halts as I am distracted by the crying of a toddler who is unhappy and not willing to wait at the bus stop with his mother. I look at the woman wearing the red and black checkered blouse. Right now, I am wearing grey denim jeggings and a black and white checkered shirt. I resume my thoughts, "I know you like me this way: stylish, petite, well dressed, always up to date. You believe it's a blessing, a soft and warm feeling to know that your companion is beautiful. Oh, come on, why do I have to dress to validate your standards? Love me the way I am," I said while getting ready for the walk. You just smiled back at me with the most beautiful smile in the world, for you loved my expressions and spontaneity. I continued while walking through the woods, "Making up and grooming to look smart is not bad. I like it, but sometimes I want to materialize my abstract side, my feelings in some tangible, touchable form because we are human beings made of flesh. How long can we survive on soul? We need physical with us. Our body needs it. Why should I deprive it of what it is created for?" I was trying to come to the point. You stopped, I stopped. You looked at me. It was an inquisitive look that carried deep emotions. Before I could read it, you moved forward to the woods. You were never so quiet before.

I still remember the patio where I sat, the soft couch specially bought a day before, maybe you wanted to welcome me warmly, softly. I sat there in my beautiful skirt trying to cover my legs. Soft afternoon light touched my face as I looked outside the window observing the patio. I remember you were amazed to see me. You grew fonder of me. I smiled. You sat at my feet, and I felt like a deity. That is how you always made me feel, my true.

I still think of you sometimes in flesh with your warm body, no, a lot of times, and I wonder if you still can miss me, feel me. You are so far from my material world. I wonder if you still feel and miss the moments that you wanted to preserve; our rhythmic silence, my hair falling on the naked back. You always thought your chaotic soul was dangerous for me. You're no more here in this world but you're present. Now you're trying to remove your presence that wrapped around me, and so now it is getting easier to sit at the bus stop observing people and their lives, and to get lost in that. I am trying to fall in love with life. I know you wanted me to feel alive, but life is no life without you. I told myself each day that I would never give up on life if you were there.

I am recalling how I would interrupt your thoughts with my endless talk while planting a fork in the steak. You would look at me with a deep smile. I know you loved that interruption in our silences. You always told me you used to wake up feeling you hadn't slept, that when I came into your life I gave you back peaceful sleep like that of a child. Now it's I who suffer sleeplessness. I miss you a lot and now I am tired. I am tired of your permanent silence.

I see wind blowing tired leaves off the Maple tree. I see peak fall colors through the window. I have enjoyed the changing colors of leaves before they fall. I want to fall again, deeper. In my room, I sink into the cushion, and try to feel how your voice grew louder the more you spoke. You spoke gracefully and wrote beautifully. You loved gracefully. Who wouldn't fall in love with you?

Your enduring love has made me wonder if there could be any other way of living. For me, abstraction was fascinating, while you found concreteness captivating. And now that you are gone, I try to feel your absence as presence, but this is abstraction and I no longer am fascinated by abstractions. I miss you. I am addicted to your being with me. You understood me, and understanding is addictive. At

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times, I hope that I will walk in through the door and you will turn with arms outstretched to let the fall begin.