

Daffodils

By Fareah Fysudeen

On a sun-drenched dirt road in Southern California, where the trees sloped like tired lovers leaning into one another, where the breeze rippled the leaves of the camphor tree like the fluttering hems of silken skirts, the world stirred quietly awake.

Old homes with turrets and unkempt lawns, new homes with bay windows and soaring ceilings, vast lawns that somehow managed to evade the zoning ordinances all stretched out along the winding dirt road. The older Muslim couple across the street is quietly sipping on their chai, routinely after Fajr, sitting on their wraparound porch. Their chai trembles and glows under sun-soaked breezes. Mustafa, a retired orthopedic surgeon, sits with his legs stretched wide, his knuckles taut over the *TIMES of India* as his wife Nadira reviews her morning Quran pages.

Always the people-gazer, Nadira notices the door to the opposite house swing open, revealing a frenzied Sarah in an airy white sundress and pink trench coat. Every morning for the past month before work, Sarah would come out with a pinched face full of anticipation to check on her not-yet-blooming daffodils, and every day, Nadira had noticed, Sarah would rush back into the house in exasperation, drag her husband Adam outside, and they would bicker for some time before kneeling down, checked on the flower bed, and assured her that her flowers would bloom. Of course, for Nadhira sitting half an acre away sipping on her chai, this scene was a daily silent movie, but she had all but memorized its script. Adam and Sarah acted simply like friends, as though they were waiting for the moment when they would be *really* married. As though everything now on the bursting, boundless lumination of Glen Cove Street was simply a fiction, a rehearsal.

Nadira glances over at her husband. His hands are large, rough. His thick reading glasses sit at the bridge of his nose, and he looks as though he is peering down at his *TIMES* with the nose-haired angle of a hilarious selfie. Nadira is suddenly filled with a rush of emotion so strong that her teacup quivers in her hand. She sets it down on the side table. Seeing Mustafa—sometimes, every so often— is exalting, it is redeeming. She looks back at the young couple across the street from her, and thinks how easily they could have been her and Mustafa, dundering through America forty years ago, not realizing then that what they loved wasn't the land, but each other.

“Do you think they'll ever realize that they love each other?” Nadira asks.

Mustafa, cheekily, not looking up from his paper, says: “Do you think we've ever realized?”

Nadira gazes at him covertly, remaining silent. *Yes*, she thinks, saying nothing at all.

The daffodils won't bloom.

Sarah is convinced of this fact. She'd planted them only because of Adam's persistent instructions last fall. It almost felt like a spiritual mandate that she plant the bulbs, because he had a way of making things whirl and sputter back to life: the smoky fireplace, the wobbly dining room chair, the peeling wallpaper all bloomed after Adam and his toolbox spent a few hours with them. He'd said, in his soft, even tone last fall, when they were just newlyweds moving into a run-down old tudor: “The perennials will make you so happy. It's the best part of spring for me.”

For Adam they certainly are. His crocuses rise out of the ground refreshed from their winter vassalage, the rosy cheeks of the hibiscus bush blush, Douglas Irises open elegantly like live paper cranes. In a bed next to them is where her daffodils are supposed to be, but there are

none. Sarah feels as though it means something, maybe about their marriage. After a winter of skirting around each other, politely occupying their shared space like blind roommates, she hoped spring would be different. But her daffodils won't even bloom.

Sarah goes back into the house, her blouse ruffled by the force with which she shuts the door. "Adam?" He is in the kitchen, making himself a PB&J sandwich for his packed lunch. He has a post-it note in hand, scribbling down *tuna & lettuce*. "Adam. The daffodils."

Adam puts the note on the fridge with a growing conglomeration of other notes: *tomatoes, pickled jalapeno, call Nadira Aunty for lawn service rec, we need a new vacuum! it's no longer getting my hair, and sunhat hat missing, dire*. He's dressed in slacks and a white shirt rolled up to his elbows, and moves like an old deer: graceful, acutely perceptive, but also with ponderous weightiness, as though he were carrying burdens of some ten thousand people. "I'm coming."

He follows her out front, crouches down, and stays in a contemplative squatting pose as he inspects the flowers. Sarah sits on the stairs and watches him watching the daffodils. Finally, he tells her for the thirtieth time: "I think they're fine," and makes his way back into the house.

"What! What do you mean 'they're fine?'" Sarah follows him back into the kitchen indignantly as he finishes up packing his sandwich. "You said the daffodils would be one of the first to bloom."

