



RAHUL SINGH

Hunting Men

It was the first time I had felt that I couldn't breathe. Breathing came in gasps and knots as I let my head drop in my hands and waited for a withdrawal of some kind. An incandescent pain had been stabbing my weary head that felt like a punishment, more severe than a heartbreak. I suppose it were the glasses of Cuba Libre under the dim lights and the sound of the music, loud enough to make my lungs feel its thrumming against the ribs. The blackness of sight, the jumping on the dance floor, the shivering nerves on the sides of my forehead and the ocean smell of him came together like uninvited guests at a private island; all rejoicing and teetering into my seclusion. He had called me to the pub with a word of endearment, *Munchkin*, that's how he addressed me, 'Munchkin, come to the pub ahead of that shitty KFC counter at Park Street.'

Munchkin, I wonder why no man ever called me that. I was called baby, babe, bitch, babydoll, slut, life, kitten, puppy by the men I had been with; however longer or shorter the tenure of that bonding. Munchkin was new. I liked it. It signified difference, in a good way. 'Maybe this was going to be different', I had said to myself reading the text. I ran the trimmer across all the regions of my body letting cottons of hair fall on the white tiles of my bathroom. In hurry I hurt my perineum but a rub of Boroplus after the hot shower healed the stinging burn. When the towel fell off my waist and I stared at the reflection in the long mirror I realised what a thin man I had grown to become with ass like two dry peas clung resolutely to my cylindrical thighs. The waxy glow after a massage of a chocolate-smelling butt oil made me feel sympathetic toward them. I had ordered the oil from some online queer shop of America, it made men smile when their mouths went down. Perhaps, it compensated for what my body lacked. I wore a black shirt with a pair of blue denims and then I doused myself in all the perfumes I owned, from *Houbigant* that was gifted to me, to *Victoria's Secret*, the one I always bought for myself. For my face, I dabbed a frosting of foundation, in pure beige shade, it smoothed the rough texture of my ageing skin replete with dentures and scars of adolescence. I never believed in making my skin appear fairer or brighter, I hated the fairness creams I had seen my mother and sister use when I was at home back in a small town of Uttar Pradesh. They were still there, thankfully. I dreaded their visit to Kolkata. It was always embarrassing when I took them out with me. At McDonald's they would order the cheapest cones of ice cream. At restaurants in Park Street they would use hands to eat rice and not know how to fork their



noodles. I stopped taking them there seeing eyes from other tables fixed on ours. In malls, they would eye products with hunger, my mother and sister would get shades of lipsticks swatched on the back of their palms, my brother would get perfumes sprayed all over his hands and leave the shops without buying a single thing. When my brother flashed his hand under my nose telling me how beautiful he smelled my teeth gritted with bitterness and bile. I would clamp my mouth shut and wish for them to be gone.

From the drawer, I pulled out my Tom Ford mascara which my friend had got when she visited the States. Of course, I paid for it. My lashes came alive with two gentle strokes. I had seen the magic of this mascara in a makeup tutorial on Instagram where I have been spending most of my nights for the past few months watching clips of makeup, work-out, make-out, and food recipes. For my unusually thick lips, I ran a blueberry-flavoured chapstick. My lips turned a shade of pink covering the grey left by merciless sticks of cigarettes. Men loved my lips. They said it was the best part of me because a pair of lips so thickly lined and luscious between theirs wasn't common among gay men. I picked up my wallet and counted the money that lay slapped against each other. Four thousand rupees seemed adequate. My job at the bank paid me well. Well enough to rent a two-room flat which I had shared earlier with a partner of mine. When he left I was worried if I would be able to pay for the flat alone because I had no intention of leaving it. A little sweet talk and casseroles of food with the landlady worked for me. She decided to reduce the rent because I was gay, heart-broken, and alone in a city away from home. She was a professor in Film Studies at some prestigious college in the city. We went for a LGBTQIA Film Festival the previous year. I met quite a few men there but the presence of her elder brother with us made it difficult for me to forge a connection with any other man. He smiled radiantly at everyone, flirted with men dressed in leather pants and suspenders touching their sculpted abdomen and biceps. At a tea stall, he held me by my waist, with those same hands, to move me on the other side. I felt my stomach tighten into a knot with a desperation for him. Unfortunately, all my need for him disappeared when after that festival we went to dinner and he introduced us to his fiancé; a woman of sharp features and slanting curves who worked in the Bengali film industry.

