

Pia Chatterjee
533B Clayton Street
San Francisco, CA 94117
piachatterjee@gmail.com
510-384-0845

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My Stalker

I had been stalked before and not minded it.

Growing up in urban India, where the job hunters far outnumbered available jobs and the streets were filled with young men looking to pass the time, I was accustomed to being followed. The boys would follow me home from the shops or the neighboring restaurants where I'd meet my girlfriends for chai and samosas. On winter evenings, when the sun set early, and the narrow lanes of my hometown were dark with power cuts, I took comfort in the presence of the shadowy stranger, always a few feet behind me, knowing that I had watchful company until I reached the safety of my doorstep. I never spoke to them, and they never spoke to me. A divide as large as the country separated us, evident in the language we spoke – my conversations with my friends were in English, the only language that we were permitted to speak in our expensive school, and

the boys spoke bad Bengali - a slang ridden version of the beautiful language that was ostensibly my mother tongue. Only I never spoke it.

When I moved to England to study literature, I did not speak to my new stalker either. Even though I knew that he, like me, was Bengali and had moved from his hometown to this new country where what was called curry was really just tomato sauce with chili powder thrown in and where white boys danced hip-hop style to bhangra because it was cool.

In England, I was quite the latest fashion.

Somehow India had become the new trend to follow, and in the university town of Oxford the shops played Bollywood music and chicken tikka masala outsold fish and chips in the street-corner pubs. Everyone I knew mispronounced lassi, and my new friends ooh-ed and ah-ed over the one silk sari that my mother had stuffed into my suitcase along with a brass figurine of the lord Ganesha. The figurine I left in my suitcase, but the sari I pinned to my dorm-room wall and instantly became the cool Indian girl. As the only toast-colored girl in a cream-colored student-body, I was not unhappy with the label. The fact that my grandfather had fought for the Indian independence movement, and spent years in prisons tortured by the English, made me even cooler. I was the real deal. Genuinely Indian. Just like Bollywood, bhangra and vindaloo.

I milked this for what it was worth, regaling my friends with stories of elephants and tea gardens, and making much of the pet monkey I had once had. Despite all my posturing, I slowly grew to make friends, with whom I spent many evenings walking in the Oxford University parks, drinking cheap wine at the corner pubs and talking about boys and books with equal animation. One Sunday, despite much reluctance on my part, Lucy, Sophie and Louise dragged me to a

local curry house, where I made fun of all the food, and proclaimed that I could make better, when in fact, I was secretly teaching myself to cook curry from online recipes.

It was at the curry house that I first met my stalker. He was the waiter who brought the wine and the beef vindaloo to the table. “Thank you,” I said absently, even though I did not eat beef.

“Excuse me,” he said, “are you Indian?”

“Yes,” I said, and asked Sophie to please pass the bread.

“Where in India?” His English was labored, and he hovered at my side, filling my glass of water and straightening the tablecloth.

“Calcutta,” I said, and reached for the naan.

“Calcutta!” he said, loudly, and my friends stopped eating and the restaurant manager turned to glance at our table. “Me too! I’m Bengali too! Are you from Ballygunge?” He asked, naming one of the posh neighborhoods in the city.

“No, Alipore,” I said, shifting slightly in my chair so that my back was to him. He filled the rest of our glasses and left. We finished all the curry and laughed late into the night at a story that Lucy told about her sister’s new crush. The waiter came up to our table a few more times, clearing plates and bringing us more wine. Once or twice he smiled and tried to catch my eye, but I was busy with my friends.

The next day he followed me to the library. I’d been in a hurry – I had an essay to write that was due by evening, and I hadn’t even begun to read the books for it. So even though I saw the waiter from the curry house follow me down Norham Gardens, I just ignored him and hurried down Main Street to the Radcliffe Camera. Five hours later, he was still there – half a foot shorter than all the other men on the campus, dressed in a crisp white button-down shirt when

everyone in town wore dark sweaters, he lolled on the railings that ran around the library while students rushed around him, entering and exiting the library with a flash of the student ID. While everyone else was there for the books, he was there for me.

In the months that followed, my stalker would appear and disappear at odd times. Once he followed me in a red Toyota as I rode my grocery-laden bike back from Sainsbury's. Another time, I thought I saw a flash of his white, starched shirt as my boyfriend Henry and I fed the ducks in the river. He slunk in the shadows when my friends and I stumbled out of bars and giggled our way back to college. I pointed him out to my friends as we shopped for a dress for the Oxford Ball. I grew used to his presence on the railings of the library. Always, he was the only other Indian in sight.

Months passed. Summer became winter. My friends went home for the holidays, clamoring for me to come and stay with them. I spent Christmas in London, in my friend's home in Islington in a house that seemed right out of the novels I'd read in India about British life. I ate my first authentic Christmas dinner, wore a Santa hat with my little black dress, and sat next to an old lady whose father had been a general. He had been posted in Calcutta, my hometown. I thought, but did not say, "There's a great chance your father tortured my grandfather." Instead, I passed the turkey. On Boxing Day, despite protests from my friend, I returned to Oxford. I was behind on my studies and had rented a room in a poor part of town to catch up with my class.

Oxford was weird without my friends. The city, so welcoming in term time, was dark and lonely in the cold. The river was frozen and the ducks were gone. My rented room was on the

edge of town, away from the colleges and the parks. Every morning I ate cereal by myself, and rode my bike to the library. At night, I ate an early supper and read until it was time for bed. In the shops, without my gaggle of friends, I noticed that the staff spoke slowly to me, enunciating clearly. It took me a long time to realize that they thought I spoke no English. I did not correct them.