"Listen, it's hard to tell right now," Adam says, not picking up her bait. He never did: he always answered her banter and flirtatiousness with an even tone, sometimes even a maddening, humorless seriousness. She'd giggle, and he'd ask what she was laughing about. She'd poke fun at his very slight lisp, and he'd respond with some mundane orthodontic detail about his

misaligned jaw. “It might be too shady. It could also be that you buried them too deep. We’ll just have to wait.” Adam put his sandwich into his insulated lunch bag. “Oh, I forgot my backpack.”

He made his way upstairs, and Sarah trailed behind him, past their still-unfurnished living room with bare mahogany beams, past her study with unorganized piles of poetry and fiction, past the massive wingback armchair in the corner, the only comfortable place to sit in their house, and also the only other place they’d ever kissed each other besides their bed. The armchair was tucked away in a dimly-lit corner of her study, stuffed between two built-in bookshelves. Sometimes when she sat in the chair working late, he would come in to say good night, then lean down and give her a kiss that made her feel like she was stuffed with something lighter and sweeter than cotton candy. Several times, she pulled him in, climbed on his lap, and they embraced in the dark.

The next day, they would talk again about the daffodils.

Sarah traces the dark wooden banister up their staircase into their bedroom. Her clothes are strewn over the bed, his in piles in color-sorted laundry baskets. Adam puts on a sweater over his shirt, Sarah applies her lipstick, watching him through the mirror. “You know,” she says, as he follows her back down the stairs, “This whole gardening thing is unfair.”

Adam leans against the doorframe of her study. Light streams through the windows, dousing her messy papers and opened doggy-eared books in yellow. He undoes some of the dog-eared pages and replaces them with post-it notes, closing her books. He always performed little services like that. Last week, he assembled her bookshelf, the week before, he did her laundry and transcribed an interview for her while she frantically attempted to meet a writing deadline, both of them delirious from coffee and incoherent mumblings until four in the morning. “Why?”

“*Because,*” she sighs, picking out some books from her bookbag and adding new ones in (*Emily Dickinson & Western Existentialism, The Prophet, Mapping the Secular Mind*), “You are an environmental engineer. Your mom does landscaping. And your dad does real estate. It’s in your blood, and here I am, trying against all odds to be something I’m not.”

“You’re a writer. Isn’t that why you have a study?” A small smile curls over Adam’s face.

“Oh, you’re hilarious.” She pushes past him in a show of annoyance.

Adam’s laugh is hearty and full as it trails her. “So what am I supposed to do about that?”

“My ego’s wounded,” she pouts, turns around while they’re standing in front of the coat closet to grab their shoes, and jabs an accusing finger in his chest. “And I would love to see you do something you’re bad at, but that I’m good at.”

Adam seems to chew on this as Sarah puts on her suede ankle boots. Above her hangs a calligraphy painting of the verse in the Quran: *So in Allah let the believers put their trust.*

“What, like, write a poem or something?”

Sarah’s eyes brighten. “*Yes,* what a great idea!”

They walk to their cars. Sarah tosses her bookbag in the backseat, still holding eye contact with him, willing him to take up the challenge.

“Okay,” he says, reveling in his ability to make her this happy.

“Really?”

“It’ll be bad.”

“Bad poems are the best poems.”

“Then I owe you one bad poem. To make up for the daffodils.”

Sarah beams at him and Adam wants to say he feels the descension of an angel, or the iridescence of morning dew, but the light is so abundant that he can see an enormous chunk of cream cheese wedged between her teeth. Adam thinks about how he could have never made her up, this girl with cream cheese and Iqbal's poetry and a pink trench coat— practically every girl he loved was furnished by his imagination, but Sarah isn't, couldn't be. She is painfully immanent. He is still wondering if it is better that she exists in real life rather than his imagination when she ducks into her car, still beaming. He gets inside his. Their garage door mechanically winds up, and they head down their driveway, part ways, just as the once-blinding sunlight gets tempered by a more settled morning over Glen Cove street.

