

You Don't Take Names

by Ajay Nair

You have turned forty now and that forces you to turn around and go back and see what slipped through the gaps between years.

You go back to the city — his city. You rent an apartment for a month that is a five minute walk from where he used to live. With you. The apartment is functional but the view is terrible. There is a door-man who appears scruffy and uninterested but when you walked by him last night on your way in, he leaned towards you to wish you good night and you were surprised to find that his breath smelled like how your tooth-paste tastes.

Every morning you walk to his street but you are not yet sure whether you really want to run into him. Perhaps you will spy him from across the street, wearing his faded brown jacket; his hands dipped deep into his pockets, his movements slow and deliberate. You know that he is too old to wear that jacket now and has probably replaced it with something more modern, befitting his current social status and occupation. But that doesn't stop you from looking for him in men wearing brown jackets — any shade of brown really, and men of any age really, even boys.

Maybe, he is in one of the coffee shops by the sidewalk that entice you with their large glass windows, beckoning you insidiously with their cheerful logos and promised warmth. He will be standing in line to order his coffee and he would have made up his mind about what he wants long before he reaches the counter. The indecisiveness of those ahead of him will burn inside him and mix up with other things that annoy him — your tendency to use the phrase 'a couple of minutes' for example, when what you mean is half an hour. When he reaches the head of the line, he will snap at the barista, as if he were to blame for your faults. When he gets his cup of coffee, he will discard its lid and hold it by its rim using just his

forefinger and thumb, with the three other fingers splayed out at different degrees, a style that you find amusing and strangely exotic as if he is pretending to be a musician.

You wonder where it all went wrong. You have not tried to keep track of him — not through the invisible spokes of the internet, nor through your common friends. Until now, when a meaningless birthday flared up inside you and the ashes of your forty years needed to be dissolved in some active, physical retrospection. You want to know what happened to him and your curiosity is a cat pawing at the edges of your impatience as you roam aggressively around your old haunts. Does he have a wife or worse, a daughter? You know where it went wrong was you.

Just when the month is about to pass and you are ready to return to your life, you see him walk in to the restaurant you are in. The restaurant didn't exist back when you were together and this fact makes this meeting less sentimental than it could be. He sees you, walks to you and smiles and you notice that his smile is less boyish and his hair more prickly than you remember it to be. He appears heavy-lidded and tired, his fist clenched in distilled violence, but you are not sure whether you can attribute it to a bad day or a bad life. He sits down across you.

You talk. But you don't take names because you no longer are the names you were, you no longer are the people you were.

