

ONE

As the plane landed at Changi Airport in Singapore, the sun was setting on the distant horizon. As I adjusted the time on my watch, I reminded myself of the resolution I had made in Mumbai. I was here for work, but I would make time to relax and unwind as well. This would be my holiday, a break from Mumbai routine, a well-deserved vacation that I desperately needed.

I was here to attend the ‘South Asian Curators Summit’, a platform for global art participants like me. While I participated frequently in such meets, this time the host city was new to me. Singapore beckoned with its wide, dark-gray streets, green trees and blue skies into a world that was spic, span and shining. The beautiful city was also home to several fine artists whose work I longed to view.

I had made my bookings at the Holiday Inn, and I hailed a taxi to take me to the hotel, located off Orchard Road. After a quick shower and a hot meal, I checked my planner for the itinerary of the conference. This was a three-day symposium, and I had an extra three days all to myself. I decided to shop toward the end of my stay.

I had decided to start off my stay by doing something really special. The pop art show that I was scheduled to visit today was one of a kind. It had been arranged by the Bank of Bredges on their premises. The show focused on the works of Andy Warhol, a great American artist renowned for his pivotal role in the pop art movement. I simply had to see it.

Using the maps feature on my iPad for directions, I hailed a taxi. I had already booked my passes online, and an easy SMS now got me inside. How technology had changed the world I lived in!

I walked up the large marble steps and through the glass doors into the exhibition area. It was beautiful. The walls on either side were covered with portraits of Marilyn Monroe, Mao Tse-Tung, Elvis Presley, Marlon Brando, Muhammad Ali and images of Campbell Soup cans and Coca-Cola bottles, all Andy Warhol creations. Whatever the critics said when he first started out, he was an artist who had the courage to challenge the high-brow world of fine art.

The exhibition was fascinating. I felt as if I had been transported into another world, modern, contemporary and closer to real life. Pop art or popular art was people's art, more relevant and real. It was what fine art wasn't. It was a plunge from something highly refined to highly people-oriented. And it was a shift I had started to enjoy. I leisurely walked through the hall, moving from one painting to another.

I reached the end of the hall, where the restricted area of bank operations began, and was about to turn around when a door suddenly swung open and two men walked out. Both looked like typical bankers. One was a balding and bespectacled gentleman. His wavy-haired colleague, however, was the one who caught my attention.

It couldn't be. A surge of forgotten emotions suddenly swept through me, and though I fought the desire, I couldn't help but look at him again. I turned my head away sharply—it was Ryan, in the flesh and blood. I shivered.

The last thing I wanted was for him to see me. Absorbed in his conversation, he stopped a few paces ahead of me and I panicked. I had to get out of there and quickly. I bent my head low, used my iPad to shield my face, and slowly started to tiptoe away. I blessed whoever had created the iPad, not only could I use it to message and call my contacts, get directions, and store information but it could also be used to hide from people.

"Excuse me," I heard a voice behind me.

"Excuse me." It was louder this time.

Forced to turn around, I had no other option but to acknowledge the security person standing in front of me.

"You're not allowed here ma'am. This is a restricted area."

All eyes were suddenly upon me. In my panic on seeing Ryan, I had actually moved towards the restricted area, rather than away from it. I lowered the iPad and nodded at the security man. I was resigned as I turned back, knowing that while many eyes had glanced my way, there was one pair that I would be unable to escape from. Ryan was looking at me and suddenly, I had no option left but to look back at him.

It had been ten years since I had last seen him. He walked up to me.

"Well, hello there."

My heart began to thump in my chest. I felt the same strange fluttery feeling when I heard his voice, the way I had all those years ago.

“Hi,” I managed, clutching the iPad a bit too tightly.

“Nice to see you here. Long time no see, *haan?*”

“Yes, unexpected,” I mumbled and nodded. Although I had spent years preparing witty replies, at this very moment I couldn’t recall a single one. Once again I had become tongue-tied before him.

Ryan smiled. His smile hadn’t changed, it was still like sunshine, starting on his lips and ending in his eyes.

“Pleasantly unexpected,” he said emphasizing the first word.

Ryan looked good. His hair, now a little grey, was still unmanageable, needing gel to hold it in place. His eyes still had that twinkle and his smile and deep voice could still do unmentionable things to my insides. I tried to look away.

“So what are you doing here?” he asked.

“Work. Art exhibition. Work.” I fervently hoped that the three words had conveyed everything I wanted to say.

“You mean you’re working with this art exhibition?” he asked, surprised.

