

# The thing is

by Ajay Nair

I first noticed him the day it rained liked it would never stop. He walked into the office, his forearms covered with an even sheen of moisture, like he'd deliberately dipped them into a bucket of water for just the right amount of time; all the hair on them patterned in slanting parallel lines. I don't know what struck me then — maybe it was something to do with the fact that I hadn't been with anyone for a long time — but I felt this urge to want to lick his arms dry. I would come to know later that he always wore half-sleeved shirts to the office and that he always wore a tie, even on Saturdays.

I offered him some napkins and watched him soak up the water. He had a detached, deliberate way of going about this; and he muttered to himself all the time in a polite, enquiring tone. He was forty years old and I had just turned thirty three.

The next few days he saw that I was watching him — I wanted it that way - and one day, at lunch, he came over and sat down next to me. He introduced himself, not offering his hand but just nodding. He said that he'd seen me at work for a year now and always wanted to talk to me but didn't know how. I asked him how come he had come to talk to me now. He looked up at the ceiling, the base of his fork clenched tightly between his thumb and forefinger. It was sunny outside and a patchy light fell inside the office pantry, lazy and sleepy.

'I don't know, maybe because you have been looking at me funny for a few days now.'

'I haven't — whatever makes you think that?' I smiled as I said that, watching him squirm. He pressed the fork down hard on the table-cloth, screwing up the pattern of triangles on it. 'It's alright. I am Rhea.'

We started having lunch together and then we started going out for dinner. He would always be polite — whether talking to me or to himself — and shy. His fingers would never linger for a second longer than it needed to on my arm or at my waist and he'd respectfully kiss my cheek good night. He'd never been married — 'the right girl hasn't found me yet' — and hadn't been with anyone for a long time. Me, I'd never been married either.

When I finally seduced him one evening — it was after a big date by our standards; a movie and dinner followed by some dancing — he turned out to be an awkward and hesitant lover. What did I expect anyway? It was not that he was boring — it's just that he needed a lot of encouragement. When he came, he whispered to himself, 'ohgodohgodohgod' - like it was something to be ashamed of, to be sorry for. I wanted to hold him close against me but I also needed to smoke, so I left him on the bed and went outside. When I came back, he was sleeping, his face filled with peace, his fingers balled around the corner of my pillow. He had slipped his underwear back on and in the half light of the moon, he looked like an overgrown child.

We have been going steady for six months now. I have taken other lovers during this time — without his knowledge, of course — but I have been faithful to him in my own way. He is still shy around me and when I am drunk, he refuses to even kiss me because he thinks that's taking advantage of me. He wears the shirts I buy him — I think he looks good in light blue — and he buys me little useless presents — books that I'd never read in a hundred years and earrings I would never wear.

I guess I sort of love him though we have never let the love word slip between us. I have felt him to be on the verge of it a few times, like he's holding it back behind his rolled tongue, but it's always

turned into something more benign like 'I adore you' or 'I care for you'.

Today I see he is more nervous than usual. He has taken care to iron the shirt that I have given him, and has trimmed his nails and his moustache. After dinner — we are in my apartment — he comes to me and says he has something to tell me. He begins to cry softly as he says that he has never been as happy as he has been with me these past few months and that I am everything to him. He is perspiring now even though it's cold in my bedroom from the air conditioning and he rubs his hands together as if to warm himself up even more. He presses his legs down hard on the floor squeezing the balls of his feet against the hard wood and I can almost feel his tension in my feet, just inches away from his. He takes out a small box from the pocket of his trousers and I know what he has in there. I wonder if he is going to tell me that he loves me. He fumbles with the box and finally opens it. I wonder if it's something he's bought or if it's his dead mother's. It gleams.

He looks at me, his eyes wet and happy, and says that he loves me, he loves me a lot. When he says the word, his voice cracks like a piece of cardboard being torn up. His ears are a bright red and I have this urge to take his face in my hands and tell him everything will be ok, everything will be alright. He goes down gingerly on both his knees — as if he is praying and not proposing — and asks me if I will marry him. I look at him, and keep looking, not saying a word.

The thing is - I can go either way.