I unplugged my phone from the charger and entered the location of the pub in Uber. The price was staggering. I checked Ola too. Ola was cheaper, unsurprisingly, I booked a cab. The cheaper rate meant a longer waiting time. I didn't mind waiting. Days and months of being an inactive gay man teaches you patience, a skill of waiting that by now I had inherited from my house. There were no texts by him anymore. I acted as though it didn't matter since I would be there anytime soon but it did matter. I wanted to see the neediness. The *want* for the munchkin. The partner with whom I had shared the flat called me jaan (life) to tell me how significant I was to him. I was his life he had said



and written in many texts, letters and emails. In bed he called me kitten because I was smaller under him, a furry body because I barely shaved when I was with him and my moans were mewling of a cat's child. He was a lawyer. He was two-years elder to me. I was twenty-eight when I met him. He earned more than I did. In fact, his parents had a bungalow in Salt Lake but he left that and moved in with me after a year of being with me. We divided chores and finances at home like two roommates sharing a flat. He was obsessed with buying decorative items for the flat. He told me he wanted to make it feel like home rather than a rented apartment. From soft white curtains to pastel coloured ceramic vases and bowls housing succulents and stones, the apartment boasted of wealth which my family envied. My mother complained how I didn't care for our house back in Uttar Pradesh where I had to eventually return to, that was *my* own and not a temporary matter. He laughed at my family when we were together in our room. He would tell me he didn't mean to look down upon them but there were some things that was funny. He said my family could be cast in an entertaining comedy serial. On most nights, I laughed with him. I told him he was right. Against his educated, well-mannered Bengali parents who saw a corner of the world at least once every year, my family was a joke. He would ask me why my father never accompanied them. I told him he doesn't like me. He wanted to know why. I would push the question away saying later and straddle in his lap for a kiss.

I clambered down the stairs as the lift that worked was moving upward. My cab was waiting for me at the gate. I boarded my cab giving him the code to verify my ride. The driver nodded with a smile and said, 'That's a lot of perfume, sir.' I smiled in return not caring if that was a compliment or an expression of suffocation I had caused entering the air conditioned box. I checked my phone for another message but there was nothing. I stared out seeing the scenes of fruits stalls heaped with pyramids of apples, pears, pomegranate pass by. The man I lost my virginity to loved pomegranate. When we were taking off our clothes he told me he had its juice daily to keep his sexual health intact. It made him last longer on the bed and that was painful for me because it was my first time and I feared shit and blood. I didn't bleed and there was no shit, fortunately, but he seemed unhappy. He never wrote back to me again. He blocked me from all social media when I tried to reach out to him. I was eighteen, I was stubborn. I made a fake account on Grindr and messaged him and asked him why he blocked me. He blocked me from there too but he left a text before doing so. He had written, you're too skinny for me. I kept losing my erection inside you. Bye. That night I deleted the application and refused to tell anyone about what had happened. I got busy in college and then took up jobs of content writing to pay for my expenses as my father didn't send enough money. After a couple of months, I downloaded the application again with a new profile, I saw him. I went through the pictures he had uploaded. He looked as charming as he had when he was on top of me without any clothes. I wanted to write to him. After a moment of restlessness, I



did. We had a conversation but I didn't reveal who I was. He said that he enjoyed our talk and would like to take me out for coffee. I was excited I said yes. He flirted wittily and then requested me to show my face. I didn't respond for a couple of hours. I didn't know how to deal with that. I was impatient for him, the idea of a man and the future of a romantic relationship. Maybe he had forgotten who I was, I thought. At 1am he sent a question mark. With hopes of him having forgotten my face, I sent the last picture I had of myself in a classroom of my college. He saw the image and blocked me without saying a word. He hadn't forgotten.

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The woman's voice blaring from the Google Maps on the driver's phone directed him in a crisp tone to the destination where I was to be dropped. A relief struck me. The voice irritated me throughout the ride. It reminded me of my partner I had shared my apartment with. His dependence on the voice when he took me out to a new place in his car. I would mute the voice every so often and offer to read the map instead. He would smile and allow me to do that. I knew the streets well. I didn't need the Google Maps. I had walked through the city. I had taken innumerable buses, auto-rickshaws when I was a college student. The twisted lanes, circuitous highways, laps of roads of this city was in my mind, set in my eyes like lines permanent on my palms. I had taken my partner on the streamer across the Ganges. He wanted to hold my hand when we stood at the railing watching Howrah Bridge float above our heads. I had held his fingers and let it go immediately. The other sweaty passengers stared at us. We had walked along the footpaths of Sovabazar ignoring sex workers approaching us for five hundred a night. He had smiled at me with amusement when we sat in a coffee shop. He asked if I had ever been with one. I shook my head and asked if he had. He nodded thoughtfully and told me that he paid a guy after sex once. It wasn't for the sex exactly. He smiled and said that the guy wanted to get home and had lost his wallet at the pub where they had met. On other days, my partner would take me outside the city for dinner with the woman's voice blaring in the car. We did that often. Long drives on a weekend somewhere outside the city. I knew he loved me. We waited to be married lawfully someday.