I sighed. Apparently I had *not* conveyed my meaning in three words.

“No, I’m here in Singapore for work, and I wanted to check out the art exhibition today, because I will be busy from tomorrow.”

“Oh, nice,” he said, his brow clearing.

“What about you?” I asked. It was the only polite thing to do in the current situation.

“I work here,” he said, “as VP Operations.”

I noted the look of pride on his face as he gave me his designation. Yes, his job and his career really mattered to him.

“I was just heading out for a meeting. Can you join me for coffee later this evening?”

It was an offer I would have jumped at years ago. But today was another day—I could no longer handle the emotional upheaval that I underwent when he was around. It was unnerving, the effect he had on me.

“No Ryan, not today. I have work,” I protested.

“Maybe some other time?” he asked hopefully as he pulled out his iPhone and scanned his schedule. I could do nothing but look at his face. A strand of his hair strayed over his temple; it suited him. How could he still look so good?

“Tomorrow evening then?”

I had my answer ready. I was not going to meet Ryan at any cost. I smiled sweetly. “Oh, that’s too bad. I’ll be leaving in the evening.”



TWO

We said our goodbyes and exchanged platitudes about how nice it had been to meet each other. Ryan had a meeting, and I left for the hotel, too distressed to think about sightseeing.

This totally unexpected run-in had stirred up a sea of emotions within me: love, hatred, and betrayal. And I had deliberately lied, ensuring that my once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of meeting Ryan was now lost.

Ryan belonged to another part of my life. We had grown up together in Kanpur—in the same school and class since kindergarten. Though we were classmates, we each had our own circle of friends. The first time I noticed him was when I fell off the swing in the playground and scraped my knee. Ryan was the only classmate who came to help me and took me to the school dispensary.

We never spoke to each other in class either. He was at the head of the class while I was always being reprimanded for my bad grades. As the teacher's pet, he'd be in the front row, while I'd be standing outside, punished for creating a disturbance.

Our friendship started when my family moved to his neighborhood. We went to school by the same bus and had the same friends in the community. It was inevitable that we met at parties, and our parents got to know each other. When she learned of his good grades, my mother insisted he come home to tutor me in maths.

I still remember our first study session. He came over to my house at six-thirty when playtime ended and homework began. I opened my books, dreading the boring half hour to come.

“Hey, you've got a new computer!” he said excitedly.

It was 1987, and computers were still a novelty—we were lucky to have a computer at home. I proudly nodded.

“Yes. Would you like to check it out?” I asked.

Putting our books aside, we went to the desktop.

It was an interesting half hour—I was amazed to discover how much Ryan knew about computers.

“Well, my father works in a computer company, so I’m naturally drawn to them.” He was unassuming, and so unlike his friends that I began to like him.

He started to come every day. We’d study for half an hour or so, and then we’d switch on the computer, where Ryan would inevitably show me something new. My grades improved and my respect and affection for this cute, yet nerdy guy, grew as well.

We had been studying together for a month when I showed him something that I had only shared with a few friends till then. That day when he came home, I showed him my sketch book. I was naturally inclined toward the arts, but because I feared ridicule I had shared it with only a few people. That day, I let Ryan into that circle. It was a big move for me, but somehow I knew Ryan would understand.

He was impressed. And I was pleased to see the expression of wonder on his face as he turned the pages.

He would stop occasionally to ask, “How did you get this shade?” or “How did you get this effect?” and I would explain. This was how it began—a friendship that would transform into love. But at that moment, neither of us knew that.

After completing his tenth board exams, he left to study in the Philippines. I hadn’t realized till then how accustomed I had grown to his presence in my life. The bus trip to school was lonely. The seven p.m. study hour was a drag, and I missed him.

He was away for exactly a year and three months. Although I missed him, I tried to move beyond my crush. And then, one day, he was back. I was waiting at the bus stop when he walked up. He was wearing a blue blazer with black trousers, his hair fell over his forehead and his eyes reflected the joy of his smile.

He looked so handsome. It was the same Ryan, but he had changed over the year. Or perhaps the year of separation made him more appealing, I don’t know. That day I saw a handsome young man who had stolen my heart.

People are fools to say that love at first sight never happens. And even though I had known him for years, and had some tender feelings for him, it was like I was seeing him with a new set of eyes. I fell in love. Love prevents

your mind from thinking rationally and that is what happened to me. My life changed in a way that I had never thought possible. I couldn't get him out of my mind.

I was happy that he was back. We spent time together. He talked of his desire to become a computer engineer. I spoke of my plans to explore the world of art. As I awaited his reaction, I wondered whether he would laugh at my choice of a career and suggest alternatives.

