

## The Nobody of the Planet

Priyanka Lakshmi had the shortened hourglass figure of a woman whose time was running out. The moon stretched its reach into her room and illuminated her bottle of Kingfisher from the inside out with its milky whispers. The label had started to become unattached with its upper left edge folded over from sitting out too long next to the candles that she blew out once the moonlight entered her room. Priyanka had grown used to sitting in as little light as possible. The darkness was obscuring of both identity and past. These two entities had become intertwined, crossing over and over one another like the henna lotus flowers that her mother had once painted on her arms and legs.

These days, she was covered by either anything or anyone. Men's kisses were curled tongues around the backs of her knees and inner elbows. She never let them kiss her anywhere else. To kiss was to feel, and to feel was to know why the girl who lived on Brindavan Street never turned away a man whose touch might bring her freedom. In some ways, she was similar to the girls who spent nights on high heeled shoes down at the corner by the fish market. They were desperately fishing like the men who spent their days on their own high stilts staring at the water. All hoping for something to pass by so that they might catch it. These women and men spent their nights fishing together, hook and bait, and left in the morning when the sun arose and the men went back to make their wages so that they might be able to afford to go fishing again the next night.

Priyanka was not one of these women. But, she was slight of hand in the width of her palms, and in her means of trying to gain freedom. And so, she posed as a woman of the night by way of a sign on her door advertising sex in order to draw the men her way. She was honest with the

men who came to her bed, except for the image of what she truly looked like and what she really was. “*I am the universe,*” she’d say, and they’d follow her story past the stars and into the milky white galaxies of her Kingfisher bottles. It wasn’t until the men burst into flames that they realized the truth.

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“*Pyaar sari dunia ki raaz dikhaega. Love will reveal the secrets of the universe,*” Priyanka whispered to the flickering light of the candle. The force of her quiet breath caused the flame to lean back against the candle’s wick. But it corrected its posture back to its upright dance upon the closing of her lips. Fire, or Jmvi as her mother called it, was the most forgiving of all the earth’s elemental lovers. It was also the most dangerous.

When her apartment building in Delhi was devoured by flames, she too was ravished by the burning light. It flickered across her skin along the lines of her henna. The flame meandered slowly along each petal of the lotus flower until her skin became all at once a glowing golden lotus. Only the skin marked by henna on her arms and legs was given this treatment of the burning lotus. Her face was not spared from the marring effects of an accidental fire caused by Timir Tarak’s neglectful discarding of his cigar onto the dry mulch of the flowerbed beneath her first floor window. The only places left untouched were the insides of her elbows and backs of her knees because of how she had held herself tightly like a lost and scared child as she waited for a death that never came. Gone was the only picture of her father before he left for a war there was never any hope of winning. Gone was antique citar whose melody lulled her to sleep night after night. Gone was her mother. Gone was Priyanka Lakshmi’s beauty.

And so, she lived in the near darkness, hidden away by Timir’s guilt in the attic of his home. Even he had never seen her in complete light since the fire. But he brought her food each

morning by way of leaving it outside of her door. And every night he collected the wooden plate with only the exchange of “sadaa sukhi raho.” And every night she replied “jeete raho” in rhythm with the gentle clicking of the grandfather clock across the hall. Despite the accommodations of a prisoner, she was free to leave anytime she wished. She was bound only by her circumstances of disfigurement and the burden she now carried.

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Sixty moons had passed since the making of Priyanka’s fate. Timir had died of lung cancer caused by years of smoking cigars. He left the deed to his house to the sole survivor of the apartment fire. And while she was not thrown out on the streets, she began to starve slowly and deliberately with no one to bring her food and no chance of understanding from the village people. The hourglass figure of her youth remained intact, but began to grow smaller and smaller. It was as though the fire was still burning away at her body like she were a candle. There came a time when she openly welcomed the embrace of a dark and solitary death.

