

Skew

by Ajay Nair

1.

Lila looked out the window, her eyes glancing up, her neck curving, revealing smooth vanilla skin. 'Looks like it's gonna rain', she said in a flat voice.

Stroman looked up from his newspaper - the sky was an unremarkable blue, scratched by a solitary, nondescript white gash of a cloud. There was no rain around, not for a few months.

'Uh-uh', he replied.

'Why don't you buy me presents any more?' She was still looking up at the sky, her vanilla skin melting in a layer of perspiration.

He knew that when she used more formal words - presents for gifts, soul-mate for husband, children for kids - he was in trouble.

2.

'It's not that I think he's having an affair. It's just that he has lost - maybe misplaced - his love for me. I keep trying to evoke the atmosphere of our romance, and I keep failing. I am miserable, J. What should I do?' Lila was not quite sobbing but her words were bubbling in the ferment of some deep melancholy. When she said 'romance', it sounded like she was cussing.

J. looked down at the paper he'd been grading. The essay on it was a wreck - a lot of words jostling and grasping for meaning. J. had lost three fingers in his right hand in an accident; he stared at the space they'd have occupied.

'Lila, what can I say? Marriages are difficult. Sometimes, you keep pecking at it till all the crumbs are exhausted. Then you leave.'

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Lila looked at the shapes his mouth made when he said this. She wanted to eat those shapes and she knew J. knew. It was this knowledge that came in between. When you are forty, instincts wear gloves.

3.

J. was exhausted from the sex. It had been an unsatisfactory climax. He'd never asked Rouge her real name. The reason he always picked her out from all the other women who worked the street was that she didn't wear any make-up. He disliked the idea of tasting lipstick. She didn't even use a perfume. Her scent was all her own, and sometimes it smothered his lust till it choked.

'You have someone on your mind tonight. Should I be jealous?' The playfulness in her tone was dangerous. It hinted at intelligence. J. didn't come to Rouge for intelligence. He came here so he could lose himself in flesh.

4.

Stroman was Rouge's favourite customer. He tipped her well, he was gentle, and when he snored, he visited peace upon her shabby dwelling.

'I need to stop doing this.'

'What?' she asked, her voice sifting through the debris of his decision, not really asking a question.

'Look at me. An overweight physicist with a taste for road-side delicacies.' He cackled at the absence of subtlety in his observation. When you lose the capacity to feel hurt, you lose the sensitivity to understand when you hurt someone.

Stroman reached over and stroked the perimeter of Rouge's chin

with his thumb. 'I am just joking. You are my soul-mate, you know that?'

'Don't be vulgar', Rouge replied, her chest clenching in some pain she didn't fully understand.

5.

'I am glad we didn't have kids. This would have been tougher.' Lila picked up her last bag and started walking out the bedroom.

'I don't know about that. Maybe what we needed was someone to fill the spaces between us. You know, kids would have done that'.

Lila looked back at him and saw numbness. Stroman was in love with his words and ideas. He should have been a writer. He didn't really mean what he said about kids. He only liked the sound of what he said, the idea of what he said.

The last thing Stroman saw of the departing Lila was the back of her heel. He wondered what equation could describe its curve. He heard the first drops of rain patter the windows and the roof. He listened for the silences between the drops.