Every year, the neighbors tried to get the county to pave Glen Cove Street with real cement, but every year, ancient Mr. Malkasian delivered the same impassioned speech about how he refused to pay unless the local government did, so they all gave up. Secretly, they loved the dirt road; in the summer, when the sun baked it dry, you could see Mr. Malkasian walking barefoot up and down the street at daybreak. He would stop, lean over his mailbox under the mimosa tree, and tilt his stern, weathered face at *just* the right angle to catch a stray ray of sunlight. A cement road could not have brought that sight. The rays of the sun gently shake the shoulders of men and women with the fingers of medallion-hued angels; Mrs. Jones frowns through her window at the high school Harrington girl who seems to have knocked over her mailbox *again*; the rabbits chew happily on the Vignesh's newly sprouted Spinach plants (oblivious that in an hour, they will be chased out in a rage by the small keeper of the garden, eight-year-old Vithya Vignesh).

On a cloudy evening in the middle of April, Sarah and Adam share a pot of tea with Nadira and Mustafa. Mr. Malkasian and the Vigneshes were also invited, but the young couple has overstayed them. Mr. Malkasian had guffed about the upcoming election and his philosophical stance on the electoral college (“Now, if we divide the total number of votes by the number of people that voted, it’s not equal! It’s not equal! Tell me why I moved to California? It’s a waste, everywhere, this damned country.”), but his uninterested audience of Mr. Vignesh and little Vithya Vignesh, though they nodded politely, failed to douse the flame of his fury. Mr. Malkasian crankily drank the rest of his tea and said goodbye to everyone, still fuming about the electoral college on his way out. The Vigneshes boasted with the group about Vithya recently winning the spelling bee and her new horseback riding lessons. Sarah snuck a glance at Adam, wondering if they, too, would be at Nadira and Mustafa’s porch a decade later, boasting about spelling bees and pet rabbits and extracurricular activities. Mrs. Vignesh rubbed her pregnant belly and put down the Indian sweets with a wide smile. “Time to sleep,” she said, “baby is very tired.”

That left the old couple and the newlyweds, sitting out on the stone deck, comfortably paralyzed by the weary weight of a springtime Sunday. The tea has gone cold. The trees in the backyard quiver with their stumpy new leaves. The clouds are brooding, but eerily majestic, breaching pockets of purple light like a hinged door to heaven. And as people on Sundays are wont to do, they linger.

When Nadira shuffles between the kitchen and deck to put away the teacups and snacks, Adam obligingly helps her. She watches Sarah from the corner of the eye, who is animatedly answering Mustafa’s questions about her ongoing experience at USC’s doctoral program in Comparative Literature. Nadira wants to ask her for updates about her marriage, but when all the

dishes are stowed, Sarah is still talking to Mustafa about books on the healthcare system, and both of them are so deep into the conversation to break away from a mere interruption. Nadira silently curses her husband for preventing a perfectly good advice session from taking place, then turns graciously to Adam.

He scratches his neck. Nadira is painfully aware of how awkward he is, how slowly he moves, like an unwieldy mulberry tree, or an agonizingly slow-chewing sloth. She is suddenly filled with gratitude— overflowing, actually— that Mustafa, though old, is agile, clever, witty. Mustafa still made jokes that are occasionally hilarious. Nadira couldn't imagine Adam making a joke without it sinking listlessly into the water like a stone that failed to skip over a lake. How different this man was from the woman he married: with a pixie-ish face, a pointed chin like the tip of a comic raindrop, and dramatic flashes of speech, Sarah is a beaming romantic. Nadira tries to size Adam up, but she can't fully do it: she wants to conclude that he's boring, but he just seems reserved.

For all the times that Sarah had described her relationship with him, Nadira had never actually made conversation with Adam. Sarah had grown close with Nadira about the topic of her relationship, because her and Adams' partially arranged marriage prevented her from fully confiding in her own mother. Both in their early thirties, rejecting marriage despite their parents' insistence for a decade until they felt distraught and lonely from searching, they didn't want any more dates, any more meet-ups. The false smiles and "tell me what you dos" and tepid coffees brought nothing but the feeling that they weren't good enough for true love if they had to work this hard to find it. Isn't it, after all, some natural conspiracy that lights the heart from within? Isn't it the closest thing to a miracle, true love? And if it meant stilted text messages and lipstick-stained teeth, maybe they were not meant to get it. Sarah thought Adam's eyes were kind

from the moment they'd met. Adam thought he wouldn't get tired of listening to Sarah speak. Maybe they had to settle for kind eyes and bad poetry. Maybe it's what they deserved: not love, but marriage; not soulmates, but each other.

