

Time after time

Tahmima Anam

You never used to smell like that, she said.

You remember how I smelled? he asked.

No, but I remember how you didn't smell.

How didn't I smell?

Like an old man.

They had fallen in love in high school. They had snuck around to the back of the biology lab and pressed their lips together. They had fumbled with the buttons of their uniforms. She had made him change his hair, short at the back, falling in his eyes at the front. He had stared at her through his thick fringe, and she had stared back, imagining his eyes boring into her soul. They held hands all the time. She called him Baby. He called her Baby.

When she left for university in America, she felt it was her duty to break his heart, so she did.

He married young; a girl from their class, someone they had made fun of because she was so tall, taller than most of the boys. They had four daughters, who shot up like stalks of rice; and on Instagram his wife perpetually sighed about how quickly it had all happened.

She fell in love every few years or so, with men who seemed all right at first but then would bore, or control, or resent her. She wrote a food blog, which had turned her into a minor celebrity, which had then led to a column in a famous newspaper, and a television program and multiple trips around the world where the camera zoomed in on her putting things into her mouth. She could kill a restaurant or make its fortune with one sentence. Her reviews were funny and cruel and full of knowing contempt, all the while keeping up an image of her as a wide-eyed, curious woman with an insatiable appetite for choux buns, or mochi, or dan dan noodles.

You smelled like sweat, she said. Adolescent sweat.

And now I smell like old man?

Not super old. Just going towards old. I suppose I smell like menopause.

You smell like jasmine and rainbows, he said.

He was exactly the same, except fatter and sadder. His wife had died, right at the start of the pandemic when no one knew anything. His only consolation, he said, was that it was before they realised it was Covid, so he was able to be with her at the end.

I remember you loved Cyndi Lauper, he said.

We used to watch that video, she remembered, *Time After Time*.

Oh yes, the one with the porcelain dog?

It was a Jack Russell Terrier.

Cyndi had cuddled her Jack Russell Terrier, and then she'd had a fight with her boyfriend, and then she'd left him, tearful, at the train station while she went off on her adventures. It was the same for her, she said. She had pulled out of the station and away from them all, away from high school friends and getting married and sighing about how quickly the children were growing.

When she heard the news, she wrote. So sorry about your wife, she said. You seemed very happy together.

We were. She was a truly wonderful partner and mother.

She'd left it at that, bore out the pandemic on zoom dinners with her parents and zoom dates with strangers. There were no restaurants to review, so she started writing about food delivery services, though she found herself becoming kinder, more willing to let people fail. She wondered whether she'd been too tough on everyone, that perhaps, now that she was almost fifty, she might start to soften.

She flew to Dhaka to see her parents. She told them not to come to the airport, but they came anyway. We have the vaccine! they said. Everyone cried.

As she was collecting her luggage, she saw him wrestling with his two trolleys, his daughters scrolling their phones behind him like a train of sad, motherless puppies. He introduced them, and they were all polite as they towered over her and said their hellos. An old friend, he said. Auntie, they nodded.

Later, he sent her a message. It was so lovely to see you. The first time I've smiled in a long time.

They kept writing, even after she went back to her flat in London. She woke up and looked to see if he'd sent her a message. He always had. She wrote just before she went to bed, knowing he would rise early and check before he made breakfast for his daughters.

Did you break up with me because of Cyndi Lauper?

Yes, she said. I saw Cyndi getting on that train and I had to do it.

You killed me.

I'm sorry. I'm really sorry.

They were in her flat in London, with the high ceilings and the cornicing and the fireplace she never lit. There was a concierge downstairs and a driver waiting to take her places and a wardrobe full of very tall shoes.

You know I can't stay here, he said.

She knew. I could come home?

He laughed. You wouldn't last a week.

I should've married you the first time, she said.

And what, give up all this? Betray Cyndi?

I suppose we'll have to wait until we're very, very old.

They joked about getting very, very old. No teeth. Hearing aids. The inability to get to certain sexual positions. The inability to have sex at all. No! She cried. There are drugs for that. There will be drugs for everything by then. It will be soon. It will feel like no time at all, he said.

When she opened her eyes, he wasn't there, except in her mind. He had died right at the start of the pandemic, before they even knew it was Covid. It was something, his wife had replied when she had written to express her condolences, that I was able to be with him at the end.

I'm so sorry for your loss, she had written.

He was a wonderful partner and father, his wife had replied.

She was there at the airport, trailing their four daughters behind her like sad, fatherless puppies. Auntie, they had nodded.

I should've married you the first time, she whispered into the solitude.

She fell asleep again, projecting herself into a distant future of endless nights wondering what might have happened if she had ignored Cyndi and married him. She knew she would continue to dream of him, calling her jasmine and rainbows, returning those kisses she had offered in secret, behind the school building, in a time before anything else had ever mattered.

Tahmima Anam

Tahmima Anam's first novel, *A Golden Age*, won the Commonwealth Writers Prize and went on to be translated into 27 languages. It was followed by *The Good Muslim*, *The Bones of Grace*, and most recently, *The Startup Wife*. She is the recipient of an O. Henry Award and has been named one of *Granta's* best young British novelists. She was a contributing opinion writer for the *New York Times* and was recently elected as a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, she attended Mount Holyoke College and Harvard University and now lives in London.

A recording of this story can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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