The cab stopped at the entrance of the tall building. The crowd at KFC was booming with kids and parents and balloons of different colours. It was nine. The night life at Park Street was coming to life. I stepped into the glassed building and was directed by the security toward the lift. The lift shot up to the fifteenth floor. My landlady told me about all the gay boys in her college when we were in the lift leaving for work. She would describe them as chocolate or vanilla. The manly ones as chocolate and the feminine ones as vanilla. I would proscribe her from doing that but she would do it anyway the next time we met. She didn't like my partner. For her, he was chocolate but not the kind



that made her excited. She said he intimidated her and that she got a wrong vibe from him. She would show me pictures of the chocolates from her college. There was a professor she showed me who was married to a woman but she was sure he was closeted and that if I did make a move he would succumb. The students were too young for me, I told her. After my partner left me, she hitched me up with one of her students. He wasn't young like the ones I had seen on her phone. He had graduated college just then and was looking for a vanilla. We met at her place and then I took him to mine. He smelled awful but I continued to sleep with him until he left the city and moved to San Francisco. She couldn't find anymore chocolates for me after him. She told me she would and that she was on the lookout. The last messages sent by her on my screen are a link and a screenshot of the Facebook profile of the professor she wants me pull out of his closet.

I marched into the pub with confidence mumbling, 'munchkin'. When I went on dates before or met any man, my heart would hammer in my chest. There was excitement in my steps and sweat around my nipples. My mouth would remain half open until I ordered a drink and put a straw between my lips. On the first day of my job at the bank, the man who handled cash had asked if I wanted a smoke. I nodded my head and followed him to the tea stall. I had never smoked before. As I held the cigarette between my fingers I wondered why I had said yes. The man flashed the lighter at me and asked, 'why are you shaking?' I shook my head and began to light the cigarette holding it between my fingers. He started to laugh releasing a puff of smoke. He asked why I had agreed to smoke if I hadn't before. I smiled nervously and shrugged. He put the cigarette between my lips and stared in my eyes. He clicked the lighter and said now suck it as I light. I did as instructed. I coughed vehemently. He smiled beautifully at me. I still remember that smile below his bald head. He was my first male friend since school. He got lunch for me from his home. His wife cooked delicious food. We would go out for smoke and he would tell me about his two girls studying in primary school. He would show me pictures of them painting on a long length of fabric, reading graphic novels, covering their faces with a glass in a restaurant and running wild in the field under the sun. He suggested me to marry and asked if I was seeing someone. For a long time, I refused to tell him about myself. After two years he got a transfer to another city with a promotion. He hugged me and asked me to call him at my marriage. I released myself from the hug and told him I did not desire women. He was confused and asked if I was gay. I nodded at him. He scanned me from my head to my toes and then looked at me as though I were filth. He never smiled at me after that or cared to share his new number when he moved to another city. My first male friend after school disappeared. What remained of him was the beautiful smile at the tea stall when I had first smoked a cigarette nervously.