This all Nadira had pieced together through Sarah's chipper resignation. Sarah had thoroughly rationalized the marriage as one of convenience and companionship, but even if Nadira was blind, she'd recognize that Sarah and Adam loved each other. Nadira knew that withholding love is the same as accepting indifference; she knew that accepting indifference is the same as wallowing in unfulfilled ideals. How often do we invent people in our minds, manufacture our soulmates on the sparkling conveyor belt of our fantasies? Nadira looked at her husband again, and believed everything good that had ever happened to her was because she accepted the love that was right in front of her, even if it had a receding hairline, and even if they were never able to conceive a child, even if left behind a history of profound imperfection and homesickness: here they were on Glen Cove street, the sun spilling everywhere.

Nadira smiles at Adam, tongue-in-cheek. She feels a bit catty, waspish. She is angry at his blindness. "How are you, *beta*?"

Adam nods deeply, a hand over his heart. His fingernails are well-manicured against his pastel blue shirt, like white houses on a Santori shoreline. "Very well, thank you, Aunty."

"You know," Nadira starts, feeling a little immodest, "You look very nice in that color. Sarah was telling me that she loves it when you wear light blue." (Sarah had said no such thing)

Nadira's revelation clearly catches Adam off-guard because his eyes widen and gleam for a second. He vaguely gestures toward his torso and his eyes don't move past the bottom of Nadira's chair. "Oh, she didn't... tell me that."

"Pay attention, *beta*. There are many things she loves."

The next day, Adam calls Sarah at work. She is in the graduate room office eating her lunch (Adam made her an extra tuna sandwich— he was appalled to find that she always ate out) before heading to the introductory writing course she teaches for freshmen. Her fingers hover excitedly over the phone. This is new.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Sarah,” she could hear him outside, near the windmills. “Hey, I was wondering if I could ask you a favor— so I have to pick up some prints for those new panels tomorrow, and FedEx is really close to the University. It’s the last day to get them. Do you think you could grab them for me?”

“Oh,” she says absently, a little disappointed that this is the reason for his call. What was she expecting, anyway? A little check-in because he misses her? “Sure, I can do that.”

Out in an office in the California desert and under bottomless blue skies, Adam is eating his tuna sandwich as he reads Sarah’s newest short story. He writes little comments in the margins: *I love this! Amazing imagery. Astute historical scenery.* In the story, a little girl orphaned by the Indian Mutiny makes up stories, lives in her head, making and remaking a world where she never lost the people she loved. *Sometimes, Sarah writes, fiction is the only salve for reality. The difference between them is nothing at all, and yet, the balance of mortality hangs by the thread of a story.*

When Adam gets home, he is looking forward to handing her a fully annotated short story with a letter of observations and commentary to advance her thinking. He is reading the news when she comes in, later than usual, tired, make-up smudged and her hijab already slipping off from the drive home.

While she sets down her things, Sarah implores, “Did you like the short story? Was it a bit stilted, towards the end? The thing is, I don’t want to come off as sentimental or pedantic... I have a problem with that, you know.” She slides in the seat across from him. The soft glow of the flush mounted light tints everything in a hyper-saturated orange, and her skin glows. “But what did you think? I want to hear everything.”

For some reason, Adam blanks out. “I thought it was good... and interesting. And I liked it. Very good job.”

She looks disappointed. “... was there anything specific?”

“I’d have to look at it again.”

Sarah rubs her temples. “I’ve had a long day. The new book I thought would... well, it doesn’t matter, anyway.” She gets up, fixes him with an implicating stare, as though he doesn’t deserve to know. “I’m going to take a shower.”

Adam wants to say something else, to hand her the annotated short story and see her eyes light up, but it’s upstairs in their bedroom, and he feels like any more words than necessary may somehow break him. Instead he asks, “Did you get the prints from Fedex?”

“Oh no,” she blurts, smacking her forehead with her hand, “I completely forgot. I’m so sorry.”

“It was the last day to get them. If you said you couldn’t, I could have gotten them myself.”

“I’m sorry, I forgot, and I was grading papers, plus one of the journal contributors dropped, and—”

Adam pushes past her, a surge of hurt and dread settling like a film around his ribs. What could she not understand? “I would have done it for you.”

That evening, they eat dinner separately, sequester themselves in different rooms, don't talk all night. Sarah doesn't realize how much they usually talk to each other until they don't. She realizes he knows each of her coworkers by name, he knows the dangers of nihilism because of her. She knows the names of so many plants, countless California perennials, has tried so many variations of tuna sandwiches. On a road trip, she could probably point out the different names of clouds: cirrus, and stratus, and cumulonimbus, which was his favorite, large and full like a weighted blanket. Leaning against the kitchen island as they cooked or while brushing their teeth, they'd learned everything about each other. It feels as though the balance of their relationship hangs in actions as fragile as going to the Fedex and reading a six-page short story, and yet, Sarah thinks, they still failed to do it.