I think my stalker was lonely too, for his presence grew constant. He stood outside the cafes as I sipped my non-fat caramel macchiatos on cold evenings. He waited outside the library as I completed my research, and huddled in his over-bright hand-knit sweater as I ate thin crust pizzas at Caffe Uno. He would sometimes say “Hello” in a thick accent that I wrinkled my nose at. “I love you”, he said frequently, trying to get my attention. “You are pretty as a picture.” Once he said, “Will you marry me?” But he only spoke to me after I emerged onto the street, done with my dinner or studies. It never occurred to me to wonder why he never followed me inside.

The day before term started, I spent the morning moving my books back to my dorm room. I was looking forward to finally having company. Earlier that day, Henry had called me on my cell phone. “Let’s go out tonight,” he’d said. “I’ve missed you. Wear your little black number, and those shoes.”

“Okay,” I said, “I will.”

But I had no intention of wearing that tiny dress on what was turning out to be a painfully cold day and went into the shops to find something that covered my legs, but sexily. When I emerged, I saw him. He was in his red Toyota, the only car on the street. The city was silent and empty, covered in snow, waiting for the students to come back from vacation.

I began to walk back along Main Street. The Toyota followed me. “You so pretty,” he called from his car. ”Hello, hello, I love you.”

I walked on. I was used to being followed, being talked to, I was used to his car. But this was the first time that the three things had happened simultaneously. Still I remained sanguine. “Indians are law-abiding,” I thought. But to be safe, I got off the deserted street and walked into a smaller side street that only allowed one-way traffic. Ignoring the traffic signs, my stalker followed me. He swung his car onto the road and began to drive the wrong way down a one-way street.

“Hey!” he called. “Can’t you hear me?”

I stopped, startled. I thought we had a rule. He would call to me, and I would ignore him. I thought we had decided on this pattern. But obviously, I was wrong. I began to walk very quickly, trying to not slip on the icy sidewalk. He followed me, speeding up to keep abreast.

“Hey,” he called. And then he slammed out of the car, jumped on the pavement and yanked my arm. I tried to run, but his fingers were around my wrist and I lost balance, falling sideways onto his chest. He caught hold of me then, and dragged me towards his car. “Have coffee with me,” he said. And then he said my name.

And that was what did it. He said my name – Sujata – pronouncing it with a soft S and a soft T, the way my mother said it. I had grown used to being called Sue by my English friends. I had forgotten how pretty my name was, when it was said the right way.

“Don’t call my name,” I shouted, right into his face. For the first time, I really saw him. My stalker was young, his hair slicked back with gel, his arms wiry from all the lifting of heavy plates and washing up. He smelled of cologne. He had dressed up for this. In his mind, this was a date.

“Are you insane?” I shouted, furious at him, at me, and this strange country where I was afraid to eat with my fingers for fear that my nails would stain. “You’ll be in jail for years for this.” And then, looking into his slender, tea-colored face I said what I knew would stop him. I drew upon my best Bengali and I said, “Your mother and your sister will be ashamed of you. Your father will refuse to see your face.” He let go of my arm then. His shoulders slouched, and he looked defeated and sad. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a blonde girl in a navy coat frantically talking into her cell phone. I heard the shrill notes of a siren growing closer.

“Go!” I said, still in Bengali. “Get out before the cops get here.”

My stalker stumbled into his car, and shut the door. Slowly, he disappeared from view, still going the wrong way on a one-way street.

The cops lifted my new black leather trousers from the snow and drove me home to college, where students were milling about the quad, back from the holidays. Two uniformed men came with me to my dorm and put ice on my bruised arms. One light-haired policeman made me tea, Earl Grey with a splash of milk and no sugar. I drank it in a white teacup and remembered to hold out my little finger, as I had seen in English movies. They cajoled me to tell them about my stalker, what he looked like, the make of his car, the license number. “He’s dangerous,” one of the cops told me, looking at me earnestly out of his pale eyes. “He’s obviously not rational. He could have hurt you. He was trying to kidnap you,” he said.

“I think he only wanted to have coffee,” I said, “In one of the shops where rich white students go. I think he thought I could take him there, that we would sit together on the leather sofas and drink caramel macchiatos. He thought I was like him, that I would understand.”

They got angry at me then, and gave me statistics of how many girls were raped in Oxford, of how many girls were attacked and molested.

“I don’t think you’ll ever see him again.” I said. “And neither will I.”

That night I fobbed off Henry with a pretend headache and excuses of tiredness. He’d go hang out at the club regardless, he said, he had met the DJ at a party and wanted to go have a look. If I’d hoped that he’d want to stay in with me, I did not let on. Instead, I switched off the lights in my room and stood by the window, looking out. Students gathered on the quad, under the lamps, looking strangely identical in their dark coats and pale faces. Below my window, a couple kissed softly, reunited after the break. Somewhere in the distance, I heard the sound of a car door slamming shut. There was a party going on in the room above me, and I heard the faint notes of bhangra, joyously raucous in the cold winter night. I knew that my friends were there, dancing to its happy beats. But I was too tired to dance and did not leave my post. Instead, I stayed by the window until my breath fogged up the glass and its opaque mist shut out the world and all I could see was the distorted image of my own face staring back at me from the cloudy glass.

The End