'Munchkin, you are here', he said as I spotted him on the high-rise chair at the bar. He offered his hand to me and kissed the back of my fingers. The bartender smiled at us and waited for our order. I said, 'Cuba Libre, please.' He turned to the bartender and raised his empty glass for a refill. He was handsome in real. His blue shirt was opened at his chest revealing the remnant of the hair he hadn't shaved. His hands were of the same size as mine even though I was a little taller than him. I could see the curve of his vertebra sticking out against his shirt as he swirled in the chair. I put my hand on his bony thigh to steady him. He blinked at me and said, 'I was right. You are just a cute munchkin.' I blushed. As age piled on me I had forgotten what it was to be complimented. I logged into the application looking for sex only. I had stopped expecting love to come my way. My face had last grown red with smile when my first boyfriend had told me that he loved to look at my face when he made love. It made him harder and happier. I was preparing for my competitive exams for banking, when he had come into my life on an awful day after I fought with my family over the phone. I had screamed at them for pressuring me to forget the examinations and find a job. He was in the next room of the men's hostel I stayed in after graduating college. He asked me if I was all right and if I would like to have tea. We went out for tea and snacks a lot after that. He had come from Bokaro to study Literature at Calcutta University. He would catch me staring at his prominent Adam's apple and ask me if I wanted to touch it. I did and he touched mine too. On my birthday, he took me to the room at the corner of the corridor that was mostly locked. He had secured the key from the lady at the desk saying he needed a space to study for his examinations. He had got a cake for me. There were packets of chips and two bottles of coke that had large quantities of rum mixed in it. We sneaked into the room at night and drank and had the cake leaving some for my roommates. Before exiting the room, he pinned me to the wall and kissed me and told me that he loved me. Six months later I found out that he was sleeping with another boy at his university. I slapped him in the same room he had said he loved me and warned him of coming in my way ever again. He tried speaking to me on many occasions. I went my way as though I never heard him speak. In three months, he had graduated and left the hostel. I remained stuck in my room, in that corridor each day reliving the happiness in that locked room, the news of betrayal on my bed and the anger I carried in my jaws, tight and set until I found my partner with whom I had to share my apartment five years later.

I finished my first glass of Cuba Libre and asked if we could take a table as the bar was too noisy to hear a word. He stood up with his drink offering a hand to me. He led me to a table on the farther end. We sat near the glass walls. I could see the city alight with cars running like snakes on the road and buildings clubbed together into fists. I picked up the box of Marlboro and the lighter and asked if he would like to smoke. He motioned me toward the



smoking room saying, 'I took one before you came. Go ahead. I will fetch you a drink and wait here.' I thanked him and swayed my way into the smoking room dreamily. The smoking room of most pubs in Kolkata reminded me of my friend's sneers and laughter after four shots of jägerbomb. She was the only friend from college who remained alive in my social life. She rooted for me in all my decisions and indecisions. She never scouted men for me. She wanted me to be single with her and follow her to pubs on Fridays and have breakfast on Sundays. She defended me when I complained to her about family and gay men. We would lock ourselves in her room and smoke joint until her mother woke up and banged at the door to check if we were making love. On Sundays, we took her dog for a walk around her neighbourhood in our dazed and dreamy steps. My partner enjoyed having her over for dinner at our flat. He would tell me he found her decision to remain unmarried interesting. They would often discuss feminism after dinner over joint. I would grow silent then and watch them argue. He would inquire her politics behind choosing not to marry. She would explain to him that marriage was a marker of patriarchy for her, a submission which, however, equal one could try to maintain would always end up in the woman bearing the brunt. One morning when my partner and I stepped out of our room after a festive dinner with my friend and my landlady and her husband, we found her lying on the carpet and her skirt raised above her waist. When we had said good night the previous night, my landlady's husband was still smoking and talking to my friend. His wife had left right after dinner, complaining of a pain in her back. There was no sign of the man. My friend was on her back stretched out on the floor naked below the waist. I rushed to my room and grabbed my sheets and gently covered her. She woke up and thanked us over breakfast seeing our hesitant faces. She apologised to us and she said nothing had happened last night. The man refused her and returned to his wife. She looked into my eyes and said that marriage may be beautiful. I had tears welling in my eyes that morning over the breakfast table. In the smoking room, I released a trail of smoke and sent her a text saying that I missed her.

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He was stirring the ice in his drink and seemed lost in the world outside the pub. I cleared my throat and took a seat thanking him for the drink. He said, 'Did you notice people staring at us?' I smiled knowingly and replied, 'They always do. Two men being romantic is rare.' He nodded thoughtfully as though I were speaking words of wisdom. He said, 'I want to make love to you. I began laughing but I could feel my cheeks flush. I asked, 'Are you drunk already?' He shrugged, 'I think so.' His phone began ringing. He mouthed Papa and went outside the noisy enclosure. I turned to the world he was absorbed in. To the right, I saw a room inside a house. A man was straightening a blazer on a hanger with a child holding a brush next to him. I thought about my



