

Shadows and Smoke by Akhileshwari Anand Raj

We've always been in that "phase"; you know, a very will they, won't they? kinda couple. We were never a couple, except that one time in eleventh grade anyway. Friends with benefits is befitting, also, actual best friends—but not a couple. You and I, we listened to Aoki all night, baked apple pies together, spent ten consecutive Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners with your family, had sex, went on amazing road trips, did I mention—mind-blowing sex? Go figure.

You had just spent the night, and I left you lightly snoring as I went into work on a Saturday. A normal weekend for me, whenever you were in town. Which was quite often these days. Work dragged on, until I got a call from Lea—your brother's wife, my best friend.

"Wh.. where are you... come to St. Lugos quickly... please", she said, hiccupping her way through the sentence.

And, I knew. Didn't really need an explanation. I made my way across town, the radio lulling faintly in the background.

You're dead. An aneurysm, they said. Never seen a case this young, they said. What I processed: the one person that needed me—to function, plainly, was gone. Selfish? Oh, yes. Was I upset? Of course not.

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I sat there, holding Lea's hand throughout the afternoon. She cried uncontrollably, like I should have been wailing, like my whole world had just been shaken up. I hugged your mum as she sat petrified, in disbelief; she kept murmuring something about all this being a bad dream. I did puzzles with your nephew Robbie, to keep him occupied. He didn't really understand the commotion, and it made him cranky.

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I really loved you—wait, I loved the idea of yours. You're dead, but I can keep you alive forever; I'll just have to find someone to replace you.

I did just that. I left the hospital in haste, went to a frat party round the corner. Round the corner from where you died. A few shots down, and I found him: naïve brown eyes and a smirk on his face, which was glowing with a sense of importance. There, I found just what I wanted, what I had found in you ten years ago. After that night, someone who will need me.

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However, I didn't spend the entire night at his place. In your memory, for what we had been. But I couldn't sleep all night, and I wasn't able to eat all day either, at least my body was mourning your loss. Next morning, I put on my black blouse and trousers, and searched frantically for shoes. I didn't even have black shoes; I wore red shoes instead to your wake.

The long drive was graced by incessant rain, and this reminded me of just two nights ago. When it was lightly drizzling outside, a pleasant patter, as we had lain on my bed, legs lost in the sheets, with me whining about how busy I was, and you listening patiently, while silently playing with my hair. Just like a perfect boyfriend would've.

I finally pulled over at your parents' townhouse, preparing myself for Round Two of 'trying to feel something but cannot.' Thank God it was an open casket wake.

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The walk from the parking lot to your living room was long; I was greeted with piteous eyes, hushed voices and tearful glances.

I met our friends. Your high school football team, the one with my first boyfriend, whom you loathed since then. He hugged me, and told me I was a strong girl who could easily overcome this. Your first girlfriend was there, the one who slapped me across the face the day you asked me out. She held my hand, and solemnly told me that she was sorry for my loss (and for all that she had put me through). All these people, they kept coming to console me. But the thing is, I didn't need to be consoled. I was perfectly fine, and that was the problem.

Your parents were a mess: your dad was hiding his grief behind his surly smile, the grief that came with the premature passing of his wastrel child, the one he disliked so much that he disowned him. He was ashamed of you when you were alive; and he was ashamed of himself now. Your mum honoured you with her words, as she recounted tales from your innocent childhood days and up to your pensive adult years. She loved you, and you repaid her by moving thousands of miles away from her in pursuit of your art.

Your brother stood grimly amongst your cousins; you would've been a part of that circle. Lea was pretending to help around with the food, causing more damage than being helpful. But that helped her put off her impending breakdown, so she continued anyway.

Robbie, your nephew and godchild, our godchild, was oblivious to the situation. He pulled his usual antics, and kept the spirits artificially high. The sight of him brought the faintest of smiles on even the most forlorn faces. He brought happiness to the room, the opposite of what you were doing at the moment.

When I saw Lea and her little family, I wondered, would we have become like them, given time? The idea was repulsive.

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What were you to me, really? That guy I've been constantly looking out for since high school, because you were an idiot. And then you became that guy I hooked up with on-and-off.

You were my project of sorts, one I took pride in fixing and refining. In the process, you became the guy who embodied my utopian ideas. I managed to make you what I needed: someone to give me a sense of belonging.

Ten years, it took me to fix you. Ten years, I invested in you. You were my perfect illusion, and now you've gone and burst my bubble by dying. That's what I grieved. How I spent too much of my time on you. For now, you're really gone, and I'm moving on.

This time around, I spent the night. I woke up to his light snores, and I realised that you didn't matter to me anymore. He's awake now, with his strong arms wrapped around me, stubble chin resting on my shoulder. I felt like I finally belonged, just like I did with you. You, him, what difference did it make?

Safe and sound, all a mere farce. I just need someone to fool me long enough to believe the farce, and you played your role for ten long, long years, really well. You've been relieved of your act now, but the show must go on.

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