He did neither. He was the only person, at the time, who supported me and told me how fantastic it was that I wanted to be an artist. He spoke about how the arts in India and the Philippines were different; how the same colors could create different forms in different places. It was in these conversations that the seed of our dreams and our future life was planted and started taking shape. Someday, I told him, I would have my own art gallery. Someday, he told me, he would manage his own business. We were young and our dreams were taking wing.

From that time on, we met regularly. I would make it a point to be where he was expected to visit. He would inexplicably be present at all the places I was going to. And soon our attraction grew into love.

But life is seldom smooth sailing. A few months later, he came home with a box of sweets. He had been accepted at the prestigious University of the Philippines.

"But you just got back." I hadn't planned to say it, but the words emerged and my tears started to flow. He hugged me close, promising that he would be back soon. We made our vows of love on the spur of the moment and sealed them with a kiss.

I too, had been selected to study fine arts at the MS University in Baroda. Despite the miles between us, we kept our relationship alive. He would visit occasionally, and my life began to revolve around the few weeks that he was in India. I would pine for him, and when he came, I would dread the day he would leave.

And then his trips to India ceased altogether. His study schedules had gotten busier, he wrote. He had to prepare for exams and submit projects. He was going in for advanced studies at the Asian Institute of Management. And he was also applying for jobs. I didn't want to disturb him so I bottled up my feelings. The word 'distance' in our long-distance relationship was

becoming predominant, and I had the premonition that something was about to go wrong.

It *did* go wrong, and how! News travels like wildfire in small cities. I learnt, from a neighbor's friend, that Ryan had a live-in girlfriend, who he had been with for the past six months—the girl's name was Sia and she was said to be very pretty.

I could never have imagined that Ryan would do this to me. My heart was being pulled out of my body with pincers. I called him the next day to ask him directly. The phone was answered by a girl who introduced herself as Sia. My anguish was unbearable—the proposal I had expected from Ryan would never come. He had played with me as if I were a toy. I felt lost, heartbroken, and used.

I cut off all communication, avoided his phone calls and tore up his letters. I decided it was time to move on and to let go of the past. I had graduated from university and was now ready to take life head on in Mumbai. I applied for jobs, and decided to focus completely on my work. I tried not to think, for whenever I did, I recalled the imaginary world of love I had created with Ryan.

I started work as a professor in Mumbai's art college and I charted a new course for my life, independent of Ryan. The heartbreaks in life make you, even as they break you. From the day I learned that Ryan had betrayed me, I chose to lead my life on my own terms. But deep inside I knew, that despite everything he had done, I never felt completely free of my love for Ryan.



THREE

I finally awoke at eight a.m. after hitting the snooze button three times. I'd had a sleepless night, thanks to a combination of jet-lag, my unexpected meeting with Ryan, and my recurring nightmare of the accident, the hospital, and my former husband. I wondered in despair if the dream would haunt me all my life—the fight at the top of the spiral staircase, the hospital where I was accused of killing him. It always left me dejected and depressed.

Will I ever be free of this? I wondered numbly.

I quickly showered and dressed. The summit started today and I wanted to be there early. I pushed Ryan out of my mind, brushed my hair and headed for the conference hall.

The hall was full of people from different countries and diverse cultures. The dais held several well-known artists, sculptors, and curators. After a few inaugural speeches, the introductory video session began. Before the lights were switched off, I saw a familiar figure walking up to me.

The hall plunged into darkness just as Ryan settled in next to me. I stiffened inadvertently, feeling his shirt brush against my arm as he sat down, closer than I thought necessary.

“What the...How come you're here?” I asked.

“The bank is one of the sponsors of the event,” Ryan replied in a low voice. “Today's session ends early. We'll go for coffee after that,” he added presumptuously.

I was about to protest but Ryan had already gotten up and left. I didn't know what to do. A part of me wanted to bolt and run, while the other said that I was now a mature adult—I was no longer a teenager with a crush on a classmate. I could handle this.

The first day ended after six hours of presentations, discussions, and speeches. I decided to listen to my sensible side, and headed to the coffee shop where Ryan had said he would meet me. I braced myself for a cup of coffee with the man who could still make me feel all shaken me up like a martini.

Ryan was waiting for me at the entrance.

“Come on, let’s go,” he said, as he strode towards his black Audi.

He held the door open for me to get in. The silence between us was broken only by brief snatches of conversation.

“Are you comfortable?”

“Yes.”

“Have you got your things with you?”

“Yes.”

The car purred to life and soon we were on our way.

“So, Riya, coffee with you after ten years, *haan?* I still can’t believe this.”

“Yes,” I mumbled and nodded, trying to avoid saying anything more. My resolve not to feel or behave like a teenager had already started to melt as I became increasingly tongue-tied before him.

The car sped through clean and busy streets. The world outside looked calm and peaceful, in contrast to my turbulent mind. I looked outside instead of at Ryan, my thoughts in a whirl. How had I had ended up here? Why hadn’t I refused his offer of coffee? How had he talked me into this? I closed my eyes. It was too late. He had always had the ability to convince me, Ryan, the man I had once loved so much.

“So, how long are you here for? A week?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“You’re staying at the Holiday Inn?”

“Yes,” he repeated the word with me.

“If there are more words in your vocabulary, Riya, I would love to hear them.”

I looked away, pretending to ignore the fact that he was teasing me. He shouldn’t. He had no right to, or did he?

We had parted a decade ago—too much time had passed to bridge the chasm between us. And to top it all off, he didn’t love me anymore. Had he ever, I wondered? He was flirting with me, as if nothing had happened. I hoped to never set eyes on Ryan again.

“And how is everyone at home?” he asked, making polite conversation.

I nodded my head to indicate all was well and clamped my mouth shut. I did not want to talk to him at all. I could sense the pain he had once caused me returning in full force when I heard him speak. I felt desolate.

We soon reached the coffee shop, located above a shopping complex. He parked the car and walked briskly to the passenger door to hold it open. Yes, this man could be a perfect gentleman whenever he wanted to. The coffee shop's interiors were a dark brown. The rich smell of freshly ground coffee hung in the air, and a range of beans were displayed on the shelves. We took a corner table and ordered our coffee.

"So, what's with you, Riya? There was a time when you could hardly shut up. And now you're hardly talking. Are you feeling okay? Are you angry with me?" Ryan asked, gently touching my hand.

"No," I said pulling my hand away.

Ryan sighed. "Riya, the 'yes' and 'fine' were better, at least they had more than two letters."

"I don't know what to say to you Ryan. It's been a long time. We have nothing in common anymore."

"At last, a complete sentence," Ryan said teasingly. "And if we don't have anything in common any more, let's talk about our differences."

I couldn't help but smile, slowly warming up to him.

"Times change, Ryan. We've both come a long way, haven't we? I never thought I would ever see you again." I was telling him the truth and Ryan nodded.

"Yes, life is strange, isn't it? I never thought we'd meet after you got married and left Kanpur. I'm sorry about what happened with you, Riya. It was unfortunate."

Ryan reminded me of my other reality.

"Yes," I said, and could say no more. My tongue seemed stuck in my mouth. I felt sorry for myself, but I knew better than to sit down and cry. I also knew that he was not speaking about us, but about something else, someone else.

"I mean about Siddharth, that was his name right?" He continued, "It must have been tragic for you."

"Yes, it was awful," I stammered. I did not want to talk about Siddharth, my late husband, there were things about his death that no one knew.

It was I who killed him.

Ryan's tone was much gentler now. He had stopped teasing me.

"This place reminds me of PNR Store. Do you remember our coffee sessions?"

How could I forget? Those were the most important and treasured memories of my adolescence.

I nodded my head again. “Yes, I remember. That place served coffee in earthen *kulhads*. We were so impressed.”

“Yes, I remember that. The coffee tasted divine...”

Our eyes met for a moment. We had been transported back to the past, when we were carefree. When, we thought we had all the time in the world.

Ryan cleared his throat. “Can I take you someplace on Saturday night for old times’ sake?”

“Where, Ryan?” In another age and time I would have agreed without asking any questions.

“Actually, Friday is the last day of the summit and exhibition. And on Saturday, the bank is hosting cocktails and dinner. Several renowned artists have been invited. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.”

The offer was enticing. I could meet the who’s who of the art world in one place. And despite my misgivings, the thought of spending more time with Ryan sounded more and more appealing.

“Do I take your silence as a yes, given the fact that you’re not communicating much?” Ryan smiled as he teased me once again.

I agreed, totally forgetting my resolve to make this the last evening with Ryan.

“So, I’ll pick you up from the hotel Saturday evening at seven. By the way, it’s a formal affair.”

That stopped me short.

“Ryan, what am I going to wear? I didn’t bring any clothes for a formal cocktail reception.”

Ryan gave me a look, then said with an odd smile, “That’s great. Then let’s go shopping.”