father, his skinny frame I came to inherit. It seemed that's all I inherited from my father. Not his strong arms, or his brilliant smile, neither any wealth I could boast of. I was the eldest son of the family. His pride. I accompanied him to his electronic shop everyday to the marketplace. I sat at the counter and handled small purchases after I crossed middle school. I ran to the bank and stood at the long lines to deposit cash. When I stood second in my 12th examinations, he proposed to send me to Kolkata to study. He took me to cyber cafés to fill in forms for college. We came to Kolkata together when I was about to start college. I had held his hands as I walked into the boy's hostel. My fingers were curled into his and he held on to them tighter. He helped me unpack my suitcase with whatever clothes I had. He explained to me five times where the washroom was, where the laundry was, where the college was, where the cafeteria was. I repeated to him thrice about his ticket in the inner case of his luggage, his towel drying on the chair, his socks under the bed of the lodge we had booked. He smiled at my roommates who had entered the room, and he came close to me to say goodbye. I leaned into his chest and released a muffled cry. He patted my back and whispered that my new friends were here and that I shouldn't cry, that I should work hard and make him proud. I nodded and he turned around to leave. I went to the window and saw him walking down the road. It seemed he was walking against the wind and dust that rose from the speeding cars while wiping his face of the tears he couldn't show to his son. I had cried into my pillow that night and all the nights to come. When I graduated he had come to Kolkata with my mother and siblings. He took us out to a restaurant in New Market for lunch after shopping. He asked if I had packed my stuff and was ready to return home. I shook my head with a new confidence that wasn't there when I had first come to Kolkata. My family was surprised. I told them I was looking for a job and that I wanted to take the competitive exam for banking. My parents refused saying it was necessary I take over the electronic shop and marry in three years' time. I said no. My father didn't say a word after that and resumed eating. At the station, after they had boarded the train to return home and I was looking at them from the platform, my father said, 'I will pay you for a year only. After that you return to the shop and take up work or I will stop sending money. The train left and I stood transfixed watching the train pass by me. I saw my home leaving the tracks and departing into some unknown, far-off town to which I had become a stranger. A year later, I cracked the examination and secured a job. My father didn't send a penny when I needed it for the first month. I had to borrow it from my friend. I stopped talking to my father since then. He never visited Kolkata and I never returned home. Only my friend knew that I hadn't spoken to my father in more than a decade and that I waited for his call every day when I saw home flash on my mobile screen.

He returned saying that his father abused him in the crappiest Bengali slurs he could imagine. I asked him to recall them and he laughed shouting



into the loud music. He asked if I wanted to dance. I bobbed my head to the music and stood up finishing my drink. He pulled me closer to him and began moving to the music and the lights. Women threw their hair in the air and on people's faces and danced with their eyes shut. I got a whiff of the sweat from his body as he held my waist and moved backward and forward. I shut my eyes and moved my waist as I had done with my friend. I could hear his amused smile brighten before me. I smiled too and kept dancing as though I were traveling to another time. My partner and I danced in our flat when we fought. It was a way to end a fight. Either he or I would turn on each other's favourite music and then pull the other person out into the drawing room for a dance. I would forget my anger and thump on our carpeted floor gasping and laughing breathlessly. I would push him on the brown bean bag and begin kissing him. We would take off our clothes and dance with music loud enough to make our shouts and screams inaudible. We would do some steps of salsa we had watched on TV, head-bang to a song, and then raise ourselves to a ballet dancer's pose. We would try twerking our asses and end up laughing at how badly it turned out. We would put on some Bollywood songs and do the steps exactly as the actors' had done in the music videos. We would dance until we were sweating and my landlady had to call me to put off the music. Lowering the volume to a jazz song, we would begin making love and then orgasm under the light of an expensive lamp in our drawing room. I didn't meet anyone when we fell apart. I went to work and returned home and locked myself in the room. I stopped talking to my friend. For days on end, I stopped going through my social media portals. I wanted to die in my apartment. In the memory of what had been his and mine. I wanted the apartment to collect over my body and make me a part of itself so I would forever be cast in the walls that had bound me and him together like a family. For ten months, I remained that way. Wishing for an end, a conclusion, some form of justice I believed I deserved until I installed Grindr again the previous month.

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He drew me closer and brushed his nose against mine. His forehead was smeared with sweat and his hair was drenched as was mine from all the dancing. I moved aside and sat at our table. He followed me and bent over the table catching breath. He called for a bottle of water, two glasses of Cuba Libre, and a bowl of fries which I suggested as my stomach was growling with hunger. We guzzled the bottle of water in no time. He insisted me on finishing my fries before consuming alcohol. We seemed skinny but our hunger was gargantuan. We called for a pizza when the hot fries dappled in cheese sauce disappeared from the table. Our mouths slowed down at the slices of pizza, we took a bite, exchanged a word about the crowd increasing at the pub and then took a sip of the cocktail. He began planning where we would go out the next time we meet. I nodded appreciatively at that. Maybe it was going to be different. He suggested the restaurant near his house in Newtown. He said that it was new