When she crawls into bed next to him, he faces away from her, shoulders rigid. She lays in bed for nearly two hours staring at the ceiling, her chest rising and falling as though a million bricks were stacked on top, thinking, *Ya Allah, how did it happen that you gave me love, and I gave you indifference?* She slips out of bed and creeps downstairs to her study. She sits at her desk, buries her face in her trembling hands. Just a few months ago, the thought of crying about Adam would've felt almost ludicrous. He was so irrelevant. But as she sobs, she thinks how good it feels to now know that they have the power to hurt each other. The opposite of love isn't hatred— it's apathy.

On her way out, she catches something on her desk. A note, hastily scrawled on a small assembly of post-it notes:

The sun shines, and no one notices.

The crocuses bloom, and no one notices.

The gardens smile, and no one notices.

But when my hands find yours, I close my eyes,

and see the world as it is.

Yesterday, I was afraid, and I was ashamed:

Today, I am in love.

How is that for a bad poem?

One morning in June, for one of the few voluntary times in her life, Sarah wakes up earlier than noon on a Saturday. She puts on her makeup, lengthening her lashes and pinkening her cheeks and lips with the same color, and goes downstairs to cook breakfast for Adam. She arranges it on the tray table, then realizes what's missing: she dashes outside to pick two hibiscuses and puts them in an empty jar of jam. When she's upstairs, Adam looks like he just woke up, with his hair matted down on one side of his head and an unmistakable drool stain on the pillow. Sarah ignores it and focuses instead on the way his arms look in the plain white undershirt, the way his neck muscles tense and flush when he sees her.

“Oh, hey,” Adam says, “I was getting worried, it’s nine am and— why... Is that for me?”

“Stuffed omelette. Blueberry scones—”

“Oh, that’s why you didn’t let me into the kitchen last night—”

“— OJ, obviously. The hibiscus is just for ornamentation.”

“It actually has some medicinal properties.” He says this with wide eyes, soft. Sarah laughs. Once, she would have been upset by his inability to say what he really meant: *thank you*,

or *I love you*, but today, she is so acutely aware that no one else could speak their language of give and take, of post-it notes and bad poems, of their exact history and circumstance.

“But really, don’t eat the hibiscus.”

They share breakfast, eating with their fingers because Sarah forgets the utensils and is too lazy to get them herself and she absolutely forbids Adam from doing her the favor. Then she makes him get dressed and they head downstairs, where she shows him the new bed of primroses she planted.

“Surprise!”

“I’m impressed, really,” he admits, bending down to check on them. “Did you... take them out of the plastic casings?”

“Was I supposed to?”

He looks at her quizzically. “Yes?” Sarah scrunches her head into shoulders. He looks back down. “... It’s fine, we’ll just dig them out and replant them. Oh... they’re light blue.”

“Yeah, I know it’s your favorite color. You keep wearing light blue.”

“My favorite... But I thought—”

“Adam, look!” Sarah crouches down, and the morning sun falls fully on her face. Between her face and the flowers is nothing but blinding, bountiful light. “The daffodils... look, they’re budding!”

When she stands back up, giddy with the excitement of finally seeing her flowers bud, Adam leans down to plant a chaste kiss at the side of her mouth. For the first time, it is not shrouded in darkness. He holds her, just as the morning sun, just as God does both of them between His merciful hands.

“I have a feeling Nadira Aunty is watching us,” he whispers.

“I’ve had that feeling, too,” she giggles.

They go back inside, into Sarah’s study, climb onto her wingback armchair.

Nadira is indeed wondering why she didn’t see the two of them in the morning. As she drinks her chai, however, she sees Mr. Malkasian walking barefoot on the dirt road, the scorching summer sun now having dried the dirt to a clean tan mat. He sways as gently as the leaves under his mimosa tree. The leaves bend softly to the summer breeze, the bushes quiver quietly. Stray clouds loiter overhead. Another luminous morning ends with the sudden thrush of more rabbits sneaking up to Vithya Vignesh’s poor little spinach garden. And so the world turns, and the sun burns, and pain teaches us to love more than our dreams ever could. Mustafa refills his wife’s cup of tea. *Yes, Nadira thinks, of this, I am sure.*