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*“Hello? Is anyone there? I saw your advertisement on the sign outside,”* the man said while sliding off his shoes by the door as he entered Priyanka’s dimly lit house. It was an automatic gesture for him, like buckling a seatbelt upon sitting down in a car. He was broad of figure, but narrow of mind. Priyanka could tell by the way he groped around in the dark without taking the time to let his eyes adjust. In her eyes, he was a hasty man with little patience for contemplation on the best way to navigate the unknown. She had seen his type before. But, he was the only visitor in over a month and she was growing desperate.

*"I am here. Please, follow me upstairs to my room and I will give you what you came for,"* she spoke quietly from the opposite side of the room.

The moon's light coming through the windows began to grow brighter as if she had summoned it with the sound of her voice. And so, she blew out the room's sole candle in the same breath as her request of the stranger. She was not ready to be revealed.

The man blindly groped up the staircase in the same way he had entered her home. The heavy sound of his footsteps against the painted wooden floors indicated that Priyanka had been wrong in her initial assessment of his figure. He was not only broad, but immensely large. She only hoped that he would not crush her increasingly diminishing figure beneath his own if he accidentally stumbled in the dark.

*"What is your name?"* he asked. This was as much in interest of sparking conversation as in wanting to use the sound of her voice as a way to orient himself in the darkness.

*"I am nobody. I am the universe."*

And with that, she removed her clothes. As he kissed the insides of her elbows and the backs of her knees, she began to tell him her story. She was unlike any prostitute he'd ever met. But he was not the type of man who sought company as a means of control. He was a quiet fisherman just looking for some company. And so, he let her whisper her story as they drank Timir's last bottles of Kingfisher.

*"When the fire burned the lotus flowers upon my skin, it also burned a hole inside me. The hole was dark and expansive and so I began to fill it with the stars and planets of my own imagination. Comets became my thoughts, and the moon became my soul. I am the universe, and the universe is me. I am trapped here alone inside of my own self, and I exist alone on a planet I have created. I am physically here on earth, but I have been trapped traveling amongst the stars*

*for decades. The passing of time has not aged my physical self, but I am like a large blue star, and I have burned hotly from the inside out for too long. There isn't much time left. I need you to free me."*

The fisherman stumbled backwards upon his heels. He was simple, and none of this made any sense. But, his simplicity had made him kind, and so he asked:

*"How can I help?"*

*"I need you to love me. Not in the way that storybooks depict romance, but I need you to see me in the light, and accept me as beautiful. However, I must warn you that you are not the first man to try. If you see me and find you cannot accept me as I am, then you will burn until you are as empty and as dark as this room."*

*"And if I should accept you? What will happen to me?"*

*"I'm not sure. No one has ever been successful."*

The fisherman did not hesitate. She knew from his first steps into her home that he was not a man of hesitation. They never were. And they had all died in flames.

*"Please light the candles. Let me see you,"* he gently urged. He wanted to know the truth about this mysterious woman and her incomprehensible cosmic secrets.

One by one Priyanka lit the candles that were placed around the small bedroom's four walls. With each successive lighting, the milky white light of the moon's reach was replaced by the orange glow of the shortened candles. Her arms were the first to be revealed. They were covered in old and intricate burns. Next her face was revealed. It was so badly marred that it was a wonder she could see at all. On the last candle, she hesitated. She was sure that after this, with her body fully in view, he would cry out in horror and burn like all the others. Priyanka lit the last candle, and then closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable. But, he made no sound.

Confused, she turned around to where he stood. His eyes were the same color as the swirls of the Milky Way that she had created in her universe. The fisherman was blind.

*“Well, what do you think of me?”*

*“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”*

And with that, she opened her mouth and revealed the entire universe before swallowing him whole. Priyanka Lakshmi was finally free, and as the last wax of the room’s candles dripped down onto the wooden floors, she left her physical body behind forever.

*“Pyaar sari dunia ki raaz dikhaega.”*

*Love will reveal the secrets of the Universe.*