and served lip-smacking Indonesian food. I told him I never had Indonesian food. He fished his phone out of his pocket and tapped at the screen. He pushed the phone toward me with the menu of the restaurant glowing bright. I skimmed through it with a nod and confirmed the location. I was about to give the phone away when my eyes fell on the name of the restaurant. My heart seemed to have stopped and I said sternly, 'No, we won't go to this place.' He looked bewildered at my sudden change of mind and expression. I was overjoyed at the prospect of a holiday in Bhutan before my partner stole me of it. I had prepared an itinerary and presented to him the money we would have to put together for the trip. I had booked us a fancy hotel that had a spa, a day at a monastery and then another day trekking along the hilly slopes. My online shopping carts were filled with all the clothes, gears, bags I would need for the trip. I had planned for five months and I had thrust it before his eyes. He glanced at the screen of my iPad and put it aside on the table standing against his side of the bed. He held my hands, knotting my fingers with his and kissed my knuckles. He smiled ruefully and I asked what happened, if he did not like the plan, if he wanted a change. Gently, he shook his head. He seemed at peace, it made my heart rise in my cheeks seeing him that serene. I asked him again if there was anything wrong with the plan. He cleared his throat and finally spoke, 'I want to break up.' My hand lost all its strength hearing him but he kept holding on to it tighter as he stared into my eyes and didn't continue further. I was waiting for him to go on, to offer an explanation but he had nothing else to say. He leaned in to kiss me and stood up to pack his bags. In two days he had returned to his house sending his driver and a help to get his things. I wrote long messages to him asking him why he took the decision, if he cheated on me, if he wanted another man, if his family was forcing him in any way. He replied promising his fidelity throughout our relationship. I kept asking why but he took to silence and showed me the picture of a new restaurant he was opening in Newtown. I blocked him at that moment. At night when I couldn't sleep with the injustice I felt I was being subjected to, I unblocked him and spewed harsh words and curses of a miserable life he had ahead of him. He blocked me in the morning. I saw the pictures of the restaurant's inauguration on Facebook. I saw him and a man, slightly taller and broader than him, standing together for a picture. I googled the restaurant and found out it was chain of hotels spread all over India being handled by the tycoon's America-returned gay son. The son's queerness was all over the internet, more than his business plans, interviews after interviews were based on him being openly gay in a country like India. I took screenshots of the articles and interviews and sent mails to my partner asking him if he left me for this man, if he was sleeping with him. To this day, I received no reply. I don't know if they are together. His Instagram and Snapchat had no presence of that man. I keep checking his social media through my friend's phone to see who he left me for. I don't know if he left me because he desired someone else. I don't know if he left me because he ran out of love for me. I don't know if he



left for something I did or I didn't do. I threw my iPad across the room when it opened to the page of the itinerary I had prepared. The answers I did not get and the uncertainty with which I woke up to another day angered me, tired me and I wanted nothing but to see myself wither in it.

'Are you all right?', he asked me seeing tears in my eyes. I smiled energetically wiping off tears and said, 'Let's dance, please?' He raised his glass and I clinked mine against it with a renewed strength that made a splash of the drink fall on your hands. We finished the drink and returned to the dance floor. We threw our hands in the air with others and danced to the rhythm. We held each other and guided our hands in practised steps. He raised my face by my chin and kissed my lips. A couple saw us and began kissing each other too. He sucked my lips and let his tongue slide through them. We released our faces and locked eyes in the zig-zag motion of the light that blinded us and then made us see something beyond the circle of our eyes. I felt breathless with hope. Just then an unbearable pain struck my head, as though someone had hammered nails into them. I held them in my hand and moved to the table. He followed me looking worried. I put my head down to my thighs and asked him to get water. My phone vibrated with a text. I opened and there was a text left by my friend, 'I miss you too, love. Come spend time with me at my home. It misses you. I am so happy you wrote to me.' It put a smile on my face.



BIOGRAPHY

Rahul Singh is currently a postgraduate student (Sociology) at Presidency University, Kolkata, India. His book reviews have been published at [LiveWire](#) and [NewPolitics](#). His short story 'A Queer Carnival' has been selected as one of the ten winners of [Tweak India](#) StoryTeller contest and will be published in an anthology in 2022. His story 'The Commotion' is forthcoming in *Muse India*. He can be reached on Instagram ([@fook_bood](#)) and Twitter ([@rahulzsing